Early Buddhist Art in Deccan: The Numismatic Underpinnings of Chronology and Political Backdrop

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Prologue:

The role played by numismatic evidence in studying the chronology has been an important theme in the study of Gandharan Buddhist Art. It has been a well-discussed subject in conferences and many papers have been devoted to the role coins play in ascertaining Gandharan chronology[1]. In comparison, the role numismatic evidence plays in the dating of Buddhist Art from peninsular India has been scantly discussed. Art historians usually discuss the dating and chronology of art using stylistic and / or comparative methods and Buddhist art is no exception; one often finds it bracketed in labels that are dynastic and therefore implicitly chronological. The terms ‘Mauryan’, ‘Shunga’, or ‘Satavahana’ to describe art are good examples. In many instances, objects displayed and discussed as ‘art’ objects comprise pieces that were once part of a much larger architectural structure. The railing pillar from Pauni, with which the ‘Early Buddhist Art’ exhibition opened, is a good example. However, they are rarely displayed and discussed bearing in mind their position, placement and reception within the context of such a structure. The same applies for understanding the social and political milieu of such objects. ‘Cave temples’ in the Western Ghat mountains have consistently attracted attraction of scholars[2]. However, there are many sites like Pauni where structural monuments like Stupas had been the focus of Buddhist establishments[3]. The Stupas like the one standing at Sopara were dug up using primitive methods of spoliation,

while some others, like ones at Ter, were revealed through systematic excavations[4]. Some, like the Stupas at Bhon or Teerth Budruk remain either largely unexcavated or the reports of excavations at such sites have not been published barring stray mentions and overviews[5].

To go beyond the nature of identifying, attributing and studying such objects from a purely 'art historical' perspective, we need to look at other evidences like inscriptions, archaeological data and numismatics to inform the art historical understanding in a more granular manner. Some ground has been broken in this direction – the doctoral research of Reshma Sawant takes an 'archaeo-historical' approach and considers the immediate pre-Satavahana phase in Vidarbha as a 'period of decentralization', acknowledging the emergence of local ruling entities[6]. But these aspects also have their drawbacks – inscriptions are scant and when dated, employ eras such as regnal reckoning which mean little in terms of relative chronology unless we have a confirmed and reliable concordance. Even then, like the debate regarding the Takht-i Bahi inscription and identity of 'Gondophares' shows[7], many inferences have to be drawn on assumptions and hypotheses. In many cases the state of preservation of inscriptions is poor and variant readings of even a single character can change their meaning and context. Archaeological data can be sparse and of uneven quality particularly considering issues such as underfunding and relentless urban pressure on sites. Coins are the numerically the strongest component of evidence; however, they are small and portable functional objects. This has a bearing on their manufacture and in turn the form, extent and stylization of motifs they bear.

In this essay I will outline how recent advances in our understanding of coinages - both in terms of data as well as applicability – has impacted on our knowledge about the political backdrop and chronology of early Buddhist art in Deccan. By 'early' I mean roughly the last two centuries of the pre-Christian era and by 'Deccan', I intend to focus on the regions

contemporarily comprising the states of Maharashtra and Northern parts of Karnataka and Telangana.

‘Post-Mauryan’ Deccan: a numismatic picture

The region of Deccan, classically known as *Dakshiṇāpatha* or ‘The Southern Road’, has been a subject of historical inquiry since the late 19th century writings of early Indologists like Bhandarkar[8]. The discursive direction that much of the 20th century scholarship has taken treats textual evidence as the primary historical source to create a narrative framework and fit material aspects of evidence, such as coins, into the narrative. This narrative is essentially linear, as evident in standard works of reference like K. A. Nilakanta Sastri’s ‘A History of South India’, and characteristically begins with ‘Aryanization’ followed by the Mauryans[9]. Central to this departure are textual references like those in Kautilya’s ‘Arthasastra’ to *Dakshiṇāpatha*, or glossed from Buddhist literature, to regions where proselytizing Buddhist monks travelled. Finds of Asokan inscriptions at many places in peninsular India, and their contents, such as the reference to the ‘border communities’ of Pandyas and Cheras, or to the administrative officials at a regional centre of governance like Suvarnagiri, are taken as further markers for a Mauryan presence in the Deccan[10].

The narrative then moves to post-Mauryan dynasties, such as the ‘Sungas’ and the ‘Kanvas’[11]. The main source of evidence describing this shift is the body of semi-mythical dynastic accounts recounted in later Sanskrit sources like the *Purāṇas*. Occasionally, we find the narrative bolstered by Sanskrit literature and commentaries, such as Patanjali’s commentary on the grammar of Panini[12]. In most of the *Purāṇas*, the ‘Andhras’ are described as successors to the Kanvas; from other evidences we know that this was the same dynasty known as the Satavahanas[13]. A debate raged in 19th and 20th century scholars as to when this political transition happened – one faction dated the inception of the Satavahana rule closer to

the demise of the Mauryas soon after Asoka around c.225 BCE, while the other suggested it to be around 70 BCE. V. V. Mirashi was a proponent of the 'longer' chronology[14] while D. C. Sircar[15] and following him, A. M. Shastri[16] opted for the 'shorter' chronology.

In recent past, this established narrative has been challenged by historians of ancient India, most notably B. D. Chattopadhyaya[17], B. P. Sahu[18] and Aloka Parasher-Sen[19]. The thrust of their argument is on regions, or the 'margins' of the Mauryan Empire, rather than its 'centre' or core areas. Together they have highlighted the 'centripetal' forces the regions might have unleashed in the fall and fragmentation of the Mauryan Empire, underscoring the importance of features such as urbanisation, social mobility, advent of script culture and the formation and assertion of regional identities. The contribution of these scholars offers a breath of fresh air in restructuring the post-Mauryan epoch in peninsular India, particularly with regard to state-formation, as it moves away from the simple linearity of the established argument and makes way for complexity with regard to political, social and economic processes. The emphasis they place on regions in their argument is however not free from inconsistencies. Chattopadhyaya, despite underlining the importance of regions, is not clear about how these regions could be defined[20]. He likens 'localities' in the Deccan to the North Indian 'Janapadas' but the nature and composition, not to mention the territorial boundaries, of these 'Janapadas' is up for grabs. To compare North Indian 'Janapadas' with Deccan 'localities' as agents of regional assertion when neither have been clearly defined can be at best complicated, and at worst, unreliable. Parasher Sen's interventions are thought-provoking but focussed mainly on archaeo-historical data from the Telangana – Andhra area, conceivably because that region has been the centre of her professional practice. Coins feature in their discussion; however, since they are not numismatic specialists, they have relied on secondary literature data that is patchy in some instances and some of it is outdated in their attempt to create models for historical processes.

What these regions were could be answered well if one looks at economic aspects rather than political categories. The Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods were characterised by rapid urbanisation; however, the geography and political economy of this process suggests that it happened in a 'compartmental' and 'nuclear' manner – urban nuclei emerged as a result of a dynamic involvement between settlement patterns, agrarianism and their impact on kin and clan-relathionships. Large tracts of land in the Deccan were forested and impenetrable; however, rivers and passes provided initial avenues of contact between these emergent urban nuclei.

Deccan was not a stranger to the idea of a coinage as such – indeed, one of the earliest series of Indian coins is thought to have emerged in the Deccan, in the uplands of Krishna Valley near Wai in Maharashtra[21], quite independent of any influence from the North. In the decades prior to the ascendancy of the Magadhan Empire, various river valleys in Deccan produced a typologically distinct coinage[22]. The 'spine' of this coinage is the River Godavari but it spread along, most plausibly as a result of estuarine trading networks, to tributary systems, such as the Wainganga system in Vidarbha, or the Tapi-Poorna system in Northern Maharashtra. In around 300 BCE, these localized coinages were substituted by the currency of the Magadhan-Mauryan Empire, the silver *Karshapanas*, which have a pan-Indian distribution of finds. The Deccan is no exception – many depositions of *Karshapanas* have been noted in archaeological record[23], both as monetary finds and in cultural contexts, like deposits in a Stupa.[24]

The immediate aftermath of the Mauryan Empire and the ensuing fragmentation saw the gradual demise of the *Karshapana* currency. It resulted into regionally issued punch-marked coins that mimicked the *Karshapana* type characteristics, such as the total number of symbols and symbols that were directly adopted from the *Karshapanas.* However, as local economies had been established and sufficiently monetized, a new and fascinating monetary

phenomenon emerged in their lieu. Concomitant with the rapid rise in urbanization and emergence of local economies around these proliferating urban centres, coinages with a unique feature appeared. The types in these coinages show a marked geographic orientation in their distribution. In my doctoral thesis, I identified this phenomenon as 'regiospecificity'[25].

'Regiospecific' coinages have a few common characteristics –

1. they are mainly of base metals such as copper, zinc and lead alloys. In all likelihood, they served the function of being a 'token' to the *Karshapana* currency

2. They are manufactured using a variety of techniques – some are struck from dies, some are cast from molten metals, some are stamped with dies on flans or blanks that are made by casting; some betray a 'punch-marked' appearance as they are struck with multiple dies.

3. The coins are largely uninscribed; however, a distinct trend to bear inscriptions emerges within certain series. These inscriptions are in Brahmi script and in the Prakrit language. They usually end in a genitive case ending '*-sa*' and bear the name of an issuer, sometimes (but not always) with a royal qualifier like *Raño* (= 'Of King'). Occasionally these inscriptions refer to cities or to motifs on the coins, like the name of an icon.

4. Collectively, certain coin types are found in ambits of certain geographic locales with not very many trans-regional occurrences noted. The execution, fabric, style and overall appearance of these regiospecific coin types is distinct and, in many instances, a 'flavour' can be discerned to attribute the coins to particular locales, even when very little else in attributive terms is available. The metrology of the coins also plays a role, as in many instances localized weight standards can also be discerned.

5. The motifs on the coins are largely comprised of flora and fauna, and a range of symbols. Many have cultural bearings – figural representations are mostly of deities; some, like the

‘lustration of Lakshmi’ (*Abhisheka Lakshmi*) are readily identifiable, while some others are enigmatic. Animals associated with kingship, such as the horse, the elephant or the lion predominate and so do some animals associated with deities, such as an ass or a donkey associated with Balarama. The symbols are drawn from a common cultural pool – swastikas and Nandipadas predominate and so does the ‘Ujjain’ symbol (two dumbbells crossed over each other, with significant variations on the orbs and quadrants). It is worthwhile to note, however, that some symbols, by the virtue of execution and stylization, distinctively appear to assume a ‘dynastic’ role; symbols with a typified execution are shared on coins issued by groups of individuals / rulers, thereby suggesting an affinity that might be clan / kinship based.

Regiospecific Coinages in the Deccan in the pre-Satavahana period:

A] The Uninscribed coins and the Inscribed region, city and ‘deity’ issues:

When the geographic regions yielding specific coin types are mapped, a picture of their distribution begins to emerge. There are four core areas which have the immediate post-Mauryan regiospecific coinages established.

1. North Maharashtra and Khandesh – characterised generally by the Tapi-Poorna river valley covering districts of Nandurbar, Dhule, Jalgaon (archaeological sites include Prakashe and Bahal)

2. Central Maharashtra (Marathwada) / East Vidarbha – present-day areas in Aurangabad, Jalna, Buldhana, Akola districts (archaeological sites: Paithan, Daunak, Bhon)

3. Vidarbha proper – Nagpur, Wardha, Chandrapur, Bhandara and Yavatmal districts (archaeological sites: Pauni, Paunar, Adam, Chandankheda, Bhandak)

4. South Vidarbha and Telangana – Yavatmal and Nanded districts of Maharashtra; Nizamabad, Adilabad and Karimnagar districts of Telangana (archaeological sites: Arni, Pusad, Kotalingala, Bodhan, Peddabankuru)

The accompanying map shows how these areas tentatively spread out. Of course, this is a schematic outlay but it would suffice to suggest the emergence of these monetized regions (MAP 1).

The area of Vidarbha offers the most promise so far as numismatic evidence goes. Sites like Kotalingala, Adam and Pauni have yielded very promising archaeological results so far as numismatic finds go[26] and the same has been corroborated through regular finds of metal scavenging communities, who work in semi-dry riverbeds to scavenge for precious metals and are a chief source of coin finds which they then sell to private individuals. A lot of data thus reported and collected is lamentably without a proper archaeological context as there exists no official channel to net this data into the discipline of archaeology in India; however, that does not diminish its importance, particularly with regard to the numismatic data, which presents reliable intrinsic methodologies (discussed further) and can be useful even without an archaeological context.

The earliest local series of base-metal coinages to emerge succeeding the Mauryan *Karshapana* currency are uninscribed coinages that populate sites like Prakashe in the Tapi Valley. The types are distinct – for example, uninscribed die-struck coins with a stylized palm tree in railing on obverse and an ‘open cross’ symbol on reverse are only ever found at Prakashe (FIG 1). In Vidarbha the picture is more complicated – a number of uninscribed coin types, manufactured by a variety of techniques, circulate here in the immediate post-Mauryan aftermath, circa 200 BCE. Noteworthy here is a series of uninscribed cast copper coins with a wide range of symbols. Similar introduction of localized uninscribed cast coins

is also evident in the Lower Tapi Valley and in Northern Telangana. Illustrated here is a local uninscribed cast coin from Vidarbha, showing a three-arched hill and a cross symbol (FIG 2). In Central Maharashtra, the uninscribed coinage is mostly die-struck and employs designs with a complex symbolic programme, with main animate and inanimate symbols often embellished with a plethora of smaller symbols – on this coin we see an elephant and a tree-in-railing symbol, with many small symbols surrounding each motif (FIG 3).

These uninscribed regional coins then gradually gave way to inscribed coins. However, it would be wrong to suggest that there is a watertight compartmentalisation in these two features. It is of course plausible, nay, certain that the uninscribed and inscribed coin series must have overlapped with each other. The advent of the inscribed coins is important because it is our earliest evidence of a local 'script culture' advancing in the Deccan. The coins which mention regions as their identifier and those that refer to city-states as issuers are significant in this respect.

Two instances of a 'region-state' being mentioned on coins are noted – Beṇākaṭa and Bhojakaṭa[27]. The Beṇākaṭa coin is punch-marked; the inscription appears in one of punches while the other punches comprise symbols, like the 'Ujjain' symbol (four circular orbs joined by bars in a cross-formation) (FIG 4). The Bhojakata coin is die-struck and bears the Brahmi inscription (Bho)jakatasa above an 'Ujjain' symbol, a horse, and a wheel (FIG 5). Both Benakata and Bhojakata are mentioned in donative inscriptions on architectural fragments of Buddhist monuments, like the Stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut, as identifiers for the donors so there is a direct link between the onomastic on coins and epigraphs. The tendency to identify people in inscriptions as well as circulatory medium of exchange with the names of the regions alludes to a primordial 'identity formation' and a reflexive recognition of these regions as socio-political units. This underlines their importance, particularly when viewed

through the discursive lens of B. D. Chattopadhyaya and his emphasis on the role of regions in understanding post-Mauryan state formation.

So far, two city-states from the Deccan are identified by their inscriptions on coins. These instances add to the wider array of city-state issues from further North, in Malwa, in the Chambal – Betwa divide, where a number of cities like Ujjayani, Bhagila, Vidisha, Kurara, Kuraghara, Nandinagara, Athakanagara, and Moragiri are known to have issued coins with their names inscribed on them[28]. Like Beṇākaṭa and Bhojakaṭa, a number of these cities are also found inscribed as identifiers / descriptors for donors who have left inscribed attestations of their piety on Buddhist monuments like Sanchi. The city-states from Vidarbha known to have struck coins are Bhadrapurika and Bhadravati. The coin of Bhadrapurika bears a standing bull on the obverse and a hill with a bird on the reverse (FIG 6). The name Bhadrapurika is inscribed in Brahmi below the bull. The Bhadravati coin has a tree-in-railing symbol with inscription *Bhadavatiye* in Brahmi to its right. The other side bears an elephant (FIG 7). The identity of the Bhadrapurika is uncertain – it might be worth to hazard a guess that it was modern-day Pauni as many coins of the 'Bhadra' kings (discussed below) are found here. Bhadravati is most likely the archaeological site of Bhandak, known also for the Vijasan Buddhist cave complex.

Coins with inscriptions referring to the motif are also known and in particular they refer to the river goddess Beṇā, depicted as a frontal image holding a pair of fish in one of her hands while the other is placed akimbo[29]. Why particularly this image needed to be identified with a label, when many other such depictions were not, would be a good question but since the images with the same iconography appear to be generically used across the subcontinent to represent a river goddess, an identifier inscription referring to a river in the region the coins are found would help in adding a particularity to the identity of the deity.[30]

B] Coins inscribed with personal names:

As mentioned earlier, a tendency to incorporate inscriptions into the design programme appears gradually in the regiospecific coinages. Apart from the region, city or deity-related inscriptions we have just seen, there are a number of coin types from these regions which bear names of individuals. While not all of these bear a royal qualifier, it would be reasonable to assume that they are monarchical issues; there are many other examples of coinages roughly contemporary to these series, where names without an explicit royal title are encountered, and they are generally taken to be the names of local kings. However, a caveat should be made that these individuals might not have been consecrated kings, and it is possible at least in principle that they are issuers of these coins in other capacities, like merchants or heads of guilds or feudal lords.

What links all these individuals very distinctly is the fact that their coins are ‘evolutionary’ in the sense that they carry the same aspects as the uninscribed series, like the symbolic programme drawn from a cultural collective, or weight standards specific to the localized economies the coins cater to. The additional layer is the inscription and with it we have more tools on hand to deploy these coins as a source of historical evidence. The names have onomastic components like endings, which help us group the issuers together in terms of classifying the coins. By far the most common name ending is ‘-Mitra’ (rendered in Prakrit as *-mita*) and we have a number of individuals such as Kanhamita (Krishnamitra, FIG 8), Suyamita (Suryamitra FIG 9), Bhumimita (Bhumimitra), Balamita (Balamitra FIG 10). The other salient group is of individuals with ‘-Bhadra’ (Prakrit *-bhada*) ending names – coins of Damabhada (Damabhadra FIG 11), Sachabhada (Satyabhadra FIG 12, FIG 13), Savabhada (Sarvabhadra) and Dhamabhada (Dharmabhadra FIG 14) are known. In this group, the coins with the name ‘Sachabhada’ form two distinct series – one with and the other without a royal qualifier and also with considerable typological differences, so it is plausible that they were

two different individuals, Satyabhadra I and Satyabhadra II. It is plausible that issuers sharing such onomastic features were a kinship-related group and sometimes, their coins bear tantalizing clues to this suggestion, such as affinity to certain symbols which they share.

The 'Mitra' and 'Bhadra' groups were the first independent groups of post-Mauryan rulers ever known in the Deccan[31]. Their coins are found mainly in Vidarbha and several have been found in archaeological context at the site of Adam[32]. Amongst these, the coins of Damabhada are very likely to be the earliest – they display a variety of manufacturing techniques, including inscribed copper punch-marked coins. Some of these carry distinct symbols and it is plausible that they were struck at various urban centres that spanned Damabhadra's domains.

Apart from these two groups from Vidarbha there are a number of other individuals whose names coins bear. In a 'regiospecific' sense, their types map onto Vidarbha as well as other regions. They can be described as follows:

1. Ashvabudha and Ayadatta (Vidarbha) – the coins of both these individuals are known in the punch-marked fabric. Their names do not bear a royal qualifier. (FIG 15, FIG 16)

2. Subena (Vidarbha) – qualified as a 'king', his coins are known from a single die-struck type, which bears a human figure carrying a stick and a water-pot on obverse, and an elephant walking to right on the reverse (FIG 17).

3. Sebaka, Kukutakhada and Viga (South Viadrbha / Yavatmal) – coins of these indiviudals, all qualified as 'kings', form a group linked to each other by type features, such as the reverse emblem, which is comprised of a characteristically depicted, double-lined Nandipada and an 'open cross' symbol (FIG 19, FIG 20). The coins with the name 'Sebaka' are by far the most numerous of the groups, they are of the 'bull' and 'elephant'-types and have been reported from the so-called 'Pusad hoard' (FIG 18).[33] Coins of kings Kukutakhada (FIG 19) and Viga

(FIG 20), closely resembling those of Sebaka, are also found in the Pusad hoard, thereby suggesting chronological proximity of these kings.

4. coins of 'Pātālatoḷata' (FIG 21) – this individual's name conspicuously does not bear a royal qualifier on his coins and they are also found in the same region as the one which yielded the coins of the 'Pusad Hoard'[34]. But his coins distinctly bear a reverse device which is different than all others – it is a prominent 'sun burst' motif, which is usually surrounded by smaller ancillary symbol.

5. Bhumimita, Balamita and Usabhamita (East Vidarbha / Central Maharashtra) – coins with these names are diverse but quite clearly part of a regional monetary picture as they all are struck to the same weight standard. They also bear a symbolic programme which is far more 'dense' than other series and resembles closely to the uninscribed coins from the same region.

6. Gobhada, Harivāya Siri, Kamvaya Siri and Samagopa (South Vidarbha / North Telangana FIG 22, FIG 23, FIG 24) – coins of these rulers, all qualified as such with the royal title, are found mainly from the urban centre of Kotalingala, in North Telangana.[35] The name ending of Gobhada (Gobhadra) links him with individuals with the same ending located further north in Vidarbha, while the reverse device of the coins of Samagopa reminds us of the double-lined Nandipada of the 'Sebaka' group of kings mentioned above, that were his close contemporaries to the North-Northwest.

7. coins with the name 'Kaṭahādi' (Central Maharashtra) – coins bearing this name are known both with and without the royal qualifier. The chief motifs on Kaṭahādi's coins are the bull (FIG 25) and the elephant (FIG 26), but he also issues coins in the types that share the reverse devices of the 'Sebaka' group of rulers described above (FIG 27).

Coins and Chronology:

Having outlined the numismatic ‘landscape’ of Deccan in the post-Mauryan epoch, a good question would be what is the utility of these coins? how can they help us understand the historical processes and developments of the milieu in which early Buddhist art flourished? After all, sites like Pauni or Bhon, which are intimately connected with the occurrence and spread of Buddhist monuments, lie very much in the ambit of the regional economic microcosms that these coins served, as objects of value transfer and exchange. There are three ways the numismatic evidence can be deployed –

1. where it links up with secondary evidence, such as inscriptions, with a bearing on chronology

2. what it reveals in terms of internal connections within these groups, for example a weight standard, or type linkages such as motifs or symbols being directly co-opted

3. through the important numismatic phenomenon of ‘counterstriking’ - sometimes, coins are manufactured from coins already struck, by stamping them with newer devices. This produces a relationship between the two issuing authorities – the authority that stamps the coins of another authority can exist only as a contemporary or successor of that authority, but never the predecessor.

A caveat should be made here – establishing an ‘absolute chronology’ for any of these entities is well-nigh impossible, in absence of an absolute chronology for the post-Mauryan epoch in general. Chronologies based on textual evidence have given us some brackets to situate these developments in; however, the picture that emerges from coins is so much at a variance from any of the textbook chronologies that we have been accustomed to, that it would be wrong to box the numismatic evidence into the textual framework at best, or simply futile, at worst.

<u>Inscriptions and coins:</u>

Barring one exception (discussed below), there are no direct concordances known for inscriptional mentions of any of these individuals – however, epigraphy helps us situating the coinage in a wider chronological bracket. As mentioned earlier, the names of *Beṇākaṭa* and *Bhojakaṭa*, which appear on coins, are also known as 'origin descriptors' for individuals from the Buddhist *Sangha* and laity, who have recorded their donations at sites like Bharhut[36]. There is a general agreement about dating the flourish of these sites to about 150 – 100 BCE. There are outlier epigraphic mentions which also point to this bracket; noteworthy are the 'Heliodoros Pillar' inscription from Besnagar near Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh[37] and the 'Kharavela' inscription from Hathigumpha cave[38] in the Udayagiri rock-cut cave complex near Bhubaneshwar, Orissa. The former is dated in the reign of a local king, Kasiputa Bhagabhadra and mentions the 'Yavana' king Antialkidas of Taxila. His dates are widely agreed to be about 130-120 BCE. Whether the 'Bhadra' kings of Vidarbha had any connections with this Bhagabhadra (or indeed, Gobahdra, known from the Telangana / South Vidarbha coin series) is not known but it is a tempting consideration. The Hathigumpha inscription valorises Kharavela, the ruler of the Mahameghavahana dynasty, for "disregarding Satakamni, despatching to the western regions an army strong in cavalry, elephants, infantry (*nara*) and chariots (*ratha*) and by that army having reached the *Kanha-bemna*, throwing Asikanagara into consternation"[39]. The location of this place is archaeologically substantiated by the find of a terracotta sealing from the Adam excavations[40], which bears the inscription *Asikasa Janapadasa*[1] and the fact that it lies to the West of Orissa, where Kharavela's kingdom was situated neatly fits in with the inscriptional mention.

However, by far the most significant correlation coins have with an inscription, particularly in a Buddhist context, is provided by the issues of Kaṭahādi. On the right side of the façade of cave 10 (as one faces it) at Ajanta, an inscription carved on a smoothened tableau records the

[1] The reading as given in the excavation report appears to be incorrect. The inscription on the seal is *Asikānāṃ Janapadasa* with the genitive collective noun referring to the 'Asika people'.

donation of a *Gharamukha* (literally ‘mouth of the house’) or the entrance or façade, by Vasithiputa Kaṭahādi[41]. The palaeography of the inscription is early, comparable to the letter styles of the Naneghat inscription. While this inscription has been mentioned many times as a marker in studies about Ajanta[42] to date the cave 10 as the earliest excavation at the site, consensus prevails on dating it to the first century BCE. Coins bearing the name ‘Kaṭahādi’ appear to be decidedly of a pre-Satavahana horizon and would most plausibly be dated to the second century BCE. Coins of Kaṭahādi are indicative of the political clout he had - not only are they known in various types, suggestive of a strong fiscal imprint, he also appears to have expanded his realm towards the West, taking over areas previously held by Sebaka and Kukutakhada, and continuing to issue coins in their types. This makes it highly likely that the ‘Kaṭahādi’ mentioned in the inscription at cave no. 10 at Ajantha is the same as the one who issued the coins. If this is indeed the case, we would need to push back the chronology of the rock-cut excavations at Ajanta by about a hundred years. This would be a major chronological revision of not only Ajanta as a Buddhist establishment, but also for the spread and ‘sedimentation’ of Buddhist monastic sites in the Deccan, not to mention the transition from a ‘wooden’ phase to the rock-cut hewing of Buddhist dwellings in the region.

Coins and kings: internal connections and chronology

The most important intrinsic evidence coins have on offer is the type-specific connections and similarities they have between issues of various entities. In absence of any other evidence, these are crucial to create a ‘skeleton’ of linkages, upon which the flesh of chronology could be built. Some of these, like palaeography of coin legends, are of less significance than others, such as a direct connection in type features like co-option of motifs or specific symbols. Apart from suggesting a mere chronological proximity between the two issuers whose coins demonstrate such similarities, such co-opting might also be interpreted to suggest a political underpinning for the observation.

So far as type similarities are concerned the coins of two pairs stand out – the coins of Ashwabudha and Damabhadra of the punch-marked type are almost identical in the choice and placement of the marks, except for the legend. Similarly, coins of Satyabhadra (II) and Subena are almost type-identical – they both have a standing male figure on obverse, with small symbols around and the legend in Brahmi placed vertically to left. The reverse motif, comprising an elephant walking to right with some symbols surrounding it also remains the same. Thus, it would be logical to conclude that within the Vidarbha region, Ashwabudha and Damabhadra, and Satyabhadra (II) and Subena were very likely close contemporaries.

However, when such similarities exist across regions it is more likely to be an outcome of a political situation, like one ruler overtaking territory of another from a different region and then issuing coins in a specific type of that region. This is the case with Kaṭahādi. His coins are mainly known from Central Maharashtra – however, he is known to have issued two types in the neighbouring regiospecific series, from South Vidarbha, exemplified by the coins from the 'Pusad Hoard'. Kaṭahādi's coins 'bull'-type coins from South Vidarbha (FIG 27) co-opt the typical features of 'bull'-type coins that are issued by Sebaka, Viga and Kukkutakhada, such as a typically executed Nandipada symbol and other associated symbols on the reverse. This suggests that Kaṭahādi must have, at some point, taken over the region in which these other coins had been circulating. The closest Kaṭahādi's coins in South Vidarbha resemble are issues of Kukkutakhada, so it is likely that he was the immediate predecessor of Kaṭahādi.

Counterstrikes:

As described earlier, counterstriking is a numismatic phenomenon that yields us incontrovertible evidence with regard to the order of issuers involved. In case of pre-Satavahana coins in the Deccan we have such evidence on hand to ascertain the internal

chronologies of some of the Vidarbha kings. Thus, we know coins of Damabhadra counterstruck by Satyabhadra (I) (FIG 28) and coins of Satyabhadra (I) counterstruck by Dharmabhadra, FIG 29), thereby giving us an order of succession – Damabhadra > Satyabhadra (I) > Dharmabhadra. The fact that these independent ruling entities were subsumed within the Satavahana Empire by Satakani is indicated by his counterstriking of two local Vidarbha rulers, namely Suryamitra and Dharmabhadra (FIG 30, FIG 31). The evidence of the Hathigumpha inscription once again is corroborated here – it mentions Satakani as already in control of Vidarbha, so his taking over the region from local rulers like Suryamitra and Dharmabhadra must have been accomplished before the inscription was engraved.

Some coins of Pātālatoḷata are interesting because they are evidently struck over Satakani's issues (FIG 32). These coins conceivably suggest that the Satavahana takeover of Vidarbha was not without a fightback - Pātālatoḷata appears to have resisted this expansion and asserted himself, striking coins in his own name either during or after Satakani's reign. As we know from inscriptional evidence[43] that Satakani had a long reign lasting at least thirty if not more years, Pātālatoḷata's reassertion is likely to have been during his reign.

Iconography and Symbolism:

It might be appropriate to outline some salient features with regard to what the coins actually depict in the pre- Satavahana epoch. As mentioned earlier the depictions on the coins are mostly animate and symbolic, and they are shown in a 'programmatic' design. They usually consist of motifs associated with authority, kingship and legitimacy which are complimented sometimes by attributive inscriptions. Some of these symbols could well suggest clan or kinship relations and as such, could be termed as 'dynastic'. Motifs like trees, rivers, hills and animals ranging from beasts like elephant, lion, bull or horse to creatures like fishes and

turtles, are preponderant on these coins. The animal motifs might not be entirely secular as they are sometimes shown with religious paraphernalia like sacrificial posts, which suggest their association with rituals related to kingship. But it is also worth noting that the many of these depictions have 'multiple vocabularies' – they could well stand for meanings adduced from different contexts and social cultures. For example, the four animals mentioned above also stand for their association with the Buddha and could well be regarded as 'Buddhist' symbols. The same is true for symbols like 'tree in railing' or 'wheel' which have multiple associations and meanings. This trend is, however, in parallel with the trend we see in early Buddhist art where motifs like the venerated tree, snakes or symbols like the Nandipada, are co-opted from a wider socio-cultural pool.

Religious motifs and symbols on these coins include anthropomorphic figures, some of which are identified with label inscriptions as we have seen. Many are related to animist worship, personifying water bodies like rivers. Other estuarine symbols include the chimera *Makara* (usually shown as an elephant-headed piscine form), fishes, turtles and the river itself, shown in many instances as zigzag parallel lines. The *Pāncharātra* hero cult makes its presence emblematically, with plough and wheel symbols, standing for Sankarshana and Vasudeva respectively. The ass and the palm tree, also associated with Sankarshana, are seen on some coins. A cockerel standard in railing on coins of Subena and Satyabhadra (II) point towards the Skanda cult being co-opted into the symbolic programme. Amongst other familar icons, the Abhisheka Lakshmi is seen on many inscribed and uninscribed coins. There are also some enigmatic depictions – such as the man standing frontal on a lotus, legs flexed at knees, holding a water-pot (*Kamaṇḍalu*) and a staff (*Daṇḍa*) that we see on coins of Suryamitra, Satyabhadra (II) and Subena – which are yet to be identified with certainty.

Epilogue:

This paper underlines certain aspects of the post-Mauryan and pre-Satavahana epoch in the Deccan, primarily looking at numismatic data. Monetary phenomena, like the rise and spread of regiospecific coinages, can be effectively deployed as tools for historical reconstruction for a period where not much material evidence survives. It also acknowledges that numismatic depiction is highly stylized, owing to limits of functionality and technology of coin production. but even then, it is possible to discern a constant dialogue with a 'cultural collective' that both Art and coinage draw from. The backdrop for early Buddhist art in the Deccan is also the formative period for 'Deccan' to emerge as a socio-political entity in the post- Mauryan period. Historians have tried to unpick the constituent processes of state formation in Deccan, particularly with a view to underscoring the importance of regions and the emergence of clan and kinship-related polities. This observation and commentary thereupon are bolstered further by contemporary coinage in the Deccan. The plausibility of clan and kinship playing a vital role is emphasized by the onomastic and a shared repertoire of motifs and symbols that we see on coins. As I have stated above, some symbols appear to emerge as 'dynastic' symbols. The spatial mapping of these polities gives us a different and nuanced understanding of the importance of 'regions' in charting trajectories of urbanization, trade and commercial networks and struggle for political power. Numismatic evidence also helps in spatio-temporal placement of political and social processes. All these processes collectively form the backdrop for early Buddhist art. The picture we see from coins is at a total variance from 'received wisdom' or the established narrative so far as the post-Mauryan epoch is concerned. There is no sign of dynasties like the 'Sungas' here and it further begs the question of how engrained terminologies like 'Sunga Art' can be used to describe and discuss early Buddhist art in the Deccan[44].

[1] See for example - Joe Cribb, "Numismatic evidence and the date of Kaniṣka I", in *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art: Proceedings of the First International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 23rd-24th March, 2017*, ed. Wannaporn Rienjing and Peter Stewart (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 7-34; Many essays devoted to the subject in Deborah Klimburg-Salter and Michael Alram (ed.), *Coins, Art and Chronology: Essays on the pre-Islamic History of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1999).
[2] A trailblazing publication is Vidya Dehejia, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972).
[3] S. B. Deo and S.B. Joshi, *Pauni excavations (1969–70)*, (Nagpur: Nagpur University, 1972).
[4] The significant archaeological site of Ter was discussed by Douglas Barrett, *Ter* (Mumbai: Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, 1960). The most recent report of excavations at Ter is published in M.J. Patil et al, "A Preliminary Report of Excavations at Ter (Tagar), District Osmanabad, Maharashtra (2014-2015)", *Man and Environment* XLVII (2): 51-63 (2022).
[5] A survey of the site at Tirth Budruk is presented by Vijay Sarde, "Archaeological Remains of Early Historic and Medieval Period at Tirth Budruk and the Surrounding Area of Osmanabad District in Maharashtra", *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 8.2 (2020), 767-95. Bhon is relatively unknown to the wider discourse but a preliminary notice is Bhaskar Deotare, "Discovery of Structural Stupa at Bhon, District Buldana, Maharashtra", *Purātattva* 37 (2006-7): 176-85.
[6] Reshma Sawant, "Vidarbha: an Archaeo-Historical Approach (B.C.600-600A.D.)", PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Archaeology, Deccan College Post-Graduate & Research Institute (Deemed University), Pune, 2006.
[7] R. C. Senior, "More Gondophares, Less Azes and Just Who met St. Thomas?", *Oriental Numismatic Society, Occasional Paper no. 25*, June 1991. Available at https://www.orientalnumismaticsociety.org/archive/OP_025.pdf (accessed 17-7-2024)
[8] R. G. Bhandarkar, *Early History of the Dekkan Down to the Mahomedan Conquest*, 2nd Edition (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1895).
[9] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, 2nd edition (Oxford: OUP, 1958), 65-87.
[10] Romila Thapar, *Asoka And the Decline of The Mauryas* (Oxford: OUP, 1961), is still the best source to have an overview of source material on the landscape, administration and political philosophy of Asoka's reign.
[11] R. C. Mujumdar (gen. ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol.2: The Age of Imperial Unity* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951), 95-100.
[12] W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 145-6.
[13] Mujumdar, *The Age of Imperial Unity*, 191-5.
[14] V. V. Mirashi, *The History and Inscriptions of The Sātavāhanas And The Western Kshatrapas* (Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1981), 3-7.
[15] Mujumdar, *The Age of Imperial Unity*, 195-6.
[16] A. M. Shastri, "Purāṇas on the Satavahanas: An Archaeological-Historical Perspective" in A. M. Shastri (ed.), *The Age of the Satavahanas* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1999), 7-21.
[17] B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *Studying Early India: Archaeology, Texts and Historical Issues* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) incorporates the essay "Transition to the Early Historical period in the Deccan; A note", 39-47. It was first published in B. M. Pande and B. D. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Archaeology and History: Essays in Memory of A. Ghosh* (New Delhi: Agam Kala, 1987).
[18] B. P. Sahu, *The Changing Gaze: Regions and the Constructions of Early India* (OUP India, 2013) offers a theoretical insight and historiographic overview of the shift away from the 'centric' approach of early historians.
[19] Aloka Parasher Sen, *Settlement and Local Histories of the Early Deccan* (New Delhi: Manohar / Routledge, 2021) combines essays by the author that underline the importance of 'regions' in the Early Historic Period. The most important of the collection for our theme is "Defining the Deccan: The Archaeology of Localities and the Writing of Regional History", *Journal of Deccan Studies*, Vol.1 no. 1, June-December 2003, 14-32. A noteworthy paper that brings coins into the discussion is Aloka Parasher Sen, "Localities, Coins and the Transition to the Early State in the Deccan." *Studies in History* 23, no. 2 (2007): 231–69.
[20] B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *Studying Early India*, 41.
[21] Michael Mitchiner, *Ancient Trade and Early Coinage, Vol. 2* (London: Hawkins Publications, 2004), 965-972. These silver coins bear a 'pulley'-like mark and are known in a range of five or six denominations. Mitchiner has dated the inception of this coinage to around 450 BCE.
[22] Prashant Kulkarni, *Archaic Coinage of the Godavari Valley and The Deccan* (Nagpur: Eternal Arts and Coins LLP, 2022) discusses several series of these coins, with typical four-mark designs.
[23] For a detailed list, see P. L. Gupta, *Coin-hoards from Maharashtra* (Varanasi: Numismatic Society of India, 1970). Hoards from other parts of Deccan include P. L. Gupta, "Nasthulapur hoard of silver Roman and punch-marked coins", *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. 19 (1957), 1-8; P. L. Gupta, *The Amaravati Hoard of Silver Punch-marked Coins*, Andhra Pradesh Government Museum Series no.6 (Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh Government Museum, 1963)

[24] The Buddhist stupa at Bhattiprolu yielded three relic caskets, the first of which was placed on 24 silver *Kārshāpaṇa* coins, arranged in a Swastika-shape. Alexander Rea, *South-indian Buddhist Antiquities, Including The Stupas Of Bhattiprolu, Gudivada And Ghantasala And Other Ancient Sites In Krishna District, Madras Presidency, With Notes On Dome Construction, Andhra Numismatics, And Marble Sculpture* (Madras: Superintendant, Government Press, 1894), 12; Pl. IV, 13-14.

[25] Shailendra Bhandare, Historical Analysis of the Satavahana Era: A Study of Coins, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Mumbai, 1999, 49-54 (accessed at http://psindiancoins.com/unzipped/Kushans/Satavahanas/Historical_Analysis_of_the_Satavahana_Er%20(1).pdf on 15-8-2024)

[26] Adam is perhaps the most prolific site in Vidarbha so far excavated numismatic evidence goes. Excavations have yielded nearly 5300 coins dated to the Satavahana and pre-Satavahana periods alongside some equipment to make them, suggesting the existence of a mint. An extensive list (with several doubtful, or simply wrong, attributions) has been published in Amarendra Nath, *Excavations at Adam (1984-1992): a City of Asika Janapada*, vol. II (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2016), 641-829.

[27]Prashant P. Kulkarni, 'Coins of Beṇṇākaṭa and Bhojakaṭa', in *Festschrift in Honour of Dr Ellen Raven*, eds. Patrick Pasmans et al., Numismatic studies no. 5 of the Numismatic Society of Diest ('s-Hertogenbosch: Diestse Studiekring voor Numismatiek, 2023), 77-94.

[28] For a full discussion on coins of the city-states, see Parmanand Gupta, *Geography from Ancient Indian Coins & Seals* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 90-165.

[29] Prashant Kulkarni, 'Beṇṇākaṭa and Bhojakaṭa', publishes a large number of inscribed and uninscribed coins with this iconographic depiction.

[30] Shailendra Bhandare, 'Icon and Identity: A Numismatic Enquiry into Early Indian Terracotta Figurines – the case of 'Vasudhara', in *Nidhi*, vol. 3, ed. Prashant Kulkarni (Nagpur: Indian Coin Society), forthcoming.

[31] Many of these coins were first published by Ajaya Mitra Shastri and Chandra Shekhar Gupta, 'Mitra and Bhadra coins from Vidarbha', *Nidhi*, vol. 1, ed. A. M. Shastri (Nagpur: Indian Coin Society), 1990, 9-24.

[32]

[33]Prashant P. Kulkarni, 'Pusad Hoard of Pre-Satavahana Coins: A Treasure', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, LXIX-LXX (Varanasi: Numismatic Society of India), 2007, 172-186.

[34] Shailendra Bhandare, 'Patalatarita(?) and other Early Rulers of Maharashtra: a Note', Indian Coin Society Newsletter 41, 2006 (Nagpur: Indian Coin Society), 102-110.

[35] D. Raja Reddy and P. Suryanarayana Reddy, *Kotalingala Coinage of Satavahanas and Other Local Rulers: A Profile* (Hyderabad: Numismatic Society of Hyderabad), 1987.

[36] Heinrich Lüders, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol.2 Pt.2: Bharhut Inscriptions* (revised by E. Waldschmidt and M. A. Mehendale, Ootacamud: Government Epigraphist for India / Archaeological Survey of India), 1963, 32, 72-73. inscription no. A-49a mentions *Beṇākaṭa*, while inscriptions A 23 and A 24 mention *Bhojakaṭa*.

[37] J. H. Marshall, "Notes on archaeological exploration in India, 1908-9", *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, London, 1909, 1053-1056. Also, D.C. Sircar, *Select inscriptions*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, University of Calcutta), 1942, 90-91.

[38] D. C. Sircar, *Select inscriptions*, vol. 1, 206-212.

[39] Kashi Prasad Jayaswal and Rakhaldas, Banerji, "The Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela", *Epigraphia Indica* Volume XX, 1929-30 (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India), 1983, 86-87.

[40] Amarendra Nath, *Excavations at Adam*, vol. II, 615-616.

[41] James Burgess, *Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples and their Inscriptions*, Archaeological Survey of Western India, vol. 4 (London: Trubner and Co.), 1883, 116.

[42] Walter Spink, *Ajanta: History and Development*, volume 4: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture Year by Year (Leiden/Boston: E. J. Brill), 2009, 1; Richard Cohen, 'Ajanta's Inscriptions' in Walter Spink, *Ajanta: History And Development, volume 2: Arguments About Ajanta* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), 295.

[43] The sealing of Satakani found at Chandankheda is dated in his 30th regnal year and constitutes by far the only evidence so far to the duration of his reign. See Harry Falk, 'Two Dated Sātavāhana Epigraphs', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 52, 2009, 197-206; Prashant Kulkarni, 'Highly Important Sātavāhana Sealings from Chandankhedā', *Indian Coin Society Newsletter* 43, 2007, 46-49.

[44] I am very grateful to the following individuals for their assistance in providing access to numismatic data -Paul Abraham - chairman of the Hinduja Foundation, Mumbai; Sharughan Saravagi – proprietor, Classical Numismatic Gallery, Ahmadabad; Avinash Ramteke and Soham Ramteke, Nagpur; Prashant Kulkarni, Nagpur and Ameet Lomate, Pune.