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The Indo-Greek Legacy in Eastern India: Transmission and Transformation of Buddhist Iconography in Odisha

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Abstract:
The interaction between the Indo-Greek world and the Indian subcontinent represents one of the most significant episodes of cultural exchange in ancient history. While the artistic and religious impact of Indo-Greek traditions has been extensively studied in the north western regions of the Indian subcontinent, particularly through the Gandhara School of Art, comparatively little attention has been paid to the transmission and transformation of these artistic influences in eastern India, especially in Odisha. This paper explores the extent to which Hellenistic artistic conventions, transmitted through long-distance trade networks, monastic mobility, and political interactions, contributed to the evolution of Buddhist iconography in Odisha between the early centuries BCE and early medieval period.

Drawing upon archaeological evidence, sculptural remains, inscriptions and comparative stylistic analysis from important Buddhist centres such as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitagiri and Langudi. The present study examines how external artistic elements were selectively adapted within local cultural and religious contexts. Rather than viewing odisha as passive recipient of Gandharan artistic traditions, the paper argues that local artisans creatively reinterpreted Hellenistic inspired motifs including drapery patterns, halo designs, lotus medallion, decorative foliage and anthropomorphic representation of Buddha.

The paper further reconnect with the natural ecology of the region, Odisha is situated within the wider network of maritime and overland Buddhist exchanges linking the north westerner frontier, the Gangetic plains, eastern India and southeast Asia. These interconnected routes facilitated not only the circulation of monks, merchants, and religious ideas but also the movement of artistic techniques and iconographic conventions. By examining the dynamic interaction between indigenous artistic traditions and external influences, the study challenges simplistic models of one way cultural diffusion and instead highlights process of localization, adaptation and creative transformation.

Keyword: Indo-Greek, Buddhist, Iconographic, culture, tradition, art

1. Introduction

The historical synthesis of Hellenistic artistic techniques and Buddhist philosophy, initially crystallized in the Gandhāra region, suggests a broader diffusion of cultural motifs that penetrated the religious landscape of Eastern India (Nishad, 2026a, 2026b). While scholars often characterize this phenomenon as an endemic development within the northwest, the subsequent integration of these Hellenistic elements into the distinct aesthetic traditions of Odisha reveals a more complex, asynchronous trajectory of artistic adaptation (Erokhin, 2020; Halkias, 2013). This study interrogates how Greco-Buddhist sculptural conventions—marked by naturalistic drapery and three-dimensional form were recontextualized within the indigenous artistic framework of the Kalinga region (Malaysia et al., 2025). By investigating the stylistic parallels between these localized iconographic manifestations and the foundational Gandharan prototypes, this research seeks to clarify the mechanisms of cultural exchange that bridged the geographic divide between the northwest and the eastern littoral (Shirole, 2026; University, 2023). Furthermore, analyzing these disparate visual vocabularies underscores the transformative role of regional trade networks as catalysts for syncretism, effectively reinterpreting Gandhāran anatomical precision through the lens of local religious narratives (Kyaping, 2016; Malik & Shen, 2026). Such intercultural mobility highlights how Hellenistic globalism fostered connectivity, allowing artistic modes to transcend the initial centers of influence and permeate diverse religious ecosystems (Zen & 10, 2025). Consequently, this research evaluates the extent to which these stylistic legacies facilitated a hybridized visual theology in Odisha, diverging from the traditional binary often applied to Greco-Buddhist art (Filigenzi, 2012; Zen & 10, 2025). This inquiry bridges the gap between the northwest's Hellenistic-influenced Gandharan styles (Shirole, 2026; Wahab, 2025) and the evolving sculptural programs of Odisha, which navigated regional Śākta-Śaiva and Buddhist intersections (Ray et al., 2026). By examining these trans-regional aesthetic shifts, this study addresses the current scholarly need to trace the evolution of Buddhist iconography beyond the classic northwest paradigm (Zheng, 2023).

This study sheds light on the underlying patronage networks and commercial channels that enabled the spread of motifs throughout the subcontinent by placing these formal stylistic migrations in context. (Assomull, 2013; Basu, 2001). By describing such stylistic encounters as dynamic, interconnected systems rather than a unidirectional dissemination of Western esthetics, this cross-regional study undermines conventional Hellenocentric narratives (Hoo, 2014). Given this, a comparative analysis of how Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions shared iconographic stylistic growth during times of concurrent religious expansion is necessary to understand the history of Orissan Buddhist sculpture (Donaldson, 2001). In particular, this study clarifies the transsectarian character of these artistic exchanges by pointing out the structural similarities between Gandhāran precursors and Orissan votive imagery, such as the maternal iconography of Hārītī and the Saptamātṛkā (Patil, 2025).Similar to the syncretic dynamics seen along the ancient Silk Road, this paradigm redirects the analytical focus onto the importance of land and maritime trade routes as essential conduits for the transmission of religious art (Jaipal, 2024). This study uses a transcultural perspective to understand these material exchanges as intricate, non-linear interactions, going beyond essentialist frameworks that isolate regional developments (Zhao, 2019). Local religious motifs might be reexamined using this analytical method, which sees them as intentional reconfigurations of Indic iconography spread throughout many geographic domains rather than as singular examples of regional genius (Acri & Wenta, 2022).

This study re-examines Gandharan and Hellenistic artistic influences in Odisha by treating cultural transmission as a process of local adaptation rather than passive imitation (Khattak, 2025; Bawa, 2024). It explores how indigenous religious beliefs and aesthetic traditions reshaped external motifs to create a distinctive regional artistic identity (Rühse & Horvath, 2022).

Maritime and inland trade networks may have facilitated the circulation of artistic ideas and materials across Eastern India. Terracotta assemblages from sites such as Asurgarh and Manikapatna offer potential evidence for investigating these cultural and economic connections (Acharjaya, 2026; Stark, 2020). By examining these materials comparatively, the study emphasizes the agency of local artisans and decentralized exchange networks in shaping artistic development. Ultimately, this approach challenges conventional centre–periphery models and highlights Odisha's role in the selective appropriation and reinterpretation of transregional artistic traditions (Bellina, 2014; Seland, 2014).

Historical Context: During the early centuries of the Common Era, maritime trade networks connected the Kalinga coast with wider trans-regional circuits, facilitating the exchange of artistic traditions and religious ideas (Rege, 2025; Acharjaya, 2026). The integration of foreign sculptural idioms with indigenous artistic and ceramic traditions reflects local communities' active role in adapting external influences to their socio-political and religious contexts (Gomes, 2019; Aerde, 2018). Archaeological evidence demonstrates that these exchanges were shaped not only by commerce but also by evolving cultural identities, patronage systems, and ritual practices (Gunawardena, 2023; Yousuf, 2026).

The Buddhist monastic centres of Lalitgiri and Udayagiri illustrate the transformation of sacred architecture and iconography, from early aniconic traditions to increasingly complex mandalic representations (Patnaik & Marinescu, 2019; Mishra, 2019). Supported by trade, pilgrimage, and patronage networks, these institutions strengthened their religious and economic influence across the Bay of Bengal region (Neelis, 2010; Milligan, 2016; Shaw, 2013). Their architectural development reflects the interaction of indigenous traditions with wider Buddhist artistic influences.

By situating Odisha within the Buddhist Diamond Triangle and the broader Bay of Bengal network, this study examines how local artisans, monastic communities, and lay patrons transformed transregional artistic exchanges into a distinctive sacred heritage (James, 2019; Fogelin, 2015). Through an interdisciplinary analysis of archaeological, iconographic, and inscriptional evidence, it highlights Odisha's contribution to the development and dissemination of Buddhist art across Asia.

Research Problem: This study challenges the conventional view that Indo-Greek and Gandharan artistic influences were confined to Afghanistan and northwestern India. It examines how Greco-Buddhist motifs reached the Kalinga littoral and were adapted by local workshops through maritime trade and cultural interactions (Morris, 2021; Das & Bairagya, 2025). By studying Buddhist monuments and artifacts from the third century BCE to the seventh century CE, the research highlights the role of local monastic centres and royal patronage, particularly under the Bhauma-Karas, in shaping Odisha's Buddhist artistic traditions (Patnaik, 2019; Kumari, 2020).

The study further explores how Buddha images, attendant deities, and decorative motifs were modified to suit regional ritual practices and religious beliefs (Revire, 2016; Dissanayaka, 2024). Sites such as

Ratnagiri and Udayagiri demonstrate the creative synthesis of external artistic influences with indigenous and Tantric Buddhist traditions (Tripathy, 2019; Pati & Choudhury, 2024). Ultimately, the research presents Odisha as an active centre of Buddhist artistic innovation, where cultural exchange fostered a distinctive regional visual identity rather than merely reproducing foreign styles.

Research Methodology: This study employs spatial mapping of iconographic motifs, epigraphic evidence, and comparative visual analysis to examine how Kalingan artisans adapted foreign artistic elements to regional monastic and ritual traditions (Das, 2026; Mohapatra, 2022). It views coastal Buddhist centres as active hubs of cultural exchange, where maritime trade, royal patronage, and local donations facilitated the movement and reinterpretation of artistic and religious ideas across the Bay of Bengal (Acri, 2016; Bopearachchi, 2022).

Archaeological evidence, including punch-marked and Roman-derived coins, highlights the commercial networks that supported these cultural interactions (Tripati, 2017). Rather than passively imitating Mediterranean and Hellenistic styles, local artisans creatively integrated external motifs into indigenous Buddhist traditions (Heitzman & Ray, 1996; Zin, 2020). By combining archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence, this research challenges conventional diffusionist interpretations and demonstrates how maritime connectivity fostered artistic innovation and a distinctive Buddhist visual identity in ancient Odisha (Filigenzi, 2020; Abraham, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Scholars such as Alfred Foucher and John Marshall established the importance of Gandharan art as a synthesis of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian traditions. Its naturalistic figures and flowing drapery significantly influenced Buddhist artistic traditions across Asia. However, the extent to which these artistic elements reached eastern India through direct migration or indirect cultural exchange remains debated (Silk, 2020).

Recent studies suggest that maritime networks may have facilitated the transmission of Hellenistic-derived motifs to Odisha, challenging the conventional emphasis on northwestern India as the primary centre of Greco-Buddhist artistic interaction (Shirole, 2026; Malik & Shen, 2026). Despite this growing interest, the role of Odishan workshops and coastal monastic centres in adapting these motifs to local religious traditions remains insufficiently explored (Samad, 2012).

This study addresses the gap by examining archaeological materials, sculptures, ceramics, and evidence of maritime trade within a broader Bay of Bengal interaction framework. It views local artisans as active agents who reinterpreted external influences rather than passively imitating foreign styles. This decentralized approach highlights Odisha's contribution to Buddhist artistic innovation and challenges conventional, one-directional models of cultural diffusion (Gupta, 2018; Mairs, 2023; Das, 2026).

Scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy and Debala Mitra have contributed significantly to the understanding of Indian art and the Buddhist monastic centres of Odisha, particularly Ratnagiri. Recent research emphasizes that the spread of Greco-Buddhist artistic traditions should not be viewed merely as a one-way process of diffusion but as an active negotiation shaped by regional politics, religious practices, and maritime trade (Acri & Wenta, 2022; Bellina, 2014).

Despite growing interest in the Bay of Bengal's cultural networks, the role of coastal Odishan centres in adapting Hellenistic artistic elements remains insufficiently explored. Archaeological evidence from sites such as Manikapatna and Jaugada, including terracotta and other material remains, offers opportunities to investigate these interactions (Acharjaya, 2026). Maritime trade and provenance studies further highlight Odisha's connections with wider Indian Ocean networks (Tripati et al., 2022).

This study addresses these gaps through a contextual and comparative analysis of sculptures, terracotta, and monastic architecture. It examines how local artisans adapted external artistic influences to indigenous religious and cultural traditions, presenting Odisha as an active centre of artistic synthesis rather than a passive recipient of foreign styles.

Existing gaps regarding specific Hellenistic survival elements in Eastern Indian Vajrayana and Mahayana art:

Although Gandharan art has been extensively studied, the transmission of its stylistic features to Buddhist centres such as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitgiri, and Langudi remains insufficiently explored (Morris, 2021; Ray, 2019). Limited provenance studies and comparative analyses also make it difficult to distinguish direct artistic migration from the local adaptation of Hellenistic-inspired motifs.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between maritime trade, monastic patronage, and regional artistic development. It investigates how Kalingan artisans selectively incorporated external stylistic elements into indigenous Buddhist iconography and architectural traditions. Archaeological remains, donative inscriptions, material provenance, and evidence of coastal and inland trade networks provide the basis for this analysis (Milligan, 2016; Bellina, 2017).

By adopting the Bay of Bengal as a framework for cultural interaction, the study challenges conventional Roman-centric and unidirectional models of artistic diffusion. It highlights the agency of local artisans, merchants, and religious institutions in transforming transregional influences into a distinctive Buddhist visual culture in Odisha (Gupta, 2018; Abraham, 2023).

Channels of Transmission: Routes & Mechanics

The junction of marine coastal trips with the intricate network of inland riverine systems detailed in recent regional trade analyzes is probably what allowed esthetic motifs to migrate into the Kalinga hinterland (Roy, 2025). These rivers served as vital conduits, facilitating the movement of Buddhist monks and craftspeople who spread iconographic traditions in addition to the movement of goods like textiles and ivory (Kumar, 2024). As important middlemen, these traveling groups created a cross-fertilized atmosphere that promoted the adaptation of foreign easthetic sensibilities to local devotional demands (Bopearachchi, 2022a, 2022b).

The fragmented diffusion patterns seen in early Buddhist art throughout the Silk Road, where discrete motifs like lotuses and architectural features were methodically incorporated into native religious frameworks, are similar to this process of selective assimilation (Hu et al., 2026). The exact mechanisms governing the translation of Hellenistic iconographic features into Odishan religious art remain critically under-theorized in existing scholarship, despite strong evidence connecting the Classical Mediterranean and South Asia through long-term commercial ties (Bhambhwani, 2010; Coningham & Young, 2015).

The Gandhāran fusion of Hellenistic and Indian traditions is frequently given priority in current research (Nishad, 2026).while ignoring how established coastal-hinterland trade routes allowed similar stylistic syncretism to penetrate the religious architecture of Odisha's hinterland (Tripathy, 2019). By addressing this disparity, this analysis shows how Odisha's periphery centers transcended the historically acknowledged Gandharan cultural hegemony by reinterpreting exogenous classical forms (University, 2023).

Trade Corridors: Inland highways linking Taxila, Mathura, Sarnath, and Tosali/Kalinganagar Similar to the spread of Buddhist and Hindu traditions to Southeast Asia through maritime networks, riverine and inland routes facilitated the circulation of artistic and intellectual ideas. While Gandharan art and Hellenistic influences in northwest India have received considerable scholarly attention, their possible connections with Buddhist art in Kalinga remain underexplored (Ghosh, 2007; Nikolaou, 2023). Comparative studies of sculpture, drapery, anatomy, and local stone materials may help identify how these artistic elements were adapted at Odishan sites (Malik & Shen, 2026; Ray et al., 2026).

This study moves beyond one-directional models of cultural diffusion to examine reciprocal exchanges and regional artistic adaptation. It argues that Odishan Buddhist art was not merely a derivative of Gandharan or Hellenistic traditions but a creative synthesis shaped by indigenous religious beliefs, ritual practices, and patronage (Silk, 2020; Spoelder, 2023). Local communities actively reinterpreted external motifs to suit their cultural and devotional needs.

Furthermore, the interaction between Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions contributed to Odisha's distinctive religious and artistic development (Donaldson, 2001; Patil, 2025). By emphasizing regional agency and cultural adaptation, this study seeks to bridge the historiographical gap between north-western Buddhist art and the eastern littoral, highlighting Odisha's role as an important centre of transcultural artistic exchange (Parida, 2026; Wahab, 2025).

Monastic Networks: Pilgrimage routes of monks transporting sketches, small portable reliquaries, bronzes, and ivories across kingdoms. This mobility of personnel and material culture underscores how sacred knowledge was not disseminated solely through philosophical texts, but was physically embodied within visual forms and ritual objects (Yousuf, 2026). These portable media served as critical conduits for trans-regional stylistic transmission, enabling the gradual diffusion of Hellenistic-derived iconographic shorthand into the sacred visual vocabulary of Odishan monastic centers (Wood & Rachel, 2012). Furthermore, the concentration of these foreign-influenced motifs in coastal trade hubs suggests that Odisha's monasteries functioned as dynamic cultural intersections, selectively integrating Hellenistic formal elements to reinforce the authority of local monastic lineages (Galli, 2011; Zen & 10, 2025).

Royal Patronage: In Odisha, royal patronage from the Mauryan period to the Bhauma-Kara and Somavamshi dynasties contributed to the development of religious art and sacred landscapes. Rulers combined external artistic influences with indigenous Kalingan traditions to strengthen political legitimacy and religious authority (Basu, 2001; Kumari, 2025). However, the possible influence of Gandharan and Hellenistic art on Odisha remains insufficiently explored.

This study challenges the view that Greco-Buddhist art spread through one-way cultural diffusion. Instead, it examines Odisha's archaeological sites and regional workshops as active centres of artistic adaptation and cultural negotiation (Halkias, 2013; Mairs, 2023). The study also investigates how local rulers and monastic institutions adapted external motifs to meet indigenous religious and political needs. By examining sculpture fragments, drapery, facial modelling, and naturalistic features, this research seeks to identify possible connections between Hellenistic artistic sensibilities and Kalingan sculptural traditions. It positions Odisha's eastern littoral as a potential centre of transcultural exchange, emphasizing local creativity rather than passive imitation (Morris, 2021; Rodriguez, 2017).

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative iconographic framework to examine Gandharan sculpture and Buddhist art in Odisha. It analyses drapery, facial features, body proportions, and sculptural techniques to identify possible patterns of artistic exchange and local adaptation (Bopearachchi, 2022). Epigraphic records, archaeological evidence, maritime networks, and inland river routes are also considered to understand the movement of artistic and religious ideas (Acri, 2016; Akhtar & Idris, 2020).

Visual evidence is further compared with Buddhist texts, including the Sādhanamālā, to examine regional variations in deity representation and Buddha imagery (Jahan et al., 2025; Revire, 2016). The study also investigates how local stone resources and indigenous artistic traditions shaped the transformation of external stylistic influences. This approach highlights Odisha's role in the selective adaptation of transregional artistic forms rather than their simple imitation (Das, 2026; López-Prat et al., 2024).

4. Results

The transformation of drapery, facial features, and ornamental motifs in Odishan Buddhist sculpture suggests a selective adaptation of external artistic influences to local materials and aesthetic traditions (Filigenzi, 2020; Acharjaya, 2026). Sites such as Lalitgiri, Langudi, and Udayagiri provide a basis for examining possible connections between Gandharan artistic conventions and regional sculptural practices (Patnaik, 2019; Patnaik & Marinescu, 2019). However, these similarities require careful comparative analysis before direct artistic transmission can be established.

Maritime trade routes and inland river systems, particularly the Mahanadi network, may have facilitated the movement of artisans, religious specialists, and artistic ideas between Odisha and other Buddhist centres (Tripathy, 2019; Morris, 2021). Monasteries potentially served as important spaces for adapting external iconographic models to local religious and patronage requirements.

Portable objects, architectural ornamentation, and sculptural reliefs may further clarify how artistic motifs circulated and were reinterpreted across regions (Brancaccio, 2014; Purdy, 2022). Overall, Odishan Buddhist art can be examined as a regional synthesis shaped by indigenous craftsmanship, religious practices, and wider cultural interactions across the Indian Ocean.

5. Discussion

Odishan craftspeople selectively adapted Gandharan naturalism to local aesthetic traditions, ritual practices, and religious hierarchies rather than merely imitating northern artistic models (Nishad, 2026;

Shirole, 2026a, 2026b). This process of artistic localization reflects the interaction between external influences, indigenous beliefs, and regional architectural traditions (Erokhin, 2020).

Sites such as Narendrapur provide opportunities to investigate how transregional artistic elements were incorporated into local religious settings (Ray et al., 2026). Maritime and inland trade networks may have facilitated the movement of artisans, religious ideas, and iconographic forms, enabling monasteries and local patrons to reinterpret these influences according to their devotional and political needs (Halkias, 2013; Chattopadhyay, 2018).

The interaction between Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions further contributed to Odisha's distinctive religious landscape (Donaldson, 2001). Rather than representing passive cultural diffusion, this process demonstrates regional creativity, selective appropriation, and the development of a distinctive visual identity through the integration of external artistic elements with indigenous religious practices (Rühse & Horvath, 2022; Parida, 2026).

6. Conclusion

The Indo-Greek legacy in Odisha serves as a foundational testament to the fluidity of artistic boundaries, revealing that regional traditions are defined not by isolation but by the strategic synthesis of trans-regional motifs (Hegewald & Mitra, 2008; Michell & Zebrowski, 1999). By moving beyond unidirectional models of cultural imposition, this study highlights how Odishan art actively negotiated and transformed inherited Hellenistic frameworks to bolster local religious identity (Zen & 10, 2025). Future inquiries should prioritize the comparative analysis of material remains across the Deccan, investigating how specific sculptural adaptations were motivated by a desire to showcase aesthetic sophistication rather than simple mimicry (Zin, 2020). Moreover, examining these archaeological assemblages through a multidisciplinary lens—integrating numismatic evidence and lithic analysis—will offer a more granular understanding of the economic and social mechanisms that underpinned this cross-cultural artistic exchange (Zen & 10, 2025). Ultimately, reorienting the scholarly focus toward the agency of local consumers and the economic context of these sculptural assemblages will reveal how such syncretic visual languages functioned within diverse, interconnected socio-political markets (Martens, 2021; Ricci, 2019). Such rigorous scrutiny of the artisan's intent as an agent of cultural translation will further dismantle the lingering paradigm of "Indianization," emphasizing instead a reciprocal framework of aesthetic contestation and regional agency (Wirasanti, 2023). This approach encourages a broader South Asian art historical framework that recognizes hybridity not as passive ambivalence, but as a site of active negotiation and epistemic contestation (Pande et al., 2025).

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