

The Buddhist Caves in Western Deccan, India, between the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics that led to the renaissance of Buddhist rock-cut architecture in Western Deccan between the fifth and sixth century. This was a transformative period in India as political, economic, and religious traditions underwent important changes; from a global perspective, this was also a time of tremendous international engagement both across the Indian Ocean and the northwestern regions of the Subcontinent. The artistic and architectural evidence from caves like Ajanta and Aurangabad will be examined in a global perspective, connecting these sites to the Buddhist networks leading to the Northwest of the Indian Subcontinent and Central Asia, and to renewed Indian Ocean trade.

The present contribution explores the global dynamics that led to the renaissance of Buddhist rock-cut architecture in Western Deccan, India, between the fifth and sixth century, by focusing on the Ajanta region in particular. In this area, during the Vakataka dynasty and shortly after its downfall, Buddhist cave sites created at the beginning of the Common Era were greatly expanded or redecorated, and entirely new cave monasteries were established. New modes of patronage, religious values, and ritual forms swept through these Buddhist communities; the sponsors of Buddhist caves were no longer ordinary individuals but wealthy members of the ruling elites and the iconography, layout and conceptualization of new caves underwent significant transformations. It is my intention to show that this period of great activity in the Ajanta region was heightened by tremendous international engagement. The artistic and architectural evidence from caves like Ajanta and Aurangabad seems to connect these sites to the Buddhist networks that led to renewed Indian Ocean trade and to Central Asia.

At the end of the fifth century CE, the Ajanta plateau became the hub of an unprecedented and cohesive movement of revival of Buddhist activity (Figure 1). At Ajanta, twenty-two new caves were added to the pre-existing nucleus of four dating to the first century BCE to the first century CE; four new caves were added at Aurangabad; the caves at Pitalkhora were refurbished with many paintings, and new cave sites were established at Ghatotkacha and Banoti.¹ The Ajanta inscriptions tell us that the patrons of the fifth century caves were the powerful members of the Vakataka ruling elite such as king Harishena, his minister and his feudatories.² For this reason, scholarship has always interpreted the resurgence of Buddhist activity at Ajanta and neighboring sites as a regional phenomenon linked to the prestige of a dominating group and to internal political strives. Yet at a closer look, it appears that much like in earlier times, the life of these rock-cut sites in the fifth century continued to be closely related to a network of commercial activities linked to Indian Ocean trade.

¹ Brancaccio, *Aurangabad*, 71–77.

² Spink, *Ajanta*, 4, 12–79.

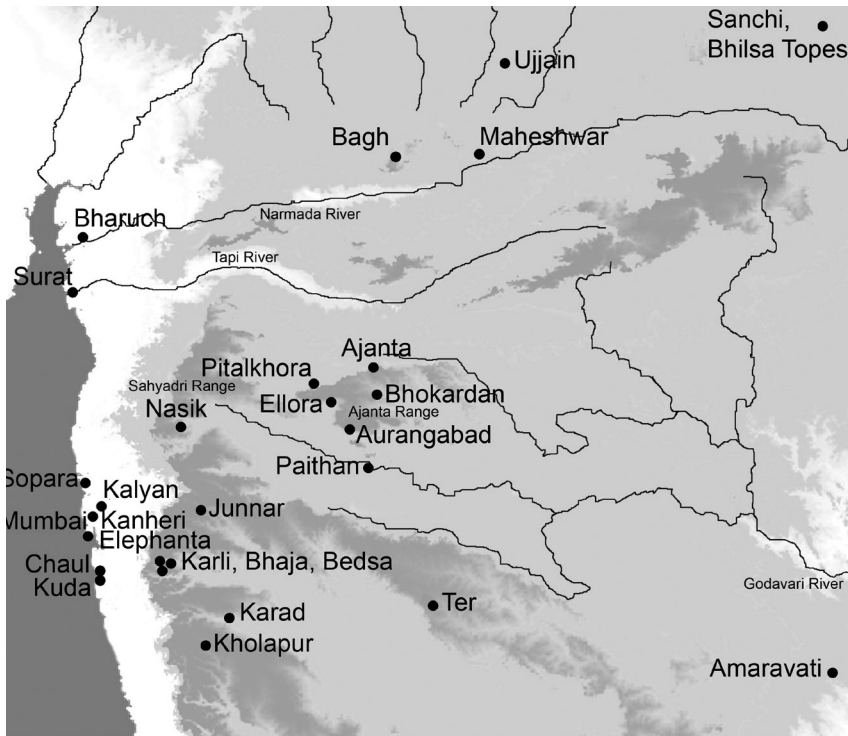


FIG. 1 Map of Buddhist Caves in Western Deccan, India. Source: Pia Brancaccio.

The financial investment required to expand and maintain a Buddhist site of the size of Ajanta with hundreds of new monastic cells must have been enormous. The prominent sculptures of two plump *dvarapala* pouring large quantities of coins from a bag on the façade of Ajanta cave twenty-six, aside from their allusions to auspiciousness, are surely suggestive of the abundant monetary wealth that patrons invested at the site. This is not a far-fetched interpretation—on the Cantamula I pillar from the site of Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh (end of the second century CE), the representation of a pile of coins is completed by an inscription associating the depiction on the pillar to an actual donation of gold coins in favor of the Buddhist establishment. As coins are a way of depicting the kind of wealth probably accumulated through trade rather than agriculture, De Romanis proposed that Cantamula's donation in Nagarjunakonda may have actually consisted of Roman gold coins (*aurei*) obtained

through involvement in long-distance trade.³ Given the poor numismatic visibility of the Vakataka rulers who were among the patrons of the Ajanta caves—it looks like they did not issue a significant coinage—one wonders whether the large amounts of coins represented on the façade of cave twenty-six at Ajanta may also refer to foreign gold coins.

An interesting archaeological find from the Ajanta caves may shed some light on this issue. In 1999–2000, while clearing the banks of the river Waghora at the feet of the caves, the Archaeological Survey of India excavated what appeared to be the remains of a monastery built with bricks. In the archaeological deposit of the last phase of occupation of the monastery a gold coin was found: archaeologists identified it as being an issue of the emperor Theodosius II. This find from Ajanta confirms that fifth century foreign trade linked to Indian Ocean must have contributed to the growth of the Buddhist site.

In fact, the Ajanta range, while distant from the coastal area, was located at the crossroads of important commercial itineraries linking the inland parts of the Deccan, producing semiprecious stones and cotton textiles, to different distribution centers: Ujjain to the north and the ports of Sopara, Kalyan and Baruch to the coast. As much as the growth of Buddhism along the Silk Road went hand in hand with the development of a commercial economy linked to silk trade, the flourishing of Buddhism in this part of the Deccan was probably associated with the production and trade of cotton textiles—in essence we are looking at a system that could be referred to as the ‘Cotton Road’. Cave sites were strategically positioned to take advantage of the trade routes, and were also situated to exploit agricultural areas. Long-distance commerce stimulated agricultural activities, linked to cotton production, as textiles became some of the most desired Indian exports on the international market.

As early as the first century CE, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* mentions the town of Ter, located in the vicinity of the Ajanta Plateau, as a place where ‘large quantities of cloth of ordinary quality and all kinds of cotton garments’ were produced to be shipped

³ De Romanis, ‘*Aurei*’, 77.

abroad across the Indian Ocean.⁴ Kosmas Indikopleustes, writing about Indian Ocean trade in the early part of the sixth century, also stated that ‘cloth for making clothes were exported from Kalyan in Konkan’.⁵ This certainly implied that the fertile ‘black cotton soil’ or *regar* covering the upper parts of the Western Deccan was exploited throughout the centuries to satisfy the international demand for cotton products. Cotton from Western Deccan was shipped across the Indian Ocean in the centuries following the great explosion of Indo-Roman trade around the beginning of the Common Era. In the excavations of the ancient Red Sea port of Berenike in Egypt, archaeologists identified more than two hundred fragments of Indian cotton. Among these are pieces identical to the ones represented in the Ajanta paintings, for color and design that are found in layers dating to the late antique period that postdate the third century CE.⁶

The number and variety of beautiful textiles represented in the Ajanta paintings, the careful reproductions of designs and color schemes, and the depiction of women making cotton on the left wall of cave one are all elements that confirm that cotton fabrics were not only part of the local material cultural, but also very likely produced in the region. Buddhism was also historically linked to the cotton industry in ancient India: a passage of the *Bhikṣunīvināya* of the *Mahāsāṃghikas*, a Buddhist school present in the Western Deccan since early on, tells us that nuns were involved in preparing and spinning cotton.⁷

The paintings at Ajanta also portray a prosperous and multicultural environment populated by foreigners and foreign products which must have reached the region via the Indian Ocean. For example, the painting depicting the Buddha’s descent from Trayastrimsa Heaven in cave seventeen shows many non-Indic types with different clothing styles, hair styles, and skin colors which suggests that it may have been common to see people from different parts of Central

⁴ Casson, *Periplus*, 83.

⁵ McCrindle, *Christian Topography*, 366.

⁶ Sidebotham, *Berenike*, 243–44.

⁷ Schlingloff, ‘Cotton’, 87.



FIG. 2 Visvantara Jataka, Ajanta Cave 17. Photo by Pia Brancaccio.

Asia, Persia, the Middle East, and possibly East Africa. In addition to foreign people, foreign imports made their way to the Ajanta region and became an integral part of the ruling elite's material culture. In the Visvantara jataka painted in the porch of cave seventeen, a servant from Central Asia holds a metal ewer as he offers wine to a couple, while a servant below hands over a matching wine cup (Figure 2). The artists represented these foreign objects in great detail: the drinking paraphernalia appear painted in brown with thin strokes of white pigment to show that their surfaces reflected light, suggesting that the ewer and the cup were made of bronze or silver. Local elite must have used these imported ewers and cups to consume wine that was also imported from far away. We know that special vessels were imported just for the king since the time of the *Periplus*.⁸ The Ajanta paintings from the end of the fifth century indicate that foreign wine

⁸ Casson, *Periplus*, 81.

was also still imported and in high demand at the time of the Vakata king Harisena. There are many instances in which foreigners in the Ajanta paintings are represented in association with wine: the best-known instance is the so-called 'Persian Embassy' depicted on cave one's ceiling.

In antiquity, wine was always transported in amphorae. Therefore scholars have interpreted all findings of amphorae fragments in India as markers of thriving Indo-Roman trade around the beginning of the Common Era. Several archaeological excavations in Gujarat, Western Deccan and South India have documented shards from such imported vessels. However, in recent times, a thorough re-examination of amphora shards from Maharashtra, Gujarat and South India carried out by Roberta Tomber from the British Museum revealed a surprising picture.⁹ A large number of what were previously thought to be Mediterranean Amphorae, are in fact different types of vessels called Torpedo Jars. They are originally from the Persian Gulf region and were made throughout the later Parthian and Sasanian periods (first to seventh century CE) up to the early Islamic periods (ninth century); they display a distinctive coarse whitish texture, a wide mouth, and no neck or handles.

Most of the fragments that Tomber analyzed had a black internal coating just like the one found in Roman amphorae used to transport wine, and in fact some scholars suggest that within the Persian (Persian-Sasanian) world, these containers were used to transport wine. The highest concentration of Torpedo Jars appears on the west coast of India: in Gujarat, Maharashtra and especially in Konkan, where a very large number of Torpedo Jars have been found on the island of Elephanta. Tomber dates most of the torpedo jars found in India to the fifth and sixth centuries.¹⁰ This means that the west coast of India experienced a peak in Indian Ocean trade in the fifth and sixth centuries comparable to the well documented one in the early historic period.

The *Christian Topography* by Kosmas Indikopleustes, compiled

⁹ Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade*.

¹⁰ Tomber, 'Beyond Western India', 51–52.

around 550 CE, speaks of many commodities plying the Indian Ocean, and describes the town of Kalyan in Konkan near Mumbai as one of the main trading port.¹¹ Visual evidence from Buddhist caves located on the Ajanta plateau, a feeder area to transoceanic trade, confirms Kosma's scenario. A fifth century painting of the Purnavardana episode on the right wall of Ajanta cave two depicts a ship and its cargo. Other work suggests that the ship was a type of Indian vessel used in long-distance trade, much like others represented in the caves, and that the containers transported are water pots. A closer look suggests that these vessels are remarkably similar to the 'torpedo jars' used for transporting wine, plentiful on the island of Elephanta.¹² Furthermore, the protagonist in the Divyavadana is originally from the city of Surparaka¹³ identified with the ancient port of Sopara in Konkan, thus locating the episode in the context of Indian Ocean trade networks.

A remarkable image from the caves at Aurangabad, near the Ajanta caves, seems to confirm the global reach of the Ajanta region (Figure 3). The porch of Aurangabad cave seven, more or less contemporary to the colossal Saiva rock-cut temple at Elephanta, is dominated by an imposing image of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara rescuing worshippers from the eight great dangers; a boat and its occupants are represented with great attention to detail.¹⁴ We know from the ship's two masts that this image alludes to ocean sailing. Additionally, the presence of a foreigner wearing a pointed cap and a caftan confirms that the image refers to the Indian Ocean commercial system, where foreign agents were not an uncommon sight.

The twenty-fourth chapter of the *Saddharmapundarika sutra* (*Lotus Sutra*) entitled 'The Exposition of the Miraculous Transformations of Avalokitesvara, the One Who Faces in All Directions' describes the dangerous scenarios illustrated in the beautiful rock-cut Avalokitesvara mentioned above. Calling the name of this bodhi-

¹¹ McCrindle, *Christian Topography*.

¹² Tomber, 'Beyond Western India', 51–52.

¹³ Rotman, *Divyavadana*, 85.

¹⁴ Brancaccio, *Aurangabad*, 160.



FIG. 3 Astamahabhaya Avalokitesvara, Aurangabad Cave 7. Photo by Pia Brancaccio.

sattva can save merchants at sea from shipwrecks, and protect those traveling in caravans from assaults from thieves. Avalokitesvara can save those condemned to capital punishment and those threatened by the magic powers of *pretas* he can also fulfill the wishes of women desiring offspring. The twenty-fourth chapter ends with a litany in verse, in part repeating the same miraculous interventions from the beginning of the chapter, in part a list of more remarkable rescues:

Avalokitesvara protects those thrown off mountains, those hit by rocks or by a sword, those who are about to be executed or imprisoned, those who are victims of witchcraft or threatened by ghosts, and those surrounded by frightful beasts and snakes.

The *Lotus Sutra* suggests that the cult of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was especially widespread among merchants and travelers, including those who travelled by sea. The invocations listed in the twenty-fourth chapter of this text include a rather long description of a shipwreck in Sri Lankan waters. Interestingly, some of the merchants in the *Lotus Sutra* carried precious items such as gold, lapis lazuli, emeralds, ‘Musaragalvas’, and corals, which are also enumerated in another passage of the same sutra as the ‘seven precious treasures’ that form a *stūpa* that magically appears to the bodhisattva Mahapratibhana.¹⁵ As Xinru Liu notes, the ‘seven precious treasures’ mentioned in *Mahayana* texts consist essentially of precious items traded along the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean.¹⁶

The *Lotus Sutra*, the image of Avalokitesvara’s miracles, and the shipwreck described in its twenty-fourth chapter, bring together the world of the Indian Ocean and that of the Central Asian mercantile communities. The geographic diffusion of images of Avalokitesvara performing the eight great miracles is very telling: these icons are absent from north India while the largest concentration can be found in the western Deccan caves and along the Silk Road at Dunhuang.¹⁷

The *Saddharmapundarika* was surely popular both along the Silk Road and in Western Deccan. This text was translated many times in Chinese—the last time at the beginning of the seventh century by the monk Dharmagupta from Lata, an area relatively close to the Ajanta

¹⁵ Kern, *Saddharmapundarika*, XI, 228.

¹⁶ Liu, *Ancient India*, 97–102.

¹⁷ At Ajanta alone there are seven tableaux of the so-called litany, a painted one was in Pitalkhora cave no. 3, while the most complete example is the one carved in cave 7 at Aurangabad (figure 10). A later sculpture of the litany can also be seen at Ellora cave 3. In the region of Konkan, along the coast of Maharashtra, icons of this miraculous bodhisattva are found at the Buddhist site of Kanheri in caves 2, 41, and 90.

region. Monks must have moved between India and China, and as monks traveled along routes well established by merchants, the diffusion of *Astamahabhaya* icons protecting merchants and travelers across these two worlds makes perfect sense.¹⁸

Among the long-distance merchants at this time, the Sogdians deserve a special mention for their extensive mercantile network. They were especially involved in silk and textile trade and between the fourth and the sixth centuries and were active in the upper Indus region. They were also recognized traders in Xinjiang and the Caucasus, and established direct commercial relationships with the Byzantine empire.¹⁹ At the same time, they also engaged in sea trade and looked with great interest to Southeast Asian commercial networks. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian mentions that in the fifth century, Sogdian merchants traded at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, and there are images of Sogdian donors at Buddhist sites in Thailand.²⁰

Many of the products that the Kosmas Indikopleustes listed as crossing Indian Ocean commercial circuits were, in fact, those traditionally traded by the Sogdians in China. In letters recovered in 1907 by Sir Aurel Stein near Dunhuang, which may date to the fourth century, Sogdian merchants refer to handling linens, other unprocessed cloth, musk and pepper.²¹ The Sogdians probably played an important role in the long-distance cotton textile trade—this network is the ‘Cotton Road’ mentioned above. Sogdian inscriptions on the upper course of the Indus river indicate that these Central Asian merchants, many of whom supported Buddhism, ventured south towards India in search of great profits; surely some of them sailed from Sind towards Kalyan and further south.

To conclude, the evidence I discuss above is a convincing argu-

¹⁸ Based on the study of the first of three chapters of the *Gaoseng zhuan*, Shoshin Kuwayama shows that between the fourth and fifth centuries a significant number of monks traveled from India to China (Kuwayama, ‘Pilgrimage’, 118–24).

¹⁹ De la Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*.

²⁰ Grenet, ‘Les Marchands’, 64–85.

²¹ De la Vaissiere, ‘Rise of Sogdians’, 19–23.

ment that the rebirth of Buddhist patronage at cave sites located in the Ajanta area during the fifth and the sixth century CE, was far from a regional phenomenon. In fact, this patronage relates to far reaching connections between the Western Deccan, the Indian Ocean network and the Silk Road.

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