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South Asian Religions and Visual Forms

in their Archaeological Context

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South Asian Religions and Visual Forms
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Edited by

Vincent LEFÈVRE, Aurore DIDIER and Benjamin MUTIN

BREPOLS

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REPRESENTATIONS OF *INDASALAGUHA*, ROCK-CUT MONASTERIES AND SHIFTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS BUDDHIST ASCETICISM

Pia BRANCACCIO

The Buddhist tradition has always been animated by an apparently irreconcilable tension between asceticism and its denial. The ascetic way is criticized in several Pali and Sanskrit texts, yet practices and ideologies associated with asceticism always played an important role in the Buddhist tradition. For example, the notion of “liberating knowledge” and suppression of all mental activities was something that Buddhism shared with ascetic traditions since early on (Bronkhorst 2009, 57); or it is well known that eulogies of extreme ascetics came to be central in some Mahayana texts (Boucher 2008). On the other hand, it has been remarked that in general the Buddhist *vinayas* are silent when it comes to meditation and spiritual practices undertaken by the monks and that the *Mulasarvastivada vinaya* goes so far as to vehemently ridicule forest dwellers and their austerities (Schopen 2004, 26).

So how does the archaeological and artistic evidence fit with this conflicting picture emerging from the texts? What does it tell us about the actual role played by extreme renounce in the Buddhist practice? By reconsidering the relevance and meaning of Buddhist rock-cut architecture and its representations in the visual traditions, the present paper aims at shedding light on the shifting parameters associated with Buddhist asceticism between the 2nd century BCE and 4th century CE. A brief comparative analysis of Buddhist caves, real and represented, seems to indicate that in the Gandharan tradition, more than elsewhere, Buddhist asceticism performed in caves remained significant.

Forests, mountains and caves have always been ideal places for ascetic practices. The ancient landscape of the Indian Subcontinent was studded with man-made shelters and caves. From the Northern valleys of Pakistan to central India, rock-cut structures were invested of special sacredness by their inhabitants or visitors, and became repositories of some of the earliest painted images or epigraphs (Olivieri 2012; Falk 2006). It should not be forgotten that many of the Ashokan major rock-edicts were carved in caves, rock shelters, or hills associated with caves.

Guhās or caves were especially suited for religious austerities: they were secluded and offered the necessary shelter and challenge to the practitioners. Located in the wilderness and exposed to natural dangers, they were simultaneously frightening and magical places inhabited by supernatural forces as evident from a number of references found in Buddhist and Jain sources (Granoff 2013). The renowned Lomas Rishi cave of the Maurya period is the earliest example of an elaborate man-made space used for asceticism. Donated by king Ashoka to the Ajivika order, this cave is not a natural shelter but rather an extraordinary monument crafted by skilled hands that transformed the living rock into an amazing structure. The cave has an ornate doorway replicating free standing wooden architecture and a flawless, polished interior that by altering sound and light enhances the wondrous and transformative qualities connected with caves in ancient India.

The practice of meditating in caves was not foreign to Buddhist practitioners, even if many textual sources disapprove of solitary asceticism. In the episode of the *Indasalaguha* often represented in art, the Buddha himself engages in ascetic exercises. The story narrated in the Pali

Sakkapanna suttanta (Rhys Davids 1903, 263-275), tells us that while the Buddha meditated in the Indasala cave near Rajagriha, the god Indra, also referred to as Sakka, visited him to seek answers to his forty-two questions about existence; Indra was worried about dying. He sent ahead his divine musician Pancasikha and eventually met with the Buddha, who extended his life by many cosmic cycles. This episode was related by Buddhagosa in the 5th century (Burlingame 1921, II, 80) and referenced by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang (Legge 1886, 80-81; Beal 1869, 180-181) who apparently visited this legendary cave in India but reported different locations for it. Surprisingly the *Indasalaguha* episode is absent from the major biographies of the Buddha such as the *Buddhacarita*, the *Lalitavistara*, the *Mahavastu*, the *Nidanakatha*. Juhyung Rhi, in a recent study devoted to this topic, remarks that the *Indasalaguha* story occurs a few times in the Chinese Buddhist canon as it is included in an early 5th century translation of the *Dirgha agama*, in a late 4th century translation of the *Madhyama agama* as well as in the *Zabaozangjing* translated in the mid part of the 5th century and in the *Dishisuowenjing* translated in the 11th century (Rhi 2009).

The earliest artistic depictions of the *Indasalaguha* episode can be seen at Bharhut and Bodhgaya, where the Buddha is obviously addressed in non-anthropomorphic form. The Bharhut scene was represented on a *vedika* pillar which was re-cut at a later time (*fig. 1*). In the image labelled as “*Indasalaguha*”, the wilderness and the environment are emphasized: the scene is dominated by a natural, large *guha* with a rocky floor surrounded by vivid images of wild animals and jagged boulders; because of later re-use, the image of Pancasikha with his harp to the side of the cave is partly obliterated. It seems that the Bharhut artists chose to represent a particular moment in the story, when the thirty-three gods along with Indra entered the cave; the central figure represented with the back facing the viewer is likely the god Indra himself, questioning the Buddha.

More space is dedicated to the *Indasalaguha* episode on the early *vedika* from Bodhgaya, as to suggest the relevance of this particular story in the local religious context. There are three uprights decorated with medallions in which a cave is depicted, and at least two of them can be securely identified with particular moments of the story as related in the Pali source: figure 2 highlights the opening incident as Pancasikha appears with his harp outside the cave, while figure 3 depicts the conclusive moments of the encounter between Indra and the Buddha, as the god sits by the cave, in proximity of the Indasala tree, and touches the earth with his hand as related in the end of the *Sakkapanna suttanta*. It should be remarked that significant new features can be found in association with depictions of the *Indasalaguha* at Bodhgaya: while the mountainous setting is still present, the wilderness is completely absent and the natural cave is domesticated into what resembles a man made, rock-cut structure. The presence of a *vedika* adds to the impression that we are looking at a sacred site transformed by human intervention.

In fact, as we continue our survey of the *Indasalaguha* through the first centuries of the Common Era, we witness the progressive transformation of the *guha* into a domesticated locale. At Kanganalli, for example, the wilderness is absent, and the cave definitely replicates a structure that is rock-cut with a well-designed entrance door (Aramaki and Dayal 2011, 66, no.8).¹ Even more remarkable is the *Indasalaguha* depicted at Sanci on a pillar of the north *torana*, where the scary *guha* in the wilderness is turned into an elaborate rock-cut *caitya* hall, obviously making

1. A representation of the *Indasalaguha* episode can be found in Nagarjunakonda where, aside from the rocky cave, every reference to the wilderness is eliminated (Granoff 2013, fig. 2).

reference to those cut in the basaltic rock of the Western Deccan. At Sanci (*fig. 4*) not only did the artists choose to substitute an image of a natural cave with that of a man-made rock-cut temple, but they also transformed the surrounding landscape into a very controlled environment. While the mountainous setting is still indicated by the bulky blocks of stone, nature becomes artificial and mannered: on the right we see two mythical beasts crouching amidst rocks, while on the upper left side two tamed felines pose for the viewer. There is nothing evocative of a challenging ascetic experience in this image, and one wonders whether this complete shift from *guha* to *caitya* may be the reflection of a concerted effort to domesticate and institutionalize asceticism at this time. Perhaps a quick look at some of the roughly contemporary Buddhist caves in the Western Deccan may shed light on the issue.

Beginning with the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, Buddhists established a large number of rock-cut monasteries in the wilderness, in an environment ideally suited for asceticism. Sites like Bhaja, Karle, Junnar or Ajanta, were all cut on the rugged basaltic cliffs of the plateau and they included two main types of rock-cut structures: monastic residential units and *cetiya* (*caitya*) (*caityagrhas*) or apsidal *stupa* halls for worship. Monks who used these elaborate caves in the 1st century BCE still cherished the idea of seclusion in the wilderness. For example at Bedsa, an inscription carved on the dome of a small *stupa* prominently placed next the apsidal hall reads: “The *stupa* of... Gobhuti, a hermit living in the forest [*and*] mendicant who dwelt on Marakuda [Marakuta]: caused to be made by his pupil, the devoted Asalamita [Ashadhamitra]” (Burgess repr. 1994, 89, VI. 2).

Yet there is very little evocative of untamed *guh*as or secluded asceticism in these beautiful and ornate man-made caves: the architecture is reminiscent of wooden structures, and monastic spaces become progressively more complex, organized around communal courts. At Pitalkhora, early Ajanta or Nasik we find large square *vi*haras perfectly laid out in the living rock, designed not for solitary retreat but for cenobitic life; even at Kondivte, Bhaja or Junnar, where we do not have these well-organized spaces, the cells are irregularly clustered around porches as to facilitate some sort of communal life. Most important, the Buddhist caves in Western Deccan were never identified in inscriptions as *guh*as but rather as *lena*, dwellings, or *pasadas*, palaces, terms very removed from the notion of ascetic retreat in the wilderness (Burgess repr. 1994, 82-140).

Finally, one should consider that these cave centres were located in areas relatively accessible in antiquity, not far away from important communication routes. An excellent example is the site of Junnar where a constellation of Buddhist rock-cut sites was established on the hills along a major road that in the Satavahana period crossed the Nanaghat pass. Archaeological explorations have also shown that these cave sites were by no means removed from everyday life—what we see today is just the tip of an iceberg. Next to the Buddhist sites were built villages, sacred areas and monasteries, while the mountains were surrounded by cultivated fields. Excavations conducted by Deccan College at Junnar (Shinde 2013) have brought to light, in the vicinity of the rock-cut monasteries, remains of a habitation site coeval with the caves with houses and areas destined to crafts production. Further, a votive inscription from the Buddhist rock-cut complex itself states that part of the agricultural land endowed to the monks was located at the foot of Manmodi hill, right next to the caves (Burgess and Indrajī repr. 1976, 46, no.14).

In sum, even if cut in the rugged rock and surrounded by trees and monkeys, these caves did not embody the idea of secluded asceticism but rather formed some of the earliest organized nuclei of *sangha* in the history of the Indian Subcontinent. A few of these rock-cut monasteries may have still grown around places where holy men had performed asceticism, much like in the early Christian tradition. For example one could hypothesize a scenario similar to that of early

monasticism in Syria. Symeon Stylite, a 5th century cenobite at the foot of mount Corypheaeus in northern Syria, climbed to the summit of the mountain and set himself upon a pillar, from which he would not descend. From that position he was visible from a distance, combining isolation and visibility, and a monastery developed around his column (Leone 2010). Isolated *stupas* erected in small chambers adjacent to *caitya* halls like Gobhuti's *stupa* at Bedsa may have in fact performed a function comparable to that of Symeon's column: erected at the very heart of the rock-cut monasteries, in addition to being burials for important monks, they could have served as foundation monuments, memorials for Buddhist ascetics credited with having first performed asceticism at the site.

The Western Deccan caves may have constituted a successful effort on behalf of the Buddhists to tame, channel and incorporate the ascetic streak that run through the *sangha*. These caves were hybrid monastic establishments negotiating between the idea of forest asceticism and that of cenobitic monasticism dominating the written *vinayas*. Going back to the Indasala image from Sanci, it seems that the representational choices of the artists were not casual; the elaborate man made *caitya*, so different from an austere *guha*, embodies an ascetic aspiration that has been successfully regulated and brought within the folds of organized monasticism. Perhaps this effort to "normalize" extreme asceticism was the reason why most of the *vinayas* were silent about such practices.

What about the Northwest of the Indian Subcontinent? How does the artistic and archaeological evidence speak of Buddhist asceticism in Gandhara? There is a striking recurrence of images of ascetics and asceticism in Gandharan art. The *Indasalaguha* episode is frequently found in the artistic repertoire (*fig. 5*) and on occasions the incident is depicted in large, iconic proportions. In the well-known inscribed sculpture from Mamane Dheri, Charsadda (Ingholt 1957, *fig. 131*), the descriptive qualities of the natural cave are magnified: the *guha* is not a tame, man-made structure; rather it is a large opening in the mountain, immersed in the wilderness with all sorts of animals, topped by jugged peaks, and populated by ascetics. These images along with large icons of the so-called "fasting Buddha" unique to Gandhara, suggest that even if Gandharan monasticism played a key role in the redaction of some philosophical works of the *Abhidharma* (Willems, Dessein and Cox 1998, 259-262) extreme asceticism was a reality known to local Buddhist practitioners. One should not forget that countless ascetics appear in Gandharan sculpture, and while they are obviously not identifiable as Buddhists, yet they show that renunciators must have been a common sight. In a few Gandharan reliefs they appear to be visibly defeated by the Buddha as in the episode of the fire temple at Uruvela (Ingholt 1957, *fig. 81-84*); more often, they are depicted while paying homage to Sakyamuni and are visited by him in the forest. Because of their background, they also seem to have made good monks once converted and enlisted in the *sangha*, as was the case for the devout Mahakasyapa.

The countless caves and rock shelters mapped in the mountainous landscape corroborate the picture that in Gandhara an ascetic tradition must have thrived side by side with organized Buddhist monasticism. A thorough archaeological survey of the Swat valley conducted by Luca Olivieri has documented hundreds of rock hermitages that have been in use from the proto-historic to the late historic times (Olivieri 2011); they are very simple structures and many of them are located in close proximity of Buddhist sites suggesting a Buddhist use for these rock structures. Shelters like the ones from Amluk (*fig. 6*) cut on the cliff below the Buddhist sacred area, were clearly linked to the monastery and may have been employed for meditation by the local *sangha*. Far from the very large and elaborate *caityas* and *lenas* of the Western Deccan, these sparse rock-cut units seem to be conceptually closer to the *guha* type and they blend completely into the

morphology of the landscape (*fig. 7*). Their early diffusion and typology would suggest that the custom of establishing monastic rock cut structures developed in Gandhara independently from the Deccan Plateau.

Unlike Western Deccan, where since the 1st century CE organized monasticism was superimposed onto forest asceticism and caves were turned into elaborate residences suited for a highly regulated monastic life, in the Northwest the proliferation of organized monasticism did not seem to obliterate the original character and function of rock-cut hermitages. Rather, it seems that austere and solitary *guhās* were often incorporated within the fabric of built monasteries in the Swat valley. Certainly this seems to have been the case at Panr where three larger man-made caves, probably serving the same function as the Amluk hermitages, were established in close proximity of the Buddhist site (*fig. 8*). Of these three caves, two are carved up on the hill while cave 1 is cut right next to the western limit of the Upper Terrace of the Sanctuary and not too far from the wall of its Lower Terrace (Callieri 2012, 129). Given the position of cave 1 adjacent to the sacred area, Pierfrancesco Callieri suggested that the cave must have been integral to the function of the monastery since its foundation. He also proposed that the caves at Panr, much like some isolated rooms found to the west of the Saidu Sharif I monastery in Swat, were used for meditation; such conclusion is founded, among other things, on the presence of a well-known underground meditation cell with painted skeleton in the monastery of Tapa Shotor in Hadda.

It seems therefore that while in Western Deccan asceticism, if still practiced, was somewhat normalized and silenced underneath the layers of organized monasticism, in the Northwest it remained a strong and visibly independent trend within some of the monastic communities in the Swat valley; practiced in its extreme form, Buddhist asceticism may have been a powerful and parallel force that institutional monasticism had to reckon with. One should keep in mind that in this region a text like the *Rhinoceros sutra*, advocating the merits of solitary asceticism, had become so important to be redacted in Gandhari and circulated as an independent *sutra* by the 1st century CE. In addition, a passage of the British Library fragment of *Anavatapta-gatha* in Gandhari, roughly dating from the same time, seems to imply that it was customary for accomplished monks to undertake spiritual practices in caves: “And I have obtained ordination in the religion of the Lion of the Sakyas, and I have attained the status of *arhat*. I am self-controlled, a personal disciple [of the Buddha]. [Even] now, O venerable ones, [although] I have supernatural power [and am] an *arhat* [and] and a savior, rocks will be [my] food when I have entered [my] cave.” (Salomon 2008, 268-269, verses 57-58)

Before concluding, it should be mentioned that the tremendous diffusion of rock-cut art and architecture in Afghanistan may also be a reflection of the ascetic “ethos” observed in some of the Buddhist communities of the Northwest. Aside from the legendary cave described by Faxian in the vicinity of Hadda where the magical shadow of the Buddha was still visible (Beal 1869, 45), several Buddhist cave sites were cut in Afghanistan during the Kushan and especially post-Kushan period. However many of the Afghani cave seem to conform to the *guha* type with irregular chambers, corridors and niches, providing monks with an environment suited for asceticism and suggestive, from an ideological and visual standpoint, of the Buddha’s meditative experience in the *Indasalaguha* (Verardi 2004).

To conclude, I hope that this paper has teased out some of the distinctive attitudes towards asceticism that emerge from the Buddhist practice rather than the texts. A brief analysis of images and architecture evocative of Buddhist asceticism points to the fact that different regions dealt with this important issue in different ways. While in the Deccan the institutional *sangha* seems to have incorporated and neutralized the ascetic tradition within its folds, in Swat extreme asceticism

remained a strong and visible component of some monastic practices, perhaps paving the way to Buddhist movements such as *Vajrayana* that turned these austerities into a main path to spiritual achievement.

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*Fig. 1—Indsalaguha, detail, Bharhut vedika
(Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies).*



*Fig. 2—Indasalaguha, detail, Bodhgaya vedika
(Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies).*



*Fig. 3—Indsalaguha, detail, Bodhgaya vedika
(Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies).*



Fig. 4—Indasalaguha, detail, Sanci north torana pillar.



*Fig. 5—Indasalaguha, Gandhara, British Museum, acc. no.1880.69
(Courtesy of the British Museum).*



*Fig. 6—Rock hermitages, Amluk, Swat valley
(Courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri).*



Fig. 7—Rock hermitage, detail, Amluk, Swat valley (Courtesy of Luca Maria Olivieri).

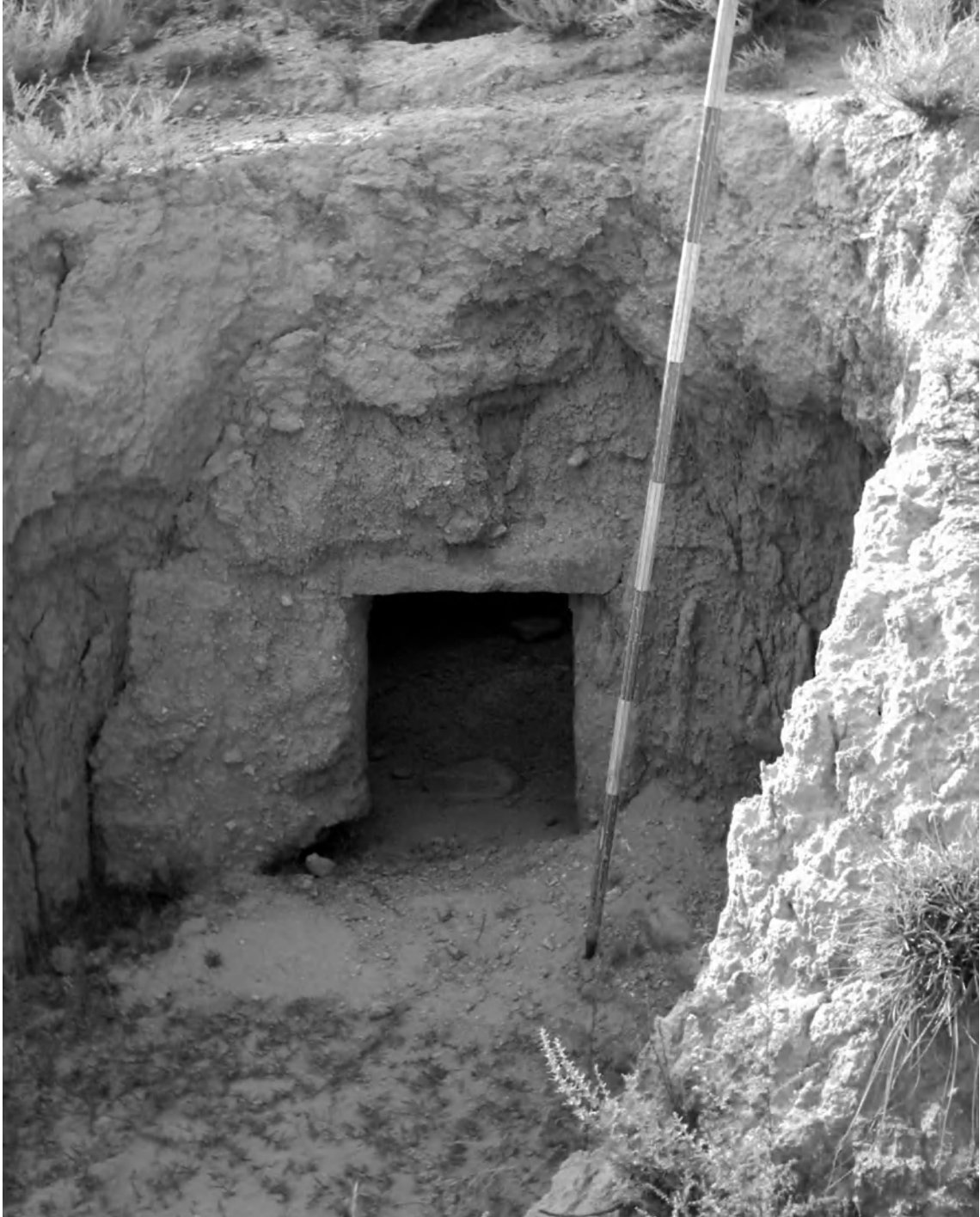


Fig. 8—Cave 3, Panr, Swat valley (Courtesy of Anna Filigenzi).