

Wine Cultures
Gandhāra and Beyond

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Intoxicating Nectars of Plenty

Reflections on Wine and Other Drinks in Ancient South Asia

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Abstract This introductory chapter frames the collection of essays. It is time that we moved beyond merely noting the presence of 'imported' Hellenistic wine imagery in Gandhāra, and the view of visual imagery as mere documentary evidence for wine culture in the region: surviving representations of wine culture from Gandhāra are just as layered and historically complex as Renaissance Venetian depictions of *The Wedding at Cana*. The essays in this book add exactly that sort of nuance to our understanding of wine in Gandhāra. After a brief summary of what we know about early alcohol production and consumption in South Asia as a whole, the chapter considers what was distinctive about a vinocentric alcohol culture in Gandhāra. How did external trade in wine from Gandhāra affect wine culture in South Asia as a whole? As a somewhat exceptional drink in the South Asian context, how might wine culture have been considered in Buddhist contexts?

Keywords Wine. Gandhāra. India. Alcohol. Intoxicants. Buddhism.

In this chapter, originally delivered as a keynote address, I wish to set the scene for all the other chapters in the volume; pieces that are based on the talks delivered at the international conference *Wine Culture: Gandharan Crossroads* (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 5th-6th May 2023). Thus I present here some general reflections on drink in South Asia, along with some comments on wine, wine in general and wine in South Asia. Many of my remarks and questions in this chapter are rather speculative in nature, intended above all to stimulate discussion, merely to preface the rest of the essays resulting from the colloquium.



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Inspired by the location of this colloquium in Venice, at Ca' Foscari, I shall begin my comments, not in Gandhāra, but within the very building at the heart of Ca' Foscari University; a building whose facade is world-famous, with the spectacular central large balcony and windows so typical of Venetian *palazzi*. Yet I always wondered what inner structure corresponded to these distinctive facades, copied all over the world, from Victorian Manchester to Las Vegas casinos. Yet, unlike in Nevada, in the original *palazzi*, these windows were positioned at the end of a very large room called a *sala* or *portego*; a long hallway of sorts, with doors leading off to separate rooms; a grand reception room with an impressive display of Venetian glass windows at one or both ends. In such rooms, as art historian Monika Schmitter has written, wealthy merchant families would host a variety of events, in a space decorated with weapons, with large credenzas of impressive silver and glass, and above all collections of paintings.¹ And it is these paintings, the *quadri da portego* that I wish to consider briefly. For as Schmitter explains, scenes of feasting and entertaining, often religious in nature, such as the supper at Emmaus or the Wedding at Cana, were common themes for art commissioned for such spaces – pictures eminently suited to a space designed for affluent feasting, and displays of cosmopolitan, mercantile success. Yet, when these paintings contained religious subject matter, as they often did, these images emphasized virtues such as charity and hospitality. As such, certain Venetian paintings commissioned for the *salas*, paintings in which we see biblical feasts, can fruitfully be understood in the context of particular social concerns and economic conditions, in rooms used for actual feasts, which no doubt influenced the choice of subject matter, the manner of representation, and also the contemporaneous reception of the images.

I wanted to think a little about the contexts of Venetian art, because so much of our detailed evidence for alcohol use in early South Asia likewise consists of ‘representations’ of drinks and drinking, which were produced and received in very particular contexts: religious, social and economic, including the reliefs of wine making from Gandhāra. Take one more example, not from Venice however: a well-known painting by Poussin in the Louvre, in the center of which two men carry an oversized bunch of grapes on a stick.² What is going on in that image? Is this a bad, disproportionate painting of grapes? Of course not; this image is part of a set that depicts the seasons, and

I wish to thank the organizers of this conference, Professor Claudia Antonetti, Dr. Bryan De Notariis, and Dr. Marco Enrico for inviting me to deliver this talk, as well as all the support from everyone else at Ca' Foscari.

1 Schmitter 2011.

2 *L'Automne*, by Nicolas Poussin.

the grapes evoke autumn and the time of the grape harvest, with two men heroically bringing the grapes home slung on a stick, like hunters triumphantly carrying a dead deer. This is less an image of a fruit than of a time, and an artistic expression of human victory over economic resources at a certain time of year.

Such are the perspectives I would like to try to bring to our reflections on wine culture and its representations in the complex, cosmopolitan region of greater Gandhāra. We need to move beyond the concept of ‘imported’ Dionysiac imagery or the search for ‘documentary depictions’ of vinification processes. The chapters in this volume exemplify precisely that sort of complexity and nuance.

Now, wine is a ‘particularly’ good topic with which to think about Gandhāra or Greater Gandhāra – a region at the fringes of, and at times infused with elements of the complex Persian and Hellenized worlds, both areas with their own well developed wine cultures. Yet Gandhāra is also part of the greater Indic world and an important center for early Buddhism. Gandhāra is also a region on trade routes to Inner Asia and China. And, last but not least, it is an area with a climate extremely well suited for certain types of agriculture, in particular viticulture, which would appear to have been long established here. Many factors intersect here. But of course, for the average Gandhāran, their land and their ways of wine, be these the drinks, words, or visual images, most likely did not seem hybrid or syncretic, but rather the norm. It is highly likely that for the Gandhārans, as for the Venetians, the extremely cosmopolitan nature of their history and culture – so strikingly cosmopolitan to outsiders and modern scholars – did not take away from the fact that their ways were a distinctive whole, more than the sum of these various parts. Gandhāra may seem at times like a fascinating ancient cocktail to us, but it was more a glass of distinctive local wine to the Gandhārans.

Before I turn to wine and Gandhāra, I wish briefly to review what we know about alcohol cultures in South Asia as a whole, for by doing so we might better appreciate what is distinctive about Gandhāra. The thing that surprised me most when I wrote a large survey of alcohol in South Asia is that, despite the limitations of mostly using Sanskrit sources to study this topic, there was so much variety within the alcohol cultures in the region over the long term.³ We have drinks made from various grains, made using two main methods. The method seen in Europe and Mesopotamia where you change the starches to sugars with the enzymes of malted grains, as well as the method associated with East Asia today, where people use molds. As such, the grain based drinks of this region resemble those to the

³ For details on the various drinks discussed in this paragraph, see McHugh 2021b, chs. 2, 3.

west and to the east. Not only that, but South Asia is remarkable for having drinks made from sugarcane at a very early period, certainly several centuries BC. Again, sugarcane drinks were not just one thing, but many: some were made from fresh juice; some from processed sugars. And this must have made a difference in other realms, economic, regional, and cultural: drinks made from fresh juice are far easier to make where you actually grow sugarcane, whereas you can make drinks from jaggery anywhere you trade it. Then we have drinks made from fruits: jackfruit, *jambu*, grape wine, and so on, not to mention all the various forms of palm toddy. Most alcoholic drinks also contained a herbal additive, a mixture of various botanicals, which was called *saṃbhāra*, which was often seen as quite essential to making these drinks, just as one sees with hops and most modern beers. I will return to the *saṃbhāra* additive mixture below in my discussion of wine.

These many drinks also most likely corresponded to different patterns of consumption: common refreshments for farm workers, as we see with toddy today; or grain *surās* brewed en masse for festivals and weddings. Some drinks were more complicated, probably more costly, and as we know from the *Arthaśāstra*, wine was imported in some places, and such drinks were likely associated with more elite consumption – at least in places where the drinks were rare and expensive. And, as with the feasts we see in the *quadri da portego* of the Renaissance Venetian *palazzo*, these patterns of consumption crept their way into representations of drinking, textual and visual, even in religious contexts.⁴ Representations of making and producing drinks could also be used to characterize regions, such as the Persian wine bower in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, or Abhinavagupta's beloved local Kashmiri wine.⁵

There is no space in this short chapter to explore the morals of drink in South Asia, but I should make two small observations before continuing. First, laws and moral attitudes concerning drink were very nuanced and complicated. Also, the erotic and sensuous delights of a drinking session as depicted in poetry might well be admired by people who were supposed to be absolutely teetotal. Second, we must remember that in the premodern world there was no concept of alcohol as a substance common to different drinks. Rather, when deciding which intoxicating drinks were permitted or not some other criteria were needed. Vasubandhu, for example, notes in his autocommentary on the *Abhidharmakośa*, that although arecanuts and

⁴ On imported wine as connoting elite drinking, see, for example McHugh 2021b, 131-2.

⁵ On toddy as characterizing certain regions, see, McHugh 2021b, 58. On grape wine and regionality, see McHugh 2021a, 10-12.

kodo millet ‘can’ intoxicate they are ‘not’ forbidden by the Buddhist precept on *surā* and *maireya* as they are not technically forms of *surā* or *maireya*, whatever those are for him.⁶ So in thinking about what may or may not have been allowed in certain Buddhist contexts as in Gandhāra, we might consider how a given liquid might have been classified. For example, if someone made a drink that resembled Italian *vino cotto* in Gandhāra, only lightly fermented but very sweet and quite suited to storage and transportation, would this be counted as covered by *surā* and *maireya* of the precept and *Vinaya* rule, or might it just be another type of honey, a grape honey or sorts, eminently suited to a monastic afternoon sugary drink? I will return to this question below.

Let us now turn to wine. First let us think about geography and environment. Not everywhere in the world is well suited for growing grapes, and then some places where you grow grapes are a bit too hot for optimal vinification. Traditionally the optimal northern hemisphere zone for growing vines is said to be between 32 and 51 degrees North – though of course with factors of continentality, altitude, rainfall, and soil, there are plenty of places within this band that are not great for grapes, and conversely, as with the wines of Nashik in modern India, there are places that work outside this range.⁷ Now, although tropical viticulture ‘is’ possible, it does not always come naturally and requires a lot of extra work. Similarly, there are, for example, solid environmental reasons why my ancestors are potato people, not tomato people. And Gandhāra, at about 34.5 degrees North, as with connected areas in Central Asia and parts of Persia, is evidently well suited to the production of grapes, and apparently long has been, given our archaeological evidence.⁸

Yet even in an area suited to viticulture people need to know about grapes, know about making wine, and they also need to think wine is a good thing to make. France, for example, is a good place to make wine. Yet this was apparently not always the case. Michael Dietler has written of the process whereby the French, or perhaps more accurately, some Iron age people living in the Rhone Valley, encountered and adopted wine and also Mediterranean material culture associated with wine, these people previously being more exclusively beer drinkers.⁹ Wine was an addition here, and was taken undiluted, to the great disapproval of classical authors.¹⁰ Despite this novel and ‘barbarian’ style of consumption, wine in ancient France was

6 For Vasubandhu on drinks and other substances, see McHugh 2021b, 221-4.

7 Robinson, Harding 2006, s.v. “Latitude”.

8 On grapes and other crops at Barikot, for example, see Spengler et al. 2021.

9 Dietler 1990, 382-3.

10 Dietler 1990, 385.

associated with imported drinking paraphernalia, Etruscan or Greek, or with local paraphernalia that sometimes emulated imported models – aligning with other wine cultures in at least that respect.

Given that it seems that grapes were long established in Gandhāra, perhaps wine was also long known, so perhaps what we are dealing with in the archaeological record here is the adoption of new forms – maybe new forms of production, and certainly new forms of vessels and imagery – be these Achaemenid or Hellenistic.¹¹ The Gāndhārī word for wine, *masu*, is Indic, but as I have discussed elsewhere, it seems possible that the prominence of that particular form in Indic languages maybe owes something to the reconstructed Iranian **madu* – and significantly we see no *oinos* words for wine here. Although pure speculation, one wonders what other aspects of wine culture in greater Gandhāra adapted selected foreign forms: Persian feasts, the *symposium* or something like it, or Indic forms of drinking perhaps, such as the rowdy outdoor drinking bouts and *surā* festivals we read of in the epics and some Buddhist sources?

What of the trade in wine, which we certainly see in the Niya texts.¹² But what about in greater Gandhāra itself – if Kāpiśāyana was so famed, might we look for evidence or processing and packaging for trade as opposed to for local consumption? I have written before about those vessels, some marked with Kushana *tamgas*, that Marshall and Allchin suggested might have been used for distillation.¹³ I am far from convinced by the distillation theory, but might these vessels perhaps have been used for trading wine or other liquid grape products? After all wine from Kāpiśa is mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* and other sources. One of the few state monopolies mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* is the trade in alcoholic drinks, and there are references to royal seals for goods there too. It would seem to fit rather well if we were to discover that those vessels held wine – and I am hopeful that someone might do a residue analysis of some of those jars at some point – maybe people here today could help with that. And for those who are more keen on the theory that there ‘was’ distillation of wine in ancient Gandhāra, some very important questions then need to be addressed: how did this radical change from other wine cultures, such as the Greek ones, arise, and why? Moreover how did the production and consumption, *not* of wine, in Gandhāra, but of a drink that would be more like Peruvian *pisco* change the nature and economics of drinking culture here?

11 On the appearance of the region of tulip bowls and *rhyta*, see Petrie, Magee, Nasim Khan 2008.

12 See the many examples under the lemma *masu* in Baums, Glass 2002-.

13 McHugh 2020.

Now, some wine regions make wine largely for internal consumption, with very little exported, and typically such wines are not very well known today. It is not uncommon, for example, to read of certain varieties of Italian wine that ‘it rarely reaches the export market’. On the other hand some wine regions are deeply shaped by the demands of the export market. Bordeaux, for example, although well suited in terms of soil and climate for producing good wine, developed into an especially important global wine center largely because of the trade with the English and also the Dutch.¹⁴ And not just because these people traded and consumed wine, for it was the Dutch, so skilled at draining wetlands, who drained the prestigious Médoc region in the mid seventeenth century. Or think of the British involvement in Marsala wine, or Port. The city of Shiraz, likewise, thrived as a center for wine in the Early Modern period due to factors of external trade and geography, good conditions for viticulture and relative proximity to trade routes.¹⁵ And this is arguably exactly what we see with Gandhāra, sited on major trade routes, suited to viticulture, experiencing centuries of contact with other cultures and economies that valued and had developed wine production, trade, and consumption. The Hellenized aspects of Gandhāran wine cultures are superficially evident, but we might also speculate whether traders and consumers from ‘within’ peninsular India have shaped the manufacture, the style, or the material culture of wine here, like the Dutch, the British, and also, in fact, the Irish did in Bordeaux.

I do apologize if I have offended any Italian sensibilities with my digressions about French wine. Personally I am extremely fond of a well-made Valpolicella. But this only goes to show that regional pride in wine can matter too. In like manner we might also consider: were people in the Gandhāran cultural sphere conscious that they were fortunate to have a desirable wealth of grapes and wine? We know that Kashmiris at a later date ‘were’ self-conscious of this, and proud of their grapes, celebrated in poetry.¹⁶ If this was the case for Gandhāra, how did the people there view parts of South Asia that did ‘not’ make so much wine? Although there is some controversy about the matter, I am convinced by Max Nelson’s work, where he writes that the Greeks in the classical period, rich and poor, drank wine as their main alcoholic drink, and not beer, which was perceived as an unusual, foreign drink.¹⁷ If wine was the main, or even the ‘only’ alcoholic drink in Gandhāra did some people there perhaps also adopt that scorn for the uncivilized and alien beer drinker we see in

14 Robinson, Harding 2006, s.v. Bordeaux; History.

15 On this trade and geography, see de Planhol 1972.

16 For example, McHugh 2021b, 256.

17 Nelson 2014.

classical Greece? Or perhaps they were possessed of a quite different sensibility regarding their place relative to the greater Indic context, where such a vast number of drinks were available, not just beer, and where drinks like *surā* and *sīdhu* were mentioned in literary and religious texts? We may well never know anything about this, but still, having such ideas in the back of our minds might well be useful in thinking about our evidence.

But is wine the only alcoholic drink people made in Gandhāra? In the Swat Valley, barley was plentiful, as was wheat and rice, and probably also types of millet.¹⁸ Did people brew grain-based *surā* in Gandhāra? Also, what of drinks made from sugar products here? We know from one document found at Loulan that what must have been exotic spices in that region, such as black pepper, long pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon were available.¹⁹ Some of these are quite typical ingredients in many recipes for drinks ‘other’ than wine in South Asia, in those *sambhāra* additives no less, and in that very same list containing the spices we also find a reference to sugar. Whatever the status of other drinks here, Gandhāra is unquestionably a ‘horizon’ between a more wine-centric world and a region with an unusually large number of drinks. Further, we might also speculate whether ‘within’ Gandhāra wine was perceived as quite variable, as it is in any wine making country, different colors, styles and so forth?

Also, let us reflect: if Gandhāra was largely a wine making region, from the point of view of someone from, say, Mathura visiting Gandhāra, this grape-centric culture of drink would have been striking. We perhaps see a hint of this awareness of regional differentiation in a somewhat imprecise but intriguing passage Dr De Notariis has translated from the Chinese version of the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, where it is stated that in Northern states even the poor drink grape intoxicants, whereas in other areas even rich people cannot obtain it.²⁰ This is sort of like a description of a land where caviar is as abundant as cabbage. And perhaps, then, in that case in Gandhāra we might find the sorts of patterns of consumption for wine, elsewhere so precious, that we might associate with the commonest drinks, such as millet *surās*, in other parts of South Asia?

While we think about access to this drink it seems entirely possible that wine was not perceived as prohibited to anyone in Gandhāra, lay or monastics. First, one might argue that people, monastics included, may have not taken the precept or rule on drink too seriously. Or, perhaps *masu*, the processed, stabilized ‘nectar’ juice of grapes, was not typically deemed to be covered by the rules on *surā* and *maireya*,

18 See Spengler et al. 2021.

19 Baums, Glass 2002-, s.v. *śakara* (and referring to document CKD 702).

20 See De Notariis 2023, 97 fn. 48.

more a kind of honey or sweet juice. Yet, even within a far more technical, even pedantic, legal framework wine might have been permitted to monks here. Now, we possess a version of the drinking precept in Gāndhārī that mentions “*surā* and *maireya*” (*suramerea*-).²¹ As with Pāli sources, quite possibly a Gāndhārī *Vinaya* likewise mentioned both drinks in defining the monastic ‘offence’ of drinking. And one might read the Pāli version and – perhaps audaciously – even this hypothetical Gāndhārī version of the rule as permitting wine to monastics. How might that be the case? One thing that is striking about wine in the South Asian context is that it only has one ‘ingredient’: grapes. This is implicit, perhaps, in the definition of wine in the *Arthasāstra*, and explicit in the description of wine in the much later twelfth century *Mānasollāsa* and also in Jayaratha’s comments on Abhinavagupta.²² If we look closely at the Pāli *Vinaya* rule on drinking, there is an offence in drinking *surā* and *maireya*.

surāmerayapāne pācittiyā ti.
surā nāma piṭṭhasurā pūvasurā odanasurā kiṇṇapakkhitā
sambhārasamyuttā.
merayo nāma pupphāsavo phalāsavo madhvāsavo guḷāsavo
*sambhārasamyutto.*²³

There is an expiation offence for drinking *surā* and *meraya*.

(*Starch-based drinks*)

Surā means: crushed grain-*surā*, cake/bread *surā*, cooked rice *surā* – with *kiṇva* (starter) put in, mixed with *sambhāra* (herbal additive mixture).

(*Sugar-based drinks*)

Meraya (= Sanskrit: *maireya*) means: flower *āsava* (= sugar-based alcoholic drink), fruit *āsava*, honey *āsava*, jaggery *āsava* – mixed with *sambhāra* (herbal additive mixture).

Of course, for this rule to be functional we need a good definition of those words. *Surā* is defined as various starchy things with the addition of *kiṇva* and *sambhāra*, the herbal additive mixture I mentioned earlier; and *maireya* is made from sugar sources: flowers, fruits, honey, sugar, also with the addition of *sambhāra* additive. Yet it appears that grape wine has no *sambhāra*. And if you accept that fact, then a

²¹ Strauch 2014, 29. I am grateful to Bryan de Notariis for making me aware of this reference.

²² See McHugh 2021b, 255-6.

²³ Vin IV 110.

canny, legally minded monk could quite easily argue it is not covered by the rule. Indeed we see this very argument being produced in a serious controversy about the permissibility of palm toddy that took place in sixteenth century Burma, which all revolved around the nature, presence or absence, of the *saṃbhāra* addition to that drink.²⁴ To conclude this digression: wine has a quite different name to the drinks in the Pali rule and is made in a quite different way, so maybe it was not forbidden.

What of wine and time, vinification as an event? Above, I mentioned visual images from Europe where grapes symbolize a season or a month. Grapes need to be dealt with fast when compared to some agricultural products. If you find yourself with a huge amount of grapes they can rapidly decay or ferment. We tend to see wine as a delicious intoxicant, a Dionysiac nectar, but arguably wine, as also the raisin, and even as with ham and cheese, is a product of the need to stabilize and store a perishable substance. You can dry grapes; you can dry them and then press them, as we see with the great raisin wines, *recioto* and *amarone*, of the Veneto. And you can make wine with fresh grapes. All these products are easier to store and to transport in trade. Undeniably from our images, archaeology, and the fame of Kāpiśāyana wine, people in Gandhāra did make what we would call wine, but did they make other grape-based products, and what was the wine like that they did make? On that note, what do we possibly make of a Gāndhārī word attested Niya: *śukhiga*, perhaps cognate with *śuṣkaka*, so perhaps implying 'dry', perhaps implying a wine made from dried grapes; an advantage in processing time in some contexts, allowing for a delay in production, as well as producing an exceptionally tasty, sweet wine, a sort of *vino recioto di Caḍota*?²⁵

As scholars of Gandhāra all know, Buddhists were by no means averse to the grape, nor to grape products, which may have been classified in various ways in various different contexts.²⁶ Also, Olivieri and Vidale have written of the probable involvement of Buddhist institutions with agriculture in the Swat Valley.²⁷ Professor Olivieri also observes that the grapes for wine in the Swat Valley may have been gathered from vines growing wild.²⁸ And he has also described the multiple stone structures for crushing and pressing wine in parts of the Swat Valley, which could have produced quite a significant volume of wine, mobilizing quite a lot of labor too. Given what a major annual event the grape harvest and wine making must have been,

²⁴ On this controversy see McHugh 2021b, 218.

²⁵ Baums, Glass 2002-, s.v. *śukhiga* (and consulting references given for that entry).

²⁶ De Notariis 2023.

²⁷ Olivieri et al. 2006, 131-5.

²⁸ Olivieri et al. 2006, 142-6.

and given its economic importance, the presence of such imagery in the Buddhist monasteries is not at all surprising, especially if the drink was not seen as immoral or prohibited.

Harry Falk proposed that Gandhāran wine was fermented quickly, as one sees with some Kalash wine making, and that this young wine was quickly consumed at a festival of sorts.²⁹ Now I do not think the evidence from Gandhāra allows us to assume that exact scenario, and I 'am' interested in the idea that some wine might have been made somewhat more carefully with an eye on storage and trade. Nevertheless, in Greater Gandhāra, an economy with a significant involvement in grapes and wine, there was surely an annual moment of abundant sweet fruit, frenzied activity, and the prospect of voluminous storable products, above all wine, that could be enjoyed locally and traded for economic gain. Perhaps there was a festival of sorts to celebrate the new wine, and certainly these images of wine making, from a wine making region, must have evoked a moment that was both sensuous and economically reassuring for everyone, drinkers or not. A moment that was well worth celebrating in art, experiencing through luxurious material culture, and evidently thoroughly supported by monastic institutions.

²⁹ Falk 2009, 75-6.

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Vin = *Vinaya* (Pali Text Society edition)

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