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"Intrusive Art" at Ajaṇṭā in the Late Middle Period: The Case of Bhadrāsana Buddhas

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Abstract: Following the apparent chaos that ensued at Ajaṇṭā during the so-called "period of disruption" in the wake of King Hariṣeṇa's death (ca. 478–480 CE), local monks and residents in the caves continued to sponsor the donation of what we term "intrusive" images after the late Walter Spink. These new donations consisted of hundreds of Buddha images, a few of which retain today painted or incised dedicatory inscriptions in Sanskrit. Many of these images represent the Buddha preaching and seated in the "auspicious pose" (*bhadrāsana*) on the conventional lion throne with his legs down. In this article, the author focuses on the images accompanied by inscriptions since they provide a better understanding of the reuse of consecrated caves, and of the nature of this new and brief iconographic development implemented by local Buddhist residents. The sudden appearance of Bhadrāsana Buddhas seems indeed to correlate with a rise to prevalence of Mahāyāna Buddhist practices at Ajaṇṭā during the late Middle Period.

Keywords: Ajaṇṭā; *bhadrāsana*; Buddhist art and iconography; intrusive art; Mahāyāna; western Deccan caves

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siddham | | *deyadharmmo 'yam upāsakasya*

yad atra puṇyaṁ tad bhavatu mātāpitroḥ sarvasattvānāṁ ca

Success! This is the pious gift of a layman.

What merit be therein, let it belong to his parents and all living beings.

(*In Memoriam* Walter M. Spink, 1928–2019)

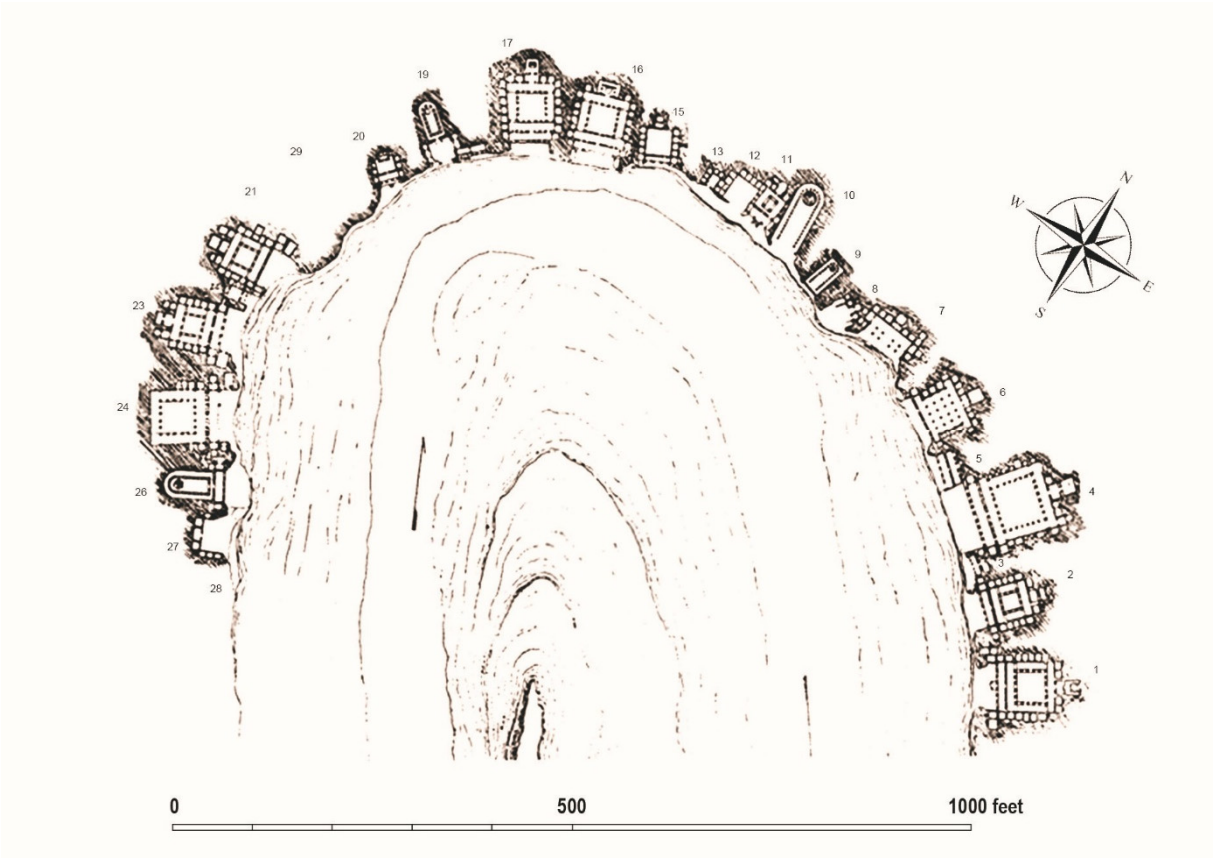
1. Introduction

Buddha images seated in the majestic and "auspicious pose" known as *bhadrāsana* appear all over the western Deccan in the late Buddhist caves[1] at, for example, Ajaṇṭā, Auraṅgābād, Ellorā, Kaṇherī, and Nāsik. This imagery is ubiquitous, found chiefly during the late fifth century, and in the subsequent sixth through eighth centuries. Most images are carved in high relief, but a few paintings also remain.

I have contended elsewhere that these Bhadrāsana Buddhas are important and distinctive art manifestations in the overall development of Indian Buddhist art (Revire 2016). In this article, however, I do not intend to provide a complete list of the images in the caves, an impossible task. Rather, I study a discrete selection found at the important rock-cut site of Ajaṇṭā, in order to apprehend their sudden emergence and possible significance. This examination depends very much on context and thus must be combined with epigraphic data whenever possible. Ajaṇṭā, deserted for many centuries, luckily offers rich visual and epigraphic evidence that would otherwise not have been available since Buddhist practices gradually declined in western India after the eighth century, and because most other cave complexes in the region were heavily disturbed or ruined over time.

2. Introducing Ajaṇṭā

The most famous, and most studied, Buddhist cave complex in the western Deccan is Ajaṇṭā, located in the modern Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. The site consists of about thirty Buddhist rock-cut excavations [Scheme 1]. Artistic work at the site occurred in two distinct phases, the first ranging from circa 100 BCE to 100 CE, and the second in the third quarter of the fifth century, according to the prevailing chronology established by the late Prof. Spink (2005a).



Scheme 1. General plan of the caves of Ajaṇṭā, Maharashtra (After Spink 2009, Figure 2).

In regard to the second phase, I adopt the "short chronology" proposed by Spink, in which the rock-cut activity at Ajaṇṭā is considered a major artistic achievement in the context of the rise and fall of the Vākāṭakas (Vatsagulma branch) circa the third quarter of the fifth century.[2] The implications of this "short chronology" are twofold: firstly, the work-span of most of the Ajaṇṭā caves lasted for only a short time, linked mostly to King Hariṣeṇa's reign (ca. 460–477 CE); secondly, there was a sudden disruption of cave activities (ca. 478–480 CE) due to the king's unexpected death and because there was probably continuing conflict between two feudatory dynasties which Spink, after Mirashi (1963)—on the basis of the Cave 17 inscription—interpreted as between the Ṛṣīkas and the Aśmakas.[3]

Following this chronology, a clear demarcation of the second phase can thus be made between what is called the "programmatic" and "intrusive" periods at Ajaṇṭā, prior to, or immediately following, the reign of Hariṣeṇa. Spink's reading of the site during the so-called programmatic phase, between approximately 460 and 477 CE, suggested that each cave was initially funded by a single major donor. This pattern of elite and exclusive patronage at Ajaṇṭā is well attested by epigraphical evidence as, for example, with the inscription of Hariṣeṇa's minister Varāhadeva, who was the chief patron of the Cave 16 excavation (Mirashi 1963, pp. 103ff; Cohen 1995, pp. 361–62).

During the fifteen or so years of programmatic Vākāṭaka patronage, Ajaṇṭā flourished under the aegis of a group of elite or courtly donors. Spink (2006, pp. 161ff) held that no "outsiders" could have contributed or donated a Buddha image or relief during this period. Except for the two important shrine images in Caves 16 and 26, introduced to the site by the minister Varāhadeva and the high-ranking monk Buddhabhadra and probably completed circa 478, no prior Bhadrāsana Buddha images were apparently carved in stone at Ajaṇṭā.[4] However, once these great patrons had departed from the collapsing site during the so-called "period of disruption" (ca. 478–480 CE), that is, the devastating years following Hariṣeṇa's death, monks still resident there, along with local devotees and individual donors, making merit while they could, briefly sponsored what Spink described as the "helter-skelter" donation of large numbers of single "intrusive" images. According to Spink's precise chronology (ibid., pp. 93ff, 158ff), after about 480 CE, all official artistic activity seems to have abruptly ended at the site. Presumably, monks continued to live in some of the caves for perhaps a few more years, after which the site became almost totally abandoned, except for the use of a few cells by itinerant ascetics, likely Śaivites, in later centuries.

In brief, the later intrusive painted and incised records of donations found throughout the site, made after the collapse of the programmatic phase, were from many different monks or lay followers (e.g., Yazdani 1946, Appendix, pp. 85ff; 1955, Appendix, pp. 111ff). These examples give evidence that the nature of late patronage at Ajaṇṭā, in its twilight after the fall of the Vakāṭakas, was ultimately no longer limited to a single donor. This article, my study of Bhadrāsana Buddha images at Ajaṇṭā, focuses exclusively on this intrusive period, following the death of Hariṣeṇa.

3. "Intrusive" Images at Ajaṇṭā

As Zin (2006) has said, "intrusions" is a term introduced by Walter Spink to refer to the paintings and reliefs of Ajaṇṭā which do not belong to the original "program" of decorating the caves. She also admits that:

> The "intrusions" can be easily recognised by the fact that they ruin the original concept, for e.g. in Cave II, on one wall near the entrance to the vestibule there is a rocky landscape, whereas on the other side is the Miracle of Śrāvastī which does not belong to the original arrangement. Such "intrusions" normally have separate inscriptions documenting who had donated them. Usually, these were monks, but also *upāsika*-s who used empty space amid the paintings to put in their little donations in the caves. Intrusive paintings or reliefs are eye-catching as they are numerous and are located in the front, on well-lit walls. (Zin 2006, pp. 100f)

In his detailed cave-by-cave itemization of intrusions at Ajaṇṭā, Spink (2005b) further argued that hundreds, if not thousands, of separate Buddha images or Buddhist triads were individual donations; a few of these retain their painted or incised dedicatory inscriptions (Cohen 2006). The presence of such donative inscriptions with the popular *yad atra puṇyaṁ* formula on, or beneath, iconic imagery invariably identify them as intrusions meant to produce merit.[5] Much of this corpus has been described by Morrissey as "palimpsests" which "apparently violated, disrupted and even vandalized" (Morrissey 2009, p. 110) the carefully controlled plans for the caves made during the programmatic period. It is important to note, however, that these intrusive carvings and inscriptions appear only in caves where the main shrine image had been already dedicated by circa 478. In other words, these intrusive inscriptions and images are totally absent inside *vihāras* without properly consecrated shrines and unfinished excavations such as Caves 3, 5, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15A, 23, 24, 28, 29 (e.g., Spink 2007, pp. 56ff, 81ff, 127ff, 161ff, 169f, 170f, 178f, 290ff, 304ff, 342ff), or even in Cave 1 where the completed shrine was "ritually dead" and never "brought to life" (Spink 2006, pp. 184ff). In Spink's words:

> [During the period of disruption] only such Buddha images (and the caves where they dwelt) that were "alive" and thus efficacious in fulfilling the donor's anxious quest for merit, were acceptable. It is for this reason that the new donors, over and over, crowded their images, if necessary, into cramped spaces in caves where the Buddha image was in worship, while they left untouched the spacious wall surfaces of excavations where, for one reason or another, the image was never brought to sufficient completion to be put into ritual use. (ibid., p. 170)

Many of these intrusive images represent a Buddha, occasionally alone, preaching and seated in the "auspicious pose" (*bhadrāsana*) on the lion throne with his legs down, but more frequently accompanied by two attendants. A pair of deer and a wheel are sometimes shown beneath the Buddha's feet, which are supported by a lotus upheld by two *nāga*-kings. Because of these attributes, many commentators hold that the panels represent specific narrative episodes from the First Sermon at Sārnāth or the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī. However, we still do not know and it might be more accurate to see these compositions as purely conventional preaching scenes, repeated far and wide over the site. Alternatively, it might point to a certain text that the donor adheres to (the *Lotus Sūtra*?), but we cannot be sure.

Such carved or painted reliefs have been reported in various numbers, sizes, and states of preservation either on interior walls, porches, outer façades, or even in some neighboring shrinelets of Caves 2, 4, Upper 6, 7, 9, 9A–B, 10, 10A, 11, 12A, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, and 26 (e.g., Spink 2005b, pp. 3, 8ff, 54ff, 98, 99ff, 105ff, 111ff, 116, 117ff, 147ff, 161ff, 168ff, 172ff, 189ff, 200ff). In the following, I list only a selection of some of the most important and well-known intrusive examples of Bhadrāsana Buddhas at Ajaṇṭā, leaving out several duplicated panels to avoid exhaustion and repetition.[6] Specifically, I focus on images accompanied by a painted or incised Sanskrit inscription which enable us to come to a better understanding of their nature and function by considering the devotional practices of Buddhist devotees in the caves.

3.1. Cave 2

A very worn painting from Cave 2's rear wall, to the left of the antechamber, seems to represent the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī with the main central Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana* on a throne, of which only the pendant legs with feet resting on a lotus pedestal can be seen (Yazdani 1933, pp. 26f, pl. 27; Revire 2022, Figure 6). According to Spink, this painting of the Great Miracle apparently "usurps the high-priority space on the left rear wall previously planned for a bodhisattva Padmapani" (Spink 2007, p. 54). Moreover, a donative record associated with the little intrusion found near the bottom in the right-side corner safely places it during the period of disruption. The two lines are damaged and hesitantly read as follows:

> 1. deya(dharmmo 'yaṁ śākyabhikṣo)[r bhadanta budha]guptasya yad atra pu[ṇyaṁ]
>
> 2. [ta] ———————————— (sa)rrvasatvā(nāṁ) ————
>
> Translation:
>
> This is [the religious donation of the Śākyabhikṣu] reverend Budhagupta . . . Let the merit therein . . . all living beings (ed. & trans. Cohen 2006, p. 280, inscr. No. 12).

3.2. Upper Cave 6

A previously unnoticed, now ruined, painted intrusion of a Bhadrāsana Buddha has an incomplete inscription near the top of the right front pilaster from Upper Cave 6, provisionally read as:

1. (deya)dharmo ya[ṁ] śākyabhik[ṣ]o[r ggo]vin[d]asya yad a(tra puṇyaṁ) —

Translation:

This is the religious donation of the Śākyabhikṣu Govinda. Let the [merit therein] . . . (ed. & trans. Cohen 2006, p. 285, inscr. No. 19).

3.3. Cave 7

A painted intrusion with an illegible, most likely donative, inscription is found on the rear wall of the porch of Cave 7, to the left of the shrine doorway (Cohen 2006, p. 286, inscr. No. 21; Spink 2006, p. 164; 2007, p. 126). Despite the faintness of this painting, the central figure of a Buddha in *bhadrāsana* can be discerned. He is apparently delivering a sermon and seems to be attended by two standing figures tentatively identified as Bodhisattvas (Yazdani 1946, pp. 13f, pl. 11a).

3.4. Cave 9

Several painted intrusions with hardly legible donative inscriptions are found on the rear wall of the *caitya*-hall cave (Cohen 2006, pp. 287ff, inscr. No. 23, 25, 26; Spink 2006, pp. 245ff). In the usual manner, they depict the central Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana* on a royal throne preaching with his two hands (Figure 1a,b). His feet rest on a lotus pedestal and he is flanked by two bejeweled attendants. In one scene, a prominent *stūpa* or *caitya* on the right with a painted inscription on the base is present, referring to the *caitya* as the *deyadharma* or religious donation of some unknown lay person or, more probably, a monk (Yazdani 1946, Appendix, 89, inscr. No. 8; Cohen 2006, pp. 287f, inscr. No. 24). Notably, these accompanying scenes, which Yazdani (1946, pp. 20–22, pls. 18a–b) thought were drawn from the life of the Buddha, appear, according to Morrissey (2009, Forthcoming), to belong to a complete story, possibly related to a particular series of episodes of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Whatever the case, a slightly better-preserved painting is found on the cave's triforium, above the ninth pillar of the right aisle (Foucher 1909, p. 26, pl. 4; Yazdani 1946, pp. 23f, pl. 15b; Zin 2003, vol. 2, pl. 20c; Spink 2006, pp. 251ff). There, the enthroned Buddha in *bhadrāsana* is directly attended by two Bodhisattvas as fly-whisk bearers with two additional standing Buddhas turned towards the central triad (Figure 2a,b).[7] A donative inscription appears between the lotus pedestals upon which the two nearest attendants of the Buddha stand. It is given in four lines which have been read as follows:

1. [siddham] deyadharmmo 'yam — ravi
2. prabhasya [ya]d atra (puṇyaṁ) tad [bha]
3. vatu mātā(p)it(r)os sarvvasattvā(nāṁ)
4. ca

Translation:

[Success!] This is the religious donation of . . . Raviprabha. Let the [merit] therein be for [his] mother and father and all living beings (ed. & trans. Cohen 2006, p. 289, inscr. No. 27).[8]

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**) Line drawing of a mural painting (intrusive?) from the rear of Ajaṇṭā Cave 9 on the left side, possibly depicting episodes of the *Lotus Sūtra*, ca. 478–480 CE (Matthias Helmdach © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities). (**b**) Line drawing of a mural painting (intrusive?) from the rear of Ajaṇṭā Cave 9 on the right side, possibly depicting episodes of the *Lotus Sūtra*, ca. 478–480 CE (Matthias Helmdach © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities).

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 2. Intrusive mural painting from the triforium of Ajaṇṭā Cave 9, ca. 478–480 CE ((**a**) Line drawing after Foucher 1917, pl. XXI, 1; (**b**) Photograph by the author).

3.5. Cave 10

Yazdani (1946, p. 38, Appendix, 91, inscr. No. 4) and Cohen (2006, p. 299, inscr. No. 49) both noticed an inscription on Pillar L9, face A, beneath the image of a sitting Buddha in *bhadrāsana*, but it is too faded to be read. In all likelihood, it recorded the name of the donor who sponsored the scene painted on this pillar (Figure 3a,b). Again, a discussion on the identification of this scene and its possible affiliation with the *Lotus Sūtra* has been proposed by Schopen (2005, pp. 278–98).

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 3. Intrusive mural painting on pillar L9 from Ajaṇṭā Cave 10, ca. 478–480 CE ((**a**): Photograph after Behl 1998, p. 43; (**b**): Line drawing after Zin 2003, vol. 2, pl. 22c).

Several rows of other Buddhas preaching and seated in *bhadrāsana* are painted on top of the pillars; they are alternately dressed in white or red robes (Figure 4).[9] Because no donative inscriptions appear to seek credit for these, Spink (2006, pp. 210ff) assigned them to the very last year of work during the programmatic phase (ca. 478). In his view, these repetitive paintings were part of a contractual project to redecorate the overall interior of the *caitya*-hall as "processions" of Buddhas and were the work of a single group of artists who started simultaneously at pillars L5 and R5 and ended at pillars L10 and R10. Spink suggested that another group of painters took over at this point and continued the work for a while, painting red-robe Buddhas, before this continuation halted due to unexpected circumstances. Spink (ibid., pp. 218f) explained the change of colors in the robes, from white to red, by the "better availability, or perhaps the lower cost, of such [red ocre] pigments" during the chaotic transition between the programmatic phase and the immediately following intrusive period. Incidentally, a similar painted row of red-robed Buddhas, also inscribed with an intrusive donative record, is seen on one pillar of the ancient *caitya*-hall at Piṭalkhoraā (Morrissey 2013).

Figure 4. Intrusive mural on a pillar from Ajaṇṭā Cave 10, ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

3.6. Cave 11

Other intrusive carved images, also once painted but now faded, seen on the right wall of the porch (Figure 5), as well as paintings found on the rear wall to the right of the shrine entrance, are attributed to the period of disruption (Spink 2005a, pp. 220ff; 2006, p. 165; 2007, p. 160).[10] A donative inscription from a certain lay follower, dated to the same period, appears on the throne pedestal of the Bhadrāsana Buddha painted over a cloth-based surface of the rear shrine wall (Dhavalikar 1968, pp. 149f, Figure 3; Spink 1968, Figures 16–19). The inscription tentatively reads:

1. [siddham] deyadharmmo 'yam upā-
2. saka mitradharmmasya
3. yad atra puṇyam tad bhava[tu]
4. mātāpitro sarvvasatvānān ca

Translation:

[Success!] This is the religious donation of the upāsaka Mitradharma. Let the merit therein belong to [his] mother and father and all living beings (ed. & trans. Cohen 2006, p. 307, inscr. No. 64).

Figure 5. Intrusive panels from Ajaṇṭā Cave 11, ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

3.7. Cave 19

The fine panel carved on the right wall outside the courtyard of Cave 19 which depicts the unattended Bhadrāsana Buddha is possibly one of the first intrusive images of this kind at Ajaṇṭā. Spink compared this low relief with images from Cave 26 and postdated it to slightly later, around late 478 or early 479 (Spink 2005a, pp. 147ff; 2007, p. 242). The large panel is framed on almost all sides by other small intrusive carvings of Buddhas in different standing or seated positions, either cross- or pendant-legged (Figure 6).[11] These minor reliefs were probably donated, after the central composition was completed, by different devotees who are often seen kneeling at the base of their own panel offerings.

Figure 6. Intrusive panels from Ajaṇṭā Cave 19, ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

3.8. Cave 22

Late carved intrusions of the Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana* adorn the shrine and rear wall of the tiny but late and unfinished Cave 22, and yet already consecrated, which, according to Spink (2007, pp. 288ff), was probably not even begun until 477 (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Intrusive panels from Ajaṇṭā Cave 22, overview of the cave and the main shrine, ca. 478–480 CE (Courtesy of AIIS # 96798).

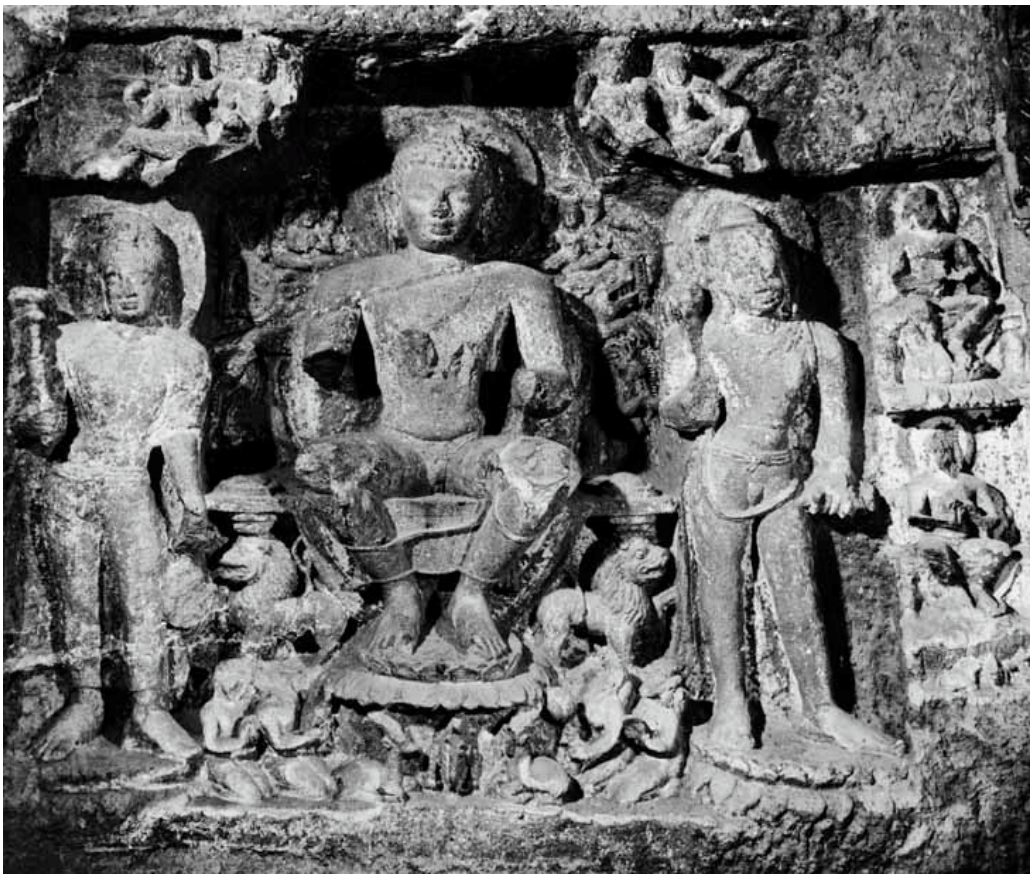


Figure 8. Intrusive Buddhist triad from Ajaṇṭā Cave 22, main shrine, ca. 478–480 CE (Courtesy of AIIS # 96809).

The cave has also three donative inscriptions, the first of which is associated with the panel found carved at the right of the entrance to the shrine (Figure 9). The panel depicts a triad centered on the preaching Buddha enthroned on an elaborate *makara*-chair, flanked by two Bodhisattva attendants, each of whom stands on a lotus pedestal supported by a long stalk. Two prominent *nāga*-kings uphold the middle stem that supports the lotus pedestal

of the Buddha. Several garland-bearers crowd the scene at the top, while a pair of deer and kneeling devotees are at the bottom of the composition. The two-line inscription is painted on both sides of the Buddha's pedestal, just beneath two lions which support his throne at the base. The inscription has been restored as follows:

1. (left) [siddham] deyadharmmo 'yaṁ śākya-(right) bhi[kṣo]r bhadanta bha—[sya] mātāpitro
2. (left) m udiśya sa[rvva]sa-(right) tvānāñ ca bhavatu

Translation:

[Success!] This is the religious donation of the Śākyabhikṣu reverend Bha[-?]. Let it be in honor of his parents and for all living beings (ed. & trans. Cohen 2006, p. 330, inscr. No. 89; cf. Dhavalikar 1968, pp. 150f, Figure 4a–c).

Figure 9. Intrusive panel with painted inscription from Ajaṇṭā Cave 22, ca. 478–480 CE (Courtesy of AIIS # 96804).

In addition to this intrusive panel, the donation of which occasioned the previous record, an important intrusive painted composition on the right wall inside the cave's shrine shows the dominant seven past Buddhas theme, plus the future Maitreya as a Bodhisattva. This painting is also accompanied by a donative inscription referring to the religious gift of a certain Śākyabhikṣu for the benefit of his parents and all sentient beings,[12] plus two important sets of descriptive labels (Cohen 2006, pp. 330ff, inscr. No. 88–90, 91–92) (Figure 10). The first label inscription found just below the row of seated Buddhas gives the following names:

> 1. vipaśvī śikhī viśvabhū (krakucchandaḥ) ka[naka]muniḥ kāśyapaḥ śākyamuni maitre[yaḥ]. (Yazdani 1955, Appendix, p. 111; ed. Cohen 2006, p. 332, inscr. No. 91)

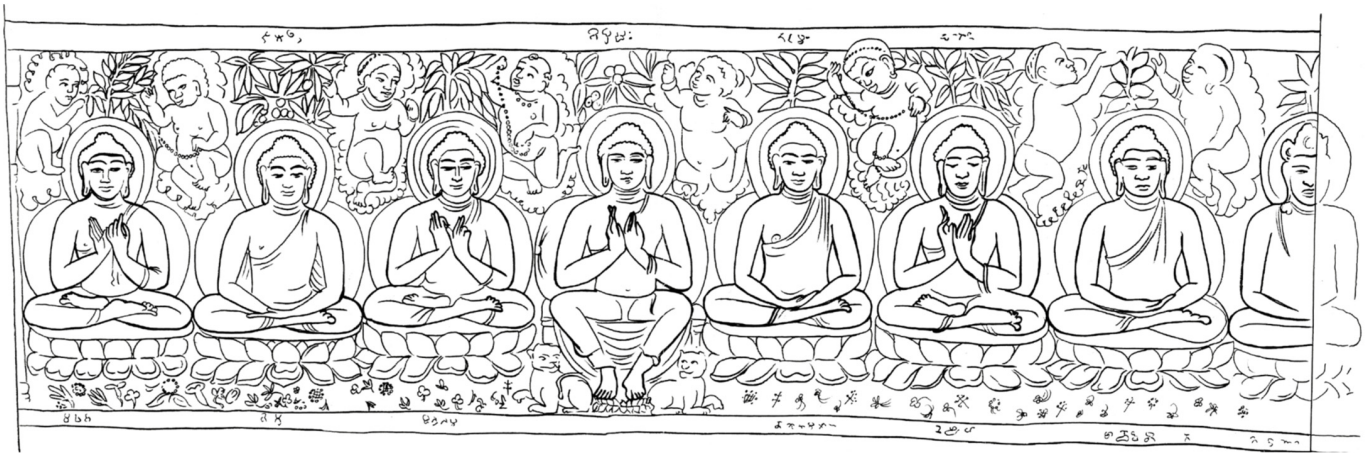


Figure 10. Line drawing of a mural painting of the seven past Buddhas, plus Maitreya, and their respective *bodhi*-trees from Ajaṇṭā Cave 22, ca. 478–480 CE (After Zin 2003, vol. 2, pl. 37a).

The first three listed past Buddhas, i.e., Vipaśyī, [13] Śikhī, and Viśvabhū, all seated cross-legged, belong to preceding *kalpas* (eons), while Krakucchanda,[14] notably the only apparent figure originally depicted in *bhadrāsana*,[15] Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, Śākyamuni, and the Buddha-to-be Maitreya constitute the (first) five Buddhas of the present *bhadrakalpa* or fortunate eon.[16] Just above them, a second label inscription gives four still legible names for their respective *bodhi*-trees:

> 2. — puṇḍarīka — śirīṣaḥ udum(b)a(raḥ) nyagro(dhaḥ) — (ed. Cohen 2006, p. 332, inscr. No. 92).

The Puṇḍarīka-tree (*Mangifera indica*) is found above Śikhī, the Śirīṣa-tree (*Acacia sirissa* or *Albizia lebbeck*) above the missing Krakucchanda, the Uḍumbara-tree (*Ficus glomerata* or *racemosa*) above Kanakamuni, and the Nyagrodha-tree (*Ficus benghalensis* or *indica*) over Kāśyapa.[17] The combination of this painting with the label inscriptions makes clear that the "auspicious pose" is not favored or restricted to any Buddha. In this case, only the former Krakucchanda was represented in the center as sitting in this manner, probably for symmetrical reasons. On other occasions in Maharashtra, for example at Auraṅgābād Caves 1 and 2, Kaṇherī Cave 90, or Ellorā Cave 9 (Revire 2016, Figures 4.80, 4.107, 4.143, 4.172), one can see a similar series depicting seven past Buddhas in a row, often seated in *bhadrāsana*, while a Bodhisattva (Maitreya?) stands at the right end in princely garb. This goes against prevailing assumptions claiming that only Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, can be depicted in this sitting posture. In actual truth, there are several possibilities as to whom the Bhadrāsana Buddhas depict, but we still do not know for sure in most cases; multiple Buddhas can all take this posture.

3.9. Cave 26

Some intrusive panels (often unfinished) were added to the vestibule of Cave 26 and positioned at the rear of the circumambulatory wall (Figures 11 and 12). According to Spink (2006, pp. 89ff), these sculptures were carved at the rear of the *caitya*-hall sometime in 480 CE, when the more desirable locations in the ambulatories had been occupied, and thus represent the very latest trend at the site. In his own words:

> At first, the new donors, sponsoring intrusive images, made large panels which reflected, in a simplified way, those sponsored by Buddhabhadra himself. However, as the months went on, and pressures increased, the ambulatory walls were broken up into a confusing array of multiple separate donations, all of course Buddha images, either seated or standing. The figures here were almost certainly all private donations, and many probably had painted inscriptions, now long since lost. (Spink 2009, caption to Figure 181)

Many of the intrusive panels display triads centered on a Bhadrāsana Buddha with attendant standing Buddhas (Figure 13a). Panel L2, however, intriguingly shows the central Buddha flanked by a crowned Bodhisattva carrying a lotus on his proper left and an attendant standing Buddha on his proper right (Figure 13b). The meaning of such iconography is unclear.

Figure 11. Intrusive panels from Ajaṇṭā Cave 26, circumambulatory wall, ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

Figure 12. Unfinished intrusive panel from Ajaṇṭā Cave 26, circumambulatory wall, ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 13. Intrusive panels with triads from Ajaṇṭā Cave 26, circumambulatory wall; ca. 478–480 CE: (**a**) central Bhadrāsana Buddha flanked by two standing Buddhas; (**b**) central Bhadrāsana Buddha attended by a standing Buddha and a standing Bodhisattva(Photographs by the author).

4. Summary and Discussion: The Rise of the Mahāyāna?

The Bhadrāsana type gradually became the "image of choice" in major image shrines at Ajaṇṭā (Caves 16 and 26) throughout the later years of programmatic work during the late Vākāṭaka phase, in the 470s CE. From the preceding survey, it is also clear that these images turn out to be very important during the chaotic aftermath that ensued during the period of disruption (ca. 478–480 CE). It is fascinating to observe how rapidly this imagery, seemingly without a clear iconographic program, proliferated throughout the complex to occupy the most visible spaces. Generally speaking, one finds only larger Bhadrāsana Buddha figures among the intrusions during the earlier period of disruption (e.g., Caves 19, 22, 26). The last intrusions, on the contrary, were smaller in size and often hastily carved in the least desirable areas once the better spaces became occupied. This trend seems to have ensued until the so-called intrusive work at the site came to a sudden halt, leaving many Buddha figures and reliefs unfinished, never plastered or painted (Spink 2009, pp. 96ff).[18] In most of the late Bhadrāsana repetitive reliefs produced at the site, the carving and decoration of the panels was reduced to a minimum. The same intense popularity of the Bhadrāsana type holds true at other late cave sites of Western India as well, but, importantly, all post-date the Ajaṇṭā production (Revire 2016, pp. 159ff).

The central question, then, is why this new iconographic development first took place at Ajaṇṭā? As yet, there is neither a clear identification of who these Buddhas are nor full explanation of why this iconography was selected so overwhelmingly at this site. Richard Cohen links the sudden appearance of the "regal posture" with Buddha images and the surrounding catastrophic political and historical events at Ajaṇṭā following Hariṣeṇa's death. He hypothesizes, "the *bhadrāsana* Buddha was [used as] a propaganda device during this [dark] moment in Indian political history" (Cohen 1995, p. 314) and "through the *bhadrāsana* iconography, patrons at the site invoked the Buddha to act in his capacity as Cakravartin, to maintain the Dharma and saṅgha at that time of crisis" (ibid., p. 315).[19] I reached a similar conclusion connecting the auspicious pose with sovereignty and kingship (Revire 2016). I also agree with Cohen to the extent that the enthroned Buddha in *bhadrāsana* is to be perceived as a metaphor of the Cakravartin or a "Dharma-king" who can claim royal splendor, even taking on a new cosmic dimension as *pantokrator*, i.e., Lord of the Universe (Revire 2022, pp. 82ff). However, in addition to these external historical circumstances, internal and religious factors may have played a significant role as well. This iconographic type was clearly used at Ajaṇṭā, not only as a propagandist visual device, but also to display a new omnipotent and supramundane character of the Buddha.

Indeed, during the so-called period of disruption, evidence for the presence of Mahāyāna cult activities is significantly more visible and substantial. We know that many of these "uninvited" donors or "intruders" at Ajaṇṭā, according to Spink (2005b), were monks who remained at the site in spite of the breakdown in organized patronage. It is likely that this period reflects the activities of remaining residents at the site, rather than an inflow of new exterior elements. Furthermore, epigraphic evidence confirms that the intrusive donors were mainly monastics. Cohen (1995, pp. 202ff) and Morrissey (2009, pp. 119ff) have calculated that the monks at Ajaṇṭā included more than 75% of the identifiable donors during this period. Importantly, these monks specifically styled themselves Śākyabhikṣus. These monastics never appear in previous inscriptions at the site, before the so-called "period of disruption", and so the Śākyabhikṣus are as "intrusive" as the Bhadrāsana Buddhas at Ajaṇṭā. The argument for the likely Mahāyāna association of these Indian monks during the late Middle Period has been assessed by Schopen (2005, pp. 223ff) and several other scholars.[20] If Śākyabhikṣus employing the *yad atra puṇyaṁ* formula can be connected to Mahāyāna Buddhism and its practices, then it would appear, on the basis of the available epigraphic evidence, that the intrusive phase at Ajaṇṭā was a very active period for supporters of this movement.[21]

While this remains only a hypothesis, other art historical evidence may further substantiate this possibility. While the late artistic production at Ajaṇṭā has often been described as mature Mahāyāna creation (e.g., Spink 1974), we see in parallel, from the second half of the fifth century onwards, a massive increase in the number of sculptures and, to an unknown extent, of paintings of Buddha images seated in *bhadrāsana*. The type seems to start at Ajaṇṭā and then spread extremely rapidly to other Buddhist sites or caves in the western-central Deccan such as at Auraṅgābād, Ellorā, Kaṇherī, and Nāsik. The research presented here attempted to tackle the complex issue of intrusive imagery from the perspective of iconographic change. It shows a striking link between the late "trendiness" in popularity of the *bhadrāsana* type in visual art and the early emergence of the Mahāyāna movement at Ajaṇṭā and beyond, throughout the Deccan, in epigraphic records.

In addition, celestial Bodhisattva images—a sure sign of Mahāyāna popular cults and activity at any one site—gradually gained significant roles in the visual arts of western Indian caves during this transitional period of Buddhist iconography (fifth–eighth centuries CE). At Ajaṇṭā, for example, we start to see triads of the Buddha with Bodhisattva attendants. In Cave 4, a prominent intrusive panel is visible on the entrance porch, depicting the increasingly popular "Litany of Avalokiteśvara" as an individual deity, on top of which, in an arched niche, a small Bhadrāsana Buddha is depicted (Figure 14). The same scene appears painted in Caves 2 and 17 (Yazdani 1955, p. 19, pl. 4a; Schlingloff 1988, pp. 175ff, Figures 1 and 2), sometimes even accompanied by donative inscriptions (Cohen 2006, pp. 285, 307, inscr. No. 18, 63).[22] A series of other related painted imagery at Ajaṇṭā, especially at Caves 9 and 10, may illustrate themes which might have been directly drawn from Mahāyāna literature, such as the influential *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra* (Figure 1a,b and Figure 3a,b).[23] This important corpus of Mahāyāna-related inscriptions, texts, and images certainly provides good correlations and a religious context for the appearance of Bhadrāsana Buddhas during this period.

In sum, although much has been lost at Ajaṇṭā, a fairly good idea of the importance of placing one's donation in specifically charged spaces, and assigning the merit produced by the gift to the attainment of "supreme knowledge" (*anuttarajñāna*) by all beings (Tournier 2020, p. 182), can still be obtained. It is indeed clear that some of these old structures, such as Caves 9 and 10, originally excavated during the first phase of activity at the site (100 BCE–100 CE), retained their sanctity throughout the centuries as they show both attempts at redecoration during the late Vākāṭaka phase and several intrusions during the subsequent period of disruption.

Figure 14. Intrusive panel depicting the "Litany of Avalokiteśvara" from Ajaṇṭā Cave 4 (porch), ca. 478–480 CE (Photograph by the author).

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Abbreviations

References to Pali texts follow the system adopted by the Critical Pali Dictionary.

AIIS	American Institute of Indian Studies, Center for Art and Archeology, Photo archive available online: http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/.
BHSD	*Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (Edgerton 1953).

Notes

1 In the following, although I am aware that this term is a bit of a misnomer, I use "cave(s)" as pure convention. These are not natural formations, but examples of Indian rock-cut architecture. On this terminology, see (Granoff 2013).

2 A detailed summary and analysis of the "short chronology" is offered in (Cohen 1995, Appendix D, pp. 422ff). For many years, scholars thought that the later caves at Ajaṇṭā were made over a long period from the fourth to the seventh centuries CE, but in recent decades a series of studies by Spink (summarized in Spink 2005a) argued that most of the work took place over only a very brief period during the glorious years of King Hariṣeṇa. Despite a few objections (e.g., Bakker 1997, pp. 88f; Bautze-Picron 2002, p. 279, n. 65; Spink 2005a, pp. 22ff; 2006, pp. 117ff), these views on the Ajaṇṭā's short chronology are increasingly widely accepted, at least in their broad conclusions, and are followed here.

3 The narrative of Aśmaka aggression stems from the problematic verse 10 of this inscription. For a new reading and a different historical interpretation, see (Cohen 1995, pp. 44ff, Appendix B, pp. 387ff). In opposition to Spink's view, Cohen considers that the Aśmakas were actually the western Vākāṭakas and that the aggressors responsible for the site's troubles and perhaps its final demise were the so-called main or eastern branch of the Vākāṭakas under King Pṛthivīṣeṇa II (ibid., pp. 62, 70f).

4 Spink noted a curious separation in time between the early depiction of Bhadrāsana Buddhas in paintings and their later appearance in carvings (Spink 2006, p. 205, n. 2). He says these Buddhas appear in painting almost a decade before they appeared in sculpture, but, he also notes, always as part of Ajaṇṭā's narrative murals, for example in Caves 1, 16, 17 and 21 (Yazdani 1955, pp. 28f, 42, 109, pls. 8a–b, 18b, 77b; Schlingloff 1988, p. 54, Figure 4.1, pp. 60–62, Figure 3; 2000, vol. 1, pp. 417, 434, 473, 475, 487, 491).

5 At Ajaṇṭā, Morrissey lists thirty-five intrusive inscriptions by monks, nine by lay people, while eleven are still uncertain (Morrissey 2009, p. 119).

6 Several views of intrusive images not listed hereafter can be found on the AIIS website: # 61421–22 (Cave 4), # 61353, # 61359–60, # 97082, # 97084–85, # 98042–43 (Upper Cave 6), # 61277, # 61280–83, # 97117–18 (Caves 9A–B), # 61264 (Cave 10A), # 98407 (Cave 11), # 98464 (Cave 15), # 61588–89, # 96909–10, # 98515–16, # 98527, # 98717 (Cave 19), # 96945, # 96956 (Cave 20), # 98717 (Cave 23), # 19215, # 96699 (Cave 26, exterior).

7 See also AIIS # 97139, # 97143.

8 For an earlier and slightly different edition, see (Dhavalikar 1968, p. 151, Figure 5).

9 For more views, see AIIS # 96984, # 96986–87, # 98381–85, # 98387–89.

10 See also AIIS # 96996, # 98407–08.

11 See also AIIS # 98536–39.

12 Cohen reads: . . . *deyadharmmo 'yaṁ śākyabhikṣo m aparaśaila i* . . . (Cohen 2006, p. 331, inscr. No. 90). The last part of this inscription was previously read and published as *śākyabhiksho*(*r*) *ma*[*hā*]*yāna* (Yazdani 1955, Appendix, p. 112). However, according to Morrissey (2009, pp. 69ff), while the latter reading appears impossible, the former interpretation put forward by Cohen that the Śākyabhikṣu may have been affiliated to the Aparaśaila monastic lineage (*nikāya*) is "grammatically untenable" since it suggests an impossible case-ending. In all likelihood, the name of the monk would have appeared in the remainder of the inscription along with the genitive case-ending; all of this has been lost. See also (Tournier 2020, pp. 184–86).

13 Another label inscription from Ajaṇṭā Cave 10 mentions the former Buddha Vipaśyī as a *samyaksaṁbuddha* (Cohen 2006, pp. 303f, inscr. No. 58).

14 The name Kraku(c)chanda (variously spelt, cf. BHSD, s.v.) is actually lost in the inscription that concerns us here, but is supplied based upon canonical lists of the seven past Buddhas, e.g., the *Mahāvadānasūtra* which, when restored, reads: *itaḥ sa ekanavataḥ kalpo yasmiṁ kalpe Vipaśyī samyaksaṁbuddho loke utpannaḥ itaḥ sa ekatriṁśattamaḥ kalpo yasmiṁ kalpe Śikhī ca Viśvabhuk ca samyaksaṁbuddhau loka utpannau asminn eva Bhadrakalpe catvāraḥ samyaksaṁbuddhā loke utpannā Krakasundaḥ* [=Krakucchandaḥ] *Kanakamuniḥ Kāśyapo vayaṁ cāpy etarhi Śākyamuniḥ iyam atra dharmatā tasmād idam ucyate* | | (ed. Fukita 2003, p. 36). For the parallel passage in Pali, see (D II 3, trans. Walshe 1995, p. 199).

[15] The painting deteriorated in modern times to such an extent that a negative taken by Walter Spink in 1966 (AIIS # 96799) no longer shows Buddha Krakucchanda in his original pendant-legged posture. I was unable to access Cave 22 during my two visits at Ajaṇṭā in 2007 and 2012.

[16] The *Mahāvadānasūtra* (cf. note *supra*, and its Pali counterpart, i.e., the *Mahāpadānasutta*) states that Vipaśyī appeared 91 eons ago, while both Śikhī and Viśvabhū came into being as Buddhas 31 eons ago. In addition, a Pali commentary explains why our present *kalpa* is regarded as fortunate or auspicious: *evaṁ pañca kappā vuttā* | | *tesu ayaṁ kappo Kakusandho Konāgamano Kassapo Gotamo Metteyyo ti pañcabuddhapaṭimaṇḍitattā bhaddakappo nāma jāto* | | (Ap-a, p. 542); i.e., "[. . .] Five (types of) eons are spoken of. As regards these, this (present) eon has become known as an 'auspicious eon,' because it will have been adorned with five Buddhas, viz. Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama, (and) Metteyya" (my translation). However, according to the later *Bhadrakalpikasūtra*, only extant in Tibetan and Chinese approximately 1000 Buddhas must appear in the present *kalpa* of which 996 are yet to come. Both the *Lalitavistara* (trans. Foucaux 1884, p. 341; Dharmachakra Translation Committee/DTC 2013, p. 317) and the *Mahāvastu* (Mvu III 330; trans. Jones 1956, pp. 321f) seem to echo the same concept of a 1000 Buddhas. Incidentally, a painted donative inscription from the antechamber wall of Ajaṇṭā Cave 2 (ed. Cohen 2006, pp. 282f, inscr. No. 14; Zin 2003, vol. 2, pl. 11) also mentions the religious gift of a lay follower (*sākyo-uṣakasya* = Śākyopāsaka) sponsoring the depiction of a "thousand Buddhas" (*bu*[*d*]*dhā sahasaṁ*). Could these represent past and future Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa? For an in-depth investigation on the concept of the "fortunate aeon", see (Skilling 2010); for more on the scheme of past Buddhas in South and Southeast Asia, see (Tournier 2019; Revire 2019). A variant list of 500 Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa is known in Tocharian Buddhism, on which see (Pinault 2011).

[17] For a recent study on the various essences of *bodhi*-trees of the seven past Buddhas, see (Shimizu 2010, pp. 18ff). The term *puṇḍarīka* occuring here does not denote the "white lotus", but rather the "white mango tree" (ibid., pp. 36ff). This is clear from the following Pali commentary on the *Buddhavaṁsa* which reads: *puṇḍarīkarukkho ti setambarukkho* | | (Mv 247); i.e., "the 'Puṇḍarīka-tree' is the white mango tree" (my translation).

[18] The possibility exists that a significant proportion of this "intrusive" material was never intended to be visible, at least not to human eyes. On this issue, see (DeCaroli 2011).

[19] For the complete argument, see the section titled: "The King is Dead, Long Live King Buddha" in Chapter 5 of his dissertation (Cohen 1995, pp. 297–315).

[20] Not all monks who went by the epithet of Śākyabhikṣu, Sakyabhikkhu, Sākiyabhikkhu, etc. were *de facto* Mahāyānists. The late Lance Cousins, for example, argued (Cousins 2003) that this is a generic term for Buddhist monks; others propose that this distinct appellation was the outcome of a "new trend" which aimed at emphasizing the importance of the Śākya clan and best served the Bodhisattva ideal (e.g., Cohen 2000). Moreover, the name is often associated with expressions that explicitly contain the term *mahāyāna* and it is frequently linked to the donations of Buddha and Bodhisattva images dedicated to "the attainment of *anuttarajñāna* by all living beings". On this issue, see also (Cohen 1995, pp. 202ff); Schopen's rebuttal of Cousins in his 1979 reprinted article (Schopen 2005, pp. 244–46); and (Morrissey 2009, pp. 68ff, Appendix). For a unique case of the *yad atra puṇyaṁ* donative formula blended in a Śaiva inscription from Nepal, dated 476/477 CE, see (Acharya 2008, p. 36).

[21] Schopen (2005, p. 239) explains that at least until the early medieval period, Mahāyāna was nearly invisible in India because it developed as a movement within already established religious communities. This may well apply to Ajaṇṭā as well, where Mahāyāna was perhaps present from an earlier time, but became epigraphically visible only during the late Vākāṭaka period. Along these lines, see also (Cohen 1995, pp. 254ff; Morrissey 2009, pp. 90ff).

[22] According to Spink's estimate (Spink 2005b, pp. 6ff), more than a dozen painted or sculpted examples of the great savior or "Lord of travelers" occur at Ajaṇṭā. Depictions of the *aṣṭamāhābhaya* Avalokiteśvara, i.e., "protecting from the eight (sometimes ten) great perils", are based on a specific literary description of that Bodhisattva as a savior found in the twenty-fourth (or twenty-fifth) chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Kern 1884, pp. 406–18; Murase 1971). Virtually identical descriptions of Avalokiteśvara also appear in both the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* and the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*. Bautze-Picron (2004, pp. 236ff, Figures 34–35 and 37, Appendix 2) notices that most examples of Avalokiteśvara as a savior are distributed on the left side (for the viewer) of the walls/entrances in the western caves.

[23] Schopen convincingly argues that a unique painting on a pillar in Cave 10 (Figure 3a,b) represents "the first, and so far only, known illustration of a Mahāyāna *sūtra* narrative in Indian art" (Schopen 2005, p. 294). According to him, the image in question is an illustration of an episode drawn from the twenty-fourth (or twenty-fifth) chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* (cf. Murase 1971). In this chapter, the Bodhisattva Akṣayamati, standing on the Buddha's proper left, after hearing Śākyamuni narrate the generous qualities of Avalokiteśvara, presents to Avalokiteśvara a gift of a necklace of pearls "worth a hundred thousand". See also Revire (2016, pp. 154ff) and Morrissey (Forthcoming).

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