

Herakles Inside and Outside the Church

*From the First Apologists to the
End of the Quattrocento*

Edited by

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Herakles *Vajrapani*, the Companion of Buddha

Karl Galinsky

One of the most remarkable adaptations of Herakles in the east is his physical appearance in Gandharan Buddhist art in reliefs of the first and second centuries.¹ This is a suitable coda to the survey presented in this volume of Herakles' vicissitudes in the context of Christianity: his range actually extended into Buddhism. That is, of course, not Buddhism in general; Buddhism had many strands and strong regional differentiations. In one of these regions, however, that of Gandhara, his presence as a companion of Buddha is well attested in artistic representations (and hardly in literature, an issue to which I will return later). Gandhara, centered on Kandahar, encompassed much of ancient Bactria and exhibits its own mix of Greek and native traditions, and during its Kushan period clearly had contacts with Rome, too.²

The central phenomenon, before we move on to the larger context and a survey of various scholarly perspectives, is this: the most common identification for this particular Herakles figure is that of *vajrapani*. *Vajrapani* means 'holder of the thunderbolt' and therefore we see Herakles with that attribute rather than his customary club (though in one relief he holds both). His physical features are unmistakable and clearly derive from Hellenistic art, from Lysippus to other eastern models. Here, however, the questions only begin. Exactly who was *vajrapani*? How does the Gandharan *vajrapani* differ from his manifestations elsewhere, especially in India (where we do have some literary attestations)? And what, precisely, does he have to do with Buddha? What kind of functions can we infer from the scenes in Gandharan art? The basic premise is that more is involved than a purely formal transfer of Herakles' iconography. Rather, there must be some meaning, but given the multiplicity of Herakles' meanings, what is it and how can we know for sure? Did the Gandharan artists

1 This is a greatly expanded version of a segment of my keynote address at the conference on *Hercules: A Hero for All Ages* at the University of Leeds in June 2013. I am grateful to Emma Stafford for her continuing interest and encouragement and to Prof. Katsumi Tanabe and Dr Kurt Behrendt for their help on some special points. Stoneman 2019 appeared too late for consideration here.

2 A developing scholarly resource is the recently established project 'Gandhara Connections' of the Classical Art Research Centre at Oxford University. For an informative earlier overview see Boardman 1994, 109–45; also, Behrendt 2007 and Zwalf 1996, 11–76. Comprehensive compilation and commentary until 1951: Foucher 1905–51.

and their patrons, such as Buddhist monks, have a preference for some specific characteristics of Herakles and on what basis? It is useful, therefore, to look at the evidence first and then proceed to the discussion of possible interpretations.

1 Some Representative Examples

In terms of the chronology of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Herakles/Vajrapani does not appear as his companion until the beginning of Siddhartha's ascetic life; he is absent, for instance, in childhood scenes where others watch over the young prince. Once Siddhartha embarks on his journey, however, the Heraklean Vajrapani is his steady attendant. He is present, for example, standing supportively behind the seated, emaciated (future) Buddha – having his back, literally – who was seeking enlightenment through extreme fasting. The relief shows Buddha's attendant as bearded, holding the *vajra* (thunderbolt), and dressed in a Kushan tunic (Figure 14.1).³ Here, in contrast to the next examples, his body is fully covered, but it is his beard that differentiates him from other representations of Vajrapani and recurs in more fully developed Heraklean assimilations. A relief fragment now in the British Museum shows a different kind of hybridization (Figure 14.2):⁴ Vajrapani wears only a short loincloth but is draped in the lion-skin, including the head, and its paws are knotted around his neck. He sports a moustache; the *vajra* is in his right hand while he holds a long Kushan-type sword in his left. Above him is a figure with a turban and two robed Buddhist monks fill out the rest of the remaining composition.⁵

The Vajrapani *sub specie Herculis* is Buddha's steady acolyte during his travels. In the lower register of another relief, Buddha is shown as the wandering preacher with Herakles on his left (Figure 14.3).⁶ The Heraklean iconography again is that of the older, 'philosophical' Herakles, with the lion skin draped around his waist and the *vajra* in his left hand.⁷ It is always Buddha who

3 From the site of Jamal Garhi, now in the collection of the British Museum (OA 1880–67). Zwalf 1996, 169–70, plate 181; Errington and Cribb 1992, 228–9, no. 216; Foucher 1905, 381–2.

4 British Museum, London, inv. no. 1970, 0718.1. This is the most frequently published image of Herakles/Vajrapani, see, e.g., Flood 1989, 17 fig. 1; Santoro 1991, 272 fig. 2; Boardman 1994, 129 fig. 4.67; Homrighausen 2015, 32 fig. 13; *Alexander der Grosse* 2009, cat. no. 351; Zwalf 1996, 230–31, pl. 293.

5 For a listing and discussion of several other Heracles/Vajrapani figures with the same emblems, see Flood 1989, 17–18.

6 Rome, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci' inv. no. 430. *Alexander der Grosse* 2009, cat. no. 350, with previous bibliography.

7 Another element from Greek art is the Erotes that form the right border of the relief.



FIGURE 14.1 Siddhartha fasting, flanked by Vajrapani, Indra, and two worshippers. Relief panel in grey schist from Jamal Garhi, northern Pakistan, c. second to third century. British Museum, London, OA 1880-67
IMAGE: © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



FIGURE 14.2 Relief fragment showing Vajrapani with lion-skin. Grey schist, c. second to third century. British Museum, London, OA 1970.7-18.1
IMAGE: © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



FIGURE 14.3 Buddha being measured by a Brahmin; Herakles/Vajrapani on his left. Façade relief, c. third century. Rome, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'Giuseppe Tucci', inv. no. 430

IMAGE: © MUSEO NAZIONALE D'ARTE ORIENTALE

is the taller of the two and that is precisely the point of the scene: Buddha is being measured by a Brahmin because his height is so exceptional. Even when Buddha is seated, therefore, the height-discrepancy remains when Vajrapani is standing next to him. Such is the case, for instance, in a relief showing the conversion of the Kashyapa brothers in India, an episode from his early period of Buddha's preaching (Figure 14.4).⁸ Besides holding his thunderbolt in one hand, Vajrapani waves a whisk or fan with his right to keep Buddha cool; the gesture has been largely interpreted as a sign of respect. Also evident here is a further variant in the hybridization of the iconography: the sculptor represents Herakles/Vajrapani as semi- or, rather three-quarters, nude. That is unusual in

8 British Museum, London, inv. no. 1961 2–18 1. Flood 1989, 19 with fig. 2; Zwalf 1996, 185–6, pl. 203.



FIGURE 14.4 Buddha performing a miracle. To his left, Herakles/Vajrapani holding the *vajra* and a fly-whisk. Panel relief in grey schist, c. second to third century. British Museum, London, OA 1961.2–18.1

IMAGE: © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Gandharan art and a testimony to the force of the Greek sculptural tradition of Herakles.⁹

A relief that was formerly in Kabul introduces yet another variation. The subject is the soon-to-be Buddha's preparation for the attack of the demon Mara prior to his enlightenment (Figure 14.5a and 14.5b).¹⁰ Herakles/Vajrapani is sitting on a rocky outcrop next to him. He is bearded and muscular and wears the lion skin wrapped around his waist. With his left hand he holds a small *vajra* that rests on his knee while his right leans on the grip of a club that stands upside down on the ground. The type may have derived from the coinage of Euthydemus I of Bactria, which showed this particular figure of Herakles

9 Almost complete nudity: Vajrapani as Hermes-type in a relief panel showing Buddha's offering of dust. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1922 2–11 1; Flood 1989, 20 with fig. 4; Zwalf 1996, 195–7, pl. 217.

10 Tanabe 2005, 364, fig. 1; Santoro 1991, 278, figures 6, 6a. Formerly in the Kabul Museum; I am grateful to Professor Tanabe for providing the photographs reproduced here.



FIGURE 14.5A Scene from the life of Buddha. Relief panel in grey schist, c. second to third century. Formerly in the Kabul Museum

IMAGE: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROF. KATSUMI TANABE



FIGURE 14.5B Herakles/Vajrapani with *vajra* and club (detail of Figure 5a). Relief panel in grey schist, c. second to third century. Formerly in the Kabul Museum

IMAGE: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROF. KATSUMI TANABE



FIGURE 14.6 Panel showing the death of Buddha with a grieving Herakles/Vajrapani on the left. Grey schist, c. second to third century. British Museum, London, OA 1913.11–8.17

IMAGE: © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

at rest; in addition, the way he holds the *vajra* is similar to Herakles' setting his club on his knee on other coins of the same ruler.¹¹ Neither is Herakles/Vajrapani missing from Buddha's death (Figure 14.6); ever the faithful attendant he stands on the left, with a rather large *vajra* in his left hand that leans against his shoulder. His right arm is raised above his head, 'in a gesture perhaps to suggest a grief-stricken rending of the hair'.¹² He is bearded but instead of the lion skin his garb is an Indian *dhoti*.

11 Santoro 1991, 278–91, with further documentation.

12 Flood 1989, 20, with fig. 3. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1913 11–8 17; Zwalf 1996, 206–7, pl. 231.

2 The Many-Sided Vajrapani

Small as it is, this sample must suffice to illustrate some of the basic characteristics of the Heraklean Vajrapani in Gandharan Buddhist art.¹³ We now need to turn to the extensive, and extensively discussed, issue of the identity and functions of Vajrapani and, especially, his manifestations in Buddhism. He was a multi-dimensional and almost protean figure who evolved over time.¹⁴

The (relatively) clearest delineation of his development has been documented in Lamotte's magisterial study of the Vajrapani character in literary and religious traditions of Buddhism in India (1966; 2003). There he appears in his early stages as a type of *yaksa*, a fairly elastic category that comprised nature spirits both benevolent and capricious and, at the other end of the spectrum, the great gods, such as Sakra, the ruler of one of the heavens in Buddhist cosmology, and even the Buddha himself. Vajrapani's career in Buddhist texts and iconography is one of the longest, culminating with his apotheosis. That, however, is not till several centuries after his assimilation to Herakles in Gandharan art. While we see him there as the faithful attendant of Buddha, his identity and functions were still a work in progress. At that time, he seems to have risen above the level of a basic *yaksa*. Such, at least, is the vigorous contention of one scholar on the basis of the purely iconographic evidence we have relating to the figure in Gandharan art.¹⁵ The Gandharan images of Vajrapani, whether assimilated to Herakles or not, 'reveal that they have no Indian or Yaksha influence ... except for the Indian-styled loin-cloth.'¹⁶ The Indian *yaksa* culture, by contrast, had moved on to depicting *yaksas* like Indian royal princes. If there is an Indian connection, it is that Vajrapani appears as an ally, if not a double, of Indra in Vedic texts; in fact, Tanabe goes on to argue that the guard and guide of the prince Siddharta after the Great Departure was not Vajrapani, but Indra himself, only to be replaced by an acolyte drawn from Greek heroic mythology because there were several drawbacks to Indra who tended to be timid and was not a good traveller.¹⁷ Others scholars have not been quite so radical and simply consider Vajrapani a secondary form of Indra because Indra, too, is attested as wielding the *vajra*.

13 More examples, all with earlier literature, appear in Foucher 1905–51; Santoro 1979 and 1991; Flood 1989, esp. 18–21; Tanabe 2005. Cf. Zwalf 1996, 423, *sv.* 'Vajrapani'.

14 'This proteiform spirit' (Lamotte, 2003, 1); '... questo proteiforme e enigmatico personaggio' ('this proteiform and enigmatic individual', Santoro, 1991, 293).

15 Tanabe 2005.

16 Tanabe 2005, 367 with detailed arguments 367–9. But see Homrighausen 30 for Buddhist literature considering Vajrapani a *yaksa*.

17 Tanabe 2005, 377–9.

Since the Gandharan iconography of Vajrapani indicates that the artists did not depict him as a *yakṣa*, how did they view him in connection with his being Buddha's guide and protector? A possible answer is that he was *bodhisattva*, i.e. someone on the path to buddhahood.¹⁸ More specifically, he could be considered a *Dhyani-Bodhisattva*, that is a companion to one of the five *Dhyani* Buddhas, the spiritual counterparts to human buddhas; *Dhyani* Buddhas personify qualities of spirituality, such as wisdom and compassion, but cannot be actual creators of the perishable physical universe, a function that is, therefore, taken care of by the *Dhyani-Bodhisattvas*.¹⁹ The identity of Vajrapani as a *bodhisattva* received strong emphasis in the texts of Mahayana Buddhism, which emerged in the first century as the 'Greater Vehicle', making that theology more widely accessible to people from all walks of life.²⁰ Its efflorescence, therefore, is contemporaneous with the period of Gandharan art under consideration here and its representations of Vajrapani. Given the multifarious and evolving character of Vajrapani, others have gone further afield and postulated even Zoroastrian influence on the early nature of Vajrapani, in the form of the Zoroastrian equivalent to the Greek *agathos daimōn* or Roman *genius*.²¹ While this takes into account some evident syncretistic tendencies and might even give us further affinities with Greco-Roman traditions, this theory has generally been rejected as being too speculative.²²

There is close to general agreement, however, that a basic point of departure for assessing the character of Vajrapani is, obviously, the *vajra*. As Lamotte puts it in his final, concluding sentence: 'Vajra is the *thunderbolt* which serves as an offensive and defensive weapon: it is also the diamond, the hardest of minerals'.²³ Most scholars have taken their cue from that, but, as Santoro has usefully pointed out, the picture was not as simple and straightforward, especially in Vedic texts. As in the case of Vajrapani and Herakles, we are again looking at many layers and an evolution:

... the term *vajra* in the Vedic texts has been translated and interpreted in various ways by different scholars and, up to this time, there is no full agreement either on the etymology or, even less, the actual and symbolic object to which it corresponds.²⁴

18 Lamotte 2003, 119–32.

19 Succinctly, Flood 1989, 23, drawing on Lamotte 1966/2003.

20 Mahayana Buddhism is followed by more than half of all Buddhist practitioners today.

21 Flood 1989, 23, with the earlier literature.

22 Santoro 1991, 293, with the earlier literature.

23 Lamotte 2003, 144.

24 Santoro 1991, 297 n. 104. See also Das Gupta 1975, 1–9.

In the *Brahmana*, for instance, which antedate the Gandhara period by several centuries, there is a wide range of objects called *vajra*, among them the sun, water, rain, butter, the sacrifice, a knife or butcher's axe, and the wooden sword used for sacrifice.²⁵ If there is any overarching definition it still provides considerable scope and elasticity: *vajra* is

the instrument by means of which the active fighter and energetic champion of the welfare of mankind, the weather god, rouses, generates, and makes accessible the powers and substances which mean food and life.²⁶

But the *vajra* can also be used by Indra as an actual weapon, which he uses to kill sinners and ignorant persons (*Rig Veda* 2.12), including a malevolent demon or demigod who had transformed himself into a serpent. What emerges from the copious lore is that the *vajra* was polyvalent and associated with many diverse functions.

In the texts that are relevant to the representations of Vajrapani in Gandharan Buddhist art we can discern more of a shift to the symbolic side as Vajrapani uses the weapon effectively to menace and threaten, but rarely to kill. As Buddha's bodyguard, Vajrapani threatens and intimidates 'those who attack the Buddha, or just those who refuse to hear his message'.²⁷ Vajrapani also uses his weapon against harmful lesser deities. One such example is a creature who kept flooding a region; Vajrapani forces him to desist – control of rains and floods, after all, was one of the prerogatives of the *vajra*-bearing Indra – and convert to the Buddhist *dharma*.²⁸ Additionally Vajrapani saves Buddha from actual physical harm, including assassination attempts by rival teachers.²⁹ In the process, the *vajra* becomes less of an emblem of physical power, than the instrument of the victorious power of knowledge:

When wielded by Vajrapani, the 'diamond' shape of the *vajra* is an instrument no less symbolic than functional, a symbol by extension of the victorious power of permanent Buddhist knowledge over the impermanence

25 Gonda 1969, 40–51.

26 Gonda 1969, 52.

27 Homrighausen 2015, 30, listing various examples; Santoro 1991, 297.

28 Lamotte 2003, 21–22; Homrighausen 2015, 30–31 with fig. 10; Flood 1989, 24, with references to several other reliefs.

29 Lamotte 2003, 16–18; Homrighausen 31.

of illusion and evil, ‘the cutting force of adamantine truth’, the truth of the Buddhist *dharma*, ‘ready to crush every enemy’.³⁰

3 The Assimilation to Herakles

Did Herakles’ club pack a similar meaning? Hardly, and of course it was not diamantine.³¹ Still, Gandharan artists had their reasons to find the Greek hero congenial for an assimilation with Vajrapani in his function as a companion and protector of the Buddha. There is general agreement that this assimilation is based on qualitative affinities rather than mere iconographic convenience and several reasons have been suggested. The principal context, of course, is Herakles’ evolving reception in the east, extending to Bactria and the reign of the Kushan. It is embedded in the many adaptations of Greek art and mythology in these areas, including Gandhara and North India.³²

Alexander brought Herakles with him to the furthest marker he left in the east, the three altars on the banks of the river Pinarus (the others were dedicated to Zeus and Athena; Curtius Rufus 3.12.7). That was simply the exclamation point of a life-long association with the hero: Alexander’s father Philip had claimed descent from Herakles; Herakles’ image on Macedonian coins took on the features of Alexander; Alexander’s standard image on other coins showed him with the lion-skin headdress; throughout his expedition Alexander appealed and sacrificed to Herakles; and his son with Barsine was named Herakles, to recall only the best known and remembered examples of the symbiosis.³³ The cult and worship of Herakles took root in the east; the multitude of finds and texts attest, as Bernard, the chief excavator of Ai Khanoum, put it succinctly, ‘the extraordinary favour that the cult of this hero enjoyed in

30 Flood 1989, 24; his quotations are from Grünwedel 1901, 38. Very similar phrasing in Santoro 1991, 297–8, who also points out, with reference to Saunders 1985, 185, that (Santoro 1991, n.105):

“the power of *dharma*, which is the power of knowledge, coincides visually and conceptually with the connotation of luminosity that characterizes the *vajra* in both its meaning as lightning bolt and diamond, with the latter meaning developed especially in Buddhism.”

31 Herakles’ club has, however, gained such polyvalency in the modern period, see e.g. chapters in Mainz and Stafford (eds) 2020, also Blanshard and Stafford (eds) forthcoming.

32 For this general aspect, see the well documented survey by Boardman 1994, esp. 109–45. Additional material in *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World* 2011, including a statue of Serapis-Herakles (first century) from Begram (no. 108).

33 See, e.g., the source material in Heckel and Yardley 2004, esp. 180–81 and 211–12; also, *Heracles to Alexander the Great*, 2011.

Greek Central Asia and, more generally, in the entire Hellenised Greek east'.³⁴ Prominent locales include Dura Europos, Palmyra, Hatra, and Nimrud Dagħ.³⁵ Herakles is shown both as a distinct deity and a syncretized one and appears in a variety of capacities;³⁶ at Ai Khanoum, for instance, he was the patron deity of the gymnasium. Another much discussed example of Herakles' association with athletes is a Gandharan wrestler's weight (the probable date is the early first century) that shows Herakles holding his club and lion-skin and being approached by a lion (Figure 14.7, below with further discussion).

A significant aspect of the visual tradition of the hero is the continuity of his appearance in Greco-Bactrian and Greco-Indian coinage.³⁷ The tradition begins with the Bactrian kings, such as Euthydemus I (230–200 BCE) and Agathocles (190–180 BCE) that show him on the reverse of their gold and silver coins in both standing and seated configurations.³⁸ Neither was Herakles reserved for the elite, as the Bactrian kings continuously put his image on their copper coinage. Beginning with the first century of our era, their kingdom was absorbed by that of Kushan, which continued contact with the west and Rome in particular. The Kushan king Kujula Kadphises, who ruled for several decades in the first century, was a great admirer of Augustus and represented himself as sitting on the curule chair of the Roman magistrate, just as Augustus did on some of his own coins.³⁹ While Herakles' image continued on copper coins, his imagery, along with other Greek deities, was adopted into the art of the court; an outstanding example, now in the Ashmolean Museum, is a seal showing Herakles wrestling with one of the mares of Diomedes.⁴⁰

As especially Boardman has illustrated, these instances of Greek mythological themes are far from isolated. Instead they are part of larger panorama of 'classical' adaptations in style and subject, including frequent representations of Herakles.⁴¹ It is typical of these depictions that they can deviate from their Greco-Roman models, which raises the question, central to the assimilation of

34 Bernard 1974, 302: 'L'extraordinaire faveur que connut le culte de ce héros dans l'Asie centrale grecque et d'une certaine façon générale dans tout l'Orient hellénisé' (my translation); cf. Flood 1989, 21.

35 Dura Europos: Downey 1969; Palmyra: Colledge 1973; Kaizer 2016, 26–7; Gawlikowski 2016, 130–2; Hatra: Al-Salihi 1971, 1982, 1987; Nimrud Dagħ: Rosenfield 1967, fig. 154.

36 For a summary, see Santoro 1991, 286–9.

37 Good *catalogue raisonné*: Bopearachchi 1991.

38 Good reproductions in Homrighausen 2015, 28, figures 5 and 6.

39 See Mahler 2008; Galinsky 2018.

40 Rosenfield 1967, 78, 102; Harle 1985. See also Santoro 1991, 281, for further representations of Heracles in Kushan art. Cf. Boardman 1994, 123–4, and Homrighausen 2015, 27–9.

41 Boardman 1994, 109–45.

Vajrapani and Herakles, whether this is largely a result of the use of a pliable iconography with little knowledge of the details of the story or, in fact, the exact opposite, i.e. a deeper understanding of the myth. This may assuredly vary from case to case, but there are enough *exempla* that suggest the latter. I will limit my discussion to two fairly representative ones.

The first is a relief from the Peshawar District with the story of the Trojan horse. As it is wheeled toward the city gate, a male figure confronts it and plunges a spear into it. A female figure, who has been identified with Cassandra, stands at the gate and throws up her arms, leading Boardman to exclaim that she ‘never looked like this in the art of the Mediterranean!’.⁴² That is certainly true, as far as her lower garment is concerned, which is Indian, while her upper body is uncovered except for a collar and necklace. The central scene recalls the Vergilian description of Laocoon thrusting the spear at the horse (*Aeneid* 2.50–53); the other two male figures are likely to be Priam (an older man with a beard) and Sinon, here a younger man pushing the horse. It would be far-fetched to assume that the native artists knew the *Aeneid*; more plausibly, a likely source is the narrative and visual tradition of *Tabulae Iliacae* that exhibit, albeit on a larger scale, similar compositional arrangements of key characters and episodes.⁴³ The exact process of transmission does not concern us here; what matters is that this is clearly an informed composition in an indigenous stone sculpture that is not of high quality. The approximate date is the second century.

The second example is the wrestler’s weight to which I briefly referred above (Figure 14.7). In the words of Behrendt:

the composition of a victorious Herakles, skin in hand, confronting a living Nemean lion is unique: a combination of iconographic elements that has no classical precedent.⁴⁴

A number of explanations have been suggested, including ‘a sculptural play with temporality, a fragmentary knowledge of the Nemean lion episode, or a local Gandharan legend’.⁴⁵ Another scholar has argued for an allusion to the

42 Boardman 1994, 136.

43 Allan 1946, with a good reproduction of the image (British Museum OA 1990,10–13.1). The image is easily accessible through the British Museum’s online catalogue, but also appears online with discussion by Stewart (2017) through the Gandhara Project (n. 2, above); also, Zwalf 1996, 233–4, pl. 300; Errington and Cribb 1992, 131 and 267, no. 133; cf., on a different relief with the same subject, Khan 1990.

44 Behrendt 2007, 13–14, with fig. 8. Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. no. 1994.112.

45 Homrighausen 2015, 29.



FIGURE 14.7 Wrestler's weight with Herakles holding a lion-skin and being approached by a lion. Schist, c. first century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.¹²
IMAGE: © METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

theme of kingship, symbolized by the lion and Herakles' diadem.⁴⁶ In terms of artistic composition, 'sculptural play with temporality' comes closest to the mark. The procedure is similar to that of the composition of the panel with the Trojan horse, although the scenes there are somewhat more contemporaneous. As it stands, it is by no means untypical of such receptions and adaptations of Greek myth into other artistic and cultural environments. An applicable methodological parallel is the occurrence of Greek myths in early Etruscan art: the fact that the compositions are not merely literal transpositions of patterns in Greek art does not mean the Etruscans did not know about their content. As Hampe and Simon demonstrated decades ago, just the opposite can be the case.⁴⁷ The same element of narrativization applies to Herakles and the lion on the Gandharan wrestler's weight: instead of showing merely the result of the labour by means of the slack lion-skin, there is the living presence of the formidable beast. The composition comprises both the threat and the victorious outcome. Neither does the imagery exclude the courtly dimension.

⁴⁶ Galli 2011.

⁴⁷ Hampe and Simon 1964.

The court is also the likely environment, to give just one more example of the range of Herakles' Gandharan representations, for his appearance on one of the shallow, bowl-shaped dishes that featured a variety of Greek myths, including Apollo and Daphne and Aphrodite and Eros.⁴⁸ The lower tier has two compartments that may have been used for wine or toiletries while the upper tier has one compartment occupied by a Herakles, who is unsteady on his legs and held up by two women, with a rather domesticated, seated lion looking on from the left. Some scholars have posited Dionysiac associations; others, the functionality of luxury goods in the female sphere with a light touch – the drunken and libidinous Herakles was a familiar figure in Greek mythology. In sum, there is sufficient evidence that Herakles (and other Greek myths), and his many aspects, were well known in Gandhara and that artists approached him with insight and understanding.

Consequently, this also applies to Vajrapani's assimilation to Herakles – the matrix is anything but superficial. Scholars have suggested various reasons, many grounded in Herakles' character, for his appearance as Vajrapani, and I will survey them briefly. It is important, however, to start with the basic affinity: both Vajrapani and Herakles had many dimensions and their traditions and characteristics had multiple layers. They were eminently adaptable even to the point, in Vajrapani's case, of being protean. Herakles, even with all his different associations, offered clearer contours that were suitable for articulating and (re)defining the figure of Vajrapani, who could be almost too polymorphous, as a companion and protector of Buddha. Unsurprisingly, in view of Vajrapani's many roles, there was some experimentation as he was also adapted to other classical types, such as Silenus, Eros, Zeus, Dionysus, Pan, and Hermes.⁴⁹ The ascendancy of Herakles did not mean reduction to a single aspect of the Greek hero; the Heraklean Vajrapani could still be different things to different people.

Certainly, Herakles' renown for strength and endurance was a major factor as was his record of victory and travel to foreign lands. In addition, there is the context several scholars have rightly stressed, i.e. the spread of Buddhism in Gandhara under the royal patronage of Kushan kings, especially Kanishka the Great (c. 127–140) and one of his successors, Huviska (c. 160–190), who may have been a follower of Mahayana Buddhism.⁵⁰ In that light, the argument goes, it was opportune to highlight Herakles' affinity with royalty, dating back to Alexander and the Bactrian kings and, possibly and even more

48 Behrendt 2007, 8–11 (with a good reproduction, figure 3); Galli 2011, 296–300; Homrighausen 2015, 29–30.

49 Tanabe 2005, 364, with detailed references; Foucher 1918, figures 326–32.

50 For a useful summary see Zwalf 1996, 30–35.

contemporaneously, to Hercules as a protector of Roman emperors.⁵¹ The Heraklean/Herculean Vajrapani may thus be seen as an appeal to the rulers that the Buddhist religion was a religion of royalty.⁵² According to Santoro, that appeal may have risen to a yet higher dimension: not only is Herakles here the model and prototype of the ideal sovereign, but the connotations go beyond earthly kingship and there is the assertion of 'the cosmic and spiritual kingship of Buddha'.⁵³ In addition, Herakles/Vajrapani is martial, although, as we saw earlier, he mostly does not have to resort to physical force to be a potent fighter for the Buddhist *dharma*.

These perspectives are well taken and they are not limiting. Above all, however, the use of Herakles and his appropriation into this cosmopolitan cultural context, which is both worldly and religious, is yet another fascinating testimony to the richness of his traditions and the range of associations he could evoke. Because of his adaptability and many dimensions which, at the same time, never resulted in diffuseness, he asserted himself as one of antiquity's most enduring figures even beyond the boundaries of Greece and Rome. In that sense, too, he was fittingly *invictus*.

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51 So Flood 1989, 25.

52 Homrighausen 2015, 33, with further argumentation and references.

53 Santoro 1991, esp. 305–9.

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