A God in Translation? Lucian, Dionysus, and Gandhara

Dionysus’ conquest of India enthralled ancient writers and artists from the Hellenistic period onward. Lucian’s Dionysus is a fascinating text since it offers us a humorous interpretation of Dionysus’s invasion and Indian reactions to the event. The text prompts its readers to reflect on Alexander’s Dionysiac self-fashioning, especially in south Asia, and not least to ask after Indian reactions to Dionysus. It so happens that what we might arguably term ‘Indian’ responses to Dionysus also can be perceived in other ways since ‘Dionysiac’ images survive in some quantity from Bactria and Gandhara, regions that Alexander and the Greeks thought of as India. The images date to a period that is roughly contemporaneous with Lucian’s lifetime and, in their own terms, also explore the relationship between Dionysus and India. These Gandharan images were recovered during the period of British rule in India, and the colonial context of recovery is important. Reflecting on Lucian and the Gandharan images together gives us a worthwhile opportunity to think comparatively about Dionysus and to inquire into the politics of religious ‘translation’.