

In Memoriam (2000-2025)
A Problematical Toilet-tray from Uḍegrām

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Abstract

The so-called “toilet trays” are particularly important for the genesis of Gandharan figurative art. These objects are characterized by a figurative part and concave divisions. These small plates, most probably “libation trays” (Falk 2010), are associated to urban contexts dated from mid-1st century BCE to mid/end-1st century CE. After this date, their production ceased. This chronological limit is particularly important because it coincides with the end of the Saka-Parthian kingdoms and the beginning of control of the territory by the Kushana imperial power. H.-P. Francfort (1979) distinguished these trays into three main types: type A: “Hellenizing,” type B: “Parthian,” type C: “Indian,” or rather “Indo-Scythian” (Lo Muzio 2002, 2011, 2018). The tray presented in this article (type C) belongs to the latter category. Made of gray chlorite schist, it dates back to the 1st century BCE in Uḍegrām (UD 370). The plate has nine partitions, with the central square that features three male busts facing forward. In front of them hang what appear to be banquet tablecloths, but which Taddei interprets as lotus petals. Although dated sixty years ago, the article is an extraordinary gem of insight and acumen by Maurizio Taddei, who was always attentive to the archaeological context and Eurasian models with an eclectic and disciplined eye, but above all gifted with a visual memory for ancient art in general (not only Gandharan or Indian) with expertise that fully encompassed 14th-century Tuscany. [LMO]¹

Keywords: Toilet-trays, Saka, Uḍegrām, funerary banquet.

¹ This article was originally published with this title in *East and West*, 16, 1/2, pp. 89-93. Its inclusion in this issue is due to the editorial team’s desire to honour the memory of the scholar 25 years after his death. Maurizio Taddei (1936-2000) was a long-time member of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, then Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan from 1967 to 1977. A great scholar of Indian art, he was Rector of the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples (1981-1984) and then Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan from 1996 until his death. For more on his life and work, see Gherardo Gnoli (2000) Maurizio Taddei, 1936-2000, *East and West*, 50, n. 1-4: 544-564. Permission to publish has been graciously granted by *East and West* and Prof. Taddei’s family.

[89] Among the objects found in the so-called “bazar” of Uḍegrām (Swat) during excavation there carried out by Prof. G. Gullini (of the Italian Archaeological Mission directed by Prof. G. Tucci) a toilet-tray from stratum I deserves our particular attention.² Though its existence was made known at the time of the Exhibition of Pakistan and Afghanistan Excavations in 1960,³ it is still practically an unpublished find (Figs. 1-2).



Fig. 1 - Toilet-tray from Uḍegrām (Swat). Italian Archaeological Mission, Saidu Sharif.

² Of schist, 16,5 cm. in diameter. On the Uḍegrām excavation, see G. Gullini, “Uḍegrām”, in *Report on the Campaigns 1956-1958 in Swat (Pakistan)*. (IsMEORepMem I), pp. 173 ff.

³ G. Gullini, in *Attività archeologica italiana in Asia. Mostra dei risultati delle Missioni in Pakistan e in Afghanistan*, Torino-Roma 1960, p. 32, no. 26, pl. III.

The tray is divided by four listels into five panels arranged in the form of a cross and into four triangular panels that fill in the remaining spaces. The four arms of the cross are each diversified by lotus petals and each of the triangular zones decorated with a four-petal rosette, while a scene with figures is the motif of the central panel. In fact, three half-bust figures are here represented: the central one is portrayed full-face with hands joined in front of the chest, whereas in the two lateral ones, the face is in full, but the torso in three quarter, view. The latter are holding an object in their hands which is certainly a cup in the case of the figure to the left and probably the same where the figure to the right is concerned.

The execution is somewhat approximate, and of the dress worn by these three persons (they all seem to be male figures) it can only be said that it is, perhaps, a long-sleeved tunic. As to hair arrangement, it seems to be in the form of a melon in the central and right-hand figures, while the left-hand one has no apparent sign of hair which makes me think it likely that the head is covered by a hat. Below the three busts three bands are visible with beaded edge and central rib. Rather than “drapes”,⁴ these are to be identified as lotus petals; and a further three can be glimpsed behind the heads of these figures. They were, then, conceived of as emerging from a corolla, and we can thus dismiss the notion that the marks carved in the lower half are meant to indicate haloes. This way of portraying figures is not without a parallel in toilet-trays (e.g., in an unpublished one seen on the Karachi market of antiques and here reproduced in Fig. 3):⁵ but in this toilet-tray the intention is clearly to depict figures actually surrounded by a corolla.

Let us make the point, to begin with, that this scene has much in common with one familiar in a fair number of Taxila toilet-trays where a pair of figures (usually a man and [90] a woman) bearing cups⁶ are portrayed. Here, there is the addition of a third, and central, figure.

Plainly, there is a dearth of characterising features that would allow sure identification of the scene: the comparisons possible are, moreover, numerous and varied, but in none of them is there a regular correspondence in every one of these scanty features. We must, then, be content with a few suggestions relating this object to one religious and

⁴ *Ibid.* (English ed.).

⁵ Diam. 15 cm.

⁶ J. Marshall, *Taxila*, Cambridge 1951, pp. 493ff., pl. 144, nos. 67-71.

cultural background rather than another, but not such as to label it once and for all.

The very composition of the scene with its three frontal, rigid figures⁷ performing extremely simple gestures leads us to attribute a liturgical, or at any rate religious, character to it. If, as seems evident, we are here face to face with a libation scene, no thought of anything profane can enter our minds. This is also confirmed by the lotus petals from which the figures emerge: these would in no way be justified in the case of three ordinary mortals attending a common banquet. It might well be a scene, then, similar to those already familiar in the Taxila toilet-trays (drinking couples, banquets) with the addition of the lotus corolla of which more anon.



Fig. 2 - Detail of Fig. 1.

⁷ The fact that the torsoes of the two lateral figures are seen in three quarter view does not, of course, affect the “frontal” character of the representation.

There is, however, a one and only feature that may enable us to push our research a little further: the hat worn by the figure on the left. It is difficult to imagine it to be a chignon, for we would then have to account for the absence of incisions to indicate the hair. Now the only type of headgear that seems plausible is the Phrygian cap that, from a frontal view, has a two-tiered appearance.⁸

This is a detail immediately suggesting a possible connexion with Mithraic iconography. Let us, in fact, examine a Mithraic relief (albeit much later) from 4th century Dalmatia.⁹ Cumont has shown that it is a sacred banquet representing the ritual repetition of the feast celebrated by Mithras and Sol before Mithras' ascent. Two figures are lying on a couch and surrounded by four initiates of different ranks of whom *Corax*, *Persa* and *Leo* may be recognised.¹⁰ Of these, *Persa* is wearing a Phrygian cap and offering a *rhyton* to the banqueters. The analogy is evident but we are not for this reason entitled to look upon it as significant.

Let us bear in mind the entire series of Mithras and Sol banqueting scenes so common in Mithraic reliefs¹¹ which lend themselves so readily to comparison with the drinking couples of the Taxila toilet-trays. In this connexion, it should be observed that one of the latter¹² portrays a couple of busts that could both belong to male figures like those [91] appearing on a Rang Mahal vase (Rajasthan).¹³ In the other trays the presence of the female figure may well be due to a tendency to Indianize the subject transforming the solar couple into a *mithuna*, as is suggested by the Taxila tray no. 70 which appears strongly Indianized as regards style also.

⁸ Cf. *Sculptures Butkara I*, pt. 3, pl. DCLXIb: second from the left, which has been wrongly described by me.

⁹ Sarajevo, Archaeological Museum; from Konjic: F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, 3rd ed., Bruxelles 1913, pp. 163 f., fig. 21; *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (cited *CIMRM*), II, Hagea Comitibus, 1960, p. 265, no. 1896, fig. 491.

¹⁰ On degrees of initiation, see above all Cumont, *Les mystères...*, cit., pp. 155ff.

¹¹ *Les mystères...*, cit., pp. 155 ff. (10) *CIMRM*, II, nos. 1648, 1740, 1975, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2181, 2338 and *passim*; cf. also *CIMRM*, I, 1956, nos. 693, 782 (with three figures).

¹² Marshall, *op. cit.*, loc. cit., no. 67.

¹³ H. Rydh et al., *Rang Mahal*. The Swedish Archaeological Expedition to India, 1952-54, Lund, 1959, p. 157, pl. 73, and p. 158; cf. also M. Taddei, "An Ekamukhalinga from the N. W. F. P. and Some Connected Problems", *EW*, XIII, 1962, p. 296, note 11.

Nor must we lose sight of the fact that the pair of figures making libation is represented on the solar chariot in two toilet-trays: one from Uḍegrām, and the other preserved in the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde.¹⁴ That there is a connexion between the communion scene (the banquet) and that of the ascent (solar chariot) both in a generally religious and funerary context is a detail not worth dwelling upon.¹⁵ But I should like to recall a particularly striking example - that of the large gold triangular plaque from the Karagodeuašh mound (Kuban).¹⁶ Here in a panel the Great Goddess is visible in the centre of a communion scene according to a scheme corresponding to the Uḍegrām tray, and placed above it is a solar chariot whose form, Rostovcev (*sic*) hesitantly remarks, “is influenced by the type of Helios, but the god... is the great Iranian sun-god, the Sol Mithra of the Roman Empire”. At the top of the Karagodeuašh plaque is the standing figure of a Tyche which Rostovcev (*sic*) believes can be identified “with the Iranian Hvareno”.

We are, then, dealing with a phenomenon of religious iconography whereby “the aniconic Iranian religion... became peopled with divine images, created by the Greek artists and no doubt accepted by the Scythian devotee”;¹⁷ it has its analogy, even though distant in time, with what occurred in Gandhāra Buddhism. We are, in fact, witnessing an intrusion by Near Eastern iconographical features (ones that are Mithraic or in touch with a Syrian religious environment) that are adapted to meanings inherent in Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹⁸

Confining ourselves for the moment to the toilet-trays alone, it seems difficult to admit, as Buchthal does,¹⁹ that “for the Indian artists these figures and scenes were genre motives of purely decorative value”, even if it can be readily accepted that nothing, or almost nothing, of their original mythological significance remains. It is my view that much

¹⁴ Taddei, *op. cit.*, figs. 22-23.

¹⁵ See in particular F. Cumont, *Lux Perpetua*, Paris, 1949, pp. 291f.

¹⁶ E. H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, Cambridge 1913, pp. 216 ff. and *passim*, fig. 120; M. Rostovtzeff, “Le culte de la Grande Déesse dans la Russie Méridionale”, *Revue des Études Grecques*, XXXII, 1919 (1921), pp. 462-81; Idem, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*, Oxford, 1922, pp. 104 f., pl. XXIII 1; G. Vernadsky, *Essai sur les origines russes*, I, Paris, 1959, p. 81, pl. V, fig. 6.

¹⁷ Rostovtzeff, *Iranians and Greeks...*, *cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁸ Cf. H. Buchthal, “The Western Aspects of Gandhara Sculpture”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXI, 1945.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7 (of the off-print).

research still needs to be done into the religious value of the numerous western iconographies assimilated by the north-western region of India: by drawing attention to this toilet-tray I merely wish to add one more piece to the jigsaw puzzle that I hope can in time, though with much labour, be fitted together.

[92] Moreover, that the opinion of Buchthal is not to be adhered to in this instance at least is proved by the lotus corolla from which the three busts emerge — a sure sign that the subject represented is of religious significance.²⁰ But it is not easy to say what this significance is: comparisons with figures emerging from flowers or palmettes in classical art or in works deriving from classical models are anything but scarce;²¹

²⁰ Regarding divine figures on lotus flowers, see especially: E. Bielefeld, "Eros in der Blüte", *AAnz*, 1950-51, cols. 47 ff.; S. Morenz-J. Schubert, *Der Gott auf der Blume. Eine ägyptische Kosmogonie und ihre weltweite Bildwirkung (Artibus Asiae, Supplementum XII)*, Ascona, 1954; among the latest contributions to the subject: Y. Krishan, *Symbolism of the Lotus-Seat in Indian Art*, *OrA*, XII, 1966, p. 36-48. In this connexion, we may perhaps recall the flowers with articulated petals known also in the West: e.g. the one in the Cairo Museum that probably dates from the Ptolemaic age and contains a small image of Horus: G. Daressy, *Catalogue general des antiquites egyptiennes du Musee du Caire. Statues de divinites*, I, Le Caire, 1906, pp. 63 f., no. 38222, pl. XI.

²¹ See L. Curtius, "Republikanisches Pilasterkapitell in Rom", *Römische Mitteilungen*, XLIX, 1934, pp. 22-32; J. M. C. Toynbee, J. B. Ward Perkins, *Peopled Scrolls: a Hellenistic Motif in Imperial Art*, *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XVIII (NS, V), 1950, pp. 1-43; A. P. Ivanova, "Mestnie motivi v dekorativnoi skul'pture Bospora", *SA*, XV, 1951, p. 197 (whose opinions are briefly summarised in G. Azarpay Laws, *A Herodotean Echo in Pompeian Art?*), *AJA*, LXV, 1961, pp. 31-35); H. Jucker, *Das Bildnis im Blätterkelch. Geschichte und Bedeutung einer römischen Porträtform*, 2 vols., Olten-Lausanne-Freiburg i. Br., 1961; D. Schlumberger, P. Bernard, *AI Khanoum*, *BCH*, LXXXIX, 1965, pp. 645 ff., and above all note 4 on p. 650 (with further bibliography). Busts emerging from foliage are very frequent in Sasanian glyptic, but are not lacking in toreutics: see e. g. M. S. Dimand, *A Group of Sasanian Silver Bowls*, in *Aus der Welt der islamischen Kunst. Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel*, Berlin, 1959, pp. 11-14. As evidence of the means by which the motif spread, it is worth recalling the hunting putti emerging from foliage or from a flower on fabrics found in Mongolia but imported from the West: *Kratkie otčety ekspedicii po issledovaniju severnoj Mongolii* (Akademija Nauk SSSR), Leningrad, 1925, pp. 28 f., fig. 8, pl. 4; M. Rostovtzeff, *The Animal Style in South Russia and China*, Princeton, 1929, pp. 85 f., pl. XXIV A 1; S. I. Rudenko, *Kul'tura Hunnov i noinulinskie Kur gany*, Moskva-Leningrad, 1962 (*non vidi*; reviewed by O. Maenchen-Helfen, *AAs*, XXVII, 1965, pp. 365 ff.). I forego quoting examples of Gandhāra art since the subject merits a study of its own; but it may perhaps be recalled that busts of *devas* and centaurs which, emerging from acanthus and suchlike leaves, decorate brackets and *nāgadantas* (false brackets: see e.g. *AGBG*, I, fig. 89) seem to derive from analogous rep-

yet to my mind of scant significance. It is perhaps more pertinent to make a comparison with some Gandhāra figures (also of classical derivation) which are generally interpreted as *kimnāras*: they emerge from a lotus flower and are sometimes grouped in three though not within the same corolla.²² Such semi-divine images gave rise to those analogous Central-Asian *kimnāras*²³ which grew into a real decorative motif without forfeiting any of their religious meaning.²⁴

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[93] What conclusions, then, can be drawn at this stage? Since this object is unique of its kind, it is as well not to go beyond a few sure notions or at least those that are least uncertain.

1) The scene depicted on the Uḍegrām tray is embodied in terms that are not human as is shown by the fact that the figures emerge from a lotus flower.

2) Such a scene must be interpreted as a ritual banquet.

3) The presence of a personage with a Phrygian cap (?) is reminiscent of Mithraic environments with which north-west India, as we know, had close ties.²⁵

What we have been studying, then, is probably an Oriental counterpart of the various *cenae* whose formation and primitive development in Christian iconography is not to be divorced from that

representations in classical *rhyta*: see e.g. E. Breccia, *Terrecotte figurate greche e greco-egizie del Museo di Alessandria (Monuments de l'Égypte gréco-romaine, II 2)*, Bergamo, 1930, pp. 73 f., no. 477, pl. XIX 7; A. Adriani, *Rhyta, Bulletin [de la] Société Royale d'Archéologie, Alexandrie, NS, X, 1939, p. 355, fig. 2*. But see also the *rhyta* from Nisa: M. E. Masson, G. A. Pugacenkova, *Par fġanskġe Ritony Nisy iz kuVturnogo nasledija Turkmenskogo Naroda*, portfolio (Juzno-Turkme nistsanskaja Arheologiceskaja Kompleksnaja Ekspedicija), Moskva, 1956, *passim*; R. Ghirshman, *Iran: Parthes et Sassanides*, Paris, 1962, p. 30, pl. 41.

²² See *AGBG*, II, pp. 20-22 (for the name); *GAP*, nos. 255, 366, 368.

²³ For instance, N. V. D'jakonova, S. S. Sorokin, *Hotanskġe drevnosti. Terrakota i štuk*, Leningrad, 1960, pls. 8, 9, 46; L. Hambis, ed., *Toumchouq* (Mission Paul Pelliot I-II), Paris, 1961-1964, pp. 386-88, fig. 454.

²⁴ Suffice it to recall that in Central Asia even the image of the Buddha, repeated countless times, becomes a decorative feature.

²⁵ For the relations between Buddhism and Mazdeism, see above all: A. C. Soper, "The Roman Style in Gandhara", *AJA*, LV, 1951, pp. 301-19; *GAP*, p. 36; E. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, I: Des origines à l'ère Śaka*, Louvain, 1958, pp. 783-85; J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 1962.

Roman funerary symbolism that was likewise closely linked to Mithraic iconography.²⁶

But no solution can now be given to the chief problem concerning both this tray and many other Gandharan reliefs, that is, what connection exists between them and Buddhism. In my opinion only a thorough examination of the three aspects of Gandharan art — stylistic, iconographic and religious — taken as a whole can lead us to a satisfactory solution of it; but too many invaluable documents remain unpublished. I hope that the reader will forgive me for this preliminary approach to the iconographic questions raised by the Uḍḍgrām tray.

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²⁶ For the parallelism between Christian and Buddhist iconography, see H. Buchthal, "The Common Classical Sources of Buddhist and Christian Narrative Art", *JRAS*, 1943, pp. 137 ff. For the influence of Mithraism on Roman sepulchral imagery, see E. Strong, *Apotheosis and After Life*, London, 1915, pp. 187 ff.

²⁷ To the abstract.



Fig. 3 - Toilet-tray N.W.F.P. *Location unknown.*

List of abbreviations

AAanz	— <i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i>
AAAs	— <i>Artibus Asiae</i>
AJA	— <i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
BCH	— <i>Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique</i>
EW	— <i>East and West</i>
JRAS	— <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
OrA	— <i>Oriental Art</i>
SA	— <i>Sovetskaja Archeologija</i>



*Maurizio Taddei (standing on the right), with Vittorio Caroli and a local worker;
Butkara I, 1958 (“Archivio D. Faccenna” Italian Archaeological Mission in
Pakistan, Saidu Sharif)*