

***Amorini* in context: A fresh study of their form and function in the collection of Lahore Museum**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Gandhara art collection of Lahore Museum and examines the motif of the amorini, its iconography and role in different sculptural contexts of Buddhist art and architecture. The paper first addresses the acquisitional history of the collection and then describes the figures of amorini and their mythical origins; thirdly, it discusses their functions and shows that they went beyond mere ornamentation. By comparing the Gandhāran amorini with coeval figures on Roman sarcophagi, this research seeks to fill a gap in current scholarship by interpreting the celestial figures of amorini as fundamental actors in funerary spaces and by highlighting their diverse role as adorants and offer-bearers in Buddhism. The study follows a qualitative research methodology and provides graphic documentation of selected artefacts from the Lahore collection. Altogether this paper aims to contribute to the present research on Gandhara school of art and how these mythological themes help us understand the adaptation and mixture of indigenous and foreign elements.

Keywords: Amorini, Garland bearers, Lahore Museum, Gandharan art.

1. Introduction

Gandhara, a region located at the northwest of Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan is often divided into Proper and Greater Gandhara (Behrendt 2007: 3). This division gives us a boundary fixed notion about the cultural activity and artistic production of the area. Even though the regions included in these two geographical frames are considered to be different by many scholars (Pons 2018: 10) has rightly pointed out that such geographical boundaries pose misconceptions about the designated art material, and can offer discrepancies about the school of Gandhara art by effecting the conclusions of art historians.

The region of Gandhara broadly includes the Swat Valley, Peshawar Basin and Northern Punjab with the local productions at Jambil-Saidu zone, and later, the region of Kapiśa which are subject to exhaustive studies of specific sites. Gandhara's sculptures stand out for their unique blend of Greco-Roman, Indian, and Central Asian influences. The

collection of Gandhara art in the Lahore Museum provides insights into these cross-cultural exchanges, particularly in the representation of celestial and mythical figures, crucial for our understanding of the philosophical-mythical thinking of Buddhist people and to understand how foreign models were adapted and perceived within a religious landscape. The figures of *amorini* are one such cases, widely depicted on narrative panels, steles and circular drums in the Buddhist art collection.

The existing scholarship (Filigenzi 2020: 219) used these amorini as an example to define the circularity of motifs from West to East. In Buddhist art, the model adapted for the depiction of *amorini* was of Western nature i.e diminutive adult. A. Provenzali (2022: 187) mentions that the earliest depictions of *amorini* can be traced from the 30 brackets found in Butkara I, which were not just particular decorative pieces, but also functional for the hanging of flower garlands.

2. A preamble: Lahore Museum Collection of Gandhara Art

In 1870s, the systematic explorations of the Gandhara region on a *grand scale* started with the Punjab Government by Sappers and Miners, first in Peshawar and Mardan and later onto more remote sites. The main aim of these excavations was to acquire sculptures for the Lahore Museum, however, many sculptures remained in the above-mentioned sites for safe keeping until they finally reached the destination (Errington 1987: 767). According to the accession register of the Gandharan collection in the Lahore museum, some provenience sites for the pieces that depict the motif of *amorini* are *Charsadda* (Acq.no. 1184) *Karamar* (Acq. no. 309) and *Mohammad Nari* (Acq. no. 1139). These objects played an important role in the study about the inclusion of Hellenistic models and subjects in Gandharan art.

At the dawn of the 19th century, the term “Gandharan art” emerged to address Greco Buddhist art: it was at that time that the early scholars of Gandhara art began to relate it to the visual cultures of ancient Greece (Stewart 2024: 37). The impact of the collection of Gandhara art housed at the Lahore Museum is captured in the famous novel “Kim” written by Rudyard Kipling in 1901. He wrote that ‘in the entrance-hall stood the larger figures of the Greco-Buddhist sculptures done, savants know how long since, by forgotten workmen whose hands were feeling, and not unskillfully, for the mysteriously transmitted Grecian touch’ (Kipling 1901: 7). Another observer of the 18th century, Victor Goloublew, a

member of *Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, expressed the impact of Hellenism during his visit to Lahore Museum in 1923. He mentioned that in the silence of this museum, one could see the influence of Hellenism on Indian history and highlighted the excursions of Alexander, and the Greek colonization of ancient India and Menander's rule (Christopoulos 2020: 1-2).

In the collection, the *amorini* sculptures (Figs. 1-9) are carved in schist, a locally available stone from northern Pakistan. However, other available lithic materials as chloritized schist, claystone, slate, steatite are also used in the sculptural production of Gandhara (Marshall 1960: 40).¹ Also, by the study of the number of marks present on these fine pieces, Pons (2018: 17) mentions that chisels, compass, burin and drill points confirm the carving process was carried out in series of steps by distinct craftsmen that also enabled to meet the rapidly increasing demands of first centuries of Common Era.

3. The Iconography of *Amorini*

In the visual culture of the Roman E, *cupids/ erotes/ putto* and *amorini* are widely spread figures. The difference among these terminologies exists on the basis of lingual preferences of different scholars addressing to them. For an instance, Mitchell (2018) made an attempt to clear out the etymological and literary difference between *eros* and *cupids* and their mentions in literature: the Italian scholarship favors *puttino* or *amorino*, German linguistic *erotes/eros*, French *amour*, *putto* or *cupidon*, the anglophonic world prefers cupid.

The context in which these subjects are depicted in Gandhara portrays a sense of interconnectivity, as they hold the garlands standing next to each other, facing in two directions. This relation of their depiction helps to understand their functionality as reactive figures holding garland in motion around the sacred space, showing a reaction that comes in a form of an offering to the dead. The imagery of *erotes* and *amorini* – by iconography – differs in Greek and Roman art. In ancient Greece, Eros

¹ Within a cluster of sites, the composition of schist can differ even among specific regions. For instance, the sculptures yielded from the Peshawar basin are made mostly in dark chloritoid schist, while the green talc schist is available in Swat. These sculptures were the result of different specializations of several artists that reflects the organization of labor in Gandhara.

was the son of Aphrodite and often depicted as a young man. In the Roman art of second to third century CE, *amorini* loses its chubby features and changes into a heavy and plump child which apparently shows more close affinity to Gandharan ones (Filigenzi 2020: 220). However, it is pertinent to mention that these figures are also depicted in erotic context within Gandhara.² Only in association with the clear statements of Roman influence on Gandhara art of 2nd century CE, the Roman origins of *amorino* lie in Pergamon, present day Turkey. The city became important in the representations of iconographic types, and the earliest known garland bearers are reported from here (Mitchell 2018: 37). But why were *amorini* depicted as infant plump child-like figures in Roman art as incorporated in Gandhara art as well? The author wants to highlight the reasons of plumpness in children depicted in Roman art that were as it is adapted in Gandhara art apparently without the need to question ‘why they have to be depicted in a certain way’. An interesting analysis is mentioned by Mitchell (2018: 38) calling it as a product of changing values of children and their roles: the body of a cherub is actually the opposite representation of the real body of children of Roman period. In the period under study – early centuries of Common Era – that is when the *amorini* appeared, there were increased rates of child mortality, therefore, their well-being was the main concern. It is evident from the ancient medical records of this period by the diviner Artimedorus who writes about children being highly susceptible to illness and death before reaching puberty. Thus, these children in Roman period were actually an anti-synthesis of a real child’s body (Mitchell 2018: 39-40). Resultingly, for the iconography of *amorini*, the form of idealized children illustrating a healthy, plump infant body with smooth skin as figures full of life were adapted (Figs. 1-2). It seems that, this iconography of *amorini* was copied as it is in Gandhara without investigating the reasons of plumpness from which the artists seemed least bothered here. The present research shall also compare it with Roman sarcophagi as it is understood closely connected to.

² Such an example can be quoted from Tanabe (2020: 47, fig. 13) showing a gem seal depicting Psyche and Eros as a couple facing each other, with a young eros standing beside them.

4. Winged *Amorini*: Meanings beyond ornamentation

Wings attached with these figures provide them with movement and motion but potentially they also emphasize their hybrid, bird and animal-like qualities. The wings of Gandharan *amorini* may lead understanding in another direction, highlighting their divine nature and can act as markers of distinction from living experience especially when they are depicted on stupas (Mitchell 2018: 47), as noticeable in an interesting unpublished example of a small circular drum (Fig. 2) depicting a row of garland bearers.

Amorini are said to be the mythological mourners that are found, just as in Roman sarcophagi, circling around the Gandharan stupas in different registers as their horizontal band suggests (Mitchell 2018: 53). The *amorini* are seen with tactile movements in a way corresponding with their environment, thus their touch is understood as tender and soft. Depicted in hard stone, the cupids are considered as non-human mythical bodies, they are separated from the real world, which makes them non-social bodies away from the stress of realities and their act of touch is actually an invitation for the viewer in the environment to touch and commemorate as they are under the constant stress of garlands which requires strength and support. The reasons of the depiction of *amorini* in ornamental context can also be understood by the definition of ornament given by art historian Oleg Grabar that ornament plays an essential role to develop sensory, physical, practical and emotional relationship with buildings, objects and artifacts (Grabar 1992: 44). It is clear that the garland held by the *amorini* is meant to give a touch perception to the viewers and the elements from which the garlands are composed of (i.e. fruits and vegetables), highlighting the material properties of the art and architecture. Thus, *amorini* add to the meaning of haptics for the viewer by playing acts like grabbing, stroking and holding and giving an ignition to the viewer to imagine how these objects are perceived (Mitchell 2018: 91). The viewer-object relationship can be understood by the installation of art into sacred spaces: that connects the attendants of the monument to the object itself. The touch-based activity shown in the garland panels reflects that, ‘the plastic art is equally effective in evoking or triggering the intention of touch in the viewer as seeing himself in it’ (Irwin 2022: 55). In other words, these installations show the ritualistic practice of bringing flowers to the monument, which seems central to the religious practice in Buddhism. The acts of grabbing and holding can be understood

as ‘sensational forms’ that the material medium triggers among the attendees of the monument. The human body connects with the ornamented object through sensory perception and deep-seated awareness, as drawing the viewer into a sacred space. Hay mentions this concept as resonance (*yùn* (韻), pronounced “*yoon*”) which is actually the over-determination of connection with the decorative element and its capacity to bring feelings and thoughts inside the viewer (Hay 2010: 77-78), also common in the art of early modern China. The close relationship between construction, craft and installation in sacred spaces, that derives sensation among the people, is also seen as a practice of obtaining merit in Theravada Buddhism. It also implies to the role of craftsmen and lay people in design and construction as an act of donation (*dāna*) that is central to Buddhist practice and shows the socio-cosmological relationship between people, things and places where haptics interplay between them (Irwin 2022: 54). The ‘emotional systems’ that are depicted in the funerary space conveyed messages which are evoked in the passer-by or attendant through figures and motifs. S. Estrin (2023: 156-180) gives example of the mythological figures of sirens which are depicted in the marble steles of the graves in ancient Greece. He expands that sirens are related to the enchanting musical voices and their depiction reflects the lament they bring to the grave. Thus, the motifs around a funeral and sacred space open up sensorial experiences that extend beyond sight and touch. It is actually a way of imagining our own encounter with the deceased and its monument (Estrin 2023: 83). In this multimodal context of art, we can better understand the significance of the *amorini*’s touch while holding garland, as they adore the monument with flowers. This sense is intended to be evoked in the viewer and attendant of the monument, as seeing himself bringing the offering to the stupa.

5. Amorini in the funerary context of Gandhara

The current research, presenting *amorini* bringing offerings to the stupa in the form of garlands, should mention John Marshall’s point of view on brackets from the early Buddhist architecture of Gandhara. In fact, in that period brackets were intentionally carved at the *stupa* in the form of winged *devas* to hang flowery garlands (Marshall 1960: 20-22). The inscriptional evidence from Sirkap, mentions that the donor paid the garland holder, confirming the fact that the stupas were embellished and bedecked with donations from patrons, tracing this pattern to the earliest

sculptures from Sanchi and Bharhut (Behrendt 2007: 26). The inscription also confirms Marshall's statement about the construction of brackets in order to hang garlands. This practice of adoration in the form of hanging garlands on stone brackets by the attendees of the monument was made by Early Buddhists and it probably became the reason for carving both the garland and the beholder in the stone itself (Marshall 1960: 21). *Amorini* holding the garland are in fact common to the Kushan empire of Gandhara and the depiction is traceable up to the Mediterranean basin, which still have so much in common with sarcophagi traditions of Asia Minor this time (Mitchell 2018: 207). The subject of *amorini* has been understood so far to be spread from Hellenistic art to Rome and Asia Minor from where to eastern Mediterranean. This influence can be understood by the presence of *nagadantas* – which are particular architectural elements used as peg to hang garlands and swags. The example mentioned by Provenzali (2022) clearly states the *nagadantas* as brackets combining Indian and classical elements with winged *amorini* figure found from Butkara I, which are not just decorative elements, but also functional (see also Casalini 2023). In the extensive volume put forward by D. Faccenna (Faccenna 1964: 165 Pl. DLXXVII) on the sculptures of Butkara I, is mentioned a false bracket (*nagadanta*) with a winged *amorino*, standing on a round base, wearing a shawl and some jewelry.

Amorini are mentioned as the mediating figures between the dead and the architecture of dead that is why their presence can be felt on the garland friezes which in early centuries of CE, adorned the lower levels of the stupas (Provenzali 2022; see also Stewart 2024: 21-22). Before the Kushan rule, when the Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati stupas were commissioned between the mid-1st century BCE and the mid-1st century CE, the Buddha's image was not shown in human forms. However, some turbaned and jeweled celestial figures holding the garland were depicted in the panels of Bharhut Stupa as evident in one panel housed in the Indian Museum (Ghosh 1978: 20; Fig. 11). These celestial figures (*yaksas*) differ from the *amorini* of Gandhara in iconography by wearing heavy jewellery, a lower garment and turbans. In Indian iconography, they acquire local apparel (Stančo 2012: 116). Moreover, in Bharhut and Amaravati examples (e.g., Fig. 12), the figures are on the upper left and right side of the stupa rather than in sequentially aligned manner next to each other as Gandharan *amorini*. However, their meaning remains same in bringing garland offerings to the monument (Shimada 2006: 90).

6. *Amorini* in stelae reliefs

In Gandhara art, the scenes of wrestling and combat appear in stelae and other objects such as lifting weights and narrative panels (e.g., Fig. 8). In the collection under study, one such stele is displayed in which small *amorini* can be seen in different acts of playing (Ingholt 1957: 100). The scene of playing and fighting *amorini* shows the transformation of sports and fights into games whose leading character were children rather than adults. The interesting fact is that these depictions of *amorini* are located next to the Buddha's narrative images and *amorini*'s iconography occupies a considerable space in a sacred area (Galli 2011: 290-291; Zwalf 1996: 203). The picture of Gandharan society in terms of depicting wrestling, combat and sports scenes can also be traced from the account of Philostratus in 'The Life of Apollonius' (translation by F.C. Bonybeare), where Taxila is mentioned as the main center of Gandhara where observant of musical performances, exercise and the royal banquet practices occurred at the time of Alexander. Moreover, another narrative panel from the collection depicts two scenes: one shows two individuals (possibly *amorini*?) grabbing each other seemingly engaged in wrestling and witnessed by some spectators. They are representative of the cultural practices which reflected the interests of people or the class that was involved in Buddhist worship and their choice of depictions (Galli 2011: 294-295).

One more representation of the *amorini* like spirit figures holding garland wreath over the head of seated Buddha is visible in the stele of Muhammad Nari house in Lahore Museum (Vendova 2022; Rhi 1991). This stele is also known as "Paradise stele", because of textual sources as *Dīvyāvadāna* and Lotus Sutra in which the scenes depicted in stele are interpreted as the paradise of Amitabh (Sukhāvātī) or of *Akṣobhya*'s paradise *Abhirati* (Vendova 2022: 42; Luczanits 2008: 48). In the *Mahāvastu*, through which Vendova attempts to interpret the iconography of the stele, the small children holding circular wreath are described as *devas* paying homage to the exalted Buddha around and over the coral tree (Vendova 2022: 42). It is evident from the textual sources of *Gaṇḍavyūha sutra* that the concept of purity (*visuddhī*) and adoration (*vyūha*) were the dominating themes to attain merit and to get access to the Buddhist realm (Rhi 1991: 150-151). Thus, the small spirits in the form of holding circular wreath, garlands, and foliage, around the head of Buddha bear the same

concept as an explicit symbol of adoration and paying reverence to the preaching Buddha in the stele.

Rhi (1991) referring to the Mahayana texts of *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and *Divyāvadāna*, explains that this power of Buddha in replicating himself and emitting light was so defined in nature that even ‘the small child could see the reflected images or the whole realm which extended from the heaven of *Akaṇiṣṭha* to small boys’ witnessing the adornment of Buddha (Rhi 1991: 97-98). With the support of such textual sources, the figures of ‘small boys’ could be the same *amorini* bringing garland wreath to Buddha’s head (Fig. 3). This concept of depicting figures with offerings and flowers could be translated to the patron, viewer or worshipper as seeing themselves adoring Buddha, in the image where ornamentation and representation mutually exist because these steles were destined to be installed in proposed niches – sometimes on dais – within the sacred areas. On the co-existence of ornamentation and its perception by the viewer in the sacred context, the author will expand in the next heading no. 6.

Recent scholarship on the *amorini* mentions that their range of depiction is diverse in Gandhara, especially during the Kushan empire with respect to iconography of Buddhist narrative art. Also, their extent is shown by the presence of *Amorini* in the Sassanian silver plates that are associated with Dionysus (Karetzky 2012: 12) and as *putti* motif from the art of Khalchayan, southern Uzbekistan (Kiilerich 1988: 148).

7. The garlands and concept of adoration and donation

The garlands of Gandhara art upheld by the *amorini*, with one-foot thrust forward to bear the weight of garland express a careful gesture of mechanical balance and distribution. On close inspection, *amorini* seem to be closely tied in the net of garlands and *taenia*.³ Thus these garlands represent *amorini*’s efforts of continued holding, sustaining and supporting (Mitchell 2018: 229). The garlands were composed of assorted fruits, rosettes and auspicious plants (Karetzky 2012: 14) which are leafy and *cornucopia* (Figs 4-7). In the Gandhara art, the garlands’ bodies are defined by lozenge patterns replicating tightly arranged laurel leaves and are adorned with floral elements. The fruits and foliage regularly appear

³ *Taenie* is a sort of woolen band, ribbon or fillet that are visible on the garlands wrapped around them with a knot. “*Taenia*,” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary.

in the form of hanging clusters (Zwalf 1996: 277; Stewart 2020: 52;). In Greek examples the garlands are continuous, but in Roman art, they divide into stems and leaves featuring flowers too with the latter being close with Gandhara (Stančo 2012: 16). Garlands and flowers are considered to be an offering to the sacred space (Lakshminarayanan 2023: 12). Thus, in Gandhara art, *amorini* as garland holders can be interpreted in the contexts of 'donors' as they bring offering to the stupa in the form of flowery garlands. The commissioner and sponsor of the stupa express materiality⁴ and donor's effect of beholding is perceived as human action (Elahi 2023: 230). The beholder-like images actually serve a visual strategy as mirror images, when observed by the viewer, one automatically links himself (the worshipper) with the image, evoking a sense of being present in the scene himself as a visitor of this place (Galli 2011: 321). If *amorini* bring offering to the monument, it is rightly said that the imagery in the Buddhist art is a symbol rather than portraits emphasizing on something 'not meant' to be physically seen but rather an intangible formula based on the perceiver and viewer of it as a reflection of its own (Coomaraswamy 1977: 159).

If the *amorini* of the Roman sarcophagi and circling around the stupa are the same figures, why are they depicted in funerary space? These *amorini* are seen as proxy to the dead themselves, and attendants holding ritual flowery garland to honor the dead free from the expressions of grieving and mediating between the living and the dead. The honoring of the monument through different offerings became an action of obtaining merit for the Buddhist devotees (Swati 2008: 117). The effect of these garlands shows that the funerary structure is forever tended and commemorated. It also implies that the presence of these garland bearers as substitute of human interaction with the funerary structure, as well as encouraging it and to consol the mourners of the time, if, the monument does not receive any offerings or visits, it will remain a place of attention with watchfulness and care (Mitchell 2018: 268). The donor figures who carry such offerings and donations acts, like a bond between the body of the donating person and themselves reflects in it to express their piety while reiterating on the concept of image (*pratimā*) and its subject (*pramā*) that the sculpture conveyed (Elahi 2023: 252).

⁴ The concept of understanding how the material itself can contribute to the artistic expression (Yonan: 2011: 232)

8. Conclusions

The schist panels depicting *amorini* bearing garlands were strategically placed on stupa drums. These garlands, composed of flowers, served as offerings and donations, adorning the lower levels of the stupa in stone. Initially, the placement of *nagadantas*, or brackets, on the stupa facilitated the hanging of flower garlands. Over time, these garland-bearing panels evolved to represent the idea that these monuments should be perpetually attended, allowing the worshipper to connect with the act of homage. This concept is a part of multimodal art practice, which studies the relationship between the object and the viewer. The motif of *amorini* interweaves the senses of touch and sight, connecting the attendee to the practice of bringing garlands, thereby integrating the self into the ritual. These emotional and sensory systems, rooted in decoration and ornamentation, convey messages deeply embedded in ritual practices. The *amorini* motif frequently appears in Gandhara art, often depicted as mythological figures. However, their roles varied within the artistic context, including garland bearers, wrestlers, and combatants. Their iconography, characterized by a plump, cherubic appearance, remained consistent across foreign and local cultures, with the exception of anklets. The depiction of anklets, commonly seen on images of women in Gandharan art, serves as a distinct feature, uniquely representing sub-continental women.

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Fig. 1 - The last register of a panel relief depicts two figures grabbing each other by waist. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 2 - A small circular drum with amorini holding garlands on their shoulders; left: detail of the decoration. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.

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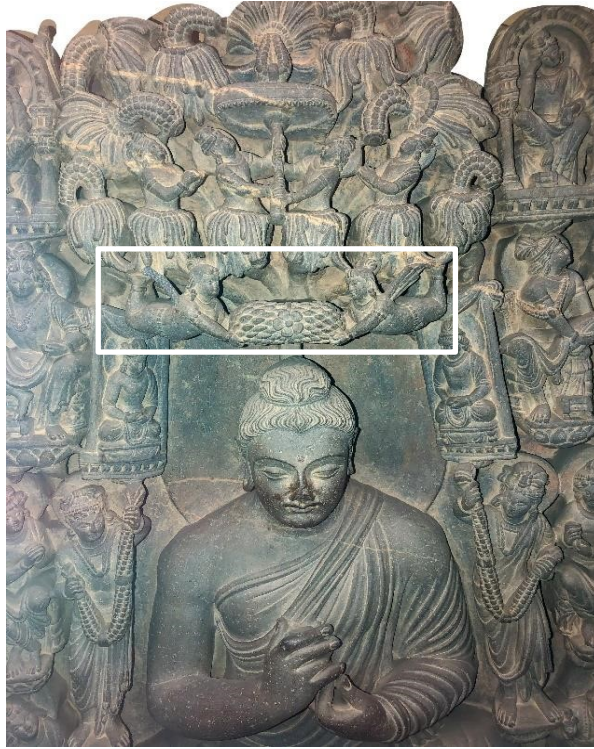


Fig. 3 - Miracle of *Sravasti*. The winged plump amorini like figures are adoring Buddha's head with wreath. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 4 - Young Amorini undulating garlands with winged figures emerging from behind. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.

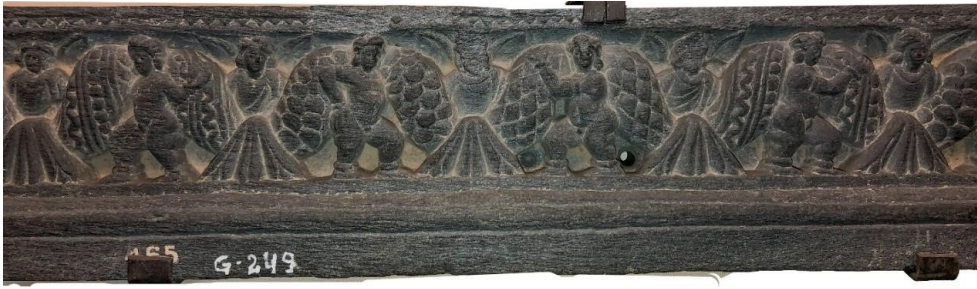


Fig. 5 - Plump children like Amorini bearing the wreath of garlands. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 6 - Amorini holding garlands bind with ribbons. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 7 - Left: Eagle in a garland frieze; right: *Taenia* (ribbon) and hanging clusters. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 8 - A rectangular panel relief with left border depicting nude amorini, standing and wrestling. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 9 - Winged amorini in worshipping pose. Photo by Author; Courtesy Lahore Museum.



Fig. 10 - Roman sarcophagus with amorini holding garlands (after Stewart 2020: fig. 2).



Fig. 11 - Sculptural panel depicting a stupa and devotees from Bharhut Stupa, Madhya Pradesh (from smarthistory.org).



Fig. 12 - Garland bearers from Amravati friezes (from smarthistory.org).