

# Śaiva-Buddhist encounters in the living rock: evidence from the Western Deccan

Pia Brancaccio  
*Università di Napoli L'Orientale*

In Lucas den Boer and Florinda De Simini (eds), *Śaiva-Buddhist Encounters in Medieval India. Studies on the History of Śaivism* 5. Napoli: UniorPress, 2025, pp. 75–99. DOI 10.6093/978-88-6719-323-3

## 1. Śaivism and Buddhism in Sopara: An early encounter

The early encounters between Buddhism and Śaivism in the Western Deccan are an engaging chapter in the region's religious and cultural history. The present contribution aims to shed light on the early interactions between Śaivism and Buddhism in Maharashtra by re-examining the archaeological remains from the area, in conjunction with relevant epigraphic and textual sources. From this, a complex religious landscape emerges, where the interactions between these two major religious movements were marked by periods of coexistence, competition, and mutual exchange.

The artistic and religious interplay between Buddhism and Śaivism is best exemplified in the sculptural and architectural evidence of the sixth century ce from Aurangabad and Ellora, discussed later in this article. However, the presence of both religious traditions in the region well predates this period, with evidence of initial encounters dating back to the early historic period. A fragment of the Ashokan Rock Edict no. IX uncovered in the ancient port of Sopara in Konkan (modern Nala Sopara, Palghar district, Maharashtra) implies that the area was already an important religious hub for non-Buddhist communities in the Maurya period (Falk 2006, 136–138). The text of the edict, of which only a few words are preserved in the Sopara fragment, encourages the practice of Dhamma over a variety of non-Buddhist religious ceremonies performed for birth, marriages, funerals, women's rites, etc., clearly an indication of the deep roots of the Brahmanical traditions in the area. The Pali Theravaṃsa tradition from the fourth to the fifth century links the introduction of Buddhism in the Western Deccan to the zeal of King Aśoka.<sup>1</sup> According to this textual tradition, at the time of the Maurya ruler, the missionary Yonaka Dhammarakkhita, likely a monk of North-Western origin given his Yavana ('Westerner') appellative, was sent to spread Buddhism to the region of Aparanta, which included the coast of southern Gujarat and Konkan, while the monk Mahādhammarakkhita was sent to Mahārāṭṭha or Maharashtra, an area encompassing the West of the Sahyadri range, or the Western Deccan plateau region.

The text of the Pūrṇāvadāna from the Divyāvadāna circulating around the second century ce offers a vivid picture of the spread of Buddhism in coastal Konkan and its first encounter with the Śaiva tradition. The story recounts the deeds of Pūrṇa, a merchant from the harbour town of Sopara (Surpāraka) in Konkan involved in remunerative sandalwood trade and shipping enterprises across the Indian Ocean, who converted to Buddhism. In this story that became widely popular throughout the Buddhist world<sup>2</sup> Pūrṇa was the main engine behind a legendary visit of the Buddha to Sopara, which firmly established Buddhism in the region by converting huge numbers of followers. This alleged trip of the Buddha also led to the enshrinement of his hair and nail relics in a stupa. An ancient brick stupa of monumental proportions still stands today in the modern town of Nala Sopara; in its dome was uncovered a remarkably rich relic deposit at the end of the nineteenth century (Indraji 1882, 274–282).

The religious landscape of the area before the advent of Buddhism remains unclear. The Sanskrit version of the text recounts a story in which the merchant Bhavila, with his fellow merchants, ventured to the Yellow Sandalwood Forest to procure fine wood for trade:

At that time, the Yellow Sandalwood Forest was under the protection of the Ogre (yakṣa) Maheśvara, but he was away attending the Ogre (yakṣa) Assembly. Then, five hundred axes began cutting down [the trees] in the Yellow Sandalwood Forest. An ogre (yakṣa) named Apriya ('Inimical'), seeing these five hundred axes cutting down [the trees] in the Yellow Sandalwood Forest, betook himself to the ogre (yakṣa) Maheśvara. Approaching the Ogre (yakṣa) Maheśvara, he said this to him: 'The General should know that five hundred axes are cutting down the trees in the Yellow Sandalwood Forest. Do what you need to do. Do what you need to do, Sir; do what must be done.' Enraged, the Ogre (yakṣa) Maheśvara dissolved the Ogre (yakṣa) Assembly, produced an enormous and fearsome hurricane, and set out for the Yellow Sandalwood Forest. (Tatelman 2001, 65)

The narrative unfolds with the revelation that, during the storm caused by the Yakṣa Maheśvara, all the merchants accompanying Bhavila invoked various gods for protection. However, Pūrṇa played the role of the *deus ex machina* and, being informed by a goddess about the dangerous situation confronting Bhavila and his fellow merchants, he promptly intervened:

Then the Venerable Pūrṇa entered into a meditation such that, as soon as his mind was fully concentrated, he vanished from Śroṇāparāntaka and appeared in the great ocean, seated cross-legged in meditation, on the gunwale of his brother's ship. Then that hurricane turned back just as if repelled by Mount Sumeru. At that, the ogre (yakṣa) Maheśvara reflected, 'In the past, any ship touched by that hurricane capsized and broke apart like so many cotton-tufts! Now, through what yoga has the hurricane turned back as if repelled by Mount Sumeru?' (Tatelman 2001, 66)

Subsequently, in the text, a confrontation unfolds between Pūrṇa and Maheśvara, who asserts himself as the guardian of the sandalwood forest designated for the use of a universal king or cakravartin. The exchange between the two ends with Pūrṇa declaring to Maheśvara that someone surpassing a universal king has appeared in the world, and that is the Tathāgata (Tatelman 2001, 67).

This passage highlights a remarkable early encounter between Buddhism and Śaivism taking place in the wilderness, an area inhabited by tribal communities who worshipped local deities and were engaged in rituals possibly linked to early Śaiva tradition. The hinterland beyond the coastal belt and the Western Ghats was also a densely forested area rich in natural resources that were crucial for commercial ventures, including the prized sandalwood highlighted as a trading commodity in the Pūrṇāvadāna. It is likely that such an encounter between Buddhist and Śaiva traditions also took place in the area where Pūrṇa's story was set, a region where mercantile and urban communities aligned with Buddhism to assert control over the forest, the domain of the god Maheśvara and his adherents. The forest also served as a meeting ground for ascetics following various religious paths.

There is evidence that, in the Konkan jungle, after the beginning of the Common Era, Buddhists established their retreats in locations occupied by Śaiva ascetics. The site of Padaṇa Hill, identified in the late nineteenth century by Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji circa six miles away from the Buddhist caves of Kanheri, may have been one such location (Indraji 1882, 45). This hill housed a natural cave along with eleven inscriptions and emblems carved into the living rock, providing evidence of a multireligious use of the site. Tsukamoto identifies the locality of Padaṇa as a hill site overlooking the paddy fields close to the Goregaon station in the Mumbai suburban area, in the vicinity of the abandoned village of Kuri, where there was a shrine known as Padal (Tsukamoto 1996, 510). The eleven markings scattered atop the hill, now no longer in existence but meticulously documented by Indraji, include bovine hoofmarks, a cakṛa, padas of varying sizes, a conch shell, and a trident (Indraji 1882, 45–56). Notably, one set of oversized padas, designated as 7a and 7b by Indraji, is described as if representing a stride or a leap towards the edge of the cliff. Among the eleven inscriptions catalogued at the site (labelled from A to K by Indraji), only a couple are associated with figurative symbols. These concise

inscriptions refer to the location as a retreat for ascetics and the abode of siddhas. Notably, inscriptions A and B, dated to the first century ce, refer to the 'Western ārāma on the Vāsāka mountain,' likely the ancient name of the hill, and the 'Eastern ārāma of Kausikeya.' The remaining epigraphs commemorate ascetics who must have practiced there. Three distinct inscriptions refer to an ascetic named Musala (Indraji 1882, 51–52, inscriptions nos. E, F, and I; Tsukamoto 1996, 511, inscriptions nos. 5, 6, and 9), clearly memorialising a prominent practitioner at the site. Inscription E, reading 'Siddha Musala,' was dated to the first century ce on palaeographic grounds. It was placed in front of the back foot of the striding set of footprints identified by Indraji. Inscription I, reading 'Musala,' is positioned just below the symbol of the trident and is dated by Indraji to the second to third century ce, along with the third inscription labelled as F, which reads 'Musaladatta' and likely commemorates the same figure (Indraji 1882, 52). The names referred to in the Padaṇa Hill inscriptions suggest that the scenario narrated in the Pūrṇāvadāna may have captured the historical reality of a Śaiva-Buddhist encounter that took place in the region in the centuries following the beginning of the common era. Remarkably, Kauśikeya and Musala are both names found in the Pāśupata lineage where they are recorded as pupils of Lakulīśa, and, according to Bisschop, they may have been the founders of two different early lines of transmission within Pāśupata lineages.<sup>3</sup> The existence of a natural cave in the proximity of the inscriptions would support the identification of Padaṇa Hill as a Pāśupata locale, as the guhā is singled out as an ideal location for sādhakas in the 'third stage' of the Pāśupata practice (Hara 2002, 129 and 205). The cow emblems carved in proximity to ascetics' names could also be interpreted as a reference to the bull vow undertaken by Pāśupatas. In the text of the Gaṇakārikā, linked to the Pāśupata tradition, it is clearly stated that one of the 'powers' to be achieved by the practitioners is the inclusion in the category of cattle—or being cattle.<sup>4</sup> The bull is central to this ascetic practice, as also shown by a passage of the Pāśupata vow in the Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 40 (Griffith and Bisschop 2003, 328).

The epigraphs on Padaṇa Hill have been dated to the early centuries of the current era, suggesting that the Western Deccan region played a key role in the development of early Śaivism. It is noteworthy that in the vicinity of Padaṇa Hill, merely 7 miles away at Kanheri, Buddhist monks established an impressive rock-cut monastery when Padaṇa Hill was still a major ascetic retreat, as attested by inscriptions dating to the beginning of the Common Era documented at both sites. The Kanhasela/Kṛṣṇagiri Buddhist vihāra, noted for its enduring ascetic features, became one of the foremost Buddhist monastic centres in the Western Deccan (Brancaccio 2022). Buddhist practitioners were also engaging in activities on Padaṇa Hill, as shown by the incision of early multivalent symbols that had meaning in a Buddhist context, such as the cakṛa, and by the pratītyasamutpāda formula. This situates the dynamic interplay between Buddhist and Śaiva practices precisely in the religious landscape of early Konkan.

It should be noted that the name of the ascetic Musala, recorded three times in inscriptions on Padaṇa Hill, is also mentioned in the Pūrṇāvadāna. A passage in this story recounts how, before entering the city of Sopara, the Buddha visited Musalaka Hill, named after the ascetic Musala. At that time, the hermit Vakkalin (bark-wearer) resided there and, upon seeing the Buddha, he purportedly jumped off the cliff of the hill. The Buddha intervened, saving him, and imparted to him the teachings of the Dharma. According to the avadāna, Vakkalin then became a monk and joined the Buddha in his visit to Sopara (Bisschop 2006, 45–47). Indraji noted the homonymy between the siddha in the Padaṇa inscription and the location mentioned in the Pūrṇāvadāna. He proposed that the Musalaka hill of the Pūrṇa story was none other than Padaṇa Hill. He also suggested that the striding footmarks engraved in the rock of the hill identified as 7a and 7b, possibly memorialised the sage Musala who leapt over the cliff in an act of extreme asceticism, as Vakkali did in the Pūrṇāvadāna (Indraji 1882, 54). Remarkably, a reference to this type of extreme ascetic action occurs in the Skandapurāṇa, where the bhr̥ guṇapātana, possibly alluding to the jump off a cliff, is described as a practice undertaken at the Hariścandra

mountain, near the ascetic grove (*tapovana*) of Puriscandra dedicated to Maheśvara, where Pāśupata Śaivas engaged in ascetic exercises. Peter Bisschop suggests the identification of Hariścandra with a homonym mountain of the Sahyadri situated near Shivneri in Junnar, Maharashtra, a location in the Western Deccan where many Buddhist caves were excavated in the first century bce (Bisschop 2006, 203, fn. 107a).

Upon analysing such fragmentary evidence from early textual and epigraphic sources, it seems reasonable to propose that there existed an early Śaiva presence in the Konkan and in the Sahyadri mountains of the Western Deccan before the advent of Buddhism. In the *Skandapurāṇa*, the ‘Sahya’ mountains marked the southern limit of the Śaiva Pāśupata tradition (Cecil 2020, 161–162). The Śaiva presence in this region appears to have been deeply rooted in forest cults and ascetic practices. At the beginning of the common era, when Buddhism gained prominence, it overshadowed the local religious substratum. The rise of Buddhism, embraced by mercantile elites, urban communities, and settlers, marked an attempt to assert control over forested land in the region, exploit natural resources, and eventually foster rural development.

## 2. Śaivism in the Western Deccan in the sixth century

The early religious milieu associated with Śaivism experienced a resurgence in visibility during the sixth century, a period when only a few Buddhist establishments continued to expand their physical footprints. This century was a time of significant political transformation in the Konkan and the Western Deccan, witnessing the emergence of new power structures aligning with the feudal society of the early medieval period. Mirashi (1955) and Spink (1968) argue that, in the sixth century, the early Kalacuri ruler Kṛṣṇarāja I assumed control of the coastal region of Konkan from the Traikūṭakas, who were previously in the area. Mirashi maintains that the predecessor of Kṛṣṇarāja I played a key role in expanding the early Kalacuri influence from Malwa to the Konkan coast, significantly enlarging the dynasty's power base. The first three early Kalacuri rulers are all described in copperplate grants as devout of Maheśvara (parama-māheśvara). The Abhona plates, where an envoy appears with the appellation of Pāśupata, affirm the Kalacuri ruler Śaṅkaragaṇa's adherence to the Śaiva faith as well as the Pāśupata devotion practiced by his father Kṛṣṇarāja I (Mirashi 1955, 42–43). In the later Vadner plates, Buddharāja's consort is also identified as a Pāśupata. The ubiquitous image of a bull on early Kalacuri coins issued by Kṛṣṇarāja and Śaṅkaragaṇa seems to corroborate the Pāśupata affiliation of the rulers, as the bull is a key emblem in the Śaiva doctrine. Early icons of the founder of the Pāśupata practice, Lakulīśa, can also be found in caves excavated in the region in the sixth century. They can be seen at Elephanta and Jogeshwari, in the coastal region of Konkan near the ancient port of Sopara, and at the Ellora caves situated on the upper plateau in the Aurangabad district.<sup>5</sup> Establishing a precise chronological horizon for the introduction of the cult of Lakulīśa as the founder of the Pāśupata sect and incarnation of Śiva, both in this region and beyond, remains a challenging task. Nonetheless, Bisschop asserts that the earliest mentions of Lakulīśa as an incarnation of Śiva can be found in the Skandapurāṇa, dating roughly to this period (Bisschop 2006, 46). The extent of the early Kalacuri sphere of influence, whether attempted or achieved, is reflected in the geographical distribution of the copper plate grants associated with this dynastic lineage. The Abhona plates of Śaṅkaragaṇa and the Vadner plates of Buddharāja were discovered in the Nasik district, the Sankheda plates of Śaṅkaragaṇa were found in Sankhed in the Baroda district, the Sarsavni plates of Buddharāja were also from the Baroda district, and the Nagardhan plates were uncovered near Ramtek in the Nagpur district. This suggests that the early Kalacuris held influence from the Western Ghats to Southern Gujarat and parts of Vidarbha, the former homeland of the Vākāṭaka, an area marked by substantial patronage of Śaiva religious establishments (Mirashi 1955, 38–56, and xlvii). The Sarsavni plates, issued by King Buddharāja and his Vadner plates, both dated by Mirashi to 610, mention land gifts near Bharuch and Nasik. This suggests that the Kalacuris firmly controlled these key areas: Bharuch, which was a major port at the mouth of the Narmada, and Nasik, a major pass on the Western Ghats. Numismatic evidence associated with the early Kalacuris also affirms their expansive reach. Silver coins issued by Kṛṣṇarāja have been discovered in Gujarat, in the Nasik district and the Mumbai area, and most notably on the island of Elephanta. These findings imply that, akin to their predecessors, the early Kalacuris sought control over coastal harbour areas, the ghats, as well as inland production zones to fully plug themselves into the flourishing Indian Ocean trade of that era (Mirashi 1955, xliii).

The borders of the early Kalacuri domain appear to seamlessly correlate with geological maps tracing locations of outcrops of native copper and other copper minerals in the Deccan Traps (Alexander and Thomas 2011). The unprecedented quantity of copper coins issued by the early Kalacuris can possibly be explained by a newfound access to copper ores situated in the Western Deccan and the Narmada area. Kosmas Indicopleustes, whose work touches on Indian Ocean trade around 550 ce, identifies southern Gujarat and the port of Kalyan in Kalyan, near which some of the most significant sixth-century Śaiva caves are situated, as pivotal commercial centres. He notes that copper was at that time a major export from Kalyan, marking a

significant departure from earlier Indian Ocean trading records like the *Peryplus* of the Erytheran Sea, dating to the first century ce, which mentioned the import of metal into India rather than vice versa.<sup>6</sup> The pursuit of wealth, power, and political affirmation by a royal household often finds expression in monumental art. The great caves at Elephanta, Jogeshwari, and Ellora 29, respectively, stand as some of the most impressive rock-cut structures ever attempted from the coastal region of Konkan to the westernmost edge of the Sahyadri. They are all dedicated to Śiva and bear images of Lakulīśa as a statement of their possible Pāśupata affiliation.<sup>7</sup> While there are no inscriptions that directly connect the Kalacuri kings to the patronage of these excavations, the unprecedented scale of these rock-cut temples, which implies the use of tremendous financial resources and access to manpower and functions as a powerful statement of authority, is surely an indication that their patrons were allied with the Śaiva ruling elites. The Śaiva sculptures at Elephanta and Ellora 29, with their distinctive fluid lines and mannered forms, also usher in a new artistic style that marks a departure from earlier idioms attested at Buddhist sites nearby like Kanheri or Ajanta. In particular, the distinct sculptural style of the Elephanta caves appears to exhibit close connections with the Śaiva sculptures from the area of Mandisor in Madhya Pradesh, and particularly Khilchipura. The Mandisor region was a major centre for Śaiva Pāśupata practice, and the Śaiva images from Khilchipura have been linked to the patronage of the local Aulikara rulers who came to be involved in direct conflict with the Kalacuris under Śaṅkaragaṇa, at the end of the sixth century (Balogh 2019, 32, and Fig. 4). The early Kalacuris, whose presence is attested in all of the areas mentioned above, may have had a role in recruiting sculptors and transferring highly accomplished talents from the Mandisor area to the Konkan and Aurangabad region to work on new powerful monuments, creating an artistic connection between these two areas. In antiquity, artists and craftsmen often moved following favourable patronage,<sup>8</sup> and the early Kalacuris seem to have acted as catalysts for the artistic renaissance seen in the Konkan and the Western Deccan caves in the sixth century. They may have enabled the spread of both a new artistic style and the Śaiva ideology it embodied.

The proximity of the monumental Śaiva caves to active Buddhist sites in the sixth century was a factor that contributed to the dynamic interplay between the Buddhist and Śaiva communities. Whether this interaction was driven by competition, reciprocal adaptation, or fertile exchange is hard to determine. For example, the island of Elephanta, where the Śaivas commissioned the excavations of the Great Cave and related units, was already the location of a large Buddhist brick stupa.<sup>9</sup> The Śaiva cave at Mandapeshwar was carved into a low hill situated only about 5 km away from the major Buddhist rock-cut monastery at Kanheri, while the Jogeshwari cave was only 4 km away from the Buddhist caves at Kondivte. On the upper plateau, in the Aurangabad region, when the Ellora Śaiva caves 21 and 29 were established, the Buddhist caves at Aurangabad, situated about 30 km away, were also active and in expansion.

### 3. The caves of Ellora 21 and Aurangabad 2: A case study of shared Śaiva-Buddhist visual idioms

Ellora cave 21, known as Rameśvara, is considered one of the early Śaiva units at Ellora dating to the sixth century. This chronology is supported by the discovery of an early Kalacuri coin issued by Kṛṣṇarāja I in the cave's courtyard (Sen Gupta 1960). The cave interior has a square plan identical to the east wing of the Great Cave at Elephanta, featuring a circumambulatory path around a square liṅga shrine guarded by two imposing dvārapālas (Fig. 1). Within the main hall and the two side chapels of the cave, large sculptural panels depicting Śiva are prominently carved. The pillars in the cave appear to be elaborate versions of the type found at Elephanta and Ellora 29 (Spink 1968), while the Nandi on a pedestal in the courtyard of the cave portrays Śiva's bull just like the Kalacuri coins issued by Kṛṣṇarāja I (Fig. 2).

*[Fig. 1: Ellora cave 21, interior — image not reproduced]*

In the numismatic issues by this ruler, Śiva's bull is represented on a pedestal as in Ellora 21, and in one instance numismatists have interpreted the designs appearing below the effigy of the bull as symbolic depictions of the Śaiva caves.<sup>10</sup> In Ellora cave 21 the Nandi pedestal showcases on its front a female image depicted with squatting legs which has been identified as an icon of the goddess Lajjā Gaurī (Fig. 3), an image that also appears several times in the votive panels carved on the walls of Aurangabad cave 2, where the squatting goddess is situated within a Buddhist visual framework (Fig. 4).<sup>11</sup> Ellora cave 21 is among the earliest cluster of caves around the waterfall area and was probably a Pāśupata cave: a small image of Lakulīśa is carved at the centre of the porch lintel (Fig. 5).<sup>12</sup> The image depicts the haloed Pāśupata master with an ascetic hairdo, seated in meditation holding a staff in his right hand with his left resting on the hip. He is flanked by two kneeling disciples and from behind him two dwarfish figures with raised hands seem to emerge. Further, the Kalacuri king Kṛṣṇarāja, whose coin was found at the cave, was himself a Pāśupata, as epigraphic evidence attests (Mirashi 1955, 42–43). The Pāśupatas, who incorporated paradoxical practices in their spiritual exercises, preferably practiced asceticism 'at a sanctuary of Mahādeva, in the vicinity of water, in cave temples' as related in Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 40 and in the foundational texts for the Pāśupata observance (Bisschop and Griffith 2003, 326).

*[Fig. 2: Ellora cave 21, courtyard with Nandi sculpture — image not reproduced]*

*[Fig. 3: Ellora cave 21, courtyard, Lajjā Gaurī on Nandi pedestal — image not reproduced]*

In a Śaiva-dominated context, the rock-cut site of Aurangabad was the only Buddhist cave establishment that underwent significant expansion in the sixth century. Situated on the hills overlooking the modern city near the Bibi-qa-Maqbara, the Aurangabad caves nos. 2, 5, 6, and 7 were created around the same time as Ellora 29, 21, and the Great Cave at Elephanta, displaying major artistic and architectural connections with these Śaiva monuments (Brancaccio 2011). While it's possible that some artists worked at both sites, commonalities between these monuments extend beyond artistic styles and reveal shared conceptions of sacred spaces, iconographies, and fruition of the divine.

### 3.1 The central shrine

A comparative analysis of Ellora cave 21 plan (Fig. 6) and caves nos. 2, 5, 6, and 7 at Aurangabad (Figs 7a and 7b) shows how Śaiva architectural solutions were adapted to suit Buddhist contexts, and vice versa. The sixth-century Buddhist caves at Aurangabad depart from traditional models of vihāras and chaitya halls, prevalent at earlier rock-cut monasteries in the region, and instead develop a new plan with a central gandhakuṭī surrounded by a corridor for circumambulation almost as if it were a liṅga shrine. Aurangabad cave 2 was probably the first unit at Aurangabad— and elsewhere in the Western Deccan, for that matter—to adopt such a design in a Buddhist context. Nestled within the limited rock space on the cliff between the earlier caves 1 and 3, Aurangabad 2 is a compact and modest structure. Featuring a straightforward square layout, it includes a central sanctum positioned along the cave’s ‘axis of access’ guarded by two imposing Bodhisattvas and surrounded by a circumambulatory path.<sup>13</sup> The walls of the pradakṣiṇapatha at Aurangabad 2 appear to have been intentionally left bare to serve as a ‘canvas’ for the sculpted images of Buddhist triads gifted by individual donors (Fig. 8).<sup>14</sup> It is tempting to read this new and ground-breaking Buddhist architectural plan featuring a square cave with central sanctum as a regional borrowing from the Śaiva caves affiliated with the Pāśupatas. In these caves, the design emphasis placed on the central liṅga shrine may have highlighted the relevance of circumambulation as a central religious practice aligned with the fourth vow in the Pāśupata vidhi (Choubey 1997, 107). The presence of monumental dvārapālas by the door is also a feature shared by sixth-century Śaiva and Buddhist shrines alike. The two imposing Bodhisattvas carved at the entrance of the Aurangabad cave 2 shrine (Fig. 9) serve as the visual and functional equivalent to the monumental dvārapālas guarding the Śiva liṅga shrine in Ellora cave 21 and 29. However, in this specific instance, we may be confronted with evidence of formal Śaiva borrowing from the Buddhist context. At the nearby Ajanta caves, already at the end of the fifth century, imposing Bodhisattva figures were painted on the walls guarding the access to the cave 1 shrine. In Aurangabad cave 2, both Bodhisattvas-dvārapālas hold a lotus standard with a seated Buddha on it, a feature that may recall the standards carried by the belligerent elites of the time; the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara on the left side of the doorway as one enters, holds a rope tightly in his right hand.

[Fig. 4: Aurangabad cave 2, interior, votive panel with Lajjā Gaurī — image not reproduced]

[Fig. 5: Ellora cave 21, image of Lakuliśa on lintel — image not reproduced]

[Fig. 6: Ellora cave 21, plan — image not reproduced]

This icon is perhaps the first ever depiction of Avalokiteśvara holding a rope or pāśa, an attribute often associated with restraint and captivity that may allude to the salvation offered by Avalokiteśvara, the liberator from spiritual captivity and the saviour from the ‘eight great dangers’ as represented in the porch of the nearby cave 7 at Aurangabad. The rope as an attribute of Avalokiteśvara became standardised in later tantric iconography associated with a form of the Bodhisattva known as Lokeśvara-Amoghapāśa.<sup>15</sup> It would be tempting, however, to read the unprecedented introduction of Avalokiteśvara’s pāśa at Aurangabad cave 2 as another feature of the shared Śaiva/Buddhist milieu of the region. Paśu (lit. ‘cattle’; here ‘the bound soul’) is a term associated with Rudra/Śiva as Paśupati (‘master of the bounded soul’), who delivered the Pāśupata observance; in the third chapter of the Skandapurāṇa, the god Śiva is identified as the one seeking ‘the welfare of all embodied beings entangled by the noose of worldly existence.’<sup>16</sup> The early cult of Avalokiteśvara seems to exhibit patterns consistent with the characteristics of Śiva; for example, Studholme, who investigated the connections between Avalokiteśvara’s six-syllable mantra Om Maṇipadme Hūṃ and the Om Namaḥ Śivāya mantra, argues that the Bodhisattva has the characteristics of a Buddhist īśvara.<sup>17</sup> Passages in the Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra dedicated to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara appear to have been developed from Śaiva traditions<sup>18</sup> roughly around the time when the Aurangabad caves iconography was

formulated. As shown by Peter Bisschop, a doctrinal verse about the worship of the liṅga quoted in Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra has its origins precisely in the Śivadharmasāstra (Bisschop 2018, 401).

[Figs 7a and 7b: Aurangabad caves, plans — image not reproduced]

[Fig. 8: Aurangabad cave 2, interior, votive panels — image not reproduced]

[Fig. 9: Aurangabad cave 2, Bodhisattva-dvārapāla with a rope — image not reproduced]

### 3.2 Lakulīśa and the Buddha on the lotus

Finally, perhaps the most remarkable case of regional Buddhist/Śaiva ‘osmosis’ may be found in the iconography of Lakulīśa, the founder of the Pāśupata sect. Aside from the small relief depicting Lakulīśa on the lintel of Ellora 21 (Fig. 5),<sup>19</sup> the very first large-scale Lakulīśa image in the region appears in Ellora cave 29 (Fig. 10), another early Kalacuri cave. In Ellora 29 the Pāśupata teacher is depicted with an ascetic hairdo, reminiscent of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. However, he wears jewellery and a Brahmanical cord across the chest. He holds a mālā in his right hand and his distinctive attribute, the staff, in his left hand. He sits with his erect phallus in dhyānāsana on a lotus flower held by nāgas and flanked by devotees. This iconography mirrors in a literal way the one recurring in votive panels seen at Aurangabad 2, among other sites, which showcase a central Buddha between two Bodhisattvas. The Buddha in the carvings is consistently depicted in a seated position, either in bhadṛāsana or dhyānamudrā, and in the teaching gesture or dhyānamudrā. Additionally, nāgas are portrayed holding the stem of the lotus flower upon which the Buddha sits or rests his feet. Sometimes devotees appear below the lotus flower, representing perhaps the panel donors. It is probable that the specific iconography of Lakulīśa in dhyānāsana on a lotus flower, an iconographic model that later became canonical in different regions of India, may have taken shape precisely at this time in the Western Deccan, modelled after the Buddhist votive panels.

[Fig. 10: Ellora cave 29, image of Lakulīśa — image not reproduced]

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the case studies discussed above suggest that the Western Deccan and the coastal region of Konkan were important centres for Śaivism since the beginning of the common era, when Buddhism became widespread in the region. At the turn of the sixth century, following the collapse of the Vākāṭaka power and its regional feudatories, the early Kalacuri rulers sought legitimacy and power by aligning themselves with Śaiva religious groups such as the Pāśupatas, which acquired new visibility in the region. This alignment led to the patronage of several Śaiva cave temples and instigated a shift in the trajectory of Buddhist art, evident in the incorporation of Śaiva elements at the sixth century Buddhist caves at Aurangabad and vice versa. At this time, the Aurangabad region emerged as a fertile ground for religious and artistic cross-pollination, with cave architecture serving as a tangible documentation of this dynamic exchange.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the Mahāvamsa and Dīpavamsa, as per Brancaccio and Ollett forth.

<sup>2</sup> Tatelman 2001 is the most thorough study conducted on the Pūrṇāvadāna and its various versions. The story of Pūrṇa and some of its segments are found in a variety of sources. The most elaborate version of Pūrṇa’s story is in the Bhaiṣajyavastu, Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1448, k. 3, 14b23–17a21. In Pāli it is found in the Puṇṇasutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya and Majjhimanikāya, while sections of it were included in the Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā and in the Paramatthadīpānī, the Theragāthā commentary.

<sup>3</sup> Bisschop 2006, 45–47. Pāśupata sources tell that the god Śiva incarnated as Lakulīśa in Karvan, a town in the modern Baroda district of Gujarat, and went to Ujjain where he initiated his first disciple Kuśika; see Bisschop and Griffiths 2003, 326. These areas of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh were historically Pāśupata strongholds. Bisschop 2006, 47 also refers to a lineage of the Pāśupatas called Mausula who supposedly followed a disciple of Lakulīśa called Musula or Musulendra.

- <sup>4</sup> Hara 2002, 173; on the govata, see Acharya 2013, 112–119.
- <sup>5</sup> On Elephanta and Ellora, see Spink 1967, 1968 and 1982; on Elephanta, see Collins 1988 and Michell 2017; on Ellora, see Malandra 1993 and Dhavalikar 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> McCrindle 1907, 366, and Casson 1989, 67, fn. 28.
- <sup>7</sup> Spink 1968 and Collins 1988.
- <sup>8</sup> There are epigraphic references in antiquity to artisans moving across different regions. In the well-known late fifth-century inscription from the guild of silk-weavers in Mandsor, it is said that these artisans moved from the region of Lāta (Southern Gujarat and north Konkan) to ancient Daśapura or Mandsor (Balogh 2019, 87–110).
- <sup>9</sup> The brick stupa, currently under excavation, was situated on the highest point on the island closer to the ancient landing point at Morbandar, where archaeological surveys have also uncovered many fragments of amphorae and torpedo jars; see Tomber et al. 2008, 128 and 166.
- <sup>10</sup> See: <https://coinindia.com/galleries-kalachuri-mahismati.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> On the iconography of Lajjā Gaurī in the Western Deccan see Bolon 1992. The image from Ellora 21 echoes the squatting goddess represented on the reverse on a copper coin issued by Kṛṣṇarāja and bearing the effigy of the bull in [https://coinindia.com/MAC509\\_3.5-345.45.jpg](https://coinindia.com/MAC509_3.5-345.45.jpg).
- <sup>12</sup> It should be noted, however, that this small image of Lakulīśa may be added to the original visual program of the porch, as the panel seems to be recut out of an ornamental floral pattern originally placed in that position. Considering the stylistic alignment of the images in the Lakulīśa panel with the rest of the figures carved on the lintel, it must have been added soon after the completion of the cave façade.
- <sup>13</sup> On the ‘axis of access’ in Hindu temples see Meister 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> In cave 2, the walls of the maṇḍapa and pradakṣiṇa today host a total of 84 carved panels, each varying in size and likely added through time by several small donors. These panels showcase a central Buddha in bhadraśana or dhyānāśana, in the teaching gesture or dhyānamudrā, seated between two Bodhisattvas. In most cases, nāgas are portrayed holding the stem of the lotus flower upon which the Buddha sits or rests his feet. Sometimes devotees appear below the lotus flower, representing perhaps the panel donors.
- <sup>15</sup> Bhattacharya 1987, 428; De Mallman 1948, 168; Donaldson 2001, 200–206; Pal 1966 and 1967.
- <sup>16</sup> Studholme 2002, 65. Some of the earliest images of Śiva on coins of the Kuṣāna rulers Huviṣka and Vāsudeva show the god with one head and two arms carrying a pāśa in his right hand and a trident in his left, as in Smith 1906, I, 74 and 84. In some cases Śiva with a pāśa is also shown as having flaming shoulders, as in Errington and Curtis 2007, 66–69.
- <sup>17</sup> Studholme 2002, chapters 2 and 3. On the relationships between Avalokiteśvara’s six-syllable mantra and the Om Namaḥ Śivāya mantra, see also De Simini 2021, 58–59.
- <sup>18</sup> The connections between the Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra and early Śaiva contexts have been explored in early scholarship and discussed by Eltschinger (2014, 81–85).
- <sup>19</sup> Cecil 2020, 218; On the possible identification of earlier images from Mathurā as representing Lakulīśa, see Bisschop 2006, 46. Perhaps the Lakulīśa image added on cave 21 was the result of a subsequent Pāśupata consecration of the cave that was not intended in the original commission.

## References

### Acharya, Diwakar

2013. “How to Behave like a Bull? New Insight into the Origin and Religious Practices of Pāśupatas.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 56 (2): 101–131.

### Alexander, Pramod & Thomas, Harel

2011. “Copper in Deccan Basalts (India): review of the abundance and patterns of distribution.” *Boletín del Instituto de Fisiografía y Geología* 79–81: 107–112.

### Balogh, Dániel

2019. *Inscriptions of the Aulikaras and their Associates*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

### Bhattacharya, Benoytosh

1987. *The Indian Buddhist Iconography Mainly Based on the Sādhanaṁālā*. Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay.

### Bisschop, Peter

2006. *Early Śaivism and the Skandapurāṇa: Sects and Centres*. Leiden: Brill.

2018. “Buddhist and Śaiva Interactions in the Kali Age: The Śivadharmasāstra as a Source of the Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra.” *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 61 (4), 396–410.

### Bisschop, Peter and Griffiths, Arlo

2003. “The Pāśupata Observance (Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 40).” *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 46 (4): 315–348.

**Bolon, Carol**

1992. *Forms of the Goddess Lajjā Gaurī in Indian Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

**Brancaccio, Pia**

2011. *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad*. Leiden: Brill.

2022. "Views from the Black Mountain: The Rock-Cut Mahāvihāra at Kānheri/Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan." In *Early Medieval Buddhist Monasteries in South Asia*, edited by A. Amar and A. Shimada and N. Morrissey, 73–88. RINDAS Working Paper Series, 34. Kyoto: Ryukoku University.

**Brancaccio, Pia and Ollett Andrew**

forthcoming. "Buddhism in Konkan." Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Leiden: Brill.

**Casson, Lionel**

1989. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Cecil, Elizabeth A.**

2020. *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Place, and the Śaiva Imaginary in Early Medieval North India*. Brill: Leiden.

**Choubey, M. C.**

1997. *Lakulīśa in Indian Art and Culture*. Delhi: Sharada Publishing House.

**Collins, Charles Dillard**

1988. *The Iconography and Ritual of Śiva at Elephanta*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**De Mallmann, Marie-Thérèse**

1948. *Introduction à l'étude d'Avalokiteśvara*. Paris: Civilisations du Sud.

**De Simini, Florinda**

2021. "The Mantra in Six Syllables of the Śivadharmā and its Place in the Early History of Śaivism." In *Śivadharmāmṛta. Essays on the Śivadharmā and its Network*, edited by Florinda de Simini and Csaba Kiss. 19–60, 311–38 (bibliography). *Studies on the History of Śaivism 2*. Napoli: UniorPress.

**Dhavalikar, Madhukar Keshav**

2003. *Ellora. Monumental Legacy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

**Donaldson, Thomas**

2001. *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*. Delhi: Abhinav.

**Errington, Elizabeth, and Curtis, Vesta**

2007. *From Persepolis to Punjab*. London: The British Museum Press.

**Eltschinger, Vincent**

2014. *Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics: Studies on the history, self-understanding and dogmatic foundations of late Indian Buddhist philosophy*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

**Falk, Harry**

2006. *Aśoka Sites and Artefacts: A Sourcebook with Bibliography*. Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.

**Hara, Minoru**

2002. *Pāśupata Studies*, edited by Jun Takashima. *Publications of the De Nobili Research Library XXX*. Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili.

**Meister, Michael**

2006. "Access and Axes of Indian Temples." *Thresholds* 32 (2006): 33–35.

**Malandra, Geri**

1993. *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist cave temples at Ellora*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**Michell, George**

2017. *Elephanta*. Mumbai: Jaco Publishing.

**Mirashi, Vasudeva Vishnu**

1955. *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era*. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 4.1. Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India.

**McCrindle, John. Watson**

1897. *The Christian Topography*. London: Hakluyt Society.

**Pal, Pratapaditya**

1966. "The Iconography of Amoghapaśa Lokeśvara—I." *Oriental Art* XII-4: 234–239.

1967. "The Iconography of Amoghapaśa Lokeśvara—II." *Oriental Art* XIII-1: 21–28.

**Sen Gupta, R.**

1960. "A Kalachuri Coin from Ellora and the Date of Rameshvara Cave." *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India* 22: 193–195.

**Smith, Vincent**

1906. *Catalog of the Coins in the Indian Museum of Calcutta*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

**Spink, Walter**

1967. "Ellora's earliest phase." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Benares* 1: 11–22.

1968. "Monuments of the Early Kalacuri Period." *Journal of Indian History* XLVI: 263–270.

1982. "The Great Cave of Elephanta: A Study of its Sources." In *Essays on Gupta Culture*, edited by B. Smith, 235–282. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

**Studholme, Alexander**

2002. *The Origins of Om Maṇipadme Hūṃ: A Study of the Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**Tatelman, Joel**

2001. *The Glorious Deeds of Pūrṇa. A Translation and Study of the Pūrṇāvadāna*. First Indian edition. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

**Tomber, Roberta**

2008. *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper*. London: Duckworth.

**Tsukamoto, Keisho**

1996. *A Comprehensive Study of the Indian Buddhist Inscriptions. Part I: Text, Notes and Japanese Translation*. Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten.

*Text set from the open-access volume (CC BY 4.0). Figures are not reproduced and pagination differs from the printed book; endnotes collect the original footnotes.*