

Skanda and the Mothers in Khotanese Buddhist Painting

The iconographic evidence of Brahmanical deities in Buddhist Central Asia has increased dramatically during the last few decades thanks to fieldwork carried out in the Khotan oasis (Xinjiang), particularly at Dandan Oiliq, a site extensively investigated by Sir Aurel Stein in the early 20th century (Stein 1907: 236-303). After being “rediscovered” in 1995, by an expedition of the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology led by Wang Binhua (Rong 2013: 424), Dandan Oiliq was visited three years later by a Sino-Swiss team directed by Christoph Baumer (Baumer 1999; 2000; 2009), who carried out cleaning of some Buddhist shrines which might have been partially investigated by Stein. Dandan Oiliq was re-explored in 2002 and 2004 by a Sino-Japanese expedition, to which we owe the discovery of new Buddhist temples (Zhang, Qu and Liu 2008; *Dandan Wulike Yizhi* 2009). These activities were rewarded by remarkable findings, including new and outstanding evidence of mural painting. What is surprising is that each campaign led to the discovery of murals bearing witness to a peculiar theme featuring characters of apparent Hindu orientation—the god Skanda along with other deities, mainly female and including animal-headed goddesses—which was only sporadically documented in Stein’s records. All this material probably dates from the 8th century or, at any rate, to the same period—whatever it is—to which the paintings from Dandan Oiliq unearthed by Stein belong.¹

The murals discovered by the Sino-Swiss team were first described by Baumer in two publications (1999 and 2000); subsequently, I con-

tributed an article essentially aimed at revising some major misunderstandings in Baumer’s iconographical reading (Lo Muzio 2008). In the meantime, Baumer, unaware of my article, still in press, published a third article (2009), in which he partially changed his descriptions and added some new hypotheses. Baumer’s most recent approach is largely based on the assumption that, however Indian the iconographic types of the figures shown in the paintings may seem, we have to identify them as disguised Sogdian deities.² In disagreement again with most of Baumer’s assessments, and having in turn further elaborated upon the iconography and the meaning of these paintings, this is yet another occasion for me to voice my views.

BUDDHIST SHRINE D13

This temple reveals a layout quite common at Dandan Oiliq and in other sites of the Khotan as well as other oases of southern Xinjiang: a rectangular building with a central rectangular shrine surrounded by a corridor.³ A podium partially preserved in the southern half of

¹ The chronology of Khotanese painting (see Williams 1973: 109–112) is still an open question and needs to be investigated in depth, in the light of the new discoveries and studies in the Khotan oasis as well as in Xinjiang altogether.

² Baumer’s urge to apply a Sogdian “filter” to the analysis of the paintings (in the wake of Markus Mode’s thesis about the “Sogdian gods in exile” in the Khotan oasis, see Mode 1991–92) derives from the persuasion of a strong Sogdian cultural and religious influence in Khotan. Baumer’s view is shared by Rong Xinjiang, who argues that a Sogdian officer (*sabao*) may have resided in Dandan Oiliq, in the second half of the 8th century, in charge of the local administration (Rong 2013: 425). We may add further evidence on the presence of Sogdians in Khotan (Yoshida 1997: 568–569), yet I am convinced that a Sogdian reading of these paintings (with the meaning that Baumer and Rong give to “Sogdian”, i.e. “Zoroastrian”) is not only unnecessary, but also misleading.

³ On the identification of this shrine with Stein’s temple XII or, more likely,

the shrine was probably intended to support a sculpture. Paintings were found on all four walls of the shrine. Apart from the remains of a composition of the type known as “the Thousand Buddhas”, preserved in the north-western corner and on the eastern and southern walls (Baumer 2009: 175, fig. 21.15), Baumer records the finding of the feet of three large standing Buddhas resting on lotus flowers (*ibid.*: 175, fig. 21.17). Although the author does not specify their location, one can imagine they were found on the southern wall, that is, the wall in front of the entrance, usually the focus of the whole pictorial programme in Buddhist and non-Buddhist Central Asian painting. In this case, we would encounter a situation similar to the one reconstructed, and far better documented, in the Buddhist shrines excavated at Karadong, in the Keriya basin, east of Khotan, with three large Buddhas standing on lotus pedestals on the wall facing the entrance.⁴ Beside one of the standing Buddhas in the D13 (but we are not told which one exactly), we see two kneeling male worshippers in *añjalimudrā* and holding a lotus flower in a pavilion on a brick platform; further right, a haloed male figure is riding a camel (*ibid.*: 175, figs. 21.17). A row of male riders on piebald black and white horses are represented beneath one of the lotus pedestals (*ibid.*: 175, 21.18), but, again, we do not know exactly on which part of the wall; this is the same for three male worshippers kneeling in *añjalimudrā*, each holding a flower to the right of a *pūrṇaḡhaṭa* (*ibid.*: fig. 21.16).

Of particular relevance to our issue are the paintings on the western and on the northern wall of the shrine (Figs. 1 and 5), each of which preserves three deities and small portions of a fourth figure. All the figures still extant share certain common traits: all of them are haloed, sit cross-legged on a large chequered cushion apart from one figure, seated on its animal vehicle (western wall, first figure from the right). All but one have their heads in three-quarter view to the left, the only exception being the third figure from the left on the northern wall, whose face is shown frontally. The male figures wear *dhotī* and scarves, typical Indian attire; the females wear a short-sleeved, tight-fitting tunic and possibly a gown, the lower hem of which hangs down in front of the seat. Only some parts of the figures retain their original colour (on the western wall, the green in the haloes of the first and third figures and in the tunic of the central

figure; on the northern wall, a pinkish or almost faded red hue in the *dhotī* of the first figure and in the halo of the central figure, perhaps a very pale green in the latter’s tunic). As Baumer rightly remarks (Baumer 2009: 178), the paintings on the two walls reveal two levels of workmanship, the figures on the western wall being more carefully drawn, both in their physiognomy and dress, than those, more sketchy, on the northern wall. Furthermore, the chequered pattern of the cushions on which the figures sit on the western wall is made of much smaller squares than in those on the northern wall. We are led to conclude that the two murals were executed by different painters.

Western Wall (Fig. 1)

On the left we see the Brahmanical god Skanda (or Kārttikeya),⁵ three-headed, four armed, sitting on his *vāhana*, a peacock, holding a bow and three arrows in the upper right and left hands respectively, a cock in his lower left before his chest and what seems to be a bunch of grapes in his lower right hand, resting on his leg.⁶ This image derives from an iconographic type (in which the god mounts a peacock) formulated in the Gupta epoch and destined for long-lasting popularity (Fig. 2). The image of Skanda-on-peacock seems to be mainly documented in the eastern part of the empire, probably reflecting a dynastic preference,⁷ whereas the western part still keeps the iconographic version of the god inherited from the Kushan epoch, portraying Skanda as standing frontally holding a spear and known in several variants both in Gandhāra and Mathurā.⁸ In particu-

⁵ These are only two of the names by which this deity is known (among the others: Mahāsena, Kumāra and, in South India, Murugan). Each of these names designates one of the originally distinct deities, which, at least in the orthodox Brahmanical *pantheon*, were merged into a single god in the Gupta epoch.

⁶ Baumer (2009: 178) thinks that “this deity represents Washagn, the Sogdian variant of Verethragna, the Iranian god of victory, masquerading under the traits of Kārttikeya”. Furthermore, in footnote 52, he has not definitely abandoned the untenable hypothesis he proposed in his first publications (Baumer 1999: 13; 2000: 88): if we interpret the animal vehicle as *ham̄sa* (goose), “we are confronted here with [the Sogdian god] Weshparkar depicted in the guise of Brahmā”.

⁷ Skanda was a major divine patron of Kumāragupta I (415–455 CE), as witnessed by his depiction on one of the coin types of that king. On the fortune of Skanda in the Gupta empire, see Mann 2012: 203–230 (more specifically, on the numismatic evidence: 218–224).

⁸ On Skanda in Gandharan art, see van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1972: 41 and fn. 109; Agrawala 1968, 1992 and 1995; Zwalf 1996: I, 121–122, II, 65–66 (nos. 102–104); Srinivasan 1997–98; Filigenzi 2005; Mann 2012: 123–129; Southworth 2014. On Skanda in the art of Mathurā, see Mann 2012: 117–121. To the same iconographic type are to be related the images of Mahāsena on the coins of the

temple X, see Baumer 2009: 175. In neither case, as Baumer admits, the hints are conclusive.

⁴ Debaine-Francfort and Idris 2001: 86, fig. 12, 15. Unlike in the Karadong shrines, in the temple D13 of Dandan Oiliq no hints are given as to what might have been represented in the upper half of the wall.

lar, the cockerel is a typical Gandharan attribute of the deity and the few reliefs showing Skanda riding the peacock *and* holding a cock are from the Gandharan area, though probably of post-Kushan date.⁹

The iconographic type of Skanda-on-peacock must have soon gained popularity in Buddhist Central Asia and China, at any rate well before the epoch to which the Dandan Oiliq murals are dated. The earliest evidence is a relief on the eastern door-jamb of the entrance to cave VIII at Yungang (Fig. 3),¹⁰ dating from the second half of the 5th century. The god is five-headed (a sixth head is probably implied on the rear), six-armed, with sun and moon, bow and arrows (possibly in the central right hand, now lost), a cockerel in the lower left hand, and the lower right on the lap, with a small round attribute between the thumb and the forefinger. His *vāhana* seems to merge the body and the tail of a peacock with the head of a bird of prey, with a pearl (?) in its beak.¹¹

As to the sun and moon discs, they are such ubiquitous divine emblems in Central Asian (especially in Xinjiang) and Chinese Buddhist iconography as to almost appear unspecific (in our Dandan Oiliq paintings, three out of six deities hold the sun and moon) and no convincing explanation has yet been given for their frequent appearance (which must not necessarily imply astral connections). A thorough study of these attributes in Central Asia and their multiple meanings is still awaited.

What is remarkable in the Yungang relief is the presence of multiple heads, a peculiarity which the literary narratives on Skanda's birth often refer to—the newborn Skanda was milked by the Six Pleiades, or *Kṛttikās* (Mann 2012: 79–80)—but which is rarely documented in Indian iconography,¹² and, to my knowledge, not in images of

Skanda when he is mounted on his *vāhana*. On the contrary, the association of the six heads and the peacock matches the description of Skanda, as a member of a group of Hindu deities (including Maheśvara, Mahākāla, Vārāhī and others) in later Buddhist texts such as the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (Bhattacharya 1958: 364).

Apart from the different number of heads, the Yungang and Dandan Oiliq depictions of Skanda seem to reproduce one and the same iconographic type, in spite of the chronological distance between the two sites (c. three centuries, if we are to follow the chronology assigned to Dandan Oiliq).

There are, however, further representations of Skanda in eastern Central Asia. Apart from those found at Dunhuang and in the Turfan area, for which I refer the reader to an article by B. N. Mukherjee (1987), new evidence has been brought to light, once again, at Dandan Oiliq by the Sino-Japanese expedition, which I will deal with shortly.

Let us now go back to the D13 mural (western wall). The central figure is a goddess with a swaddled child in her lap and a naked child sitting on her left leg. Here I agree with Baumer, who identifies this figure with Hārītī (Baumer 2009: 179), formerly a child-devourer *yakṣiṇī*, who, once converted to the Buddha's doctrine, was worshipped as a protectress of children. According to well-documented iconography, in Gandhāra, where her cult must have been particularly popular,¹³ she is usually accompanied by more than one child. That this was true in the Khotan oasis as well (where she was known as *Hārrva*) is proved by the well-known mural fragment from Farhad-Beg-Yailaki.¹⁴

The third figure is a four-armed animal-headed goddess, wearing a winged crown with a round central ornament, large round earrings (*patrakunḍala*), a necklace and bracelets. She holds the sun and moon disks in her upper hands, a lotus in her lower right and probably a fourth attribute in her left hand, now lost, at the chest level. The animal to which her head belongs is most likely a boar.¹⁵

Kushan king Huviṣka, 2nd century CE (Mann 2012: 129–135, with the proposal of a possible Iranian component in the personality and in the iconography of this deity), in which the cock is shown as perching on the tip of the spear.

⁹ See the Skanda on peacock shown in a fragment of Gandharan relief in the British Museum probably dating from the post-Kushan period (Zwalf 1996: I, II, no. 103) and in a relief in the State Museum of Lucknow (Joshi 1972: 110).

¹⁰ Mizuno and Nagahiro 1951–55: V, 98 (the figure is erroneously identified with Viṣṇu); Mukherjee 1987: 252–254, fig. 5, who thinks of a representation of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, modelled on the iconography of Skanda.

¹¹ A relief on the western door-jamb shows a three-headed and eight-armed Maheśvara sitting on the bull Nandi, holding sun and moon, bow and arrows, a bunch of grapes and an unclear attribute (Mizuno-Nagahiro 1951–55: V, pls.10,12–15; Baumer 2009: fig. 21.23).

¹² Its earliest appearance is recorded on coins of the Yaudheya clan (in a coin class dated to the end of the 1st–early 2nd century CE), showing on the obverse a two-armed Skanda (named Brahmaṇyadeva Kumāra) with two rows of three heads each (Thakur 1974: 305; Mann 2012: 103–107, 113–115, figs. 3a-c). Icono-

graphic evidence of the six-headed Skanda will be found again only much later, from the 6th century onward, and never in images of the god mounting his peacock; see a bronze sculpture in the National Museum, New Delhi, according to R. C. Agrawala from the Chamba Hills, 6th–7th century (Agrawala 1967; see also Srinivasan 1997–98: 244, fig. 19) and a wooden sculpture in a temple in the temple of Ādiśakti Devī in Chatrahi, Chamba (Srinivasan 1997–98: 244–245, fig. 20).

¹³ On the legend of Hārītī and her depictions in Gandhāra, see Foucher 1905–51: 130–142; Bivar 1970; Zwalf 1996: I, 44, 116; II, pl. 92; Quagliotti 1999–2000.

¹⁴ Bussagli 1979²: 54, 58; Williams 1973: 138–139 (with references to Khotanese written sources), fig. 144.

¹⁵ At first (Lo Muzio 2008: 192) I thought of a dog- or wolf-headed goddess. Baumer proposes to see a boar or a wolf head; as to the sex of the figure, he

Should this identification be correct, we may think of another Hindu goddess, Vārāhī (Fig. 4), the female personification of Varāha, Viṣṇu's third *avatāra* in standard list, very often appearing among the Saptamātrkās (or Aṣṭamātrkās), or the Seven (or Eight) Mothers.¹⁶ As far as the attributes and other iconographic details are concerned, the relationship of the Dandan Oiliq goddess to her Indian prototype seems rather loose; yet there are a few similarities worth pointing out. First, she holds a lotus flower, which can be included among Vārāhī's attributes,¹⁷ second, her waist is not as slim as that of the other figures portrayed in the Dandan Oiliq temple, a plump shape being one of the distinctive traits of Vārāhī.¹⁸ We are left to speculate why the Dandan Oiliq boar-headed goddess is adorned with a winged crown. This emblem appears in Sasanian dynastic imagery beginning with Bahram II (276-293 CE)¹⁹ and enjoys further popularity in Central Asia, being adopted by sovereigns of the Hephthalite and other cognates dynasties, north and south of the Hindu Kush (6th–7th centuries CE).²⁰ In the Buddhist context a winged headdress can be associated with Vaiśravaṇa, the Guardian of the Northern direction, as evidenced in Dunhuang (a woodblock print from Cave 17, mid-10th century)²¹ and in Japan (wooden image of Tobatsu Bishamon-ten, first half of the 10th century),²² but not in Khotan, where the cult of Vaiśravaṇa is thought to have spread from.²³

To complete the description of the western wall painting, the re-

initially assumed it to be male (Baumer 2000: 88), later on he wrote that "its sex can't be gauged" (2009: 179); as he/she has a boar head, however, Baumer identifies this deity as another representation of Waśaghn (see above fn. 6).

¹⁶ On the iconography of Vārāhī, see Donaldson 1995. On her representations among the Saptamātrkās, see Meister 1986; Panikkar 2000: *passim*.

¹⁷ For instance, the Vārāhī portrayed in the Paraśurāmeśvara Temple at Bhubaneśvar, Orissa, 7th century: Donaldson 1995: 160; Panikkar 2000: pl. 105.

¹⁸ Donaldson 1995: in particular 155, 157, 159, 160.

¹⁹ See Curtis 2007: 427–28, figs. 26, 28. The winged crown was probably meant to express the concept of *x'arānah*- («royal glory») through one of its symbols, (the wings of) the bird *vārāyana* (Gnoli 1988).

²⁰ See, for instance, the coins of the Nezak Shah (Vondrovec 2010). On this and other types of crowns as a means for identifying a Hephthalite patronage in the art of Tokharestan, see Il'yasov 2001: 196. On the supposed connection between the Hephthalites and the spread of the winged crown further east, see Kageyama 2007.

²¹ Stein 1921: 1037; Whitfield 1983: fig. 153; Carter 1995: 132–133, 135–137 (on the relationship between Vaiśravaṇa and the Kushan PHARRO and/or OR-LAGNO), pl. XXIV, 23. On the Central Asian genesis of the Japanese imagery of Vaiśravaṇa/Bishamon-ten, see also Grenet 1995–96.

²² Carter 1995: 131–132, pl. XXIV, 22.

²³ On iconographic and literary evidence on Vaiśravaṇa in Khotan, see Williams 1973: 132–135.

mains of a fourth figure (a knee and part of the seat) are still visible to the left of Skanda.

Northern wall (Fig. 5)

From the left, the first figure is a three-headed, ithyphallic figure, holding the sun and moon emblems in his upper hands, probably a fruit in his lower left, his lower right resting on the knee. He wears a diadem with a round central ornament, a necklace and armlets; he has moustache and long hair, partly falling on the shoulders, partly arranged in a *jaṭā*; in the middle of his forehead, the third eye; a black bull lies under his feet. This should be the Hindu god Śiva, or Maheśvara, as he is generally named in Buddhist sources,²⁴ accompanied by his mount, the bull Vṛṣa.²⁵ Maheśvara is well documented in Khotanese painting, although, for some iconographic details, each example is more or less at variance with all the others.²⁶ The Maheśvara painted on a wooden panel from Dandan Oiliq (temple DVII.6),²⁷ perhaps the best known example, most closely matches the figure in our painting, of which it seems to provide a more accurate and detailed description: three-headed (in this case, the lateral faces are clearly portrayed as terrific and female), four-armed, holding sun and moon, a fruit and a *vajra* (the only attribute lacking in the D13 Maheśvara), ithyphallic, wearing scarf and *dhotī* made of a tiger skin, diadem with central round ornament (plus a lunar crescent), necklace or torque, armlets, knotted *yajñopavīta*, sitting on a chequered cushion, with two addorsed white bulls (rather than one) lying at his feet.

In the centre, we see a female figure with a swaddled child in her lap. She wears a cap already noted in Khotanese painting, for instance in a mural from Balawaste, in which it is worn by a multi-armed female deity holding a fish, depicted beneath a large standing Buddha along with Maheśvara.

²⁴ On Maheśvara in Buddhist sources, see Williams 1973: 142–145; Iyanaga 1983.

²⁵ According to Baumer (2009: 176–177), the god shows the iconographic traits of Maheśvara, but is actually to be identified with the Sogdian god Weshparkar.

²⁶ Wooden panel from Dandan Oiliq, temple DVII 6: see Stein 1907: I, 278–279, II, LX (Stein interprets the figure as a form of Avalokiteśvara); Williams 1973: 142, fig. 51; Whitfield 1985: 316, pl. 70. Murals from Balawaste (Williams 1973: 142, fig. 49; Gropp 1974: 116, fig. 42) and Kuduk-kol (Williams 1973: 142, fig. 48), wooden panel from an unspecified site in the Khotan oasis (Williams 1973: fig. 50; Mode 1991–92: fig. 16). To these examples (all in the British Museum), we can add two Umāmaheśvaras painted on wooden panels: the first from Dandan Oiliq, now in the Central Museum of Lahore, see Williams 1973: 142, fig. 52; the second from Khadalik, in the National Museum, New Delhi, see *ibid.*: 142, fig. 53.

²⁷ See fn. 24.

The figure on the right is a three-headed, four-armed ithyphallic god wearing a *dhotī*, a necklace, two threads across his chest, with spiders clinging on them, and snakes coiling around his arms. His central face has a fearsome countenance with eyes wide open (third eye included), whereas the side faces appear calm. I wonder if the three circles on the nimbus may indicate human skulls. In his upper hands he holds sun and moon, in the lower a trident held horizontally, with the prongs towards the right (not visible in the picture illustrated here; see Baumer 2009: fig. 21.19). The most suitable parallel I could find for this image is shown on the reverse of an addorsed sculpture from Fattegarh, Kashmir (Granoff 1979). According to Phyllis Granoff, the main figure on the obverse is a three-headed “Buddhist” Maheśvara, as suggested by the small seated figure, apparently Buddhist, adorning his hair dress. The figure on the reverse is Mahākāla (Fig. 6), one of Maheśvara’s emissaries, here appearing as he is described in the Buddhist sources.²⁸ The Fattegarh Mahākāla has a gruesome face, with open mouth showing fangs, round open eyes crowned by curved brows, a human skull on the forehead and, above it. Mahākāla wears a necklace and a *yajñopavīta*, both made of knotted snakes, in his two arms holds a trident horizontally, with the prongs towards the right;²⁹ above his forehead, there is a small, seated three-eyed figure, similar to the main character, but holding a club in his right hand.

The similarities between this figure and the one depicted in the Dandan Oiliq painting are enough for us to think that they represent one and the same deity, Mahākāla, so much so that in the Khotanese mural, surely not by chance, he sits in close proximity to Maheśvara.³⁰

Further to the right there was a fourth figure, of which, however, only the right knee and part of the right arm and of the seat are preserved.

Unfortunately, in none of his publications did Baumer provide information about the precise position of the paintings on the respective walls or about their respective measurements. Moreover Baumer

²⁸ The most fitting correspondence seems to be offered by the *Sādhnamālā*; for references to this and other relevant texts, see Granoff 1979: 80.

²⁹ An addorsed relief from Bāramūla (Kashmir) showing a close iconographic resemblance with the Fattegarh icon (although in a different style and workmanship) is housed in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum, Srinagar, see Pal 1973–74: 39–41, figs. 10, 11; Granoff 1979: 75–76, who interprets the sculpture as a Maheśvara/Mahākāla belonging to a purely Hindu context, lacking any sign of Buddhist affiliation (*ibid.*: 81).

³⁰ In spite of the ithyphallism, the terrifying glance, the trident and other details, Baumer (2009: 177) identifies this deity as Brahmā, but he adds that “in the assumed Sogdian context prevalent in Dandan, the figure represents Zurvan, the deity of Time”.

contended that we are dealing with two triads (Baumer 2009: 175 and *passim*), although the fact that each group includes three figures may be due to the chance of the discovery.

BUDDHIST TEMPLE CD4

Let us now consider the murals brought to light by the Sino-Japanese expeditions. In 2002, in a Buddhist shrine named CD4, which included more than 30 pieces of wall paintings, a large fragment recovered from the eastern wall of the eastern wing of the corridor surrounding the shrine is particularly relevant for our topic (Fig. 7) (*Treasure of the Silk Road* 2005: 71–79; Zhang, Qu, and Liu 2008: 158, fig. 5, colour pl. 5). It preserves part of a composition including one or more large standing Buddhas (one foot on lotus blossom still extant above) and, below, a number of seated Buddhas. Along the right and lower edges there is an L-shaped row of deities in much smaller scale, which have much in common with those from the D13, to begin with the posture and the attire. Apart from the imperfect state of preservation of the painted layer, the drawing appears as sketchy as that on the mural of northern wall, in D13. What I have described as the lower hem of a gown, in the female figures, here is further stylised to look like a seat.

Starting from the top of the vertical row, we see a female, animal-headed figure with an elongated attribute in her right hand. It is not easy to ascertain the animal her head belongs to, however I think that what seems to be a long curved muzzle³¹ could actually be an elephant’s trunk. I wonder whether we may identify this figure with Gaṇeśa’s female form, Vināyakī, also known as Gaṇeśvarī, Gajānanā, and numerous other epithets (Agrawala P.K. 1978). She is a rather rare and late member of the Saptamātrkā sets (8th–9th century) (Panikkar 2000: 60, 96), but she is more at home among the 64 *yoginīs*. Textual references about her iconography are elusive or very late,³² but if our deity is Gaṇeśa’s *śakti* the attribute held in her right hand could be a radish (*mūlakakanda*), which, by the way, appears in the hand of Gaṇeśa in three of the four Khotanese representations of this deity found at Khotan and Endere (Fig. 8).³³ As to the strange animal sitting in front of her, we would expect this deity to be accom-

³¹ At any rate, it can by no means be interpreted as “its tongue hanging out” (Zhang, Qu and Liu 2008: 157).

³² On the descriptions of this goddess in textual sources and on the artistic evidence about her, see Agrawala 1978, third and fourth chapters respectively.

³³ Williams 1973: 145–147, figs. 39, 54–56; Whitfield 1985: 309, 311 (nos. 53.2, 57).

panied by Gaṇeśa's *vāhana*, a mouse, which is not obvious in this mural. Whatever animal is represented here, it shows a remarkable resemblance to the *vāhana* of the Vināyaki depicted in the temple of the 64 *yoginīs* at Hirapur, in Orissa (Fig. 9). The embarrassment we feel in recognising Gaṇeśa's vehicle in this strange animal was surely felt, some decades ago, by Kedarnath Mohapatra (1953), who saw it as a donkey; this interpretation was later rejected by B.N. Sharma (1970: 169) and P.K. Agrawala (1978: 26), both of whom assumed that Vināyaki's vehicle cannot be other than a mouse; again, Th. Donaldson (2002 II: 667) thinks of a donkey. This issue probably needs further investigation and new clarifying evidence.

Going back to our painting (Fig. 7), below the elephant-headed goddess sits a female figure with a swaddled child in her lap; apart from the veil hanging from her cap, she is identical to the central figure in D13, western wall (Fig. 1). The figure represented below, in the corner between the two rows, is now faded beyond recognition (only a few strokes of the contour are still visible).

The first figure we can discern in the horizontal row is a goat- or ram-headed four-armed female figure, with the sun and moon and an unclear object in her right hand. A goat's (or ram's) head could therefore lead us to think of Naigameśa, or of a female counterpart of this demon linked with children's health.³⁴ Considering that the image of Skanda appears immediately next to this ram-headed figure, we may suggest a comparison with a relief in the Cave 21 at Ellora (8th century), in which Skanda, standing with a cock in his left hand and accompanied by his peacock, is flanked by two ram-headed figures in *añjalimudrā* (Mann 2012: 214-215, fig 40).

As I have mentioned, the following figure is a three-headed Skanda sitting on a peacock, with the sun and moon and a cockerel in his right hand. An interesting additional feature is represented by the black dashes on his skin, which may represent scars.

The sequence is closed by a frowning female deity with drooping breasts, who lifts an emaciated naked child grasping him by the wrists and ankles. Figures portrayed in the same attitude, though animal-headed, are witnessed in a now lost Khadalik mural³⁵ and in a painted manuscript from Dunhuang (Fig. 13), which I will deal with shortly.³⁶

³⁴ Rees and Fumitaka 2013: 256–266, with relevant bibliography on literary sources and archaeological finds.

³⁵ Stein 1921: pl. XI; Williams 1973: 139–140, fig. 45.

³⁶ This is how Baumer (2009: 180) reads the same sequence of deities in temple CD4, starting from top: "The first figure with the nimbate head of a deer has two hands; the right one holds a lotus flower, the left one maybe as well [...].

Further right, there is a standing male figure, with moustache and cap, in front of whom two horses face each other (cf. Zhang, Qu, and Liu 2008: 158, fig. 5).

It is clear that what remains of the sequence of deities framing the Buddhas in the temple CD4 has much in common with the one preserved in the temple D13, both in its composition and in the iconographic rendering of some of the deities it includes.

BUDDHIST TEMPLE CD10

The last piece of evidence, yielded by the Sino-Japanese excavations in 2004, is a mural (Fig. 10) preserved on the north-western wall of the Buddhist shrine named CD10.³⁷ The composition is quite similar to those we have been dealing with so far (a group of female deities headed by Skanda), although the impression it conveys is that of a paratactic sequence with little iconographic variation. In the lower register, an ornamental band of red squares, each containing a red and white circle; on the extreme left the bust of a female figure in profile to the right. In the upper register (more likely the middle register of the wall, only partially preserved) there is a row of seven female figures, ended on the extreme right by a three-headed and four-armed Skanda on his peacock, holding the sun and moon disks in his upper hands and a cock in the lower left. The seven goddesses are portrayed in the same posture, kneeling in three-quarter view to the right, on the background of rectangles of alternating colours. They share the same outfit, although in different colours; most of them join their hands either in *añjalimudrā* or, perhaps, to hold some object, no longer discernible; only the seventh female figure holds a swaddled child in her lap. To her left there is a cuirassed male holding a spear (*Vaiśrāvaṇa*?). Further left there is one last figure (at least in the picture I could analyse), probably female, only partially preserved.

Let us now try to make sense of all this. It is evident that the presence of Skanda along with female deities, sometimes animal-headed sometimes holding a child in their laps, links all the compo-

The next figure is a sitting wolf or jackal [...]. The third figure is again Hārīti [...]. the figure at the left bottom corner is not recognizable any more, the next sitting figure has the head of a camel or a horse [...]. The next two figures to the right represent sitting male, nimbate deities [...]. The first one [...] is probably Washagn, shown under the traits of Kārttikeya. The second, ithyphallic figure, has a single nimbate human head and holds in his hands a kind of elongated bag".

³⁷ *Dandan Wulike Yizhi* 2009: pl. 9. I am very grateful to Erika Forte, who kindly handed me this picture as well as the bibliographic reference about it.

sitions we have seen so far to the cult addressed to *grahas* “seizers, snatchers” or *bālagrahas* “children snatchers”.³⁸ This is the context in which Skanda makes his first appearance in early Hinduism. Before becoming a *senāpati*, the general of the army of the gods and the son of Śiva (or of Agni), Skanda was already worshipped as a disease-causing deity and credited with leading hosts of malevolent spirits—mostly female demons called *mātrī* or *mātrkā*—harmful to pregnant women as well as to children (White 2003: 27–66; Wujastyk 2011²).

Skanda is a complex deity, and there is nothing I could add to the insightful and original analysis recently made by Richard Mann, who traces the history of this multifaceted god, from its earliest association with terrifying spirits to his successive distancing from them, having acquired the rank of *senāpati* (Mann 2012).³⁹ It will be useful, nevertheless, to summarise the most salient points. The earliest full-fledged descriptions of Skanda and of these demoniac hosts are mainly found in the *Mahābhārata* and in a number of Ayurvedic sources, beginning with the *Suśrutasamhitā*, a text which, just like the *Mahābhārata*, covers a long time span from the Maurya, through the Kushan and the Gupta periods, although its final form dates from around 500 CE (Wujastyk 2001²: 106; Mann 2012: 25–47). In the *Mahābhārata*, however, Skanda undergoes a substantial transformation; in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* section, in particular, in the narratives concerning his birth, a number of strategies are enacted in order to emancipate the god from his wicked inclinations and enhance his status. In the *Śalyaparvan* section of the *Mahābhārata*, the conversion is perfectly accomplished and Skanda has been definitely promoted to the rank of the general of the army of the gods.⁴⁰

It is worth highlighting that the “redefinition” of Skanda is substantially unattested in the Ayurvedic literature, where Skanda retains his original character as a harmful *bālagraha*. According to the *Suśruta Samhitā*, of all the *grahas* he is known as the most dangerous (Mann 2012: 31). The Brahmanical decontamination of Skanda, promoted by the epics, did not affect the Ayurvedic traditions un-

³⁸ The presence of *grahas* in Khotanese imagery as well as literary sources was already suggested by J. Williams, while commenting upon a few mural fragments showing animal-headed figures, see Williams 1973: 139–140. Baumer is aware of Williams’s hypothesis and considers the possibility of interpreting some of the figures in the D13 painting as *bālagrahas*, but they do not seem to be coherent with the overall exegesis of the subject he proposes (see above, p. 72, fn. 6).

³⁹ See also Mann 2001, 2003 (his PhD dissertation) and 2007. For some reviews of Mann’s 2012 monograph, see Hatley 2014; Srinivasan 2014; Pal 2014. I am grateful to Donald M. Stadtner for pointing out the last two references to me.

⁴⁰ For a full treatment of what I have summarised here in a few lines, see Mann 2012: 49–77, with references to the written sources.

til much later: in the *Aṣṭaṅgahṛdayasamhitā* (c. 600 CE) and in the *Kāśyapasamhitā* (7th century CE) Skanda is still a dreadful deity afflicting children, along with the other *grahas* (*Loc. cit.*).

The written sources provide few details about these spirits, which are often presented as simple lists of names or anonymous groups of “mothers”. Only in a few cases is their appearance sketchily described. In India the iconographic evidence of these beliefs consists of a few reliefs from Mathurā, dating from the Kushan epoch, that is the 2nd or 3rd centuries.⁴¹ Skanda appears with his martial equipment and in two cases the mothers are portrayed as semi-theriomorphic figures (Fig. 11). To these stone reliefs we can add a few terracotta figurines of single mothers, in some cases goat-headed (Fig. 12), with a child in their lap.⁴²

The original context of these reliefs is not specified, but I would not discount the possibility that they may have belonged to Buddhist shrines, so much so that terracotta figurines portraying similar characters are recorded in several sites in northern India, such as Rajghat, Kumrahar and Jetavana, always in association with Buddhist monastic settlements and in layers dating from the Kushan to the Gupta periods (Rees, Fumitaka 2013: 255–265). This is a category of finds which usually goes under the conventional label of “Naigameṣa”. In fact Naigameṣa is a goat-headed male deity or spirit linked with pregnancy and child-birth,⁴³ but, in Indian archaeological literature his name has been commonly attributed to almost any goat-headed deity, regardless of whether it is male or female.

There has always been a strong tie between traditional medicine and Buddhism. The Buddhist monastery provided an institutional home for medical education and healing practices stemming from the Vedic and Brahmanic tradition (Zysk 2000: 38–49). Buddhist monk-healers and hospices ranged over South Asia as well as Central Asia and the Far East, with a concomitant spread of medical literature, which was translated from Pali and Sanskrit into Tibetan, Chinese, and, what is particularly significant for us, into Khotanese.⁴⁴ There are medical texts translated into this language, in particular substantial portions of two of them: the *Siddhasāra*, an Ayurvedic

⁴¹ Agrawala 1971: 80–82, fig. 6–8; Panikkar 2000: 4–6, 16; Mann 2012: figs. 9–13.

⁴² Panikkar 2000: 31–53, pls. 9–13, 15. On a stone-relief from Mathurā (*ibid.*: pl. 7) a male goat-headed figure is portrayed as sitting on a throne, flanked by a child and female attendants.

⁴³ See above, p. 76.

⁴⁴ On the spread of Indian medicine beyond India along with Buddhism, see the fourth chapter of Zysk’s monograph (2000³: 49–70; on Khotanese sources, 63–64).

treatise written by Ravigupta (c. 650 CE), wholly preserved in Sanskrit and in Tibetan, but translated into Khotanese from the Tibetan in the 10th century. The incomplete manuscript of the so-called, and otherwise unknown, *Jivakapustaka*, in corrupt Sanskrit and Khotanese (Maggi 2009: 413-415) dates from the same epoch.

Apart from the spread of medical literature *stricto sensu*, even more relevant evidence of the integration of the beliefs concerning the *grahas* in Buddhism is represented by the *dhāraṇīs*, or mystic spells to be uttered in order to exorcise serious illnesses. A remarkable example is provided by the three extant leaves of a *Mahāsāhasrapramardanī* manuscript (Fig. 13) (Maggi 1996), which is one of the *dhāraṇīs* later grouped in the pentad of deified spells known as *Pañcarakṣā*.⁴⁵ The original manuscript, probably dating from the 9th century, contained eight or nine folios; each of the three extant folios, recovered by Aurel Stein in Dunhuang, and now in the British Museum, bears on both sides the picture of a demon accompanied by a Chinese text and a compendious Khotanese translation. The text provides the Khotanese and Sanskrit name of each figure, along with the particular disease it can provoke. This important finding has not yet been subject to any serious iconographic analysis, which is beyond my concern on this occasion. I will just remark that it clearly belongs to the same ritual context that we have pointed out for the Dandan Oiliq paintings. All figures of the Dunhuang manuscript are represented along with one or more children, and one of them, an owl-headed goddess here named Mukhamaṇḍikā (Mukhamaṇḍā in Khotanese), holds a naked child grasping him by the wrists and ankles, thus recalling the sinister image represented in Dandan Oiliq CD4 (Fig. 7) and in a lost mural from Khadalik (see above, p. 76 and fn. 35).⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

An important addition to our documentation on Buddhist mural painting in eastern Central Asia, the paintings recently found at Dandan Oiliq touch upon a number of relevant questions concerning the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism. In particular, they

⁴⁵ The five *dhāraṇīs* are first grouped together in the *Sādhnamālā* and in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (12th century). Each of them was earlier worshipped as an independent goddess. The text of the *Mahāmāyūrī*, the earliest of all, was already translated into Chinese in the early 4th century CE; cf. Mevissen 1992: 415; the first known depictions of *Mahāmāyūrī* as a goddess appears in Ellora, Caves VI and VIII, see Mevissen 1990: 230 and fns. 43–45, fig. 8.

⁴⁶ Williams (1973: 140) proposes to identify the wolf(?) -headed female figure in the Khadalik fragment with the *grahā* Mukhamaṇḍikā.

provide new material for one of the major issues in the realm of Buddhist ritual and art, that is, the role assigned to Hindu deities in the Buddhist system of beliefs and to what extent can those deities still be labelled as “Hindu” in view of their new setting.

It would be improper to think of the practice of traditional medicine in Buddhist monasteries as a borrowing from a distinct culture (i.e. Brahmanism), as traditional medicine, along with all the beliefs it implied, was part of a common heritage: the whole system became an organic part of Buddhist practice since the earliest times. After all, the insightful re-appraisal by Robert DeCaroli (2004) of the worship of *yakṣas*, *nāgas* and other semi-divine beings, ubiquitous in the iconographic programs of the earliest preserved Buddhist monuments as well as in Buddhist literature, urges us to reconsider the part played by these beliefs in the life of early Buddhist monks.

Traditional medicine was, therefore, the ideal channel through which a host of male and, especially, female disease-causing spirits or deities were incorporated into Buddhism, and later worshipped in the form of mystic spells, or *dhāraṇīs*. This is the religious background which helps us understand the meaning of all three compositions in the recently excavated Dandan Oiliq temples. From an iconographic viewpoint, however, they deserve a few more comments, with regard to both the overall scheme of presentation and the individual characters.

Even if we consider the possibility that the early reliefs from Mathurā I have mentioned above (Figs. 11 and 12) may have belonged to Buddhist monuments, similar sets of *grahas* (Skanda at the head of or among female deities depicted as animal-headed figures or according to the mother-and-child model) are no longer seen in Buddhist (or in Hindu) iconography until they reappear in Khotan in the 8th century. We may therefore say that in Khotan we have evidence of an “archaic” scheme of presentation of these entities, yet their respective iconographies—at least in the cases in which we can reasonably propose comparisons with the Indian imagery—is not archaic at all. To begin with Skanda, whose Khotanese images reproduce an iconographic type which spread in northern India from the 5th century onward—more precisely in north-western India, if, along with the peacock, we bear in mind the cockerel in his hand—and that in the second half of the same century we find as far as Yungang.

The same applies to Mahākāla, whose depiction in the temple D13 matches the Buddhist iconographic type of this deity, as witnessed in the art of 7th century Kashmir and described in later Buddhist texts. Furthermore, if we are right in detecting a relationship with the iconographies of Vārāhī and Vināyakī in two of the Khotanese female figures (D13 and CD4), we would obtain additional confirmation that

individual characters in the groups of deities at Dandan Oiliq mirror Indian models of a relatively late date, appearing in groups of female deities which, according to some scholars, can somehow be viewed as ennobled or reinvented forms of the early “mothers”, i.e. the Saptamātrkās and, later on, the *yoginīs*. In this regard, it may be useful to add that, whereas the Saptamātrkās are at first still guided by Skanda (and here lies a significant link with the earliest *mātrī*), in the 5th century they are already headed by Śiva (Maheśvara),⁴⁷ sometimes accompanied by one of his emanations, Mahākāla (Panikkar 2000: 116, 120, 148, 175), two of the deities we find in the painting of Dandan Oiliq D13.

To conclude, the scheme in which the Hindu deities are put on stage in Dandan Oiliq recalls the traditional presentation of *grahas*, widely documented in Indian epic and Ayurvedic literature as well as in Buddhist spells; however, its iconographic appearance in India seems to be limited to the Kushan period. On the other hand the individual deities featured in the Dandan Oiliq groups are in harmony with the later developments of Indian iconography, an issue which surely deserves further investigation. The ritual and iconographic programme to which this diverse Buddhist and Hindu iconography has been domesticated is essentially Khotanese.

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⁴⁷ The earliest iconographic evidence is probably a rock relief at Badoh Pathari, in Madhya Pradesh (Panikkar 2000: 76–77, pls. 21, 22).

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Fig. 1: Dandan Oiliq, temple D13, painting on the western wall (after Baumer 2000: fig. 70).





Fig. 2: The god Skanda, Gupta period. Benares, Bharat Kala Bhavan (after Mann 2012: fig. 31).



Fig. 3: Yungang, cave VIII: the god Skanda (photo: Ben Yeuda).

Fig. 4: The goddess Vārāhī. Relief in the Madhukeśvara Temple, Mukhalingam (Andhra Pradesh), 8th century (after Donaldson 1995: fig. 5).

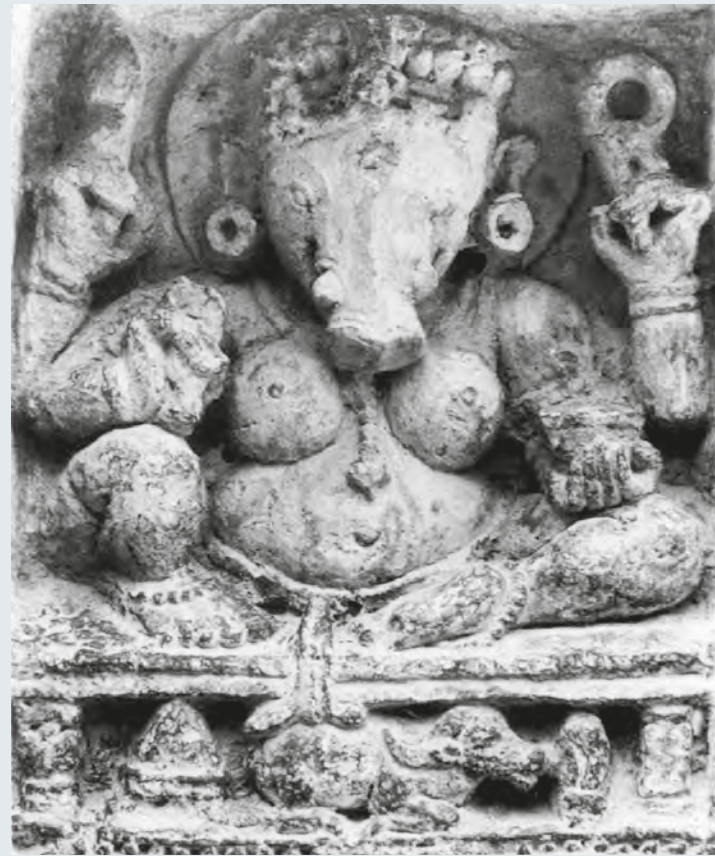


Fig. 5: Dandan Oiliq, temple D13, painting on the northern wall (after Baumer 1999: fig. 24).



Fig. 6: Mahākāla. Reverse of an addorsed sculpture showing Maheśvara on the obverse. From Fattegarh, Kashmir (after Granoff 1979: fig. 2).





Fig. 7: Dandan Oiliq, temple CD4, eastern corridor
(after *Treasures of the Silk Road* 2005: fig. 32).

Fig. 8: Gaṇeśa. Painted wooden panel from Endere (Khotan oasis) (after Whitfield 1985: no. 57).



Fig. 9: Vināyakī. Relief in the Temple of the 64 *yoginis* at Hirapur, Orissa (photo: Dinesh Korgaokar).





Fig. 10: Dandan Oiliq, temple CD10: a row of female and male deities (after *Dandan Wulike Yizhi* 2009: pl. 9).



Fig. 11: The god Skanda beside a *mātrkā* with a child in her lap. From Mathurā. Mathurā Government Museum (after Mann 2012: fig. 11).



Fig. 12: Animal-headed female deity with a child in her lap. Terracotta figurine from Mathurā. Mathurā Government Museum (after Panikkar 2000: pl. 10).



Fig. 13: Three folios (obverse and reverse) of a *Mahāsāhasrapramardani* manuscript. From Dunhuang. London, British Museum (after Whitfield 1985: pl. 75).

