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LIQUID CONNECTIONS: WINE, RITUAL, AND CROSS-CULTURAL CURRENTS IN GANDHĀRA (A REVIEW ARTICLE)

by

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Claudia Antonetti, Bryan De Notariis, Marco Enrico (eds.), Wine Cultures. Gandhāra and Beyond, Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari – Venice University Press, 2024, 311 pp., ISBN 978-88-6969-877-4 (print), ISBN 978-88-6969-816-3 (e-book), €74.00.

Wine Cultures. Gandhāra and Beyond, edited by Claudia Antonetti, Bryan De Notariis, and Marco Enrico, is the outcome of the interdisciplinary MALIWI project (*Making Libation of Wine from Golden Cups: Social, Ritual, and Ceremonial Use of Wine in the Gandhāran Area, from the Achaemenids to the Kushans*), supported by Ca' Foscari's SPIN initiative (*Supporting Principal Investigators*). Spanning 311 pages, the volume represents a significant scholarly contribution to the underexplored intersection of alcohol, ritual, and cross-cultural exchange in ancient South Asia and its broader Hellenistic context. The editors note that, aside from recent studies such as James McHugh's book[1] and De Notariis's own work on grape wine in Buddhist literature,[2] systematic research on wine in the South Asian context – particularly in Gandhāra – remains scarce. Drawing on a vast corpus of Indian, Chinese, and Greco-Roman sources, this collection addresses the ceremonial, symbolic, and sociopolitical roles of wine in textual traditions, religious practices, and artistic representations. The volume also serves as a key output of the 2023 international conference *Wine Culture: Gandharan Crossroads*, and is accompanied by a publicly accessible Zotero bibliography,[3] making it an indispensable resource for scholars of ancient religion, history, and intercultural contact. The main body of the book is divided into three parts – (1) "Indological Sources. Literature and Anthropology," (2) "Archaeology of Wine. Comparisons and Diachronies," and (3) "Gandhāra and Classical Sources. Imagery, Iconography, Epigraphy and Texts" – all preceded by an introductory chapter.

In this introductory chapter, "Intoxicating Nectars of Plenty," McHugh reflects on the complex cultural, religious, and economic dimensions of alcohol in ancient South Asia,

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[1] J. McHugh, *An Unholy Brew: Alcohol in Indian History and Religion*, New York 2021.

[2] B. De Notariis, *Where is Grape Wine? On Grapes and Wine in Pāli Buddhist Literature and Beyond*, JIABS 46 (2023), pp. 81–119.

[3] www.zotero.org/groups/4744246/wine_in_gandhara/library.

with particular attention to Gandhāra. Drawing a provocative comparison to Renaissance Venetian depictions of the wedding at Cana,[4] he emphasizes that representations of drinking – rather than direct evidence – form the primary basis for our understanding of alcohol in this period. McHugh critiques reductive readings of Gandhāran wine imagery as merely 'imported' Dionysiac motifs or documentary records of vinification, urging instead a contextual approach to these depictions. He situates Gandhāran wine culture within a broader South Asian spectrum of fermented drinks – made from grains, sugarcane, fruits like jackfruit and *jambu*, and often infused with *saṃbhāra* – noting that the premodern world lacked a unified concept of "alcohol" as a substance common to them all. Gandhāra's latitude and archaeological evidence support its long-standing suitability for viticulture, and the region's term for wine, *masu*, while Indic, may reflect influence from the reconstructed Iranian **madu*. While Hellenistic elements are superficially evident, McHugh suggests that internal South Asian actors may have significantly shaped Gandhāran wine culture, much like the Dutch or British impacted Bordeaux. He characterizes Gandhāra as a cultural 'horizon' between wine-centric and multi-beverage regions, and suggests that wine was likely not perceived as prohibited to monastics or laypeople. Notably, grape wine, consisting only of grapes and lacking *saṃbhāra*, could plausibly be interpreted as not violating Buddhist precepts. Finally, while Harry Falk proposed a model of quickly fermented wine consumed at festivals,[5] McHugh entertains the possibility of more careful production practices oriented toward storage and trade.

The first part of the book, "Indological Sources. Literature and Anthropology," opens with the chapter "The Gandhāric Roots of the Indian *Symposion* and Sympotic-like Elements in Buddhist Literature," in which De Notariis investigates how elements typically associated with the Greek *symposion* – alcohol, sex, and intellectual pursuits (following Kenneth G. Zysk[6]) – appear in early Buddhist texts, particularly within the Theravāda tradition. Drawing on Pāli sources such as the *Vinaya* and suttas like the *Upakkilesasutta*, De Notariis identifies instances where Buddhist monks and nuns engage in behaviour explicitly condemned by the doctrine yet closely resembling elite, private gatherings (*Vin*. II 9–10; II 267), thus attesting to the presence of sympotic-like practices. While these narratives serve to censure, they also inadvertently reveal cultural accommodations, suggesting that Buddhists at times followed the motto "When in Rome do as Romans do". He further argues that certain deities described in cosmological texts – *karoṭapāṇi*, *mālādharas*, and *sadāmattas* – represent drinking, sexual allure, and intoxicated joy, and may function as 'sympotic deities'. The chapter is commendable for its close engagement with primary sources and its incorporation of textual criticism, which substantially strengthens the argument. However, several aspects could be refined: the metaphor of Gandhāra as a 'grey area' is conceptually vague and analytically unhelpful; some notes are overly lengthy and might have been more effectively integrated into

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[4] While the author offers detailed descriptions of contemporary art, the absence of accompanying images limits the reader's ability to fully appreciate the analysis. Including visual material would have greatly enriched the discussion and made the argument more accessible.

[5] H. Falk, *Making Wine in Gandhara under Buddhist Monastic Supervision*, BAI 23 (2009), pp. 65–78, here at pp. 75–76.

[6] K.G. Zysk, *From 'Symposion' to* Goṣṭhī*: The Adaptation of a Greek Social Custom in Ancient India*, Studia Orientalia Electronica 9 (2021), pp. 83–111, here at p. 105.

the main text; and the proposed etymology of *asuras* as deriving from a lack (*a-*) of the intoxicant *surā* – used to imply a cultural valuation of alcohol – is speculative at best and requires more philological support.[7] Despite the chapter's strengths in textual analysis and iconographic insight, its central claim – that Gandhāra mediated Greek sympotic customs into Buddhist contexts – is more speculative than demonstrable. The material presented better supports a nuanced view of internal Buddhist tensions between ascetic ideals and worldly practices than any direct lineage from the Greek *symposion*.

In another chapter, "In Search of Regional/Local (*deśī*) Words for 'Intoxicant' in First-Millennium India," Andrea Drocco examines the semantic and linguistic diversity of terms for intoxicating substances in Old and Middle Indo-Aryan languages, with a particular focus on *deśī* (regional or local) vocabulary. Drocco traces the diachronic development from Vedic and Classical Sanskrit (OIA) through Prakrit (MIA) and Apabhraṁśa, the latter emerging as a literary idiom by the 5th–6th century CE. Central to the analysis is the tripartite classification of Prakrit lexicon into *tatsama* (Sanskrit loanwords), *tadbhava* (words evolved from Sanskrit), and *deśī* (non-Sanskritic, regional terms). While texts such as *Kuvalayamālā* and *Vivāgasuyaṃ* primarily contain *tatsama* and *tadbhava* words for intoxicants – e.g., *āsava*, *surā*, *madirā*, *sīdhu*, and *maireyaka* – Drocco highlights the presence of *deśī* terms like *jāī* and, notably, the extensive list in Hemacandra's *Deśīnāmamālā*, including obscure and understudied names such as *avakkarasa*, *kavisa*, and *piṭṭhakhaurā*. He further notes the Sanskritisation of originally Dravidian terms, as in *kallā* → *kalya*, underscoring the complex interlinguistic dynamics of the period. Despite their cultural and philological significance, Drocco stresses that *deśī* words remain a largely neglected area of study since the pioneering works of Georg Bühler,[8] John Beames,[9] Richard Pischel,[10] and others in the 19th century. His contribution thus revives and expands a crucial linguistic inquiry into the socio-ritual dimensions of intoxicants in early South Asia.

In the last chapter of this part, "Wine in India and Other Substances: An Anthropology of 'Entheogens'", Stefano Beggiora explores the ritual and cultural dimensions of psychoactive substances – commonly referred to as *entheogens* – across historical and contemporary South Asian contexts. Drawing on archaeological, textual, and ethnographic evidence, he situates fermented drinks such as wine and palm sap (known as 'toddy', or *kallu*) within broader traditions of sacred intoxication, from the Vedic *Soma* and Avestan

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[7] According to M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, Oxford 1899, p. 121, word *asura* (असुर) is linked to the root *asu* (असु), which is interpreted as "life" or "vital breath"; A. Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization*, Oxford 2015, pp. 114–116 proposes that the Proto-Indo-Aryan term *asura* was borrowed into Proto-Uralic as *asera-*, conveying the meaning "lord" or "prince". This linguistic borrowing suggests early contact between Indo-Aryan and Uralic-speaking populations.

[8] G. Bühler, *The Deśīśabdasaṅgraha of Hemacandra*, Indian Antiq. 2 (1874), pp. 17–21.

[9] J. Beames, *Comparative Grammar of the Modern Aryan Languages of India: To Wit, Hindi, Panjabi, Sindhi, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya and Bangali*, 3 vols, London 1872–1879.

[10] R. Pischel, *The Deśīnāmamālā. Edited with critical notes, a glossary, and a historical introduction by Richard Pischel and George Bühler.* Pt. 1: *Text and critical notes by Richard Pischel*, Bombay 1880.

Haoma to contemporary tribal practices among *ādivāsī* communities in Odisha, who ferment *salap* from *Caryota urens* using localized microbiological starters. The analysis also revisits classical narratives – such as the *samudramanthana* or 'churning of the ocean of milk' – interpreting them as metaphors for psychological and cosmogonic transformation, while engaging with broader anthropological and theoretical frameworks from Mircea Eliade,[11] Michael Harner,[12] and the proponents of 'entheogenic theory'. Of particular interest is the chapter's reflection on fermentation as a sacred, generative process, endowed with healing and metaphysical significance through concepts such as *ranu*. While Beggiora's approach is at times impressionistic – such as his symbolic reading of intoxication as cosmogony – the chapter offers a valuable synthesis of textual traditions and living ritual practices, and prompts renewed consideration of indigenous epistemologies in the study of intoxicants. One minor terminological issue worth noting is the author's use of *incipit* in the sense of "introduction", which diverges from its standard scholarly meaning – namely, the opening words of a text – and may cause confusion.

The second part, "Archaeology of Wine. Comparisons and Diachronies", opens with the chapter "The Archaeology of Wine in the Southern Caucasus: New Methods for an Old Tradition," in which Elena Rova traces the deep historical roots and cultural continuity of viticulture in Georgia and the broader Southern Caucasus. As a core region of early wine production, the Southern Caucasus boasts archaeological evidence dating to the 6th millennium BCE, particularly in Shulaveri-Shomu culture sites, where wine may have been made from wild grapes (*Vitis vinifera* subsp. *silvestris*). This tradition persisted through the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages, aided by the favourable conditions of the 'Holocene climatic optimum'. Key finds such as the Areni-1 grape-crushing installation in Armenia – associated with ritual head burials – suggest that wine played a symbolic as well as practical role in early societies. The continuity of Georgian wine-making practices, especially in *qvevris*, has been recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. Rova highlights the expansion of wine culture across the Kura-Araxes horizon and its elite associations in the Trialeti kurgans (3rd–2nd millennia BCE), culminating in the widespread symbolic and ritual use of wine from the 1st millennium BCE through Late Antiquity. The use of drinking horns (*rhyta*), banquet iconography (such as the Dionysian banquet depicted in the Dzalisa mosaic), and hybrid local-Achaemenid styles all underscore wine's embeddedness in cross-cultural identity and ritual. Richly illustrated with visual materials, the chapter demonstrates how archaeological and iconographic evidence can illuminate the *longue durée* of wine culture in this pivotal region. As such, it constitutes an important *comparandum* for exploring the presence and cultural semantics of wine in Gandhāra.

In the chapter entitled "An Assyrian Winery in Khinis, Ancient Khanusa (Kurdistan Region of Iraq)," Francesca Simi, Costanza Coppin, and Daniele Morandi Bonacossi present the first archaeologically attested wine production area in ancient Mesopotamia, located near the monumental complex of Khinis in the hinterland of the Assyrian capitals Nineveh and Khorsabad. This discovery, part of the broader *Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project* (LoNAP), sheds new light on elite and possibly ritualised

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[11] M. Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaiques de l'extase*, Paris 1951.

[12] M. Harner (ed.), *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, New York–London–Oxford 1973.

viticulture during the Neo-Assyrian period. The site features an extraordinary concentration of eighteen wine presses whose layout parallels other known viticultural installations, and is integrated into a monumental hydraulic infrastructure attributed to Sennacherib in the early 7th century BCE. The wine production complex is commemorated by cuneiform inscriptions and rock reliefs that link the practice to royal authority and divine sanction. Richly illustrated, the chapter also situates this winery within long-term regional traditions, arguing that contemporary winemaking among Christian Assyrian and Chaldean communities may trace its roots back to this imperial past. As such, the Khinis site provides an essential comparative case for contextualising the intersection of wine, power, and sacred landscape in other ancient settings, including Gandhāra.

With another chapter, we move into a neighbouring region of ancient Gandhāra, as Prabhjeet K. Johal's "Wine in Achaemenid Arachosia. An Imperial Network of Regional Wines" investigates the emergence and integration of viniculture in Arachosia, a southeastern satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire. Centred in the agriculturally favourable Arghandab valley, Arachosia is depicted on the Apadana reliefs at Persepolis as a wine-producing region, with tribute bearers carrying distinctive drinking vessels. Although pre-Achaemenid evidence remains elusive, the chapter argues that imperial investment – particularly in irrigation infrastructure such as *qanats* – stimulated widespread viticultural development. Wine became central to courtly feasting and administrative practices, circulating as tribute and being consumed across a range of social strata, as suggested by standardized vessels and Aramaic documents recording large-scale wine storage and use. Johal thus positions Arachosian wine as a key commodity within the Achaemenid imperial network, tied to broader processes of cultural and economic integration.

The next chapter, "Wine in Gandhāra. Notes on a Mythical and Economical Geography," by Omar Coloru, Elisa Iori, and Luca M. Olivieri, stands out as the key contribution of the volume, offering a richly layered synthesis of myth, history, and archaeology to reconstruct the *longue durée* cultural and economic geography of wine in the highlands of Gandhāra – particularly the Swat, Bajaur, and Kunar/Chitral valleys, collectively forming a 'Wine Belt' that overlaps with what is today Greater Kafiristan or Peristan. Beginning with Alexander's campaign through these regions in 327 BCE, the authors unpack the politically motivated fabrication of a Dionysian presence in the area, tracing how local features such as wild vines, ivy, and mountain cults were woven into a Hellenistic narrative to justify conquest and establish ideological legitimacy. They argue convincingly that the myth of Nysa and the mount Meros, where Alexander reportedly engaged in Bacchic rites, was a diplomatic fiction emerging from mutual accommodation between Greek and local interlocutors. The itinerary of Alexander's march through the region, presented in the chapter, is especially useful and thoughtfully reconstructed, drawing on literary sources, topographic analysis, and firsthand archaeological experience. While the footnotes might initially seem too long, they are so interesting and rich in content that the reader cannot fault them – in fact, they are integral to the argument's depth and sophistication. The chapter then turns to the archaeology of wine, establishing a continuous tradition of viticulture and viniculture in Swat from the mid-2nd millennium BCE, with Dardic communities as the key agents in production and ritual consumption. The authors integrate material culture – from wine presses and funerary ceramics to satyr-like figures in Gandhāran art – to demonstrate that wine was not only a cultic and funerary medium, but increasingly, under Achaemenid and Hellenistic influence, an

urban symbol of social distinction. The chapter's broad chronological scope and interdisciplinary depth make it a pivotal contribution to understanding how local ecologies, imperial ideologies, and indigenous practices converged in the making of a Gandhāran wine culture.

The last part, "Gandhāra and Classical Sources. Imagery, Iconography, Epigraphy and Texts," opens with Cristiano Moscatelli and Anna Filigenzi's chapter, "Beyond the Form. Observations on Wine-Symbolism and Related Figurative Themes in Gandhāran Art," which offers a compelling exploration of how Gandhāran visual culture encoded layers of symbolic meaning rooted in local religious and pastoral traditions. Drawing on recent archaeological finds – including schist reliefs and figural representations such as the enigmatic male deity from Barikot – the authors argue that motifs like wine vessels, grape clusters, and goat-headed cornucopias reflect an ideological system centred on wine consumption and goat sacrifice, characteristic of the so-called 'Dardic' substratum. Ethnographic parallels with Nuristani and Kalasha practices underscore the persistence of an Indo-European pastoral ideology, which Buddhism did not displace but rather integrated through localised iconographies of tutelary couples, erotic pairs (*mithuna*), and revelry scenes. Such scenes, the authors suggest, may depict ritual festivities akin to the Kalasha New Year, revealing how Buddhist monuments visually assimilated indigenous cosmologies. Rather than static ornamentation, vine scrolls, *kantharoi*, and goat imagery served as vehicles for transmitting collective memory, religious value, and regional identity across centuries.

In the next chapter, "Wine, Women and Royalty in Gandhāra," Claudia Antonetti examines the symbolic and ideological intersections of female political authority, ritual libation, and kingship in the context of Alexander's encounter with the Assacenian kingdom. Focusing on the figure of Queen Cleophis – reputed to have negotiated with Alexander and possibly engaged in a romantic relationship with him – Antonetti treats this episode as a cultural construct rather than a factual account. Central to her analysis is a procession of noblewomen performing wine libations, which she uses to explore the broader significance of wine, gender, and power. The chapter traces the political and religious roles of royal women through numismatic and funerary evidence, highlighting figures such as Agathocleia and elite burials in the Swat Valley. Turning to material culture, Antonetti considers Gandhāran reliefs and ritual vessels, noting the predominance of *kantharoi* and cornucopias over the more classically Greek *phiale* or *patera*. Rare silver *phialai* – often lacking archaeological provenance but suggestive of elite ritual practices – hint at localized adaptations of Mediterranean traditions. Although the chapter draws on a wide and impressive range of sources, the interpretive thread remains somewhat diffuse, and the conclusion does not fully consolidate the insights developed throughout.

In the chapter devoted to "Wine in the Gandhāran Epigraphic Corpus," Stefan Baums investigates the sparse yet intriguing epigraphic traces of wine culture in ancient Gandhāra. Although evidence is limited, inscribed vessels – mostly *phialai*, goblets, and trays – attest to the ritual, commemorative, and possibly recreational use of wine-related paraphernalia. These objects, often made of silver and occasionally bearing elaborate dedications, originate from various sites, notably Taxila and several unprovenanced hoards likely associated with sanctuary contexts. One notable example is a bilingual dedication by the meridarch Kalliphon to a deity named "Khaos" or "Boa," revealing Greek and

Gāndhārī devotional vocabulary.[13] Elsewhere, inscriptions from Dasht-e-Nawur suggest communal wine-drinking rituals tied to local religious practices in the Kushan period. Baums also critically engages with Falk's interpretation that certain large bowls were used for wine in Buddhist monasteries,[14] arguing instead that they may have served more neutral functions, such as water vessels. While some vessels were likely used in ritual contexts, Baums questions previous claims about their role in Buddhist monastic settings, instead proposing that many were later repurposed for Buddhist ends, as with the famed Indravarma reliquary. Despite the evidence for wine consumption and gifting, the epigraphic record remains silent on viticulture itself in Gandhāra. In contrast, related terminology appears extensively in Central Asian documents from Niya and Kucha, pointing to a broader regional network of practices and vocabulary. Baums concludes that the Gandhāran wine culture was embedded in a culturally hybrid society where Greek, Iranian, Indian, and local elements intermingled – reflected in both the objects and the names of their donors.

In the final chapter, "Strabo on Wine in Ancient India," Marco Enrico explores how viticulture functions within the ethnographic and utopian frameworks of Strabo's *Geography*, focusing especially on the contested account of vine cultivation in the kingdom of Musikanos.[15] While Strabo generally classifies India as ἄοινος – lacking in wine – he reports that in Musikanos' domain, grapevines grew spontaneously and wine was produced, a detail attributed to Onesikritos and typical of Greek utopian tropes linking agricultural abundance to civilizational advancement. Enrico contextualizes these claims within a broader Greco-Roman literary tradition that idealized India, yet simultaneously positioned it within a framework of controlled marvels and 'civilized barbarism'. He highlights the tension between fantastical representations and archaeological evidence of actual wine production in regions such as Gandhāra, where viticulture long predated Greek contact. Enrico ultimately challenges the reading of these passages as merely utopian, arguing instead that even idealized features – like spontaneous vine growth – rest on tangible realities. While he suggests that the references to wine, wheat, and olive oil might have been intended as civilizational markers within the ethnographic narrative, in my opinion, this interpretation risks overstating their symbolic function in Greek accounts of India.

In conclusion, *Wine Cultures. Gandhāra and Beyond* stands as a valuable and ambitious contribution to the study of cross-cultural exchanges in antiquity, illuminating the manifold ways in which wine – as commodity, ritual substance, and cultural symbol – mediated interactions across regions, religions, and artistic traditions. The volume undoubtedly advances the state of research beyond the frequently cited article by Falk,[16] which was the first – and an ingenious – attempt to address the topic of wine in Gandhāra. The book's breadth, both geographical and disciplinary, is among its greatest

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[13] CKI 552 in S. Baums, A. Glass, *Catalog of Gāndhārī Texts* 2002, available at gandhari.org/catalog.

[14] Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[15] Strab. 15.1.22 = *FGrHist* 134 F 22: ἐν δὲ τῇ Μουσικανοῦ καὶ σῖτον αὐτοφυῆ λέγει πυρῷ παραπλήσιον καὶ ἄμπελον, ὥστ᾽ οἰνοφορεῖν, τῶν ἄλλων ἄοινον λεγόντων τὴν Ἰνδικήν.

[16] Falk, *op. cit*.

strengths, even if its wide scope occasionally results in a lack of coherence or thematic closure.[17] Yet this very openness may be seen as an invitation to further inquiry rather than a limitation. By foregrounding wine as a mobile, multifaceted cultural agent, the editors and contributors open new pathways for thinking about connectivity, material culture, and religious practice across the wider Iranian and Indian worlds. This collection will be of considerable interest not only to specialists in Gandhāran studies but also to scholars of ancient religion, art history, and the archaeology of cross-cultural contact.

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[17] Other errors – such as spelling mistakes – are very few; for example, “Symposyum” (p. 31) and “Augustu” (p. 307, n. 37).