

Development of Greek Religious Iconography in Early Kushan Coinage: Adaptation, Integration and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the process that led to the emergence of royal and religious imagery in Early Kushan coinage during the early 1st and 2nd century CE. The examination of the development of royal and religious motives, which is related to the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greeks, shows that they were integrated into the context of the oriental traditions of Bactria, while also engaging with Parthian, Indo-Parthian, and Indo-Scythian coin designs. This phenomenon resulted in different numismatic practices that, though attempting to retain former traditions, crystallised in a range of novel features used to express its own identity. As far too little attention has been paid to this process of formation and transformation, this paper also aims to assess the scope of religious imagery, which was fundamentally connected with the Central Asian Iranian-Hellenistic religious context. The main approach is to examine how political and social developments as well as the interaction between Early Kushan society and other Indo-Iranian dynasties affected coin images. My focus will be on the process ending in the formation of an independent iconography and the stabilisation of political and royal appellations on coinage.

KEYWORDS

Bactria; Greco-Bactrian; Early Kushan; Indo-Greek; 1st and 2nd century CE; Religious imagery; Kujula Kadphises; Hermaios imitation; Wēś.

THE GREEK GODDESS NIKE AND EARLY KUSHAN COIN IMAGERY

Pictorial representation on early Kushan coinage was inspired by a broad range of cultural dynamics that were already well-established in the region. This contributed to the diverse iconography displayed by early Kushan coinage. These visual trends were initially adopted by the Indo-Greek and the Greco-Bactrians and were perpetuated by nearby dynasties, namely the Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians, and Parthians. Evidence for this cultural trend can be found among the Indo-Scythians, who preserved common practices in Bactrian and Indo-Greek coinage, while transforming the Greek royal bust to reflect their own royal imagery, clad in Scythian-style nomadic armour. The succeeding Indo-Parthians not only continued using the pictorial elements of the Indo-Scythians, but likewise adapted the model to portray the royal images in an 'Iranian style' (JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 5). Over time, coin design among the early Kushan integrated the various cultural and religious influences of the region under their rule. That is to say, Kushan imagery was 'multicultural' in nature, drawing iconographic features from the 'Hellenized Orient', Zoroastrianism, India, Buddhism, and local traditions (JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 259). In general, the Yuezhi-Kushan, as one of the earliest successors of the Greeks in Bactria, alluded to several religious visual concepts on their coinage. That is to say, the Yuezhi adopted forms of religious imagery which the residents of the newly conquered regions recognized, making an astute selection of the coinage of those rulers whose political influence was still strong in the region.

The obverse occasionally displays the royal portrait of the ruling king, the former king of the region or the Roman imperial image. In this regard, two different coin systems may be attested in the north Oxus and south of the Hindu Kush. This can be seen in the Bactrian imitations of Eucratides's (c. 170–145 BC) and Heliocles's (145–130 BC) coins (**Pl. 3/1:1** and **3/1:2**), two recognized and deeply-rooted coinage in the regions north of the Hindu Kush, as well as the Hermaios imitation series issued south of the Hindu Kush.¹ The reverse design, on the other hand, illustrated Hellenistic religious features formerly displayed on Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek, and Indo-Parthian as well as Indo-Scythian coinages. Evidence of this cultural mix can be found in one of the canonical motifs, the Greek goddess of victory, Nike, which is attested on the various coinages of the Indo-Iranian dynasties, particularly in Central Asia, and the provinces north and south of the Hindu Kush. In order to trace the process of formation and transformation of this iconographic feature, it is important to understand the impact of certain influences on the representation of this important religious motif.

The goddess Nike is often depicted on Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek, and Parthian coins, the latter being the inspiration for the use of this deity on Kushan coinage. In ancient Near Eastern traditions, portraying the king in the presence of the deity is generally interpreted as a sign of familiarity between them. Among Parthians, archers were replaced on the reverse of coinage the representation of an enthroned king, alongside a divinity from the 1st century BC onwards (ERRINGTON – CURTIS 2007, 49). The king is depicted on the reverse, on horseback and receiving a symbol of kingship from a deity, either Nike or Tyche (**Pl. 3/2:1** and **3/2:2**). Although the goddess Nike was a recognized motif in Parthian coinage during the early 1st century CE, it also was already present on the coinage of several Parthian rulers before this period (SELLWOOD 1980, types 36.19 and 42.1), for instance in Phraataces's (ca. 2 BC–4 CE) issues, on which Nike is displayed behind the king's head (**Pl. 3/2:3**) (SELLWOOD 1980, type 56.6). In a similar example, a flying Nike is represented in front of and behind the king's head on his diademed king and Musa type (**Pl. 3/2:4**) (MITCHINER 1978, 608–611). Following this, a winged Nike was depicted on the reverse of Vonones I's (8–12 CE) coins, on which the figures stand to the left bearing a palm branch and diadem (**Pl. 3/2:1**) (SELLWOOD 1980, type 60.2). As importantly, Nike is shown standing to the right, holding a palm branch, on the reverse of Gotarzes II's (40–51 CE) copper issues (SELLWOOD 1980, type 65.46).

It should be further noted that, the representation of a mounted king is rare on Parthian coinage. However, one of the earliest examples in which a king is depicted on horseback is Phraataces's bronze issue, on which the king is portrayed on horseback riding to the right (SELLWOOD 1980, type 57.15; MITCHINER 1978, 607). In addition, Parthian coinage generally represents the seated archer on the reverse, except in coins by Artabanus II (10–38 CE)² (**Pl. 3/2:5**) and Pacorus II (78–105 CE) (**Pl. 3/2:6**), which show a mounted king facing to the left. Although these two issues present minor differences, they are very similar overall, presenting the king on horseback in the 'investiture scene', which is uncommon in Parthian coinage (SINISI 2012, Type 2(1)).

It is, therefore, necessary to establish how this Parthian royal-religious iconography was adopted by Kushan coinage. It should be noted that the evidence conclusively proves that the depiction of Nike on coinage was adopted by the Parthians' eastern neighbours, namely Indo-Parthian (**Pl. 3/3:1** and **3/3:2**), Indo-Scythian (**Pl. 3/3:3**), and, ultimately, early Kushan

1 These coins were issued either by the Yuezhi or Kujula Kadphises.

2 Artabanus II was one of the Parthian kings credited with establishing the mechanism of 'Iranisation' by dropping the title 'Philhellene' from the reverse legends of his tetradrachm. ERRINGTON – CURTIS 2007, 49.

coinage. Evidence of this cultural convergence can be seen in the case of a mounted figure accompanied by the goddess Nike on the so-called Heraios tetradrachms, on whose reverse a flying Nike is depicted behind the head of the ruler (**Pl. 3/4:1**). The same trait has also been attested on the obverse of billion tetradrachms by Gondophares, on which the king is displayed on horseback with the Nike flying above his head.

Eventually, the first established king of the Kushan dynasty – Kujula Kadphises (40–90 CE) – began by modelling his coinage on Greek traditions, which were firmly rooted in Bactria. This applies to both the denominations and the pictorial motifs on the obverse and reverse of his coins. His Eucratides imitation type, found north of the Oxus, is a silver obol minted in the reduced Attic standard similar to those of the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides I. The reverse side of this type depicts two-star caps of the Greek gods, the Dioscuri, with two palms and two parallel Greek legends on the right and left sides of the motif. South of the Hindu Kush, he also employed the goddess Nike on the reverse side of his Hermaios imitation series.³ This group of Hermaios imitations depicts the winged Nike standing to the left, wearing a long Hellenic robe and holding a wreath in her outstretched right hand (**Pl. 3/4:2**). This practice of presenting the Greek goddess Nike in early Kushan coinage consistently apply to the copper imitation of the Heraios tetradrachms issued in Taxila, on which a flying Nike, holding a diadem in her right hand, is shown behind the head of the mounted king (**Pl. 3/4:3**). In the same vein, the standing winged Nike is also represented on the rare coins issued by Kujula Kadphises (**Pl. 3/4:4**). This type was issued in Sind, and Nike is depicted facing left and wearing Hellenistic clothes identical to those on the Hermaios imitation type. She holds a dotted diadem in her right hand and with her left hand carries palms over her shoulder (CRIBB – BRACEY, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the depiction of the standing Nike was an existing religious imagery among the Greco-Bactrians and Indo-Greeks and could be regarded as a prototype for the succeeding dynasties. Therefore, it could be hypothesized that the depiction of the goddess Nike or Tyche offering a diadem to the king fundamentally stemmed from Greek traditions that were integrated into oriental iconographies and became a recurrent motif in Parthian iconography. Religious imagery of this type, which alludes to Parthian traditions of 'equestrian investiture', in turn betrays the nomadic origin of the 'horse-breeding Scythians' and Parthians (SHENKAR 2014, 55–56). This custom was later adopted and transformed by the early Kushan and Gondopharid kings, namely Kujula Kadphises and Gondophares respectively.

Nonetheless, the former coin design was slightly adapted to fit Bactrian and Iranian traditions. After Kujula Kadphises, rulers refrained from using the representation of the Hellenistic goddess Nike. The process of amalgamation of Greek religious imagery with Bactrian-Iranian iconography ultimately reappeared on the coinage of Huvishka, alongside a novel Bactrian appellation to Oanindo (**Pl. 3/4:5**). The iconographic representation is similar to the Nike depicted on the reverse of a rare coin type issued by Kujula Kadphises in Sind. The Nike-like figure, wears typical Hellenistic dress, holds a 'jewelled diadem' in her extended right hand and a palm branch stretches over her left shoulder. However, the control mark Kharoshthi *bhu* (CRIBB – BRACEY, forthcoming) depicted in the right field of the Kujula Kadphises issue has been replaced on Huvishkas' coin with his tamga.⁴ It has been suggested that her Bactrian name Oanindo was derived from the Iranian star deity, Vanainti, which is connected to the Zoroastrian Verethragna, the god of victory (ROSENFELD 1967, 91; cf. also JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 289, no. 744).

3 These series were extensively studied by Bopearachchi and divided into several groups. Group IX was referred to as Hermaios-Kujula Kadphises joint coinage. The depiction of Nike features on group VIII. BOPEARACHCHI 1991, 343; BOPEARACHCHI 1995, 39.

4 For using tamga as a sign for dynastic affiliation see TAASOB 2020, 298.

THE GREEK GOD HERACLES AND EARLY KUSHAN COIN IMAGERY

As a multicultural region, Bactria embraced a wide variety of deities. Besides Nike, the Greek god Heracles was a well-established religious phenomenon within the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coinage traditions. The coinage of Demetrius I (200–180 BC) and Euthydemus II (185–180 BC) provides a good illustration of his presence in the Hellenic context of Central Asia (Pl. 3/1:3 and 3/1:4). This may be regarded as a prototype for depicting Heracles on the coins issued in the region and eventually became one of the most well-developed and most frequently found Greek gods in the Iranian-Bactrian world which ultimately appeared under his own Bactrian name in the Kushan coins. The Greek divine iconography of Heracles is represented on the local Bactrian issues of Pabes and Phseigaharis as a standing nude man holding a lion skin in his left hand while his right hand rests on a club (Pl. 3/1:5). As importantly, he is also attested on the Hermaios imitation series⁵ issued south of the Hindu Kush, as a standing naked man who holds a club in his right hand and has a lion skin draped over his left arm (Pl. 3/4:6). This image, encircled by the Kharoshthi inscription, carries the political title of *maharajasa khushanasa yavugasa kalana karisa* ‘of great king, Kushan yabgu, Kujula Kadphises’. Interestingly enough, group IX includes another set of coins that represents Heracles on the reverse and bears the name of Kujula Kadphises both on obverse and reverse (Pl. 3/4:7) (BOPEARACHCHI 1991, 343; BOPEARACHCHI 1995, 39). However, the reverse images on Hermaios imitation series began with groups I to VII, which depict an enthroned Zeus (Pl. 3/4:8), and were followed by the representation of Nike in the group VIII.⁶ Subsequently, religious representation on the Hermaios imitation series progressively evolved into the depiction of Heracles. It seems likely that this development in religious imagery from enthroned Zeus to Nike to Heracles was largely, if not exclusively, the result of various social, political and religious developments. A possible explanation for this iconographic changes is the invasion of nomads under the leadership of Kujula Kadphises in the south Hindu Kush and Paropamisadae. Accordingly, changes in the titles conveyed by coinage could be simultaneous to political changes and the military expansion of Kujula Kadphises throughout the region. This fits with inscriptions in Kharoshthi, such as a silver scroll found in Taxila (KONOW 1929, 70–77) and an inscription from Panjtjar (KONOW 1929, 67–70). In these inscriptions, Kujula Kadphises is referred by the titles *maharayasa rayati-rayasa devaputrasa Khushanasa*, that is ‘Great king, king of kings, the son of the gods, Kushan’ and *maharaja Gushanasa*, that is ‘great king of the Kushans’. As previously noted, the early Kushan rulers that followed Kujula Kadphises ceased portraying the Hellenistic goddess Nike as well as Heracles on their coinage. The reason for this transformation could be found on the religious imagery on the reverse types, which progressively integrated the oriental traditions of Bactrian and Iranian goddess. This integration is reflected in the identification of Heracles with Verethragna, the god of war and victory (JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 285), which in the Iranian world received the Bactrian name of Orlagno. He is represented in one of Kanishka’s (127–151 CE) rare issues, in which he is depicted with a bird head dress or a tiara surmounted by an eagle (Pl. 3/4:9).⁷ Following this, Heracles is illustrated on the rare issues

5 group IX. BOPEARACHCHI 1995, 40.

6 Concerning the dating of these series, both Cribb and Bopearachchi are of the opinion that they belong to the first half of the 1st century CE. Also, both have discussed the treatment of the royal portrait and its similarity to those of Augustus and Tiberius; for this reason, they should be dated to c. 60 CE. CRIBB 1984; CRIBB 1985, 138–149; BOPEARACHCHI 1998, 400.

7 According to Frantz Grenet (2015, 216), the ‘eagle is one of Verethraghna’s manifestations in his Yašt’.

of Huvishka (150–190 CE), who mainly adopted the legacy of his predecessor. These issues, uniquely struck in gold and copper, provide a remarkable example of Heracles' features alongside the Bactrian name Orlagno (**Pl. 3/4:10** and **3/4:11**).

THE GREEK GOD ZEUS AND EARLY KUSHAN COIN IMAGERY

Affiliation with the extant regional religious traditions by the Yuezhi and later by the Kushan is also expressed by the representation of Zeus, who was the highest Greek god and held special significance as a god of the sky, thunder and wind. He was depicted as a standing, bearded male figure, sometimes crowned with rays and wearing a Greek robe that covers his left shoulder. He is shown with his usual attributes, such as a sceptre in his left hand and a thunderbolt in his right hand. Like other Yuezhi and early Kushan takes on the Greek religion, Zeus featured on the Heliocles imitation series and on the cross-legged type of Kujula Kadphises, found to the north of the Oxus and Taxila respectively (**Pl. 3/4:12** and **3/4:13**). The latter issue represents a seated king in a cross-legged position with a pick axe in his right hand. The reverse type shows a standing Zeus holding an upright sceptre in his left hand. This coin type is another significant example of the integration of royal and religious imagery displayed in coins minted in the Indo-Iranian borderland. In the same vein, this issue may have been inspired by Indo-Scythian coins of Azes II (AD 16–30), which had likewise been minted in Taxila. Similarly, the reverse type has close parallels with those issued by the Indo-Parthian kings Abdagases I and particularly Sases, dating to the second half of 1st century AD, which were struck in the same region (**Pl. 3/3:5** and **3/3:6**). Following Kujula Kadphises, *Soter Megas/Vima Takto* (90–113 CE) likewise adopted the Greek god Zeus on the reverse of his local coinage, issued in the Mathura and Gandhara regions (**Pl. 3/4:14**). In the latter series, Zeus is facing right, wearing a diadem and a long robe, holding a sceptre in his left hand and making a gesture of acknowledgment with his open right hand. As a matter of fact, the Greek religious iconography was deliberately linked with a local feature, which is clearly visible in the depiction of a water pot with emerging leaves in the right field of the coin, an element which was used later as an attribute of Wēś on Vima Kadphises's coins. However, after *Soter Megas/Vima Takto*, Zeus was integrated in the religious settings of the early Kushans in different arrangements, which will be discussed in the following sections.

HERACLES/WĒŚ, TYCHE/ARDOCHSHO AND EARLY KUSHAN COIN IMAGERY

Religious syncretism and integration reflected on both obverse and reverse of coins. This novel practise is attested for the first time in the Wēś/Ardochsho type issued by *Soter Megas/Vima Takto* in the Gandhara region (Type 2: SIMS-WILLIAMS – CRIBB 1995–1996, 119). The obverse of this type illustrates the standing male figure, with a cloak over the shoulders, facing right and holding a long sceptre in his right hand, and an animal skin wrapped over the left hand, along with the *Soter Megas* symbols, including the three-pronged tamga and the Kharoshti letter *vi*, which are represented on the left and right field respectively. The reverse portrayed a standing female figure, wearing a long robe, facing right and holding a *cornucopia* in her right hand while resting her left hand on her hip. The Nandipada symbol is presented in the left field and the water pot with emerging leaves, which is similar to those of his Gandhara issues, feature in the right field (**Pl. 3/4:15**). This type seems to highlight the integration of several religious traditions. As such, the attributions and function of the figure on the obverse,

which appears in the guise of Heracles, has been merged into the Bactrian or eastern Iranian god, Wēś,⁸ who is – like Heracles – shown naked with an animal skin and club, which in some instances rests on the ground (Pl. 3/4:16).

This religious iconographic amalgamation is also clear in the representation of the goddess of fortune, abundance and prosperity, who reflects the influence of the Hellenistic deity Tyche, often depicted with a *cornucopia*. However, as a result of religious integration within the local traditions, the deity has been identified as the Iranian goddess Ardochsho, the goddess of moisture and water (ROSENFELD 1967, 74; JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 264), and the Indian god Lakṣmī (SAMAD 2010, 115–124), one of whose attributes is a water pot.

It is important to note that the representation of the Hellenistic Tyche already featured on the reverse of a Zeionises issue (20–40 CE), on which the king is shown as if he was being crowned by the deity Tyche, who holds a *cornucopia* in her left hand and a wreath in her right hand (Pl. 3/3:7). Subsequently this religious iconography became a common feature on the reverse of Kanishka (Pl. 3/4:17) and Huvishka issues, on which Ardochsho is explicitly inscribed and presented with its Iranian denomination (Pl. 3/4:18). However, Ardochsho remained among the most prominent deities depicted on coinage in the south of the Hindu Kush until the late Kushan period.

This progression seems especially clear in Vasudeva II's coinage, on which the deity Ardochsho is presented frontally, seating on a 'high-backed throne', wearing a long robe and holding a diadem in her right hand and a *cornucopia* in her left. Although a seated type of Ardochsho is not found on earlier Kushan coinage, it might have been inspired by earlier Indo-Greek coin iconographies (ROSENFELD 1967, 74). The double decadrachm of the Indo-Greek ruler Amyntas (95–90 BCE) portrays a Tyche seated on a high-backed throne with a *cornucopia* in her left hand and making a gesture of acknowledgment with her right hand.

WĒŚ AS INDIAN OR IRANIAN GOD ON EARLY KUSHAN COIN IMAGERY

The adaptation and integration of other religious concepts and beings reflected on the Kushan coinage – not only Greek and Iranian but also Indian – confirm the syncretic religious approach of the Kushans. Perhaps the first indication of Indian religious concept in the Kushan coinage is connected with the representation of a controversial sole deity (the so-called Oešo, Wēś or Śiva), presented on the gold and copper issues of Vima Kadphises (113–127 CE) in seven types.⁹ Although he was depicted with a set of iconographical attributes that embodied double cultural functions, they were later associated with Indian deities and exclusively with Śiva. He appeared as a standing deity, leaning against a bull with a variety of attributes: holding a trident, a thunderbolt, on the shaft of the trident or as a separate element, water-pot. He was also shown with two or four arms, an elephant goad, a flaming halo and an antelope skin, that are likewise depicted on the later Kushan coins. These attributes would hardly have been recognized on a sculptural depiction of Śiva dating to the same period (JONGEWARD 2004, 172), which makes the identification of this deity more uncertain. Although the reverse image in these coins is surrounded by a Kharoshthi inscription, this does not provide any clue concerning the identity of the deity. Therefore, the actual identification has become a subject of intense debate within the scientific community; various identifications have been being put forth, as the Iranian god Vayu, based on the iconographic features and phonetic affinity (HUMBACH

8 This will be discussed intensively in the next section.

9 This category was proposed by JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015.

1975, 399–408; TANABE 1991–1992, 51–69; TANABE 1997, 263–280; BOYCE 1993, 34–40), or as the Hindu god Śiva, based on the different attributes associated with the divinity (FISCHER 1957, 416–436; HUMBACH 1966, 46; GÖBL 1983, 257–264; MACDOWALL 1987, 184; FUSSMAN 1998, 593, n. 55; CRIBB 1997, 11–66; GRENET 2015, 207). The author has discussed elsewhere (TAASOB 2020, 86–90) the attribution concerned with the iconography and various interpretations of the Kharoshti inscription (FALK 2010; BOPEARACHCHI 2008; GRENET 2015; HUMBACH 2014) that encircles the image. Concerning shared attributes, the trident is significant, as it came to be recurrently associated with the Indian god Śiva in a later period.¹⁰

The identification of the deity as the Indian god Śiva has been recently contested by Boparachchi, who claimed that the image of Śiva that appeared on the Vima Kadphises coins is a composite deity, which was created by Gandharan engravers who borrowed other religious attributes from the Hindu divinities. He discussed that the trident (*paraśu*), as a weapon, is one of Śiva recurrent attributes.¹¹ Besides the trident, other important visual attributes, such as the bull, the erect phallus, the water pot, multiple heads, and four hands, are further evidence for associating this deity with the Indian god Śiva in a later period.

This relationship between Śiva and bulls is connected with the mountain associations of the Hindu god, is fundamentally one of his most prominent characteristics (JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 264; CRIBB 1997, 37). The correlation between the deity and the bull is interesting because the bull is an attribute to which the Iranian deity Wēś was also related.¹² Similarly remarkable practices of religious assimilations were previously depicted on the coinage of Kujula Kadphises and Vima Takto (Cribb type 7: SIMS-WILLIAMS – CRIBB 1995–1996, 119), and could be interpreted as a further link with earlier local coinage. This can be attested in depictions of bulls on coin series issued by the Indo-Scythians Azes II and Zeionises – which were mainly in circulation in Taxila and Begram, south of the Hindu Kush, and Kashmir respectively.

Another significant feature depicted alongside the deity on the Vima Kadphises coins is the water pot or *Kamandalu*. This has been regarded as a significant Śiva attribute, which is likewise predominant in Bodhisattva Maitreya sculpture in the Gandhara region in later periods (BLURTON 1993, 84). Although Boparachchi regarded *Kamandalu* as a container for the holy water of Brahmā, the creator, he argued that the image represented on the Kushan coins is a composite deity which is ‘going through a transitional period before the codification’ (BOPEARACHCHI 2016, 65. See also TAASOB 2020, 87, n. 11). While one can identify the water pot as an expression of the ascetic character of Śiva, it must be taken into consideration that these iconographic features emerged much later than the early Kushan period. The iconographic evidence from the early years of Vima Kadphises does not represent Śiva with these shared attributes. The deity is presented with his double cultural function, which merged the Greek god Heracles and Bactrian features.¹³ The god was depicted with a set of iconographic attributes that were only later associated with Indian religious beings and exclusively with Śiva. Beside this, the developed visual representation of the deity and epigraphic evidence

10 It has been suggested that Śiva was never presented with a trident in Mathura iconographical representations. LO MUZIO 1995–1996, 162, where he also cited KREISEL 1986, 104–105.

11 BOPEARACHCHI 2016, 64. For further information concerning the use of the trident as a weapon, see his n. 37.

12 The bull as one of the attributes of Wēś could be also connected with the Zoroastrian mention in the Rām Yašt, where the Iranian god Vayu is also connected to the bull, which may have been considered as one of the most significant aspects of ‘Vayu-worship’. TANABE 1997, 270; TAASOB 2020, 94.

13 There are several controversial discussions around the identification and attribution of this deity as to whether the deity is the Indian god Śiva or the Iranian god Vayu, TAASOB 2020.

(TAASOB 2020, 89–90) from later periods, along with phonetical and linguistic interpretation,¹⁴ offers enough clues to his identity. This can be illustrated by analogies between the coins of Vima Kadphises's successors, on which the Bactrian name Oešo (Wēś) is inscribed. Iconographically speaking, among all the attributes, the trident appeared predominantly with Wēś on the Kushan coinage for the duration of the Kushan Empire, whereas other symbols ebbed and flowed over time (CRIBB 1997, 37). It has been suggested that the trident might be ascribed to Indo-Scythian and indigenous deity, which may have 'acted as [a] stylistic transmitter between Greek and Kushan iconography' (ROSENFELD 1967, 125). This interpretation finds some support in the coins issued by Maues (SENIOR 2001, fig. 27:1) and Azes in the Gandhara region, on which the Greek deity Poseidon is shown with a trident similar to Wēś's (Pl. 3/3:8). It has been suggested that the Maues coin type is the earliest indication of the presence of Śiva in the region and may have stood as a prototype for the representation of the trident as one of the attributes of the Kushan Wēś (ROSENFELD 1967, 125, also citing BANNERJEA 1956, 120–121). The influence of other Indo-Iranian dynasties, including the Indo-Scythian, in development of Kushan iconographic representations is undeniable. However, it should be further noted that the coin types similar to those of Maues were not conceived to become a common or familiar coin type to circulate in the region. That is to say, not a large volume of these type of coins was minted, and it would therefore be very unlikely that they served as a prototype for the depiction of Wēś with trident in Vima Kadphises's coins (TAASOB 2020, 99).

Although the actual identification of Wēś has become a subject of intense debate within the scientific community, it should be noted that certain attributes depicted with Wēś should not be construed exclusively as belonging to the Indian god Śiva or the Greek god Heracles. The visual depiction of this deity is assigned to the representation of the eastern Iranian god by Kushan and, like the other religious concepts which were assimilated to form a novel context by the Kushan, it can be hypothesized that these two deities, Wēś and Śiva were likely in the process of being assimilated at this time.¹⁵ As previously noted, the Kushan chose the Iranian name Wēś for the depiction of a deity that shares characteristics attributed to Indian, Greek, and even Zoroastrian religions. This is reflected in the representation of the elephant goad and water pot, which are characteristic attributes of the later Indian god Śiva,¹⁶ but also symbols of the Iranian deity, specifically the god of the sky. This also agrees with the depiction of the animal skin and the thunderbolt, which are allusions to the presence of Greek beliefs in the Kushan Empire.¹⁷ Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the depiction of the deity with water

14 The main dispute is concerned with the title *mahiśvara*, which has been interpreted either as 'devout to Śiva' or 'a great lord', to support the Shivaism religious tendency of Vima Kadphises or a 'secular power', for that king deified himself through the 'god's title sovereign'. CRIBB 2014, 89; cf. also FALK 2010, 76 as well as LO MUZIO 1995–1996, 163. For the discussion of the title and a full analysis of the different views on this matter see TAASOB 2020, 92.

15 Discussion of a thorough identification of Wēś is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information, see TAASOB 2020.

16 Indologists debate about what was Śiva's name at this time: was it already Śiva, or Rudra or Išvara Maheśvara, as attested by Vima Kadphises's coinage? GRENET 2015, 207.

17 JONGEWARD 2004, 172. CRIBB 1997, 36; CRIBB 1998 argued that the gods represented on Kushan coins should not be conceived as reflective of the religious practices of their subjects or their trading partners. Alternatively, according to the firm evidence provided by the Rabatak inscription, the gods on the Kushan coins appear to make a direct reference to the king's beliefs and claims to legitimacy, which the king wished the Iranian gods to endorse. This is made apparent by the correlation between the obverse and reverse sides of the coins. CRIBB 1998, 89–90. This issue has been interpreted differently by the author, see TAASOB 2020, 100–103.

pot or trident may have been one of the earliest depictions of Wēś in the Kushan period. In fact, Vima Kadphises expresses the first and a far more unique representation of Wēś, which was venerated by all Kushan Kings and became one of the most widely-accepted iconographic religious motifs in the whole Kushan numismatic corpus. This was the period when the Kushans reached their peak in terms of political power. Accordingly, the practice of coin design, which emerged as a novel pictorial feature, was introduced by Vima Kadphises to reflect his role bringing about a new political, social and religious setting. Moreover, it needs to be taken into account that royal and religious imagery must be regarded as a political and religious statement by the imperial authorities, that is, Vima Kadphises, who was already more 'Iranized' by this time. This is clearly seen in one of the earliest and rarest Kushan numismatic series by Vima Kadphises to feature the goddess Nana, who is depicted with a halo around her head and is labelled NANAŠAO. The goddess Nana played an essential role in the religious context of Central Asia. She is regarded as one of the most venerated deities among the Kushans, and her cult can be clearly recognized in the material culture found in the region. She is depicted bestowing the authority of kingship and blessing the king, and is represented on both coins and seals, as well as in the Rabatak inscription.

Taken together, these results make the attribution of the deity depicted on Vima Kadphises's coins as Śiva, and thinking Vima Kadphises as a follower of Shivaism, less likely (TAASOB 2020, 100). Furthermore, owing to the lack of 'non-numismatic' iconographic evidence and the absence of the name of deity Wēś in the Rabatak inscription, earlier arguments regarded him merely as a royal cult during the Vima Kadphises period (JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 55). However, the numismatic evidence suggest that the cult of Wēś also reached subjects at all levels of the Kushan society. This is not only suggested by Wēś's portraits on the gold issues, which were probably used in ritual, festive or memorial occasions presided by the supreme authority and high-echelons of the Kushan society, but also by Vima Kadphises' copper issues of various denominations: tetradrachm, drachm, and didrachm, which were used for ordinary transactions by the region's inhabitants. Moreover, Vima Kadphises reigned for a short period of time, during which he used a limited number of coin designs and dies, all of which had an exclusively religious imagery (BRACEY 2009, 50; cf. also JONGEWARD *et al.* 2015, 53). Therefore, that possibility of Wēś being only a royal cult, exclusive to Vima Kadphises, is implausible (TAASOB 2020, 101).

CONCLUSION

This paper shows that the coinage system of Bactria evolved over time, initially drawing inspiration from the Greek world to work its way into the local, regional, and trans-regional areas of Bactria, while, in turn, having an effect on a variety of cultures and traditions. The evidence reviewed so far demonstrates that the Yuezhi-Kushan honoured a wide variety of contemporary and older religious beings that were already present in the region. As previously noted, these traits – which were merged together by the Kushans – were reflected on their coinage. Evidence to support this view is the use various attributes, which express Greek, Bactrian-Iranian, and Hindu religious iconography, motifs assimilated and circulated through different dynamics of interaction throughout the Indo-Iranian borderlands. The final conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that the variations present in the religious iconographic features depicted on the Kushan coinage suggest that the Kushan venerated the deities of the very diverse societies with which they interacted through both conquest and trade. The religious affiliation of the Kushan kings was not different from that of their

subjects. The deities depicted on the Kushan coins is a direct indication of the religious beliefs of the Kushan society as a whole. Nevertheless, this religious affiliation was sponsored by the ruler who could officially designate the spiritual beliefs of his society by presenting his power as being legitimised by a deity. However, the stylistic studies of the coins and the inscriptions found in the region suggest considerable religious syncretism in early Kushan society and integration with local Bactrian traditions, which were progressively becoming Bactrian-Iranized rather than remaining purely Greek and nomadic.

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