

From the (Back)ground Up: Sculptural Technique and Content in Gandharan Relief

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Figural reliefs from ancient Gandhara continue to draw scholarly attention for their similarities to Greek and Roman sculpture. Roman sarcophagi in particular are now acknowledged to have inspired many Gandharan reliefs, as is clear from parallels in composition (e.g., isocephalic frieze format), figural rendering (ubiquitous himatia), and decorative motifs (grapevines, garlands). This focus on the Gandharan use of Roman models, however, elides a crucial difference between the two traditions: Gandharan sculptural technique differs dramatically from Roman. While a Roman artist defers defining the back plane until the very end, after the figures are fully rendered, a Gandharan artist instead begins by excavating down to and defining the desired back plain, thereby establishing the depth of relief and the limiting back surface before modeling the figures.

After establishing this fundamental divergence in sculptural practice, I proceed to draw out its implications for understanding key aspects of Gandharan stoneworking and the relationship between Gandharan reliefs and Roman models. First, my observation refutes the long-entertained idea that Gandharan reliefs were carved by immigrant Roman sculptors or sculptors trained in Roman methods (as this would improbably require them to have forsaken their familiar mode of carving). Second, I argue that the Gandharan technique led its sculptors to favor certain compositions and figural arrangements over others; this in turn explains the tendency (observed yet unexplained) for Gandharan artists to draw from second-century Roman sarcophagi rather than later ones. Finally, the Gandharan mode may have helped shape the repertoire of scenes and subject matter selected for carving, favoring content emphatically compatible with this manner of carving.