

Iconography of the Elite in Post-Greek Bactria and North-West India and Its Transmission from the Saka to the Yuezhi*

by FABRIZIO SINISI

Viene presa in esame la rappresentazione dell'élite tra Battriana e India nord-occidentale di ambito Saka e Yuezhi. L'interpretazione correntemente diffusa secondo la quale gli appartenenti a questi due gruppi sarebbero chiaramente distinguibili in quanto raffigurati in modo differente, un'impostazione che rispecchia l'idea di due orizzonti culturali fundamentalmente diversi, viene messa in discussione in favore di uno scenario alternativo: anziché elaborata indipendentemente dando vita ad un'iconografia reale distinta da quella Saka, la rappresentazione dell'élite Yuezhi – in particolare quella del sovrano – ne è l'erede diretta, in un contesto di sostanziale affinità tra i due gruppi.

The circa two centuries between the fall of the Greek kingdom of Bactria around 140 BCE and the birth of the Kushan Empire in the mid-1st century CE remain to this day one of the most obscure periods in the history of the region between Bactria to the North and Northwestern India to the South. The modalities of the collapse of Greek domination North of the Hindu Kush and of the penetration into the region of the Central Asian invaders, their internal relations and links with the lands to the South of the great mountain range and with the Parthian Empire to the West (among other questions) are all matters on which we can only make summary hypotheses and which still largely remain to be clarified.¹

A point on which there is now widespread agreement is that Bactria was overrun in two distinct phases, the first ascribed to Saka groups and the second to those known to us from Chinese sources as Yuezhi.² Some of the Saka ended up settling in Drangiana

* This text is the revised version of my paper “Royal imagery in the North-West before the Kushans: Sakas and Yuezhi” presented at the 23rd conference of the European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art held in Cardiff in July 2016, the conclusions of which have remained unchanged (cf. Sinisi 2018: 161-162). In the meantime, an article on Khalchayan by P. Skupniewicz and M. Lichota (2017) has been published, which (notwithstanding the individual points made) adopts a basic approach that I myself share, placing the too-often-neglected role of compositional schemes at the centre of iconographic analysis. On the other hand, I had access to Francfort 2020 only after completing the text, and I could not use it.

I would like to take the opportunity here to thank Anna Filigenzi for having read the text, Ciro Lo Muzio for having discussed with me some issues and for his help in locating some of the titles in Russian, and Claude Rapin for some suggestions. Needless to say, I am the only responsible for the contents of this article.

¹ The bibliography, which it is impossible to cite all of here, even briefly, is enormous and above all heterogeneous. Without entering here a discussion on their conclusions, it is enough to compare the studies that have accumulated over time on the localization of the five *yabghu* created in Bactria by the Yuezhi (Grenet 2006; Falk 2014; Yang 2016, to name just the most recent) with those on the border area between Bactria and Parthia, in the last thirty years just two articles by E. Rtveladze (1995; 2011).

² Some more recent works (almost all with references to previous literature, especially Rapin 1992 on the excavations of the Treasury at Ai Khanum): Abdullaev 2007; Rapin 2007: 48-50, 60; Benjamin 2007: 181-189, 213-215; Neelis 2007: 62-63; Grenet 2012; Francfort 2013: 1543; Bernard 2016: 110-113. Martinez-Sève 2018 proposes that this approach should be revised with regard to the reconstruction of the post-Greek history of Ai Khanum.