

Views from the Black Mountain: The Rock-Cut *Mahāvihāra* at Kānheri/Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan

Pia Brancaccio (Drexel University)

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist rock-cut monastery at Kanheri/Kṛṣṇagiri in the coastal region of Konkan, Maharashtra is located within the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in the greater Mumbai metropolitan area. With its 101 caves and 58 rock-cut inscriptions spanning 1000 years from the beginning of the Common Era to the 11th century, Kanheri is the largest Buddhist rock-cut monastery in western Deccan, with the highest number of inscriptions and the longest life span.¹ A handful of inscriptions from the late 5th century onwards refer to the rock-cut monastery at Kanheri as being a *mahāvihāra*, a term that is used in Pāli texts to describe large monastic dwellings (Roth 1997: 44). In later epigraphic sources, the term alluded to complex and extensive monastic centers with a large numbers of monks in residence. Major Buddhist institutions designated as *mahāvihāras* prospered in Bihar and Bengal during the Pāla period (8th–11th c), where they enjoyed royal support and became important centers for Buddhist learning with an international reputation. A thorough re-examination of archaeological, artistic and epigraphic evidence from the Kanheri caves makes a compelling case for the fact that this site, to date hardly considered in the scholarship, was in fact one of the great Buddhist monasteries of India that rose to international prominence by the turn of the 6th century.

EARLIEST EVIDENCE

The caves at Kanheri were established sometime during the 1st century CE when the Sātavāhanas controlled the region and the site experienced continued patronage throughout the 2nd and 3rd century as votive inscriptions suggest.² The earliest epigraphic attestation of Kanheri as a *mahāvihāra* can be found in a copper plate inscription dated to the late 5th century and mentioning the Traikuṭakas rulers of northern Konkan. The inscription was found by James Bird in 1839 in a votive stupa in the area before the *caitya* hall (Cave 3) and is now unfortunately lost (Fig. 1; Bird

¹ In addition, 27 stone-slab inscriptions were documented in proximity to the group of funerary stupas situated in the southwestern corner of the site: Gokhale 1991: 109.

² For an overview of caves and inscriptions at Kanheri, see Gokhale 1991.

1841: 94). It mentioned the gift of a *caitya* in stone and brick, likely the *stūpa* in which the inscription was deposited, at the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* by a donor named Buddharuci coming from Sindhu Viśaya or Sindh (870km to the north) (Burgess and Indrajī 1976: 58; Gokhale 1991: 59–62; Mirashi 1955: 29–32). The name of the monastery as ‘Kṛṣṇagiri’ or ‘Black Mountain’ clearly alludes to the black color of the rock hills where the caves are excavated. The occurrence of the epithet *mahāvihāra* in this copperplate inscription aligns perfectly with the epigraphic diffusion of the term elsewhere in India during the Gupta and post-Gupta period.³ The rock-cut monastery at Kanheri continued to be referred to as a *mahāvihāra* throughout the 9th century in the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period inscriptions discussed below.

The use of the term ‘*mahāvihāra*’ or ‘great monastery’ in the context of the Kanheri caves elicits an idea of monumentality that goes beyond the simple size of the site; the term brings forth notions of antiquity and religious authority and is interwoven with the formation of a Buddhist collective memory. Monumentality highlights power relations and distinction, and its implementation requires significant mobilization of resources and technical know-how. The monumentality of the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* is underscored by a number of features: the huge extension of the monastic site with so many caves and resident monks that required great organization and financial support; the presence of a complex water collection and distribution system with built infrastructure such as a retaining wall that was still extant in 1896 on the northwest edge of the site (Bhandarkar 1896: 165); and finally, the presence of truly colossal sculptures in the most ‘public’ area of the site.

AN EXTENSIVE MAHĀVIHĀRĀ

The fact that the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* had a huge monastic population at the end of the 5th century is demonstrated by the number of funerary stupas erected under a rock shelter at the southwestern edge of the site. This is the largest assemblage of funerary monuments ever documented in the western Deccan caves. Each small stupa was erected to commemorate an accomplished monk who resided and died at Kanheri (Schopen 1997: 175–6) and while a few of these monuments may have been established in the earliest phases of occupation of the site, most of the surviving inscriptions associated with these monuments date to the 5th century or later (Gokhale 1991: 109–10; Schopen 1997b: 176). This shows that a considerable number of advanced Buddhist monastics were based at Kṛṣṇagiri precisely at the time when the site was first being identified as a *mahāvihāra*. Remarkably, the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* did not include caves designed to function as large communal monastic dwellings of the type seen at Ajanta, with a square court-

³ The term *mahāvihāra* also occurs in the Ikṣvāku and Viṣṇukuṇḍin inscriptions from Andhra Pradesh. See EIAD, nos. 10, 20, 55, 61, 175, 180, 186, 407. For the detailed discussions of these inscriptions, see Tournier 2018: 27–69.

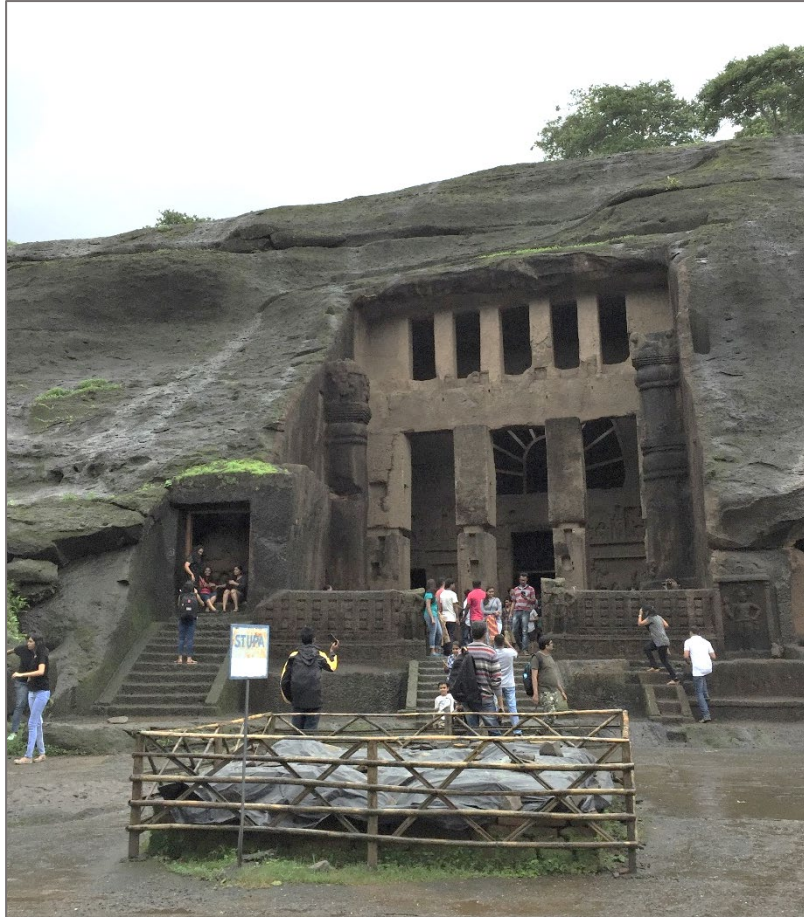


FIG. 1 View of the Caitya Hall (Cave 3), Kanheri.
Photo: author



FIG. 2 View of Caves 93–95, Kanheri.
Photo: author

and rows of cells opening on three sides. Instead, at Kanheri one finds a great number of smaller and independent rock-cut units scattered on the hill, typically consisting of one cell opening onto a room and preceded by a porch (Fig. 2). Such small structures were undoubtedly more conducive to the cultivation of individual ascetic goals rather than to practice of cenobitic monasticism.⁴ The placement of two colossal rock-cut sculptures of the Buddha in *varadamudrā* (ca. 7m high) right at the entrance of the *caitya* hall Cave 3, the most ‘public’ cave at the site (Fig. 3), speaks of the monumentality of the Kanheri *mahāvihāra*. A late 5th-century inscription incised on a pillar to the right of the entrance to the hall, in proximity to one the colossal Buddha images, states that the Buddha (*Bhagavat*) image (*pratima*) was the gift of Śakyabhikṣu Buddhagoṣa, the *mahāgandhakuṭī-vārika* or the caretaker of the great *gandhakuṭī*, who was also the pupil of Reverend Dhammavatsa, a teacher of the *Tipiṭaka*.⁵ This inscription by an eminent monk who was a master in the transmission of Buddhist texts confirms that at the end of the 5th century, Kanheri was recognized as an important center for Buddhist learning by eminent teachers who mastered the Buddhist canon. Contemporary inscriptions recovered at the memorial stupas corroborate the fact that accomplished masters resided at Kanheri, such as *arhats* who attained the ‘three knowledges’ (*tevijā*; Gokhale 1991: 111, epitaph no. 1; Schopen 1997b: 178) or the ‘analytical understanding’ (*paṭisambhidā*; Gokhale 1991: 114, epitaph no. 3).

The votive inscription by the above-noted Śakyabhikṣu Buddhagoṣa likely refers to the donation of the colossal Buddha carved right next to the epigraph, while the *mahāgandhakuṭī* where Buddhagoṣa performed his duties was most likely the *caitya* hall where the image was carved, a great *gandhakuṭī* worthy of a *mahāvihāra*. The title of *mahāgandhakuṭī-vārika* is also relevant if connected to a passage related in the *Divyāvadāna* that provides information on what a *gandhakuṭī* was: a structure dedicated not only to Śākyamuni but also to the six Buddhas of the past, which included a *caitya* with a fore area to be regularly swept (*Divyāvadāna* no.23, translated by Strong 1977: 402). The textual references to *gandhakuṭī* (Strong 1977: 393; Schopen 1997a: 268) suggest that such a structure was often linked to monasteries but not necessarily located in

⁴ Evidence for the ancient practice of forest asceticism in the area was documented by Pandit Bhagwanlal Indrajī in the nearby Padana Hill, situated only 3 km away from Kanheri and overlooking the Buddhist monastery. Indrajī recorded a group of eleven fragmentary Prakrit inscriptions and symbols at this site dating from the 1st to the 6th century CE (Indrajī 1882: 45–56). They recorded individual names and were positioned in proximity to a natural cave, along with several sets of footprints. Inscription C dated to the 1st century CE refers to the hill as “the abode of *siddhas*” (*pavato abhūnto sidhavasati / parvatebhyantaḥ siddhavastih*; Cecil 2020: 161). Inscriptions E and I refer to an ascetic Musala whose name is surprisingly similar to the forest ascetic Musalaka who, according to the *Pūrṇāvadāna*, was converted by the Buddha in the vicinity of Sopara in Kokan, in an area that could well coincide with the surroundings of Kanheri (Indrajī 1882: 54–5).

⁵ Gokhale 1991: 52, no. 7 and Luders 1912: 103, No. 989 to translate the term *vārika* as ‘guardian’. Strong also addresses this inscription from Kanheri (Strong 1977: 400), while a broad discussion of the meaning of the word *-vārika* in compound terms appears in Silk 2008: 102–25 and Schopen 1997a: 268.

the interior of a *vihāra*, a feature that would certainly apply to the *caitya* halls carved in the rock-cut monasteries of western Deccan and in particular to the Kanheri *caitya* hall Cave 3.

Echoes of Kanheri as a *mahāvihāra* resonate in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang who both describe a monumental rock-cut monastery situated in the Deccan. While some of the details included in their accounts do not match what we see at the site today (and it is likely they did not visit the site themselves), their descriptions surprisingly reflect key features unique to the Kanheri caves. The 5th-century traveller Faxian, while talking about the rock-cut ‘Pigeon’ monastery in the Deccan, describes the site as having many small monastic cells, rock-cut stairs cutting across the hill, water twirling and flowing in a stream in front of the caves, and many *arhats* living in the monastery (Beal 1906: I, 69–70).

In the 7th century Xuanzang echoes the description by Faxian when speaking of a monastery called Brahmaragiri (Deeg 2005: 487) that was cut in “a solid mass of rock without approaches or intervening valleys”. The monastery, whose foundation is associated by Xuanzang with a Sātavāhana king and the Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna, included elaborate rock-cut works, *vihāras* on five levels, and complex waterworks. It was huge monastery, occupied by over a “1000 monks”, and had a major library “with all the authoritative works of instruction spoken by Śākyā Buddha, and all the explanatory compilations (commentaries) of the Bodhisattvas, and the exceptional collection of the miscellaneous school” (Beal 1906: II, 215). While the location of this monastery as situated by Xuanzang (about 300 *li* southwest of the Kosala country) makes the identification with the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* problematic,⁶ the picture offered by the Chinese pilgrim seems to capture the reality of the caves at Kanheri quite well.⁷

The Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* continued to flourish as a major place for learning throughout the next phase of recorded patronage (the 9th century) in conjunction with the triumph of esoteric Buddhist traditions. Two important epigraphs from the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period (8th–11th c) — in Cave 11 (the so-called Darbar Cave) and Cave 12 (just opposite of Cave 11) — mention major donations at the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* (Mirashi 1977: 1–6, nos. 1–2; Gokhale 1991: 66–72, nos. 21–22; Tsukamoto 1996: 425–8 [Kanheri nos. 21–23]). Unfortunately, these inscriptions, engraved in visible positions on the main architrave of the caves, are barely legible today.⁸

⁶ Xuanzang states that Brahmaragiri is 300 *li* (Chinese miles) (< 150 km) southwest of (Dakṣiṇa) Kosala, which is usually taken as the Chhattisgarh area. In a 5th-century inscription from Cave 16 at Ajanta by the Vākāṭaka minister Varāhadeva, Kosala is also celebrated as a conquest of his overlord Harishena,

⁷ The description of an impressive rock-cut monastery in South India by the 8th-century Korean pilgrim Heicho echoes the accounts by Faxian and Xuanzang. My thanks go to Akira Shimada for reviewing the relevant passages.

⁸ The epigraphs in question from Caves 11 and 12 were first copied by West in 1862, who actually combined together two inscriptions found in Cave 12 (West 1862: Nos 14 and 43).



FIG. 3
Colossal Buddha,
Right porch of the
caitya hall (Cave 3),
Kanheri.
Photo: author



FIG. 4 Unfinished Caitya Hall, Kanheri.
Photo: author

The inscription from the larger Darbar Cave 11 is dated to the Śaka year 775 and mentions the Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings Govinda III and his successor Amoghavarṣa I, as well as the Mahāsāmantas Pullaśakti and Kapardin II. The inscription commemorates the donation by the Gomin Avighnākara from the Gauḍa country (or Bengal) of a permanent endowment of 100 *drammas* for the construction of meditation rooms and clothing for the monks at the ‘Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra’ (Mirashi 1977: 6, line 4). This epigraph is laid out as a contract, as it refers to the presence of two witnesses and contains instructions on how to administer the gift after the donor’s death. It also includes a final curse against anyone who misappropriates the gift: such an individual would be reborn in one of the hells and eat cow flesh vomited by dogs.

From this inscription, we learn that the rock-cut monastery at Kanheri was designated by the 9th century as the ‘Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra’, a term that at this particular time aligns the cave center to the great contemporary monasteries of northern India, such as the Śrī Nalānda mahāvihāra. Much like the *mahāvihāras* of north India in the Pāla period, the caves at Kṛṣṇagiri must have received significant royal patronage: the three large tanks excavated at the western top edge of the site situated right next to a retaining wall (still extant in mid-19th century) were projects that required a considerable financial investment and may have been undertaken under princely auspices. The Kanheri findings of clay seals with impressions of the *ye dhammā hetu* formula, as well as a seal with the seated Buddha at Bodhgaya documented by West in 1860–1 but now unfortunately lost, position Kanheri with the great Pāla monasteries. The conspicuous gift of a devotee coming all the way from Bengal shows that the Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra was well connected in the 9th century to the great circuit of the northern *mahāvihāras*.

A poorly legible inscription from Cave 11 that still remains unpublished (personal communication by Nicolas Morrissey) offers a further attestation to this late phase of prosperity and growth of the cave monastery. It relates the donation of two separate endowments for the repair and expansion of a *vihāra* overseen by a *navakarmika* at the Kṛṣṇagiri mahāvihāra. It is tempting to ascribe the aborted excavation of the second unfinished *caitya* hall Cave 1 (situated in proximity to the earlier Cave 3 (Fig. 4)) to this particular moment of expansion of the monastery. The barely roughed-out excavation, of which only the rock façade remains, shows a configuration that could well align the structure with the design of the later Buddhist *caitya* hall of Cave 1 at Ellora.

The Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra was undoubtedly a prominent center for Buddhist studies in the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period, with its emphasis on ascetic cultivation and esoteric teachings that resonated with the isolated location of the site and the configuration of the monastery. The inscription in Cave 12 dated to the Śaka year 765 — and thus 10 years earlier than the one in Cave 11 — commemorates the gift of 20 *drammas* for the worship of Bhagavat, three *drammas* for repairs in the *vihāra*, and five *drammas* for books in addition to a larger perpetual endowment totaling 160 *drammas* to the Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri saṃgha by a certain Viṣṇugupta, son of Pūrṇahari

(Mirashi 1977: 1–3; Gokhale 1991: 71 nos. 22). The epigraph also mentions two Śīlāhāra princes: Pullaśakti, the Mahāsāmanta of Kōnkan, and his successor Kapardin II, under the rule of Amoghavarṣa I, the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king in power during the mid-9th century. Viṣṇugupta’s monetary gift for books significantly surpasses the amount designated for repairs at the *vihāra*, quite possibly for Cave 11 itself — a sure indication of the fact that the great monastery at Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri had an extensive library and was an important seat of Buddhist learning. In fact, the largest cave at the Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra, Cave 12 (Fig. 5), was not a residential cave but rather a large, rectangular plain hall with two long low cut benches likely used by monks to study, recite and copy sutras.⁹ It is an unusual type of cave in western Deccan, comparable only to the multi-storied Cave 5 at Ellora, thus likely a contemporary excavation.

CENTER FOR TANTRIC TEACHINGS

Textual sources provide additional evidence which demonstrate that precisely at the time the votive inscriptions were recorded in Caves 11 and 12, the Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri mahārāja mahāvihāra was indeed a very prominent center for Tantric learning in Konkan and well-connected to the famous *mahāvihāra* of north India supported by the Pāla rulers. Between the end of the 8th and beginning of the 9th century, the Tantric master Jñānapāda, the founder of the earlier of the two exegetical schools of the *Guhyasamājatantra*, studied for nine years in Konkan at a place called ‘*Nam mkha’i śiṅ ldan*’ prior to becoming a teacher at Vikramaśīla.¹⁰ Davidson (2002: 312) identifies this place with Kṛṣṇagiri, thus locating the ascetic training of Jñānapāda at the Kanheri caves, while Szántó (2015: 540) tentatively locates the site at Kadri in Karnataka.¹¹

The renowned Buddhist scholar Atiśa also allegedly went to the Kṛṣṇagiri *vihāra* prior to taking his vows at the Uddanḍapura (Odantapuri) *mahāvihāra*. The list of ‘Indian and Tibetan Panditas’ included in the *Chronicle of Buddhism in India and Tibet* by Bu ston Rin chen grub, written sometime between 1322 and 1326 (van der Kuijp 2013: 115), tells us that at the age of 19, Atiśa traveled to the Kṛṣṇagiri *vihāra* where he:

commenced the study of the meditative science of the Buddhists which consists of the Triśikṣā or the three studies — morality, meditation and divine learning —, and for this purpose he went to the *vihāra* of Kṛṣṇagiri to receive his lessons from Rāhula Gupta. Here he was given the secret name of Jñānaguhyavājra, and was initiated into the mysteries of esoteric Buddhism. (Das 1893: I, 8)

⁹ Cave 12 at Kanheri allows plenty of light to enter the space, making it suitable for activities such as the copying of sutras. Its layout calls to mind the monastic study halls of more recent Himalayan monasteries.

¹⁰ As in the Tibetan translation of Vitapāda’s commentary to *Mañjuśrīmukhāgama* (Szántó 2015: 550–2).

¹¹ Szántó suggests that Jñānapāda, usually associated with the patronage of the Pāla king Dharmapāla in the late 9th century, had already risen to prominence at the time of the ruler Devapāla, sometime after 810 CE and before ca. 850 CE (Szántó 2015: 540)

It is tempting to view the monumental rock-cut seats excavated in proximity to Cave 101 in the uppermost series of caves as ‘thrones’ where such prominent and accomplished *siddhas* sat while teaching or engaging in meditative practices (Fig. 6).

Perhaps the most remarkable references to the Kṛṣṇagiri monastery as one of the great international Buddhist Tantric centers can be found in a Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitāstotra* manuscript from Nepal, dated 1015 CE (CUL, Skt. Add. 1643; Foucher 1900; Kim 2013). This manuscript contains an illustrated list of the most important Buddhist sites and cultic images situated in the subcontinent at the time. Including locations in Gandhara, Uddyana, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Sri Lanka, Andhra and Konkan with relative explicatory labels, it traces a geography of esoteric Buddhism. Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan is the only place represented twice in this great list of sites, and both illustrations and captions leave no doubt as to its identity as the rock-cut monastery at Kanheri.

The first reference to the Kanheri caves appears on Folio 214, v2, at the end of the 30th chapter of the manuscript (Figs 7 and 8). The label identifies the image as being a representation of the *khadga caitya* at Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan. The focal point of the illustration is a white stupa enclosed in a shrine that is inferred by the presence of a bejeweled door. The *caitya* is located among rocks and trees, and within the hills of black rock are two square openings, possibly depictions of monastic caves or cells, in which two monks are sitting, both slightly turned towards the central *caitya*. The monk on the left holds a book in his right hand, while below two more monks look up towards the sitting monastic masters and the *caitya* — an incredible 11th-century visual reference to the Kanheri caves. The ancient name of the site as Kṛṣṇagiri is clearly referenced by the black rocks covered by the thick forest.¹² The monk holding a manuscript in his hand alludes to the existence at the site of a major Buddhist scholastic center, an important function of the monastery confirmed also by the above-noted 9th-century inscription from Cave 12 recording a donation for books.

The stupa labeled as being the *khadga caitya* in the manuscript illustration, clearly erected within the enclosed space of a cave, is very interesting. The Sanskrit term *khadga* (‘rhinoceros horn’ or ‘rhinoceros’) has a long history in the Buddhist textual tradition. It refers to individuals

¹² The particular depiction of trees in this illustration of the Kṛṣṇagiri *mahāvihāra* seems to corroborate the hypothesis proposed by Davidson that the great Tantric master Jñānapāda resided at Kanheri. The etymology of the name of the monastery where Jñānapāda resided in Konkan as given in the Tibetan translation of Vitapāda’s commentary to the *Mañjuśrīmukhāgama* is discussed by Szanto (2015: 551): “If we read the text as transmitted in the Peking Canon (Ōta. 2729, 108a3: ... *śiñ rnam* ‘*khriñ śiñ steñ du bres pa lta bur gnas pa’o ll*) and if we grant closer attention to Tibetan grammar, it would seem that the meaning is something more along the lines of: ‘the trees are such that they are coiled and spreading upwards.’” This description actually mirrors perfectly the images of the spreading trees with coiled trunks in the illustration of Kṛṣṇagiri on Folio 214, v2 of the *Prajñāpāramitāstotra* from the Cambridge University Library (CUL, Skt. Add. 1643).



FIG. 5 Interior of Cave 11, Kanheri.
Photo: author



FIG. 6 Rock-Cut Seat near Cave 101, Kanheri.
Photo: author

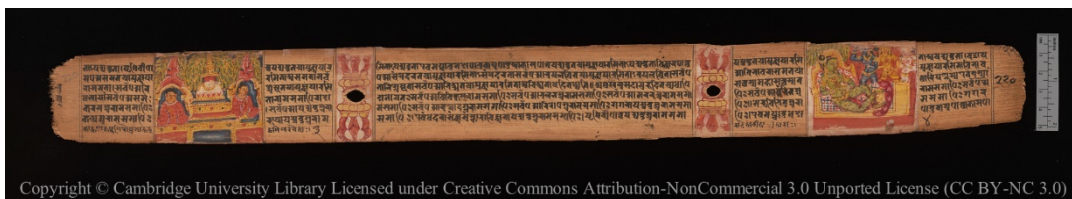


FIG. 7 Kṛṣṇagiri (right), Prajñāpāramitāstotra manuscript, 11th century, Nepal.
(CUL, Skt. Add. 1643, Fol. 214v.) © Cambridge University Library



FIG. 8 Detail of Fig 7. Illustration of Kṛṣṇagiri, Prajñāpāramitāstotra, 11th century, Nepal.
(CUL, Skt. Add. 1643, Fol. 214 v.) © Cambridge University Library

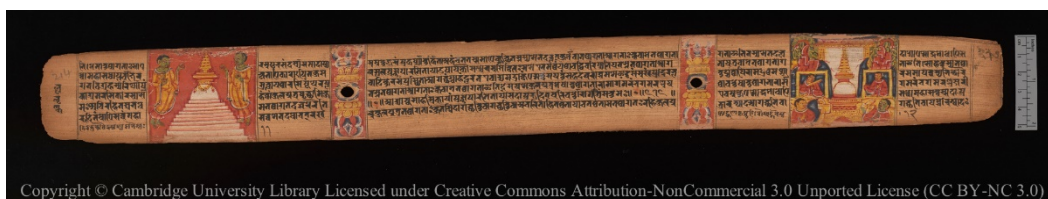


FIG. 9 Kṛṣṇagiri (left), Prajñāpāramitāstotra, 11th century, Nepal.
(CUL, Skt. Add. 1643, Fol. 220v.) © Cambridge University Library

pursuing enlightenment in solitude and to *pratyekabuddhas*. Its most immediate association is with the so-called *Rhinoceros sūtra*, an important Mahāyāna text preserved in Pāli, Sanskrit, and Gandhārī (Solomon and Glass 2000).¹³ The text is a eulogy of forest asceticism where practitioners are encouraged to “wander alone like rhinos” (Solomon and Glass 2000: 106), to cut ties with the material world and to live in solitude in the forest to pursue enlightenment. Such a scenario perfectly fits the milieu of Kṛṣṇagiri: a *mahāvihāra* with a strong ascetic propensity and a large number of small, individual caves where traditions of meditations and austerities were practiced and taught by great masters. The textual references cited above mentioning illustrious *acāryas* who spent years of ascetic training at Kṛṣṇagiri before heading to the great *mahāvihāra* of north India and changing the course of Buddhist history confirm this picture.

The second visual reference to Kanheri in this copy of the *Prajñāpāramitāstotra* appears on Folio 220, v1 (Fig. 9). Here the illustration is labeled as a representation of the *pratyekabuddha śikhara caitya* at Kṛṣṇagiri. In this painting, the wilderness of the setting is perhaps more pronounced than in the previous one. The rocks and trees almost entirely cover the upper part of the illustration, while the focal *caitya* does not appear to be enshrined in a structure but rather sitting outdoors beneath the thick vegetation. The monks are here represented in caves that do not resemble the monastic cells depicted in Folio 214. I would like to suggest that perhaps the *pratyekabuddha caitya* in this painting may be one of the stupas erected at Kanheri in proximity to Cave 3 to commemorate the monastic dead, perhaps a memorial to a particularly relevant *pratyekabuddha* who pursued enlightenment at the site. The existence of a *khadga caitya* and a *pratyekabuddha caitya* at Kṛṣṇagiri confirm that this *mahāvihāra* was a major center for ascetic practices. *Pratyekabuddhas* resided in forests on mountains (Strong 1994: 48), as beautifully presented in the preamble to the Sanskrit *Khadgaviṣṇagāthā* incorporated within the *Mahāvastu Avādana*. This text opens with the literary image of 500 *pratyekabuddhas* assembled in a forest, each reciting a *gāthā* of the text before entering *nirvāṇa* (Salomon 2007: 6).

From the references in the Nepalese *Prajñāpāramitāstotra*, we may conclude that towards the end of its active life, the Kanheri monastery became well-known as a Tantric center across the Buddhist world. The absence of esoteric images sculpted on the walls of the caves does not necessarily undermine the hypothesis that Kanheri was a major center for Buddhist esoteric practices. Tantric rituals generally relied heavily on the use of painted mandalas and portable images made of perishable materials, items that would leave few archaeological traces depending on the climate and materials involved. One can assume that wooden images were widely used in esoteric rituals at Kanheri, given the exceptional find of a multi-armed wooden image of Tārā (Gokhale 1991: Pl. 8), likely of local production. This small sculpture, in very poor condition of

¹³ Pāli: *Khaggavisāṇasutta* Sn 1.3; Skt: *Khadgaviṣṇagāthā*; Gandhārī: *Khargaviṣṇasutra*.



FIG. 10 Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara,
Cave 41, Kanheri.
Photo: Akira Shimada

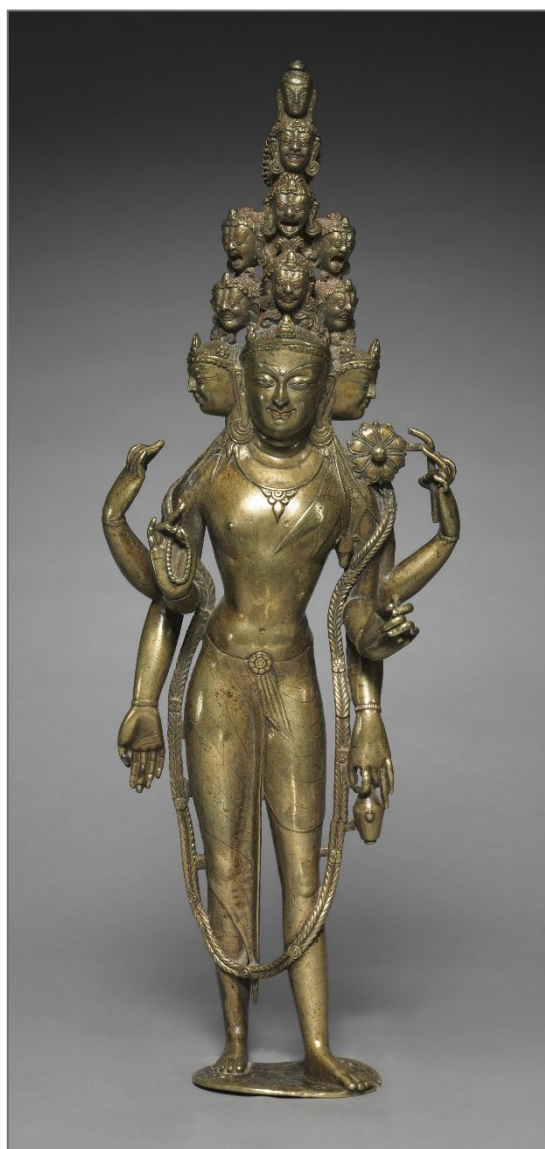


FIG. 11 Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.
Ca 1000, Western Himalayas.
Gilt bronze with silver and copper inlay.
39.4 x 14 x 7.6 cm (15½ x 5½ x 3 in
Cleveland Museum of Art, Acc. No. 1975.101
Photo: courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art

preservation and now unfortunately lost, shares distinctive iconographic features with Pala bronze images of this Buddhist deity dating to the 9th century.¹⁴

The representation in the porch of Cave 41 at Kanheri of an image of Avalokiteśvara *Ekadaśamukha* (Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara) (Fig. 10) an iconography of the bodhisattva not found elsewhere in western India, is the only example of esoteric stone sculpture from Kanheri. It probably dates to the Rāṣṭrakūṭa phase of activity at the monastery, and further connects the caves to the Himalayan regions where this esoteric iconography widely circulated through metal images in the 10th and 11th centuries. A portable gilt bronze of this bodhisattva from the western Himalayas dated to ca. 1000 CE, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 11), offers a stylistic and iconographic counterpart to the Kanheri image and speaks for the artistic and religious exchange which occurred between Konkan and the Himalayan regions in the 11th century.

CONCLUSION

To close, the above evidence demonstrates that Kṛṣṇagiri/Kanheri was a very prominent Buddhist monastic center in the post-Gupta period when it came to be designated as a *mahāvihāra*. It included a *mahāgandhakuṭī* within its premises, colossal sculptures, and donors coming all the way from as far as Sindh. The international reputation of the monastery grew further in the 9th century when the *ŚrīKṛṣṇāgñahārāja mahāvihāra* rose to be a major institution for esoteric teachings, well-connected to the Buddhist circuits of the *mahāvihāras* of north India and the Himalayan regions, with renown Tantric masters receiving training at the site. The two illuminations depicting Kṛṣṇagiri included in the aforementioned 11th-century manuscript from Nepal (CUL, Skt. Add. 1643, Folio 214v and Folio 220v) show how Konkan was a hub of esoteric Buddhism, with the highest concentration of Tantric centers for any region mentioned in the text. While it is hard to say if Kanheri was still an active center when this manuscript was illustrated, the fact that it was the only place illustrated twice in this source would suggest that it was one of the most pre-eminent and long-lived Buddhist monasteries in the western Deccan.

¹⁴ Sankalia first compared the Kanheri Tārā to a Pala bronze from Nalanda (Sankalia 1987: 297). The Kanheri wooden sculpture also shares key features with a seated multi-armed Tara in bronze now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Acc. No. 1979.513. Accessed November 12, 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38933>.

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