

A Reliquary Miscellany:  
towards a new edition of Gandhāran reliquary inscriptions

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When Sten Konow in 1929 published his comprehensive edition of Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, this included sixteen inscriptions on or associated with Buddhist reliquaries. Only eighty-two other Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions and one single manuscript were known at the time. The situation has changed radically: more than five hundred and fifty Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, fifty-one of them connected with relic deposits, are currently known, and recent years have seen the discovery of more than seventy-five Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts, providing for the first time a rich literary corpus for first-century-BCE to third-century-CE Gandhāra on the background of which the inscriptional material, old and new, needs to be freshly evaluated. A research project to provide such a reevaluation as well as a new art-historical assessment is underway in collaboration with David Jongeward (University of Toronto) and Richard Salomon (University of Washington). The present paper presents the results of a comprehensive textual study and new translation of the complete corpus of Gandhāran reliquary inscriptions. It is becoming ever more clear that Gandhāra occupied a special role in the development of the early Buddhist relic cult: hardly any inscribed reliquaries are known from other parts of early South Asia, and those from Gandhāra are distinguished by their extensive use of scriptural quotation and allusion and reference to Buddhist doctrinal concepts, several new instances of which could be identified. The paper will further discuss the demographics of relic patronage, with special reference to the political landscape of contemporary Gandhāra and to the role of female donors. It will conclude with a discussion of the use of writing in the context of the relic cult on the background of the general epigraphic and manuscript culture of ancient Gandhāra.

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