

YAVANA (IONIAN) DONORS OF THE BUDDHIST CAVE ARCHITECTURE IN WESTERN INDIA [A.D.100-A.D.250]

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Abstract

Rise of Buddhism during the 6th century B.C. was a significant event in the history of India. Buddhists have greatly contributed to evolution of rock cut architecture. Buddhist cave architecture in India grew in response to certain specific needs of the Buddhist community. The needs were two fold, residential and devotional. The **Viharas** were the residential places. Major requirements for the devotional needs were creation of a **stupa**-the dome structure which became the early Buddhist object of veneration, a circumambulatory path and free space i.e. the Congregational hall for occasional gathering of the fraternity and the laity. Such work of excavation was difficult and time consuming requiring anywhere from a few years to a few decades. Obviously it needed royal patronage and financial support from the people.

The epigraphic data throws a welcome light on the fact that activity of creating rock cut monuments in western India received a generous patronage and the rulers and people from all walks of life came forward. The **Yavanas**, i.e. Ionian Greeks in western India also patronized this activity. Originally, the term *Yavana* is applied to the people who came from Ionian Islands to India. In course of time, it was loosely applied to the **Greeks, Romans, Shakas and the Parthians**.

During the first two centuries of the Christian era, there was a direct maritime trade between India and the Roman Empire. This was a period of remarkable progress in trade and industry in India. It was during this time the western coast of India witnessed the growth of brisk foreign trade with the western world including Roman Empire. There were a good number of the Yavanas in western India.

The present paper aims at focusing on the Indo Greek trade, and the traders, their colonies in western India and their contribution for the cause of the rock cut architecture by the critical evaluation of the inscriptional data of the Yavana donors from the archaeological sites.

This paper will show how Buddhism in western India received generous donations from the rich **Yavanas** who came here in pursuance of their trade. Some of their gifts in form of rock cut monuments are still visible. The Yavana donors and their donations are recorded in the inscriptions at Nasik, Karle and Junner sites. Interestingly, the rock cut excavations show the impression of the Greco-Roman art brought in by traders in the form Chaitya hall (congregational hall). The motif as triskelion, centaur and persipolitan pillars and their capitals at these sites owe their existence to the Yavana donors and were carved probably by Yavana artists. Their existence in the socio economic life is attested by their donative inscriptions at the Buddhist rock cut caves in western India.

Keywords: Rock cut Monuments in western India, Indo-Greek trade and traders, Yavana traders and their donations.

1. INTRODUCTION

From remote antiquity, there was considerable commercial and cultural intercourse between India and the west Asia. The invasion of Alexander the Great formed an important landmark in contact between India and the west. Alexander's conquest helped in infiltrating Greek culture in Bactria as many of his followers were induced to settle in Bactria.

India's second contact with the Greeks began during the Mauryan Period. The Mauryan Emperors had intimate connection with Greek kingdoms of the west. These rulers sent ambassadors to the Greek kingdoms of the west and welcomed the western ambassadors to their court. We have the account of this second conquest by the Greeks, their gradual expansion over a wide area of North India, other alien races came with them to India who successively ruled over the greater part of northern and western India in the last century before the Christian era and the first few centuries after it. The Indian literature refers to them as **Yavanas, Shakas, Pahalavas and Kushanas**, who mingled with the Indian people in subsequent period.

2. INDO-GREEK CONTACTS

Strabo (Circa 54 BCE-24 CE) refers to the authority of Apollodotus of Artemita, the Greeks of Bactria became masters of *Ariana*, a vague term roughly indicating the eastern districts of the Persian Empire and north western India. It is said that the Bactrian chiefs, particularly Menander, conquered more nations than Alexander and that these conquests were achieved partly by Menander and partly by Demetrius, the son of Euthedemus, the King of Bactria. Association of Demetrius with India is proved by literary as well as archaeological evidence. Demetrius flourished during the first half of the 2nd Century BCE.

Demetrius reduced to submission a considerable portion of Afghanistan, the Punjab and Sind, and founded cities in the conquered territories which bore his own name and possibly that of his father. A later king Menander, who apparently belonged to the house of Demetrius, reined gloriously at *Sakala* (Euthydemia) identified with modern Sialkot in Pakistan. Some of these later Greek princes and members of their court were converted to Buddhism or Vaishnavism. Menander became a Buddhist follower after a great discussion with Nagasena, a great Buddhist scholar and Heliodoros became an adherent of Vaishnavism. He established a pillar at Vidisha with a Garuda (eagle) capital, a symbol of the Vehicle of lord Vishnu.

In course of time, the political power of the Bactrian Greeks was threatened. These were also the foreign conquerors, who supplanted the Greeks in northwest India by the Shakas, Pahlavas or Parthians and later by the Kushans.



Fig. 1 Greco-Bactrian Kingdom and Indian Sub Continent

According to Strabo the Bactrian chiefs got possession over the *Indus delta*, the kingdom of *Saraostos* i.e. Saurashtra of present Gujarat state and Sigerdis probably Sagardvipa- i.e. the Cutch the northern part of the western coast. Aparanta, also known as Konkan is the coastline of present Maharashtra state.

2.1. Indo Greek Trade

The early centuries of the Christian era was the period of remarkable progress in trade and industries in peninsular India. In the first century CE, trade between India and west was greatly facilitated when the pilot Hippalus discovered how to lay his course straight across the ocean. It was a period when western coastline

and Deccan plateau which was a part of the Satvahana Empire, witnessed the growth of brisk foreign trade with the Roman Empire. This was a direct maritime trade between India and the Rome. There was an unprecedented increase in the volume of trade as articles of luxury from India were in great demand in Rome

2.1.1 Testimony of the foreigner's accounts

Periplus of the Erythrean Seas a Greek account, a manual for the Greek navigators who carried trade between Roman Empire and India through the Red Sea route and gives the details of the Port towns, the commodities to be sold or purchased, from each port on the route, inland industrial centers and the market towns of Deccan and peninsular India etc. It gives detailed information of India's maritime trade that was carried through the western and the eastern coast and gives a list of articles of import export. This manual of the navigators was written sometimes between CE70 and CE80. It refers to the entire trade route from the rome to India through the Red Sea, Indo Greek trade, Greek Navigators and ships landing to the ports of Konkan, market towns of the country called *Dachinavades*- i.e. Deccan, various commodities and articles of luxury to be purchased from Indian port towns etc.

Periplus gives a list of articles that India exported to Rome. These include- Indian spices like black pepper, dry ginger, nard oil, cardamoms spikenard, costus, bdellium, ivory, agate, carnelian, lyceum, cotton cloth of all kinds, silk cloth, yarn, long pepper, all kinds of wood like sandalwood, teak, black wood and ebony for medical and architectural purposes, Indian birds and animals, pearls, Indian herbs used as medicine, brass vessels and many other items were exported.

Pliny, a Roman historian bares the testimony to the vast sums of money sent to India in payment of the commodities imported from India. He had complained to the Roman court about the drain of the Roman Gold coins. He complains that for the purchase of luxurious articles, Rome pays every year a million sesterces to India. Find spots of the coins reveal the area of the concentration of economic, specially, the commercial activities. Discovery of Roman gold coins along the ancient Indian trade routes, trade centers and the market towns confirms the fact that there was a brisk trade between India and the Roman Empire.

2.1.2 Early Phase of rock cut architecture in western India

In Western India, the natural trap-formations were chosen for cutting the caves from rock. It was possible because of the softness in texture and horizontal bedding which rendered easy the work of quarrying, molding and sculpture. This resulted in a large number of Buddhistic excavations spread over a period of nearly ten centuries and covering the entire trap-area of western Deccan.

Buddhist cave architecture in India grew in response to certain specific needs of the Buddhist community. The needs were two fold, residential and devotional. The **Viharas** were the residential places. Major requirements for the devotional needs were creation of a **Stupa**-the dome structure which became the early Buddhist object of veneration, a circumambulatory path and free space and the **Chaitya** i.e. the Congregational hall for occasional gathering of the fraternity and the laity.

2.1.3 Trade routes and development of rock cut architecture

At the beginning of the Christian era, there was a network of roads connecting all important cities Industrial centers and the market towns in India. There was a well developed communication system between the different parts of the south and north India (Das, D. R., 1969, *Economic History of The Deccan*, p.127.) These roads helped to increase the internal and trade and cultural relations and also to maintain contacts with foreign countries through routes in all periods of history.(Motichandra1977, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*, p.26)

It was during this period that rock hewn cave dwellings were created in Western India. Out of nearly 1200 Buddhist rock cut excavations in India, about 800 are in western India, most of them in present State of Maharashtra. Buddhists have greatly contributed to evolution of rock cut architecture.

Earlier excavations of this series (200 B.C.E.-200 C.E.), pertaining to the Hinayana creed of Buddhism, consist Chaityas or temple halls and Viharas or monastic residences, all copies again of structural prototypes in brick and timber.

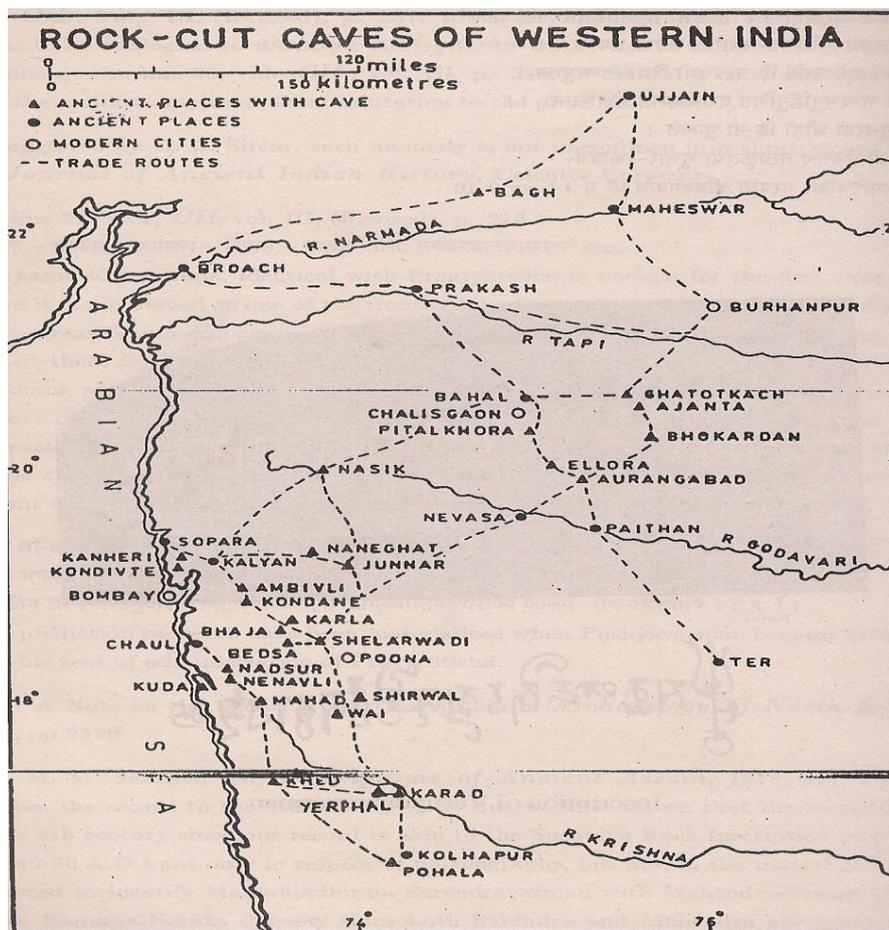


Fig. 2 Map Showing rock cut caves along the Trade routes
Source: Dhavlikar, M. K., Late Hinayana Caves of Western India

2.1.4 Royal Patronage and Popular Support and Pattern of Donation

Emperor Ashoka's patronage to Buddhism resulted into the expansion of Buddhism practically all over India. After the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra, the capital city of the Mauryan Empire, the missionary efforts made by Theravada Sangha, Buddhism must have spread rather extensively and by 200 B.C., the Buddhist communities began to use excavated dwellings in the hilly regions of Maharashtra.

With the patronage of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, Buddhism greatly expanded, spreading throughout India and to Ceylon. A number of *stupas* were also constructed in North West India patronized by the Indo-Greek rulers. The Pali chronicles state that at the conclusion of the third Buddhist Council organized under the patronage of Emperor Asoka, the Theravadin Sangha (the Buddhist organisation) sent missions to various parts of India and to Ceylon. It also mentions that one Yonarakkhita (a Yavana) was sent to Aparanta [Northern Konkan] and Mahadharmarakkhita to Maharatta plateau part of Maharashtra i.e. western Deccan.

As a matter of fact, the Buddhist fraternity received the royal patronage in India. More than that, it received the popular support as is evident from the inscriptional records. In western India, hundreds of the inscriptions belonging to the period under review throw light on the fact that Buddhism was largely supported by the Buddhist laymen, merchants and traders, mercantile and industrial guilds, householders and other common men and women. It is the fact that people from all walks of life came forward to fulfill the needs of the Buddhist fraternity in this region.

The Pattern of donation shows that at the beginning, the donations were made for the creation of the monuments or its part. The epigraphic records throw a welcome light on this aspect. The donors came forward for the creation of *Cave dwellings* i.e. *Viharas*, *Stupas* i.e. *the Place of worship*, *Chaityagrihas*, i.e. *the Prayer hall*, *cells in caves*, *water cisterns*, *pillars*, *halls*, *Mantapai* i.e. *porch*, *Lattice windows*, *Monastery*,

refectory, wells, Lake, reception halls etc.

Buddhism in western India received generous support from the rich Yavanas, who came here in pursuance of their trade. Some of their gifts in form of rock cut monuments are still visible in this region. Dhavlikar opines that, "a good number of the Yavanas probably came to western India in wake of the Kshatrapa invasion in the first decade of the second century A.D. Of course, there is no doubt that some of the Yavanas were here right from a very early period from the days of Emperor Asoka, who had appointed Yavana Dharmarakhita for propagating Buddhism in Aparanta i.e. coastal part of present Maharashtra State. This would suggest that there was a sizeable Yavana population in Maharashtra since the time of Emperor Ashoka. Besides, there was a marked influx in the latter half of the first century A.D." (Dhavlikar, M. K., *Late Hinayana Caves of Western India*, p. 12)

3. The Yavana Patrons of rock architecture

The accepted fact is that many Yavanas were here during this period as is attested by their munificent grants recorded in form of inscriptions. Epigraphic records from the excavated sites at **Karla, Nasik** and **Junnar** throw some light on the Yavana donors and their donations to the Buddhist establishments in western India. Besides, it appears that there were Yavana artists who may also have been working here. The **Persepolitan** (Greek) capitals, surmounted by adorned lions on the free standing **dhavaja Stambhas** (or the flag pillars) at Karle, presence of such motif as **Triskelion, Sphinxes, Centaur** etc. may be considered as an indication of the influence of Greek art. Thus, the idea of excavating a rock surface may have begun independently and incorporated Greco-Roman ideas brought in by traders at least in the form of some of the monuments in western India.

The most popular early form of the Stupa (dome structure) shrines was upsidal found at Bhaja and practically most of the sites of western India. This form has some resemblances to the European basilicas and it has been assumed that the inspiration for this form came from the Yavana traders, many of whom are mentioned by the name as donor.

There were many Yavana donors at Karle, Nasik and Junnar. The Sphinxes at these sites owe their existence due to the Yavana donors and were carved probably by the Yavanas. The Yavanadonors of western Indian Cave architecture are as follows:

3.1.1 Yavana donors from Junnar group of caves

Junnar in Pune District of Maharashtra is presently a small town, located on the south bank of river Kukadi and is surrounded by hills. There are in all 324 excavations in rocks of which 10 are Chaityagrihas, 174 Viharas and other chambers, 115 cisterns and the remaining unfinished excavations. Majority of Junnar caves owed their existence to the lay community of merchants and other occupational groups. Its occupational capacity could have been 200-300 monks and nuns.

Junnar was an important urban centre in the early centuries of the Christian era. During the Satavahana Period, Junnar was a very important trading centre and it is therefore highly likely that it also had a sizeable population of the Yavanas i.e. The Greeks, Romans, Shakas, and Parthians. Below is given the data of the donors from Junnar group of caves and their donations (refer Table no.1):

Table 1.
Yavana donors from Junnar group of caves

Sr No.	Name of the Yavana Donor	Designation Recorded in the Inscription	Date of the donation (Circa, on paleographic background)	Donation	Place of Residence	Source
1	Chanda	A Yavana	60 B.C.E.	Gabhadara	Not Mentioned	Luders Apendix, E.I., Vol.X, No.1156
2	Irila	A Yavana	230 C.E.	2 Podhiyo (2 cisterns)	Gata or Garta Country.	Luders Apendix, E.I., Vol.X, No.1154
3	Chita	A Yavana	280 C.E.	Bhojanamantapa (A dining Hall)	Gata or Garta Country	Luders Apendix, E.I., Vol.X, No.1156

Junnar lost its importance after the downfall of the Satavahanas and there was no architectural activity worth the name after the 3rd Century A.D. (Dhavlikar, op. cit., 1984, p. 12) They are all Theravada establishments and represent the excavation activity expanding over 200 years (Gokhale B. G., Buddhism in Maharashtra, 1976, P. 46).

3.1.2 Yavana donors from Nasik group of caves

Nasik has occupied an ideal geographic position. It is an important pilgrimage centre on the banks of river Godavari in western India. Nasik had linkage though Thalghat with important sea ports on the western coast viz. Kalyan Sopara and Bharukachcha. It had continuous communication with north India (Gokhale Shobhana, 2005 'The Significance of Nomenclature of The Buddhist Caves at Nasik' *Journal of the Epigraphic Society of India*, Vol. XXXI, , PP 9-19). Nasik was one of the important centres of Hinayana Buddhism in western India.

There is the group of 24 caves at Nasik locally known as Pandavlenas. The possible occupational capacity here could be about 100 at peak period (Gokhale B. G., op. cit. P. 46). These caves are very significant for the study of early rock cut architecture in western India.

Certain donations made by Yavana Indragnidatta who hailed from **Dattamitri** in the North are worth mentioning. The Epigraphic record mentions his father's name Dharmadeva and son Dharmarakhita. We have an example of the renaming of **Patalas Demitrias** (Thosar, H., S., 2004, *Historical Geography of Maharashtra and Goa*, p. 72) after its conquest by Demitrias the Bactrian Greek ruler, which is mentioned in its Sanskritised form as Dattamitri in this Nasik inscription. Some other inscriptions at Nasik record the gifts of the Shakas who were also the foreigners and made their donations to the Buddhist establishments at Nasik and Kanheri.

Table 2.

Yavana donors from Nasik group of caves

Sr No.	Name of the Yavana Donor	Designation Recorded in the Inscription	Date of the donation (Circa, on paleographic background)	Donation	Place of Residence	Source
1	Indragnidatta along with his father Dhammadev and son Dhammarakhita	A Yavana	120 C.E.	Lena (A Cave), Podhio (A Cistern), A Chaityagriha (congregation Hall)	Dattamitri	Luders Appendix, E.I., Vol.X, No.1140
2	Lekhak Damchik Budhik	A Shaka, writer by Profession		A water Cistern		Luders Appendix, E.I., Vol.X, No.1140

3.1.3 Yavana donors from Karle group of caves

The Site of Karle caves was located on ancient trade route and played a vital role in trade and commerce and also in preaching the Buddhist ideas in this region. Karle had a larger Buddhist community, began its career in middle of the first century A.D. It has one of the finest Chaityagrihas in western India, created between C. E. 50-70.

Buddhist establishment at Karle also received generous donations from a variety of sources. Among the foreign donors, mention may be made of the Yavanas. Since most of the Yavana donors at Karle mention **Dhenukakataka** as their place of residence. Dhenukakataka is identified variously by scholars. Its identification with Dharanikota in Andhra Pradesh by Bhandarkar, Deulwada near Karle caves by D.D. Kosambi, its location is suggested somewhere in Maval area of Pune district by M. N. Deshpande. However, recently Thosar, op. cit. p. 72) has identified this place with Junnar, which was the royal seat of the early Satavahana rulers. His statement is convincing and he suggests, that excavations at Junnar have yielded much antiquarian remains of the early centuries of the Christian era and having its proximity to Naneghat

pass through which passed the main artery of the export trade of the Satavahanaperiod with the Roman Empire. It is obvious that the Yavana traders from Dhenukataka were from the city of Junnar, where they must have had their residential colony and were engaged in mercantile activities.

Table 3.

Yavana donors from Karlegroup of caves

Sr No.	Name of the Yavana Donor	Designation Recorded in the Inscription	Date of the donation (Circa, on paleographic background)	Donation	Place of Residence	Source
1	Sinhadhaya	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Dhenukataka	E.I. Vol.VII, No. 7.
2	Dhamma	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Dhenukataka	E.I. Vol.VII, No. 10.
3	Vitasangata	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Umehankatakata	E.I. Vol.XVIII, No. 01.
4	Dhammadhaya	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Dhenukataka	E.I. Vol.XVIII, No. 04
5	Chulayakha	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Dhenukataka	E.I. Vol.XVIII, No. 06
6	Yasavadhana	A Yavana	50 A.D.	Thambho i.e. A Pillar	Dhenukataka	E.I. Vol.XVIII, No. 07.

3.1.4 influence of Greco- Roman art on Cave architecture

Influence of the Greco-Roman art on the west Indian cave architecture has been observed as follows:

- The Chaitya at Bedsa shows an elaborate façade fronted with pillars and pilasters, often described as '**Persepolitan**' surmounted by spirited sculpture—human and animal.
- The ornamental façade of the Pandu-lena at Nasik is two storied show the **Persepolitan pillars** flanking the arch opening.
- The magnificent Chaitya at Karle is the largest and most evolved of series marking the culmination of Hinayana rock architecture. In front of the entrance, there are two free standing Pillars with **Perseolitan capitals**, surmounted by adorsed lions.
- Other pillars at Karle which separate central nave from aisles also have **Persepolitan capitals**, with abacus carrying beautiful pairs of kneeling elephants.
- In front of a Chaitya at Kanheri there are lion pillars, not free standing as at Karle, but attached to the rock.

Thus, the Indo Greek trade, and the traders, their colonies in western India and their contribution for the cause of the rock cut architecture is attested by the archaeological evidences and the epigraphic data.

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