

Women in the vanguard? Reflections on early Indian Buddhism



Peter Skilling
French School of Asian Studies (EFEO),
Bangkok

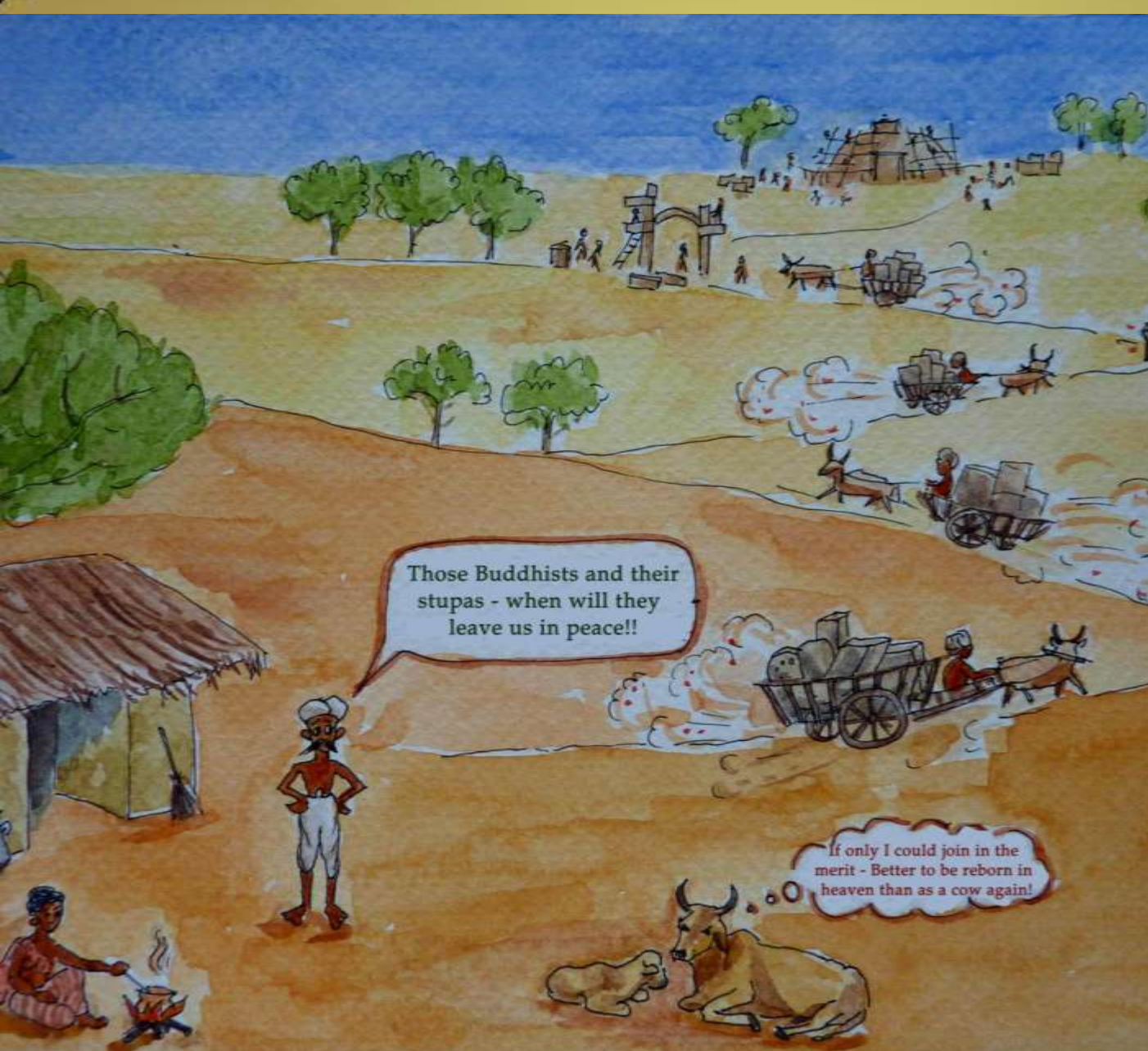
2014

Buddhist women were active participants in the construction of early Buddhism in India.

Nuns and laywomen were among the sponsors of monuments, monasteries, and statues of the Buddha across India, and a collection of verses attributed to nuns is among the earliest documents of female literature in India, or, perhaps, worldwide.

Were women merely donors, or were they also intellectual innovators?

In this paper, I reflect on this difficult and complex question.



2nd century
BCE to 2nd
century CE:

The Buddhist
building boom

Watercolour, 2012
by Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool

The earliest surviving Buddhist monuments were stupas built to house relics. Relics travelled first class across India, in processions of stately elephants. They were celebrated with music and dance.



Women and men celebrated the Buddha Śākyamuni through his relics. The housing of relics created new landscapes dominated by clusters of stupas and monastic structures, both on the hills and in the plains and valleys.



Stone coping from Vidisha (Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior (MP)).
2nd-1st c. BCE. One of the donors was a lady named Asabhā.
Photo P. Skilling, 2012.



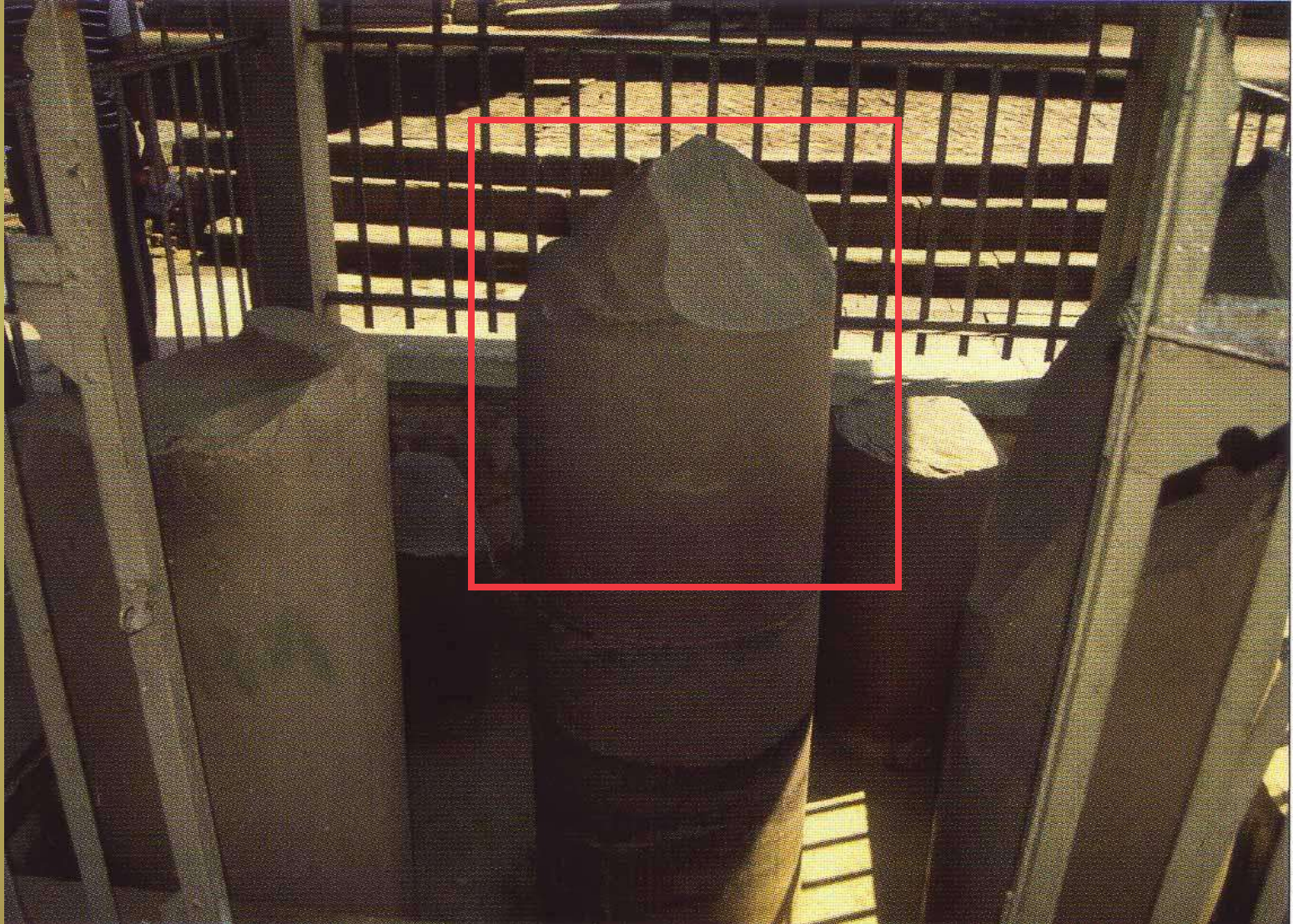
In the mid-2nd century BCE, King Asoka went on pilgrimage to pay respect to sites connected with the Buddha. Asoka's inscriptions express his deep concern for the welfare of the saṃgha, both monks and nuns, as well as for the male and female lay practitioners.

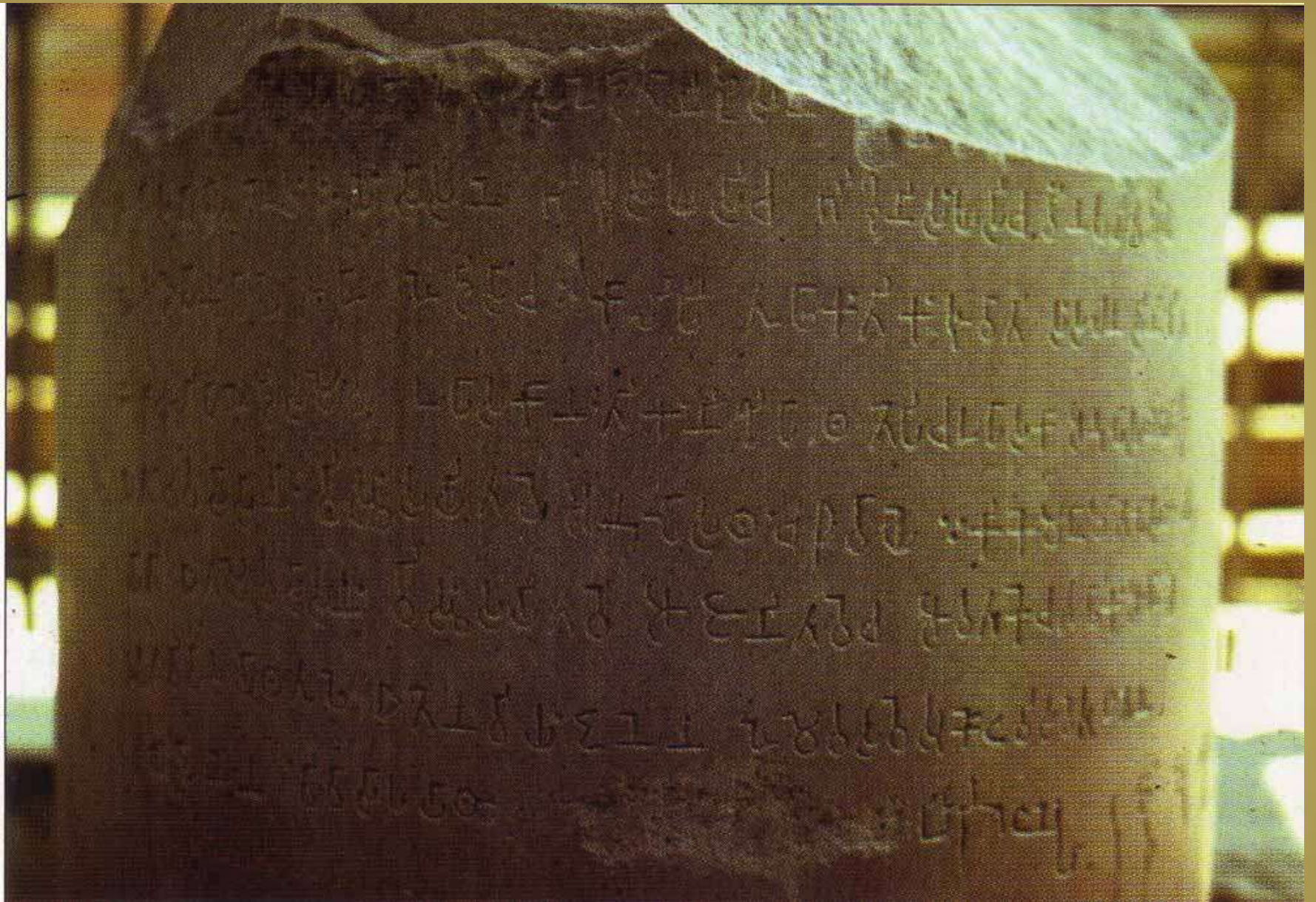
Inscribed relief depicting King Asoka (*raya asoko*) and his queen. Inscribed panel, Kanaganahalli, Karnataka (excavated during the 1997–98 season: *Indian Archaeology, 1997-98, A Review*, pl. 72).



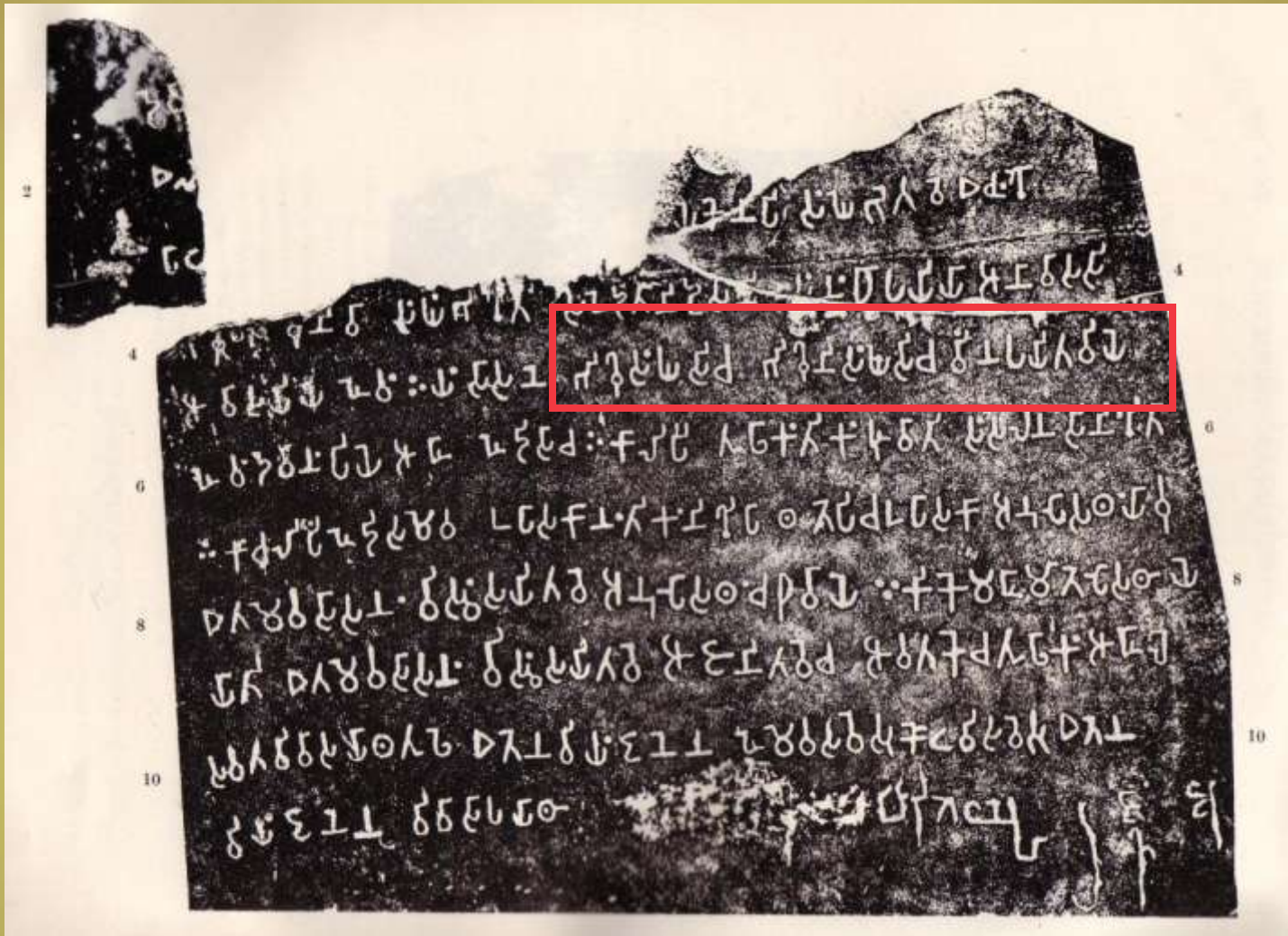
View of Sarnath and shed for Asokan pillar. Harry Falk. *Asokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source-Book with Bibliography*, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein, 2006, p. 106, p. 209.

Asokan pillar, Sarnath. Falk. op. cit., p. 209.





Sarnath Pillar inscription of Asoka



Sarnath Pillar inscription of Asoka
(Hultzsch repr. 1991, pp. 161-164)

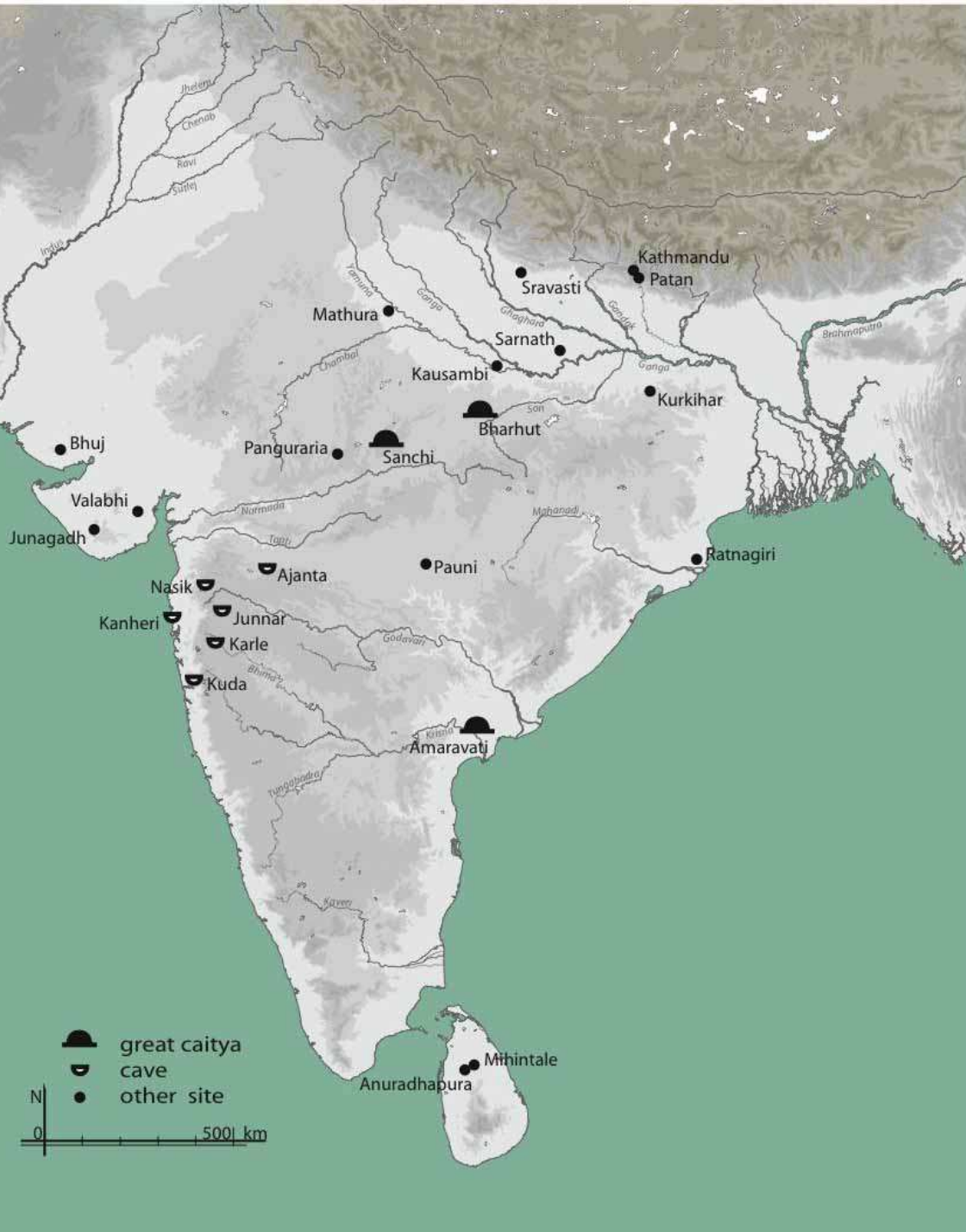
Sarnath pillar-inscription

- But indeed that monk or nun who shall break up the samgha should be caused to put on white robes and to reside in non-residence. Thus this edict must be announced to the samgha of monks and to the samgha of nuns. Thus speaks Devanampriya (hevam iyam sasane bhikhu-samghasi ca bhikuni-samghasi ca vimnapayitaviye).

Collective donation

- The early stupas were built through collective donation by females and males from many walks of life and sectors of society. They were not sponsored by kings or members of the court. This great collective effort of Buddhist communities defined a significant turn in India cultural history. At this crucial moment, women were among the sponsors and planners. Many of these sponsors were nuns. Some were queens and princesses, but the majority were lay-followers.

Bhikṣunī inscriptions in India: an overview



Map: *Pierre Pichard*



bhikhunikāye saṃvahikāye dānaṃ ālaṃbanaṃ.

This base stone is the gift of the nun Saṃvahikā.

Sarnath, Brahmi characters, 2nd century BC.

ASI, AR 1906-07, pl. XXX 1; Tsukamoto IV Sarn 85.

Mahabodhi Temple

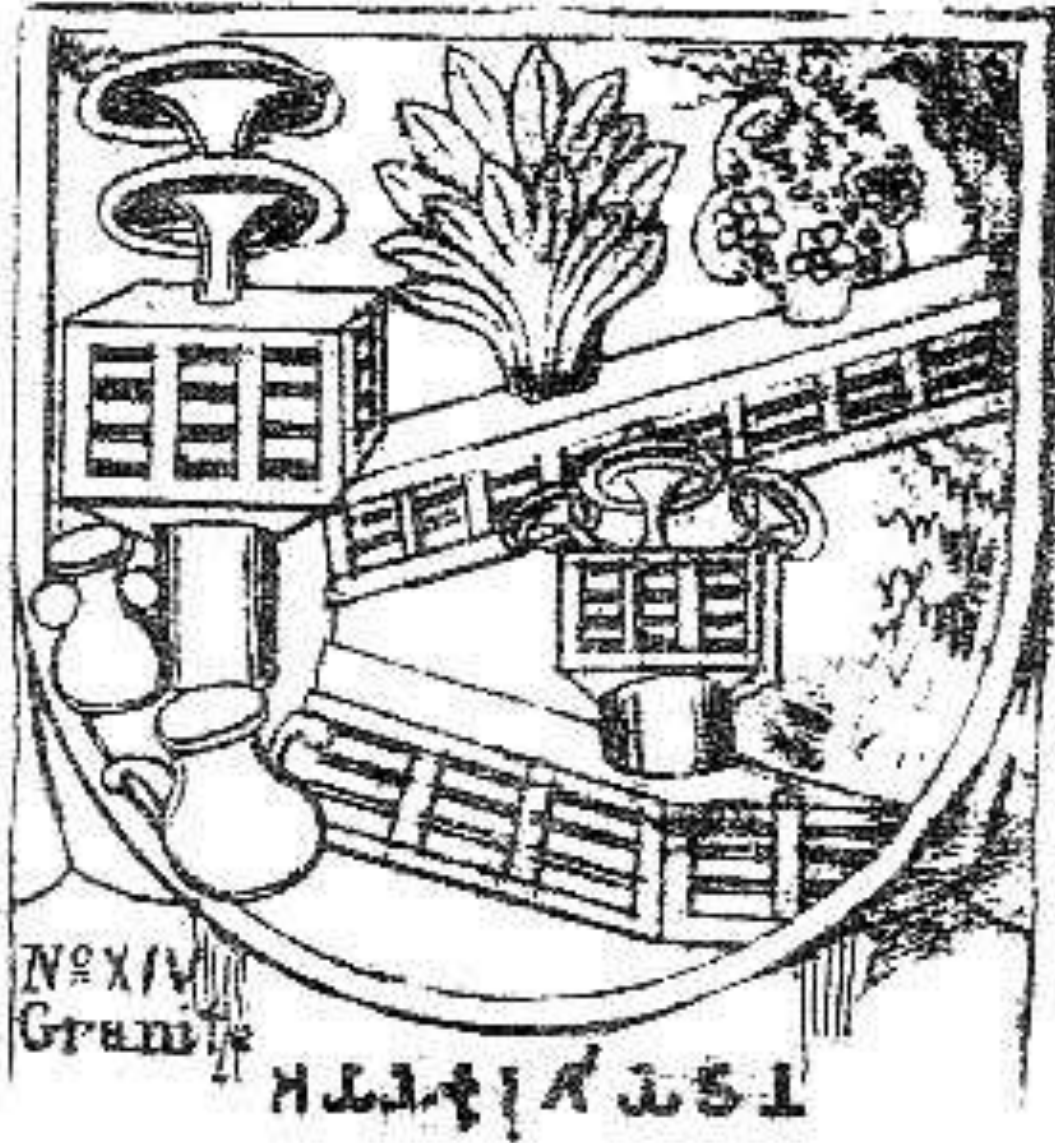


Some of the oldest dedication inscriptions are on the stone pillars that once encircled the Bodhi tree, before the temple was erected. They date to about 2nd-1st century BCE.



Railing of the Mahabodhi Temple:

Many of the railings
were sponsored by
Āryā Kuramṅī, a
queen.



Āyāye Kurugiyē
dānaṃ:

Gift of Āryā
Kurumṅī:

Mahabodhi
railing



This pillar donated by Kurumṅī is one of the few originals still kept at the temple.

Photo, P. Skilling,
29.10.2012.



TREE WORSHIPPED FROM RAIL AT
BUDDH-GAYÂ.
three leaved tree behind the flying figure

Āyāye Kurugiyē dānaṃ:

Gift of Āryā Kurumṅī:

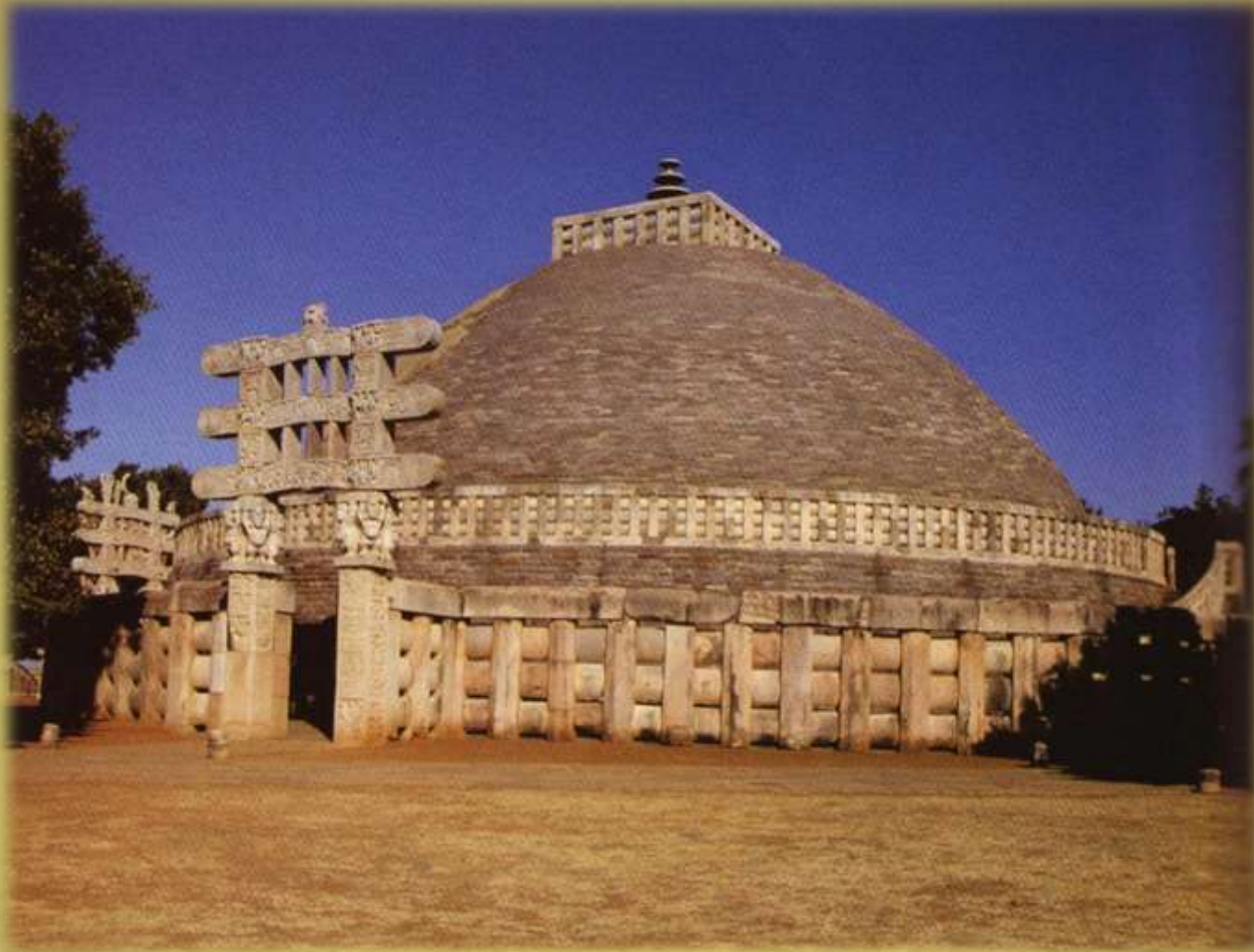
Mahabodhi railing

Bodh Gaya: Railing pillar donated by Āryā Kurumṅī (Bodh Gaya Museum)



Āyāye Kurugiyē dānaṃ

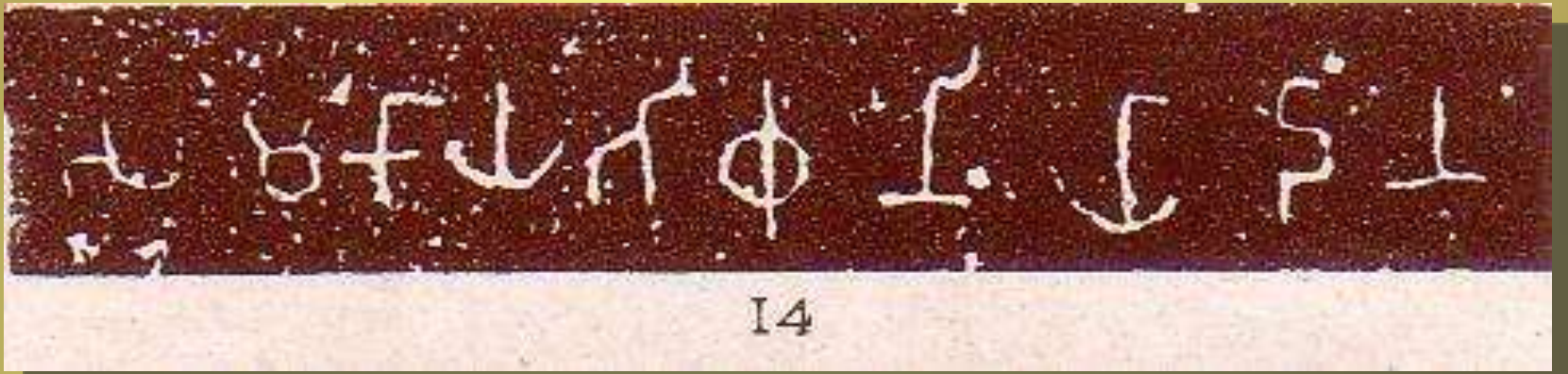




Sanchi Stupa I

(Regnier 1998, p. 58)

Sañchi Inscription

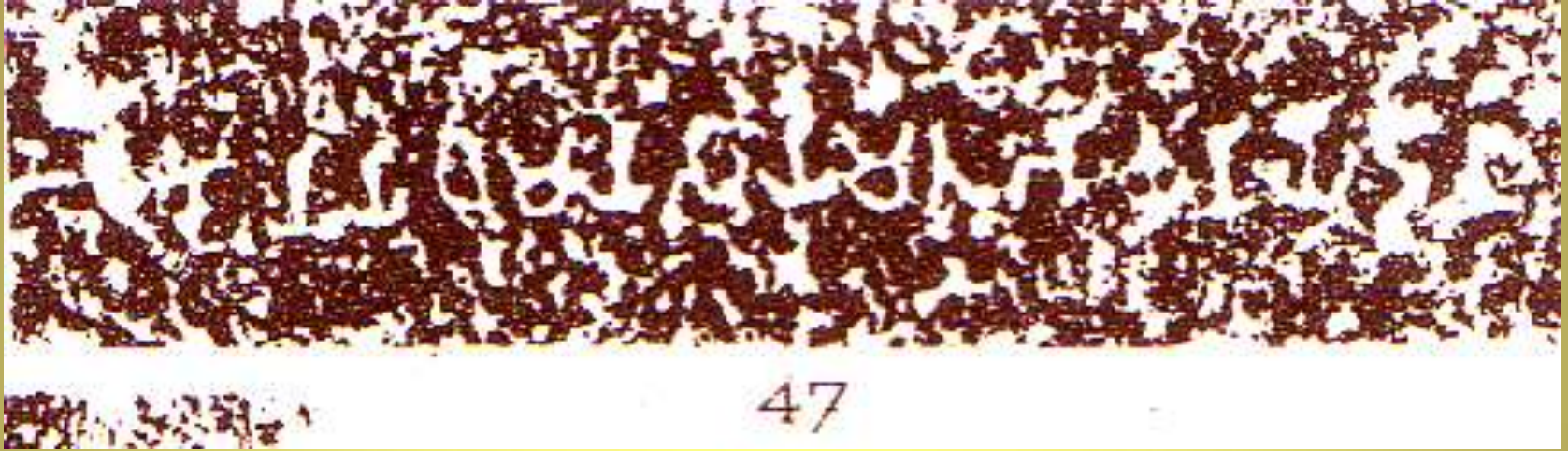


Pl. 128, 14. On a cross-bar (inside)

Samikāya bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Sāmikā (Svāmikā).

Sañchi Inscription



Pl. 129, 47. On a cross-bar (outside)

[U]jeniyā Dhamayasāyā matu bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of mother of the nun Dhamayasā (Dharmayaśā)
from Ujjenī (Ujjayinī).

Sañchi Inscription



Pl. 129, 58. On a Coping-bar (Outside)

Nāvagamikānā upasikānā dānaṃ

The gift of the female lay-worshippers of Navagāma
(Navagrāma).

Sañchi Inscription



Pl. 129, 73 On a coping stone (outside)

Sagharakhitāya Koramikāya bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Sagharakhita (Saṅgharakshita)
a pupil of Koramikā.

Sañchi Inscription



Pl. 130, 125. On a cross-bar (outside)

Yakhiya bhichuniye Vedisā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Yakhī (Yakshī) from Vedisa (Vediśā).

Satdhara, a massive stupa as big as Sanchi Stupa No. 1, was surrounded by a railing.



Many of the crossbars and uprights of the now dismantled railing were donated by nuns and laywomen



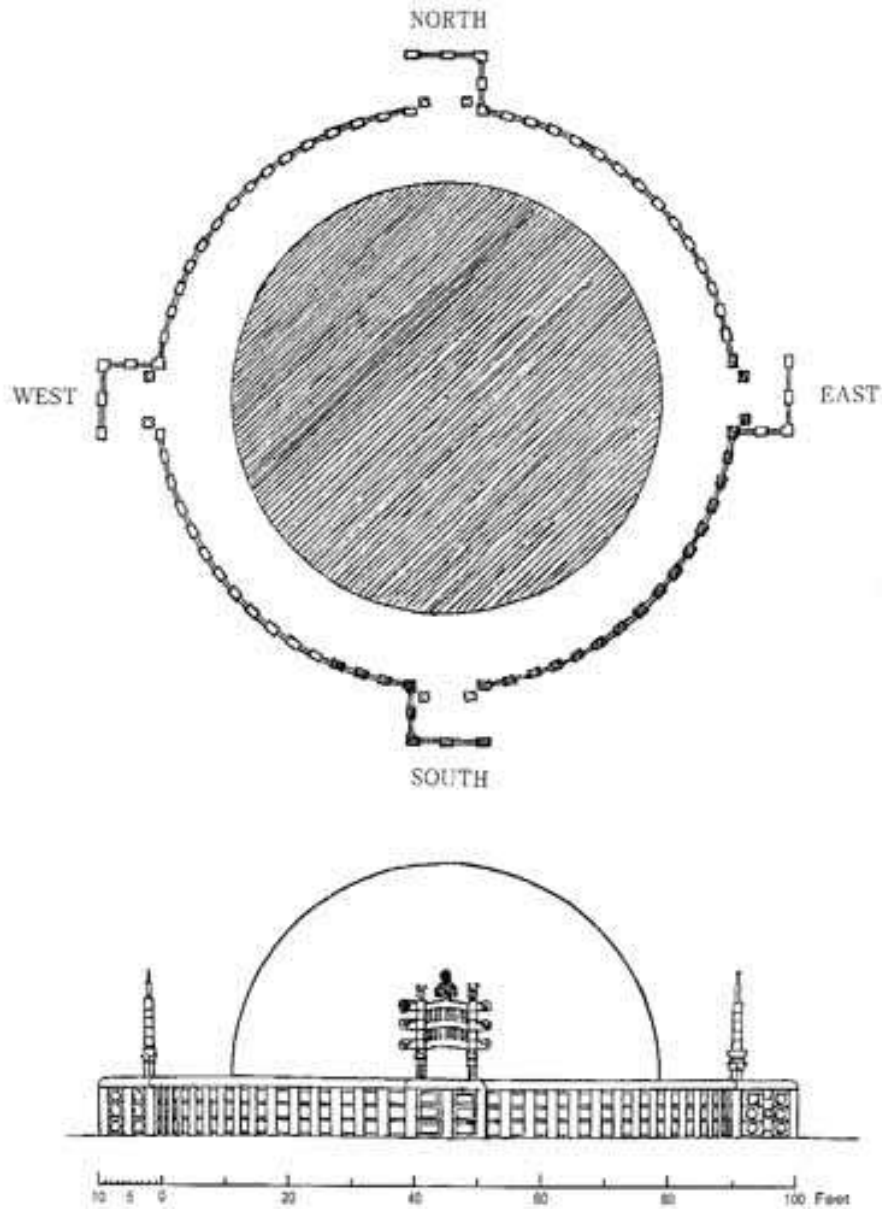
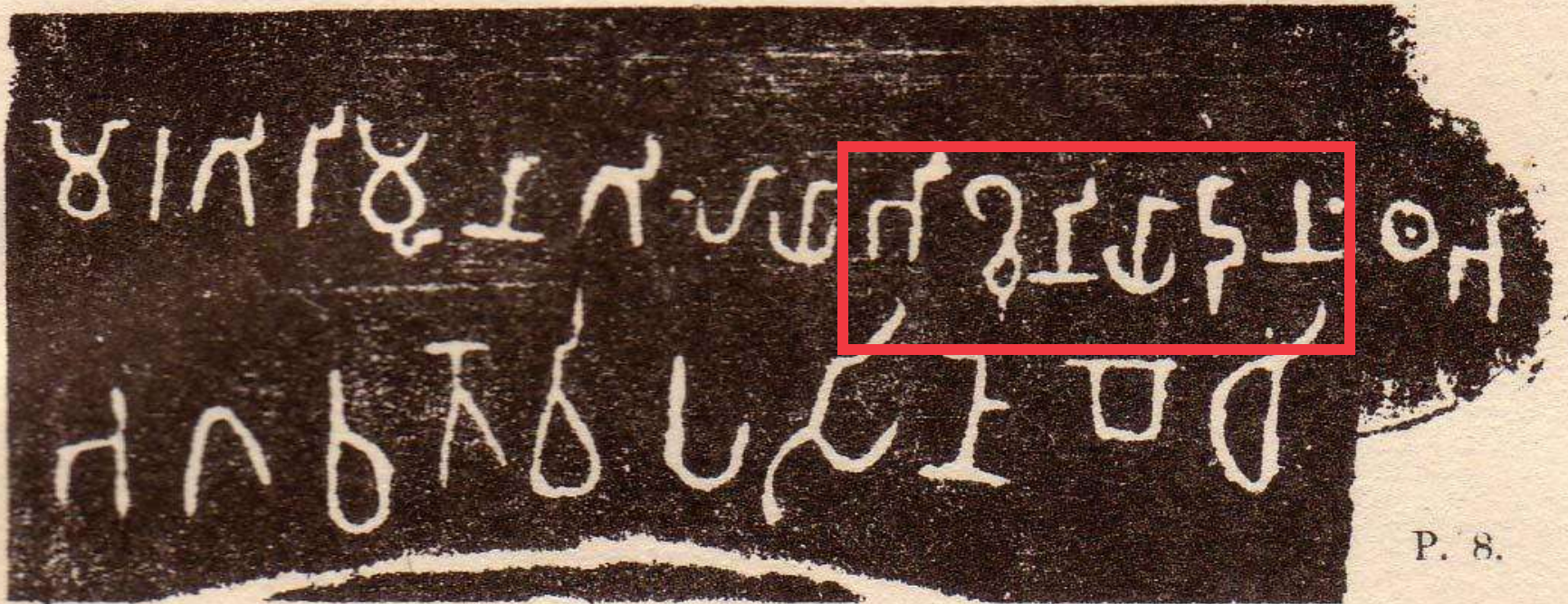


Fig. 24 Bhārhut の塔 (平面図・立南図)

Bharhut Stupa
(Tsukamoto 1998.
II, Fig. 24

Bharhut dedication inscription No. 4

Moragirimha Nāgilāyā bhikhuniyā danaṃ thabhā
... Pillars, the gift of the nun Nāgilā from Moragiri
(Mayūragiri).

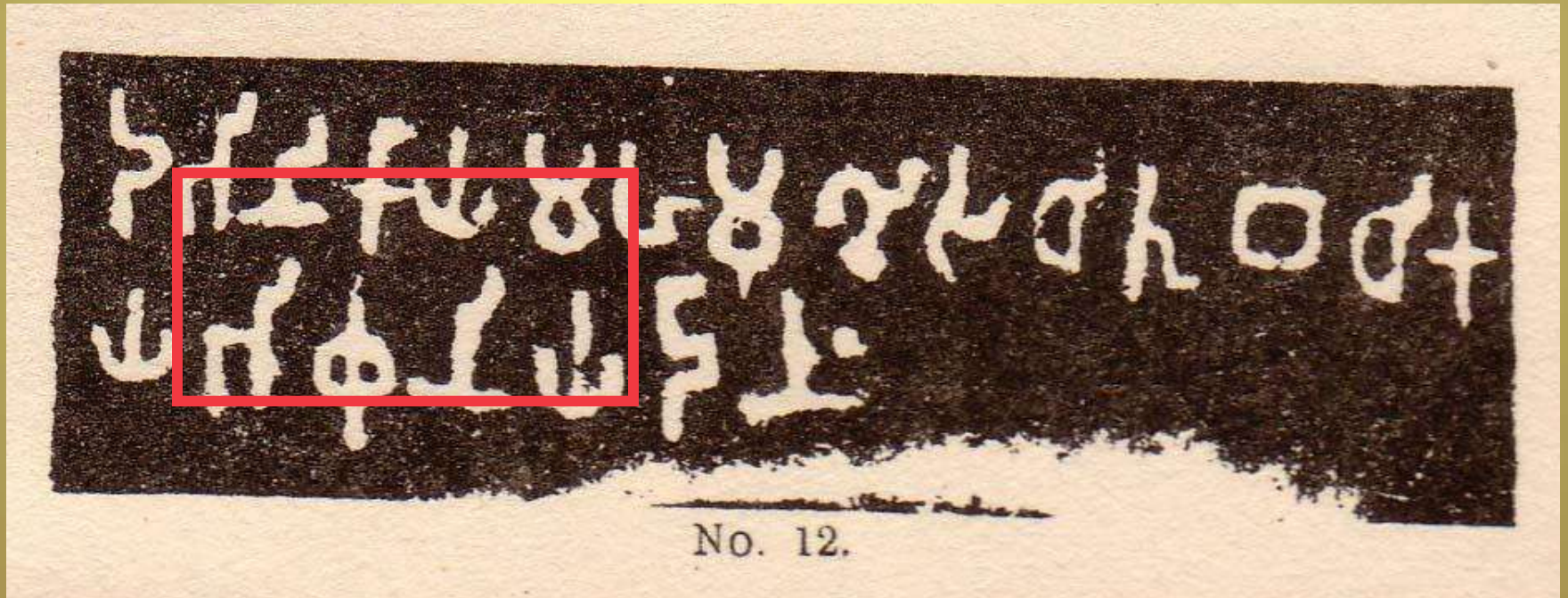


No. 4.

Bharhut dedication inscription No.12:

Dabhinikāya Mahamukhisa dhitu Badhikaya bhichuniya dānaṃ:
Gift of the nun Badhikā, daughter of Mahamukhi, the Dabhinikā.

(CII, II, II A 44)

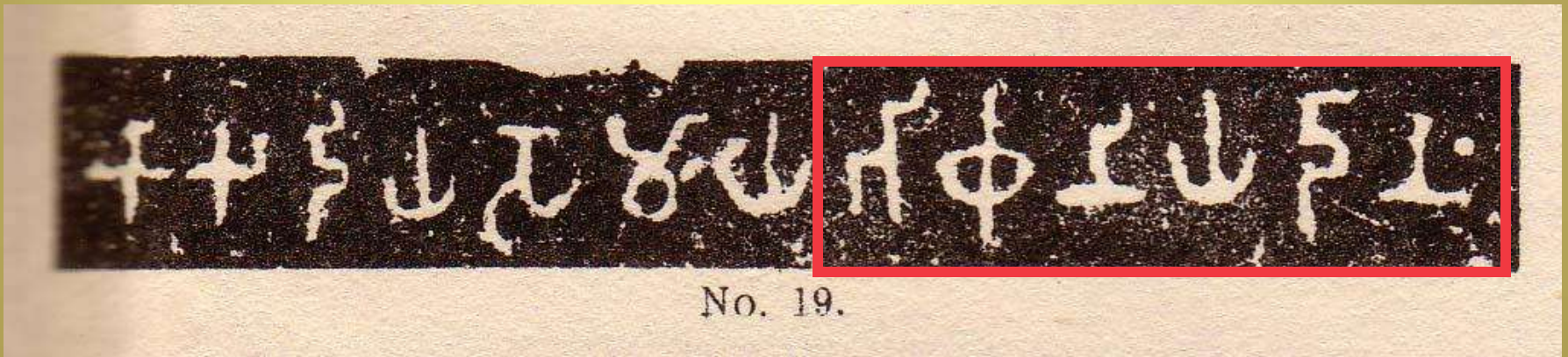


Bharhut dedication inscription No.19

Kākaṃdiya Somāya bhichuniya dānaṃ

Gift of the nun Somā, from Kākaṃdi.

(CII, II, II A 44)



Panguraria (Dist. Sehore, MP) – Asokan inscriptions discovered about 1976.



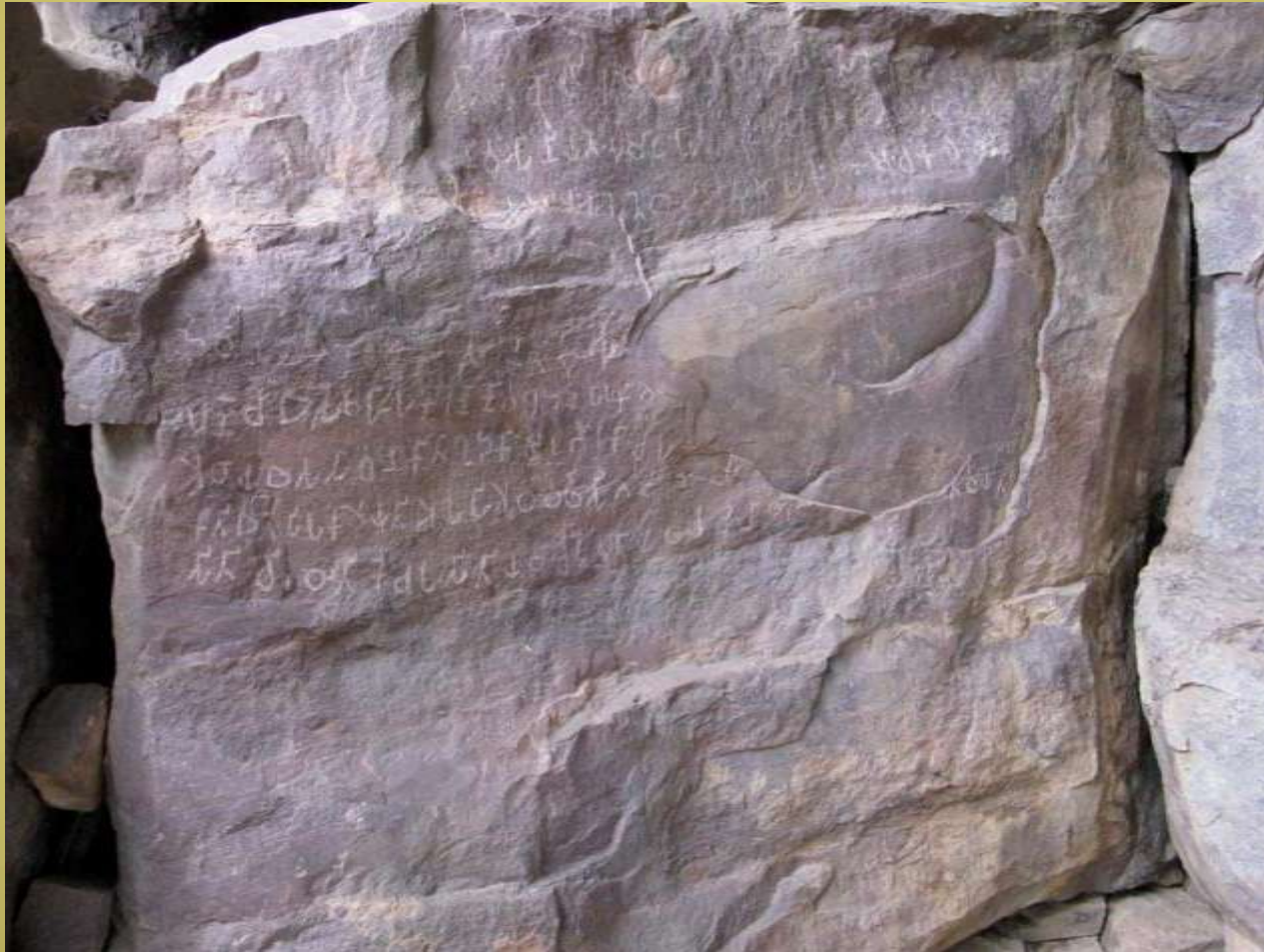
The Narmada valley from Panguraria : from Jabalpur to the sea



Panguraria, MP



Panguraria – “Western version” of MRE I (Sircar)



ASOKA'S VISIT TO PANGURARIA AS A PRINCE

piyadasi nāma / rajakumāra va / saṃvasamāne i-/ maṃ
desaṃ pāpunitha / vihāra(ya)tāy(e)

Piyadasi by name, when he was crown prince ... came
to this place on a pleasure tour.



Parasol staff, Panguraria, Budni Tehsil, Dist. Sehore, MP. At Panguraria 2 Asokan inscriptions are engraved in a rock shelter overlooking the Narmada valley, a Minor Rock Edict I (Falk 89–90) and a separate edict (Falk 109–110) that records a visit paid to “this locality” (imam desam) by Asoka when he was crown prince. The staff and stone parasol were found near the largest stupa below the rock shelter. The two-line Prakrit inscription reads:
Saṃgharakhitāya bhicchuniya dāna Koramkāya atevasinihi karapitam/Pusaya
ca Dhamarakhitaya ca arahaya ca. etā atevasiniyo karāpika chatasa,
This is the donation of Saṃgharahitā Bhikṣuṇī, made by her disciple nuns
from Koramkā. Pusā, Dhamarakhitā, and Arahā had the parasol made.





Panguraria

Shaft of stone
parasol with
donative
inscription in
early Brahmi

Sanchi Museum,
storage



Panguraria

Shaft of parasol donated by nuns: “This is the gift of the nun Sagharakhitā Koramikā. Her pupils caused it to be made. Pusā, Dhamarakhitā, and Arahā: these pupils caused the parasol to be made.

Note: Sagharakhitā Koramikā and Dhamarakhitā are also known from inscriptions at Sanchi.

Sagharakhitāya bhichhniya da(dā)na Koramika(kā)ya atevasini(nī) hi kāra(rā)-
pitān⁴

Pusāya cha Dhamarakhitāya cha Arahayā⁷ cha etā atevasini(ni)yō kārāpikā chhatasa

Panguraria
Ribbed stone parasol donated by nuns





Pauni Stupa (Maharashtra):

Mucarido Nāga
donated by a nun,
pupil of Mahāyasā

(National Museum,
New Delhi)

Excavations at KANAGANAHALLI

(Sannati, Dist. Gulbarga, Karnataka)



K P Poonacha

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA
2011

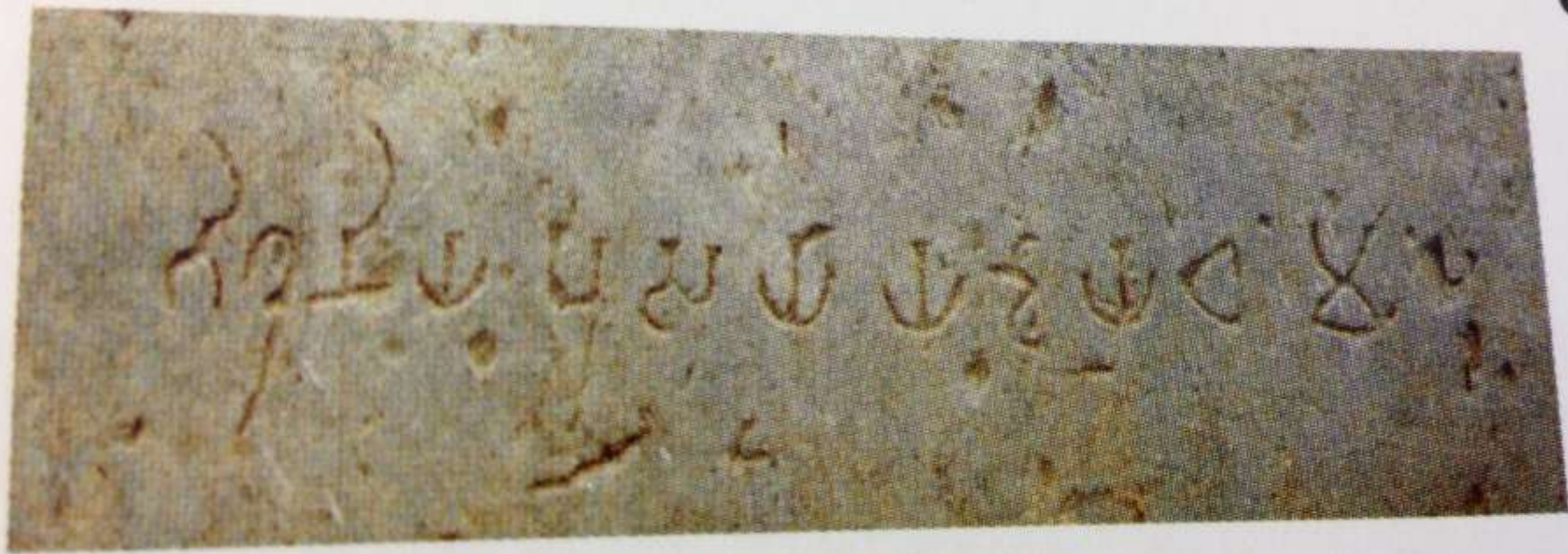
Kanaganahalli,
Karnataka: a newly
excavated stupa.
Here too, nuns
and laywomen
made a big
contribution.

Kanaganahalli donors

- Bhikhuniya pusayāya deyadhammam: gift of the nun Pusā.
- Bhuyima bhikhuniya deyadhamam: gift of the nun Bhuyima.
- Therasa āya Isirakhitasa atevāsiniya bhikhuniya Naguyāya deyadhama: Gift of the nun Nāguya, disciple of the noble Thera Isirakhita
- Himarakhitāya atevāsiniya Vidhīya dānam: Gift of [the nun] Vidhi, pupil of [the nun] Himarakhitā



6



7



Cave residences: Sri Lanka



Cave residences — Vessagiriya.

Improvement to the Caves—Av2ba — the residences of the early monks.





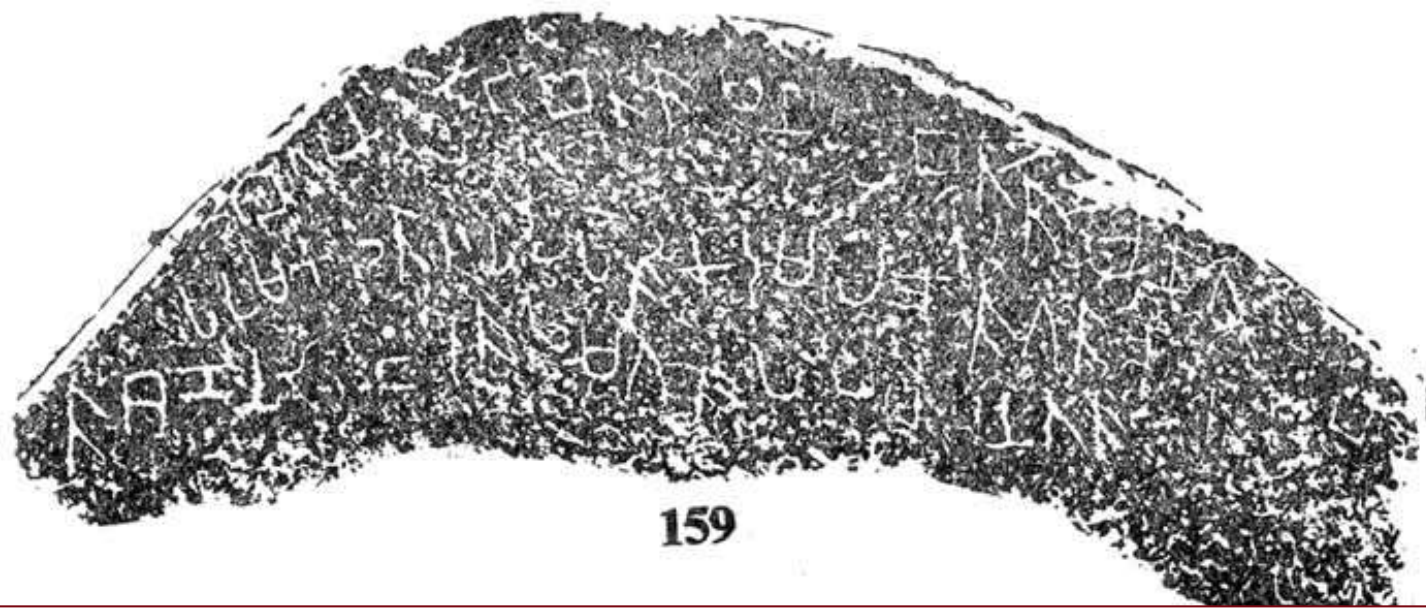
8

8 Tiśa-śamaṇiya leṇe śagaśa

The cave of the nun **Tissā** [is given] to the Saṅgha.



- 14 Kaṇagama-ra[jhaśa] Tiśaha jhita Śavera-Śamaṇiya leṇe śagaśa
- The cave of the nun Savera, daughter of Tissa, king of Kaṇagama, is given [to the Saṅgha].
- 15 The same text as No. 14, but with the omission of the word *śayaśa*.
- 16 Parumaka-Humana-puta upaśasaka dine*
- [The cave] of the lay-devotee son of the chief Sumana, is given [to the Saṅgha].



159

159 [13] (1) Ba[ta]-Na[ga]ha ca bata-Śumanaha ca bata-Śumana-gutaha ca (2) parumaka-Data-jhiya upaśika Rama leṇe śagaśa aga[ta]- (3) anagataśa (4) samaṇi-Palaya ca Aśa-Dama-gutaha ca (5) Raha ca

The cave of lord **Nāga**, and of lord **Sumana**, and of lord **Sumanagutta**, and of the female lay-devotee **Rāmā**, daughter of the chief **Datta**, is given to the Saṅgha, present and absent. Also of the nun **Pālā**, and of the Venerable **Dhammagutta** and of **raha**.



332

332 [7] Parumaka-[Pa]śudavela-jhitaya Rohani-
samaniya leṇe śagaśa niyate

The cave of the nun **Rohiṇī**, daughter of the chief
[Pa]śudavela, is dedicated to the Saṅgha



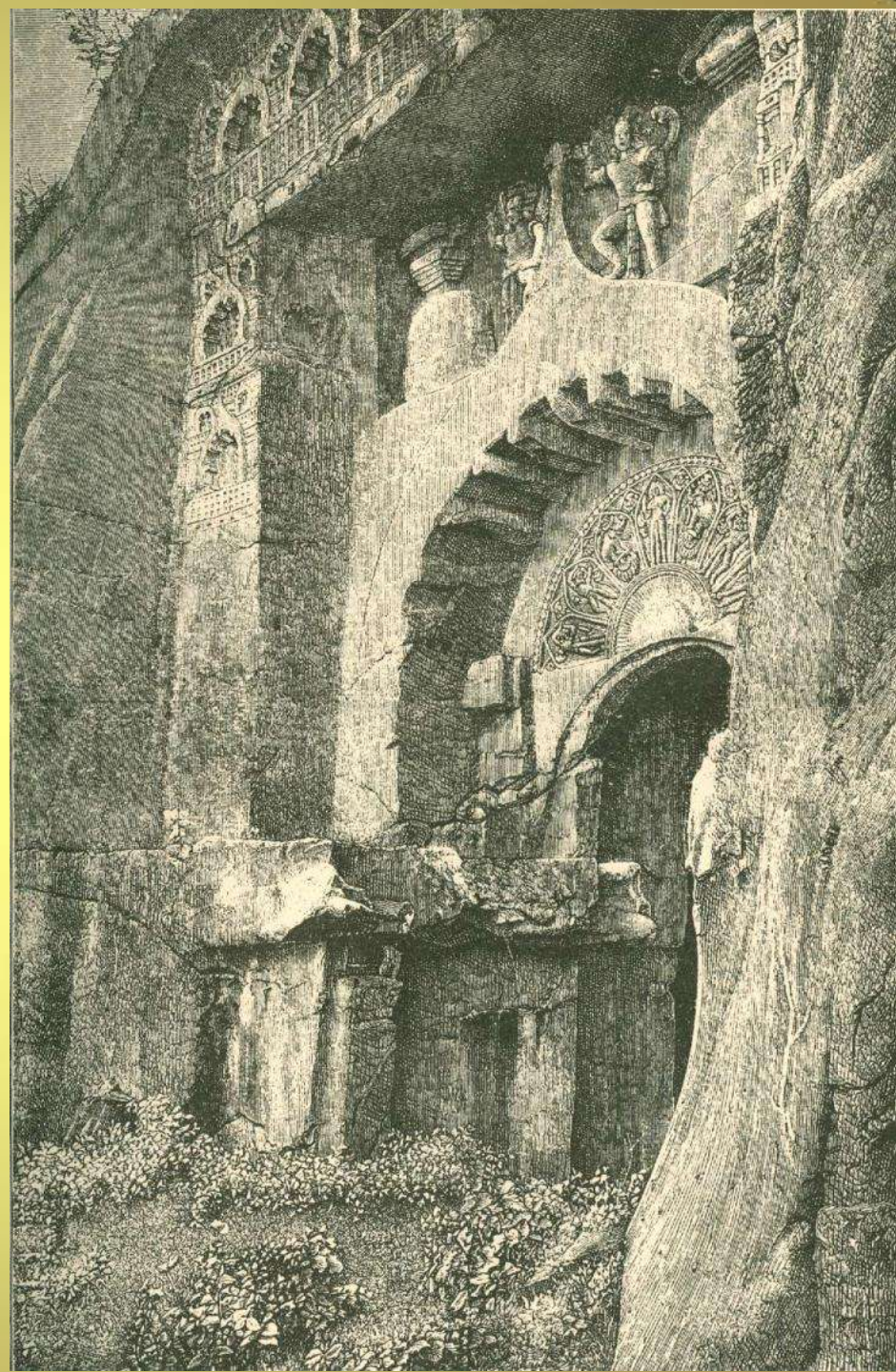
725

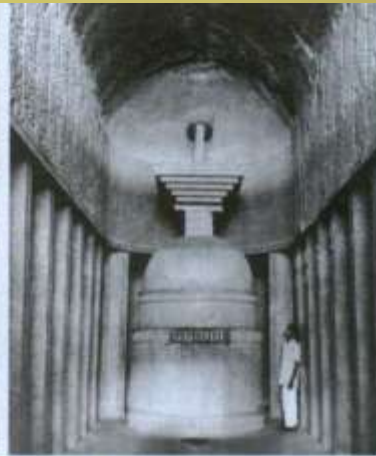
725 [2] Śenapiti-parumaka Puśadevaha jhita Naga-śamaṇiya maha-leṇe śagaśa

The great cave of the Nun **Nāgā**, daughter of the chief **Phussadeva**, the Commander-in-Chief, [is given] to the Saṅgha.

The western caves

The pattern of donation in the cave temples, the earliest of which are contemporary with the great stupas, is different. Single caves shrines, assembly halls, and residences were often sponsored by single donors. Collective sponsorship is seen in the stupas and caityas.





CHAITYA HALLS: KARLE; BEDSA (TOP);
KANHERI (MIDDLE LEFT); BHAJA CHAITYA
HALL ENTRANCE (MIDDLE RIGHT); VIEW OF
BHAJA CAVES (BOTTOM)

Buddharūpa, Buddhapatimā: The image or statue of the Buddha

- Exactly when or where the first image of the Buddha was produced is unknown. We do know that some of the earliest colossal stone images were produced at Mathurā by monastics belonging to the Sarvāstivādin order. Dedicatory inscriptions reveal a group of learned monks and nuns connected by teacher-disciple relationships who sponsored images along the Yamuna River valley.

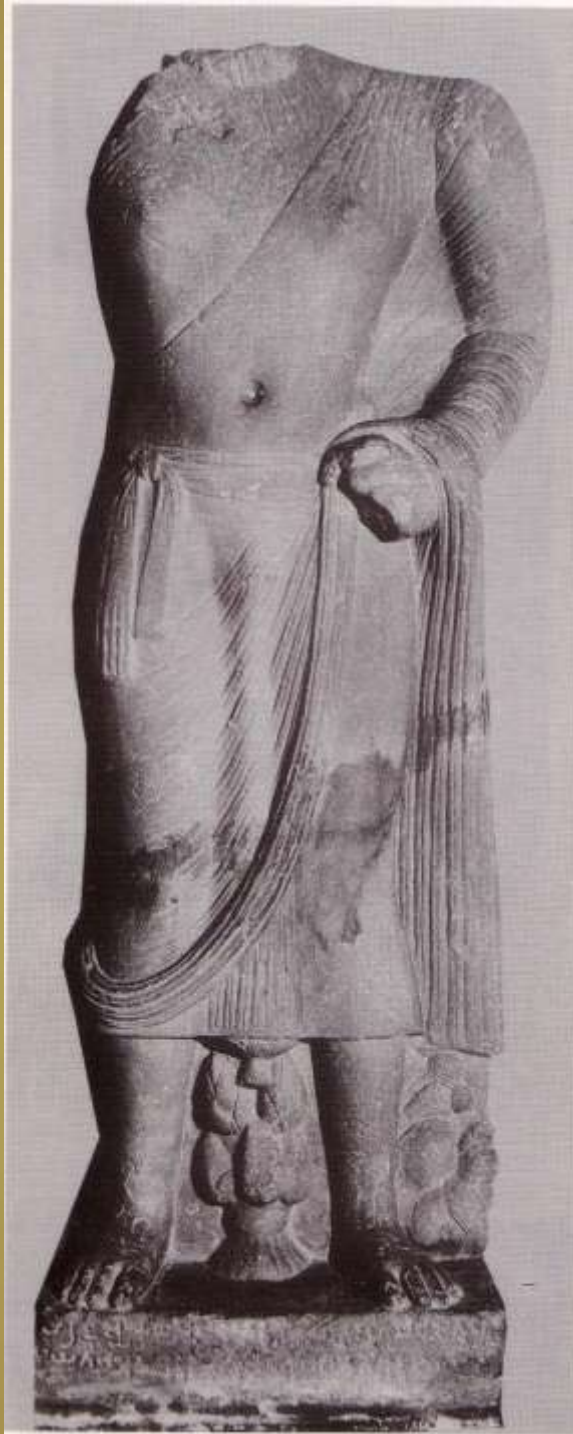
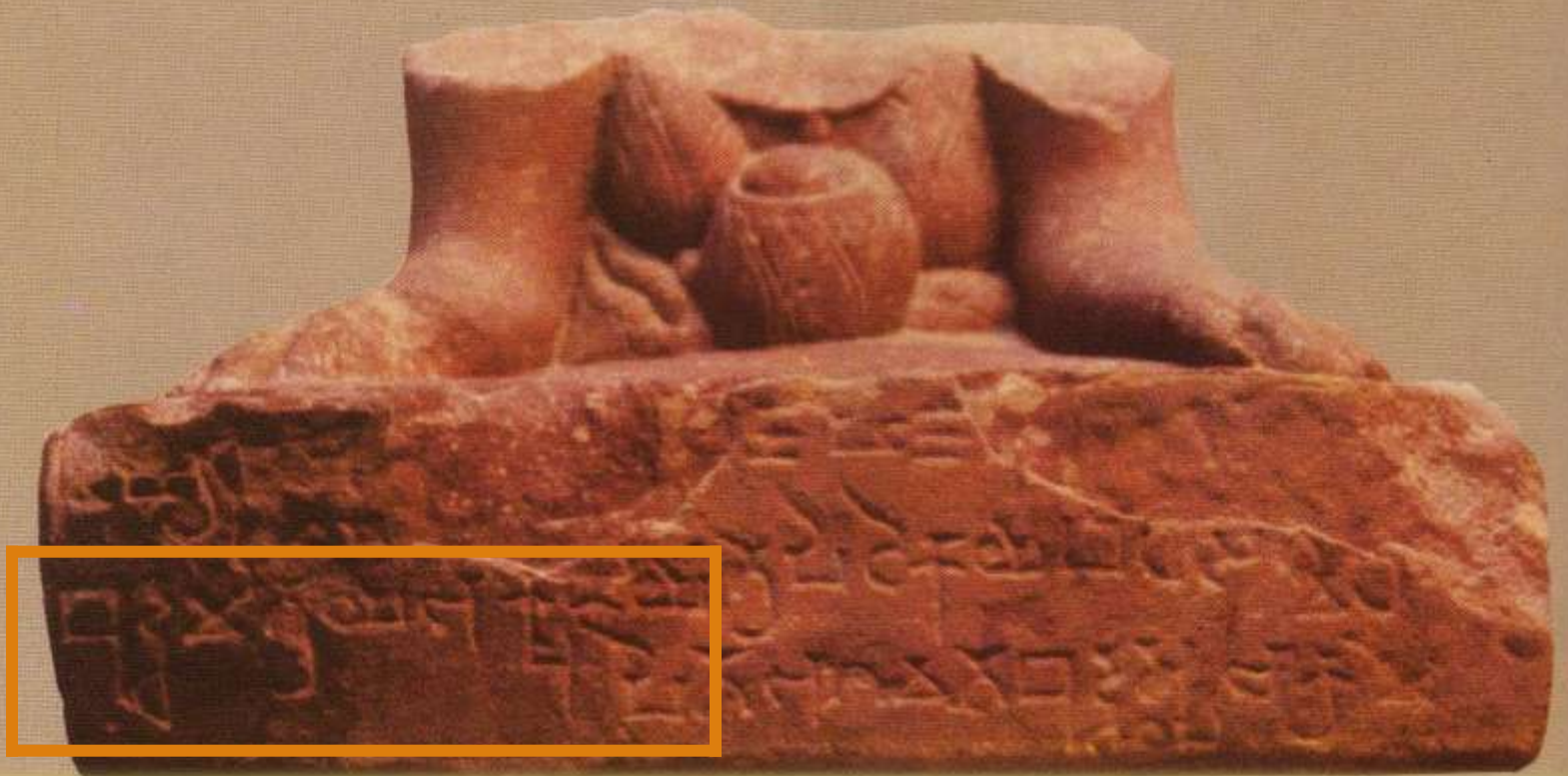


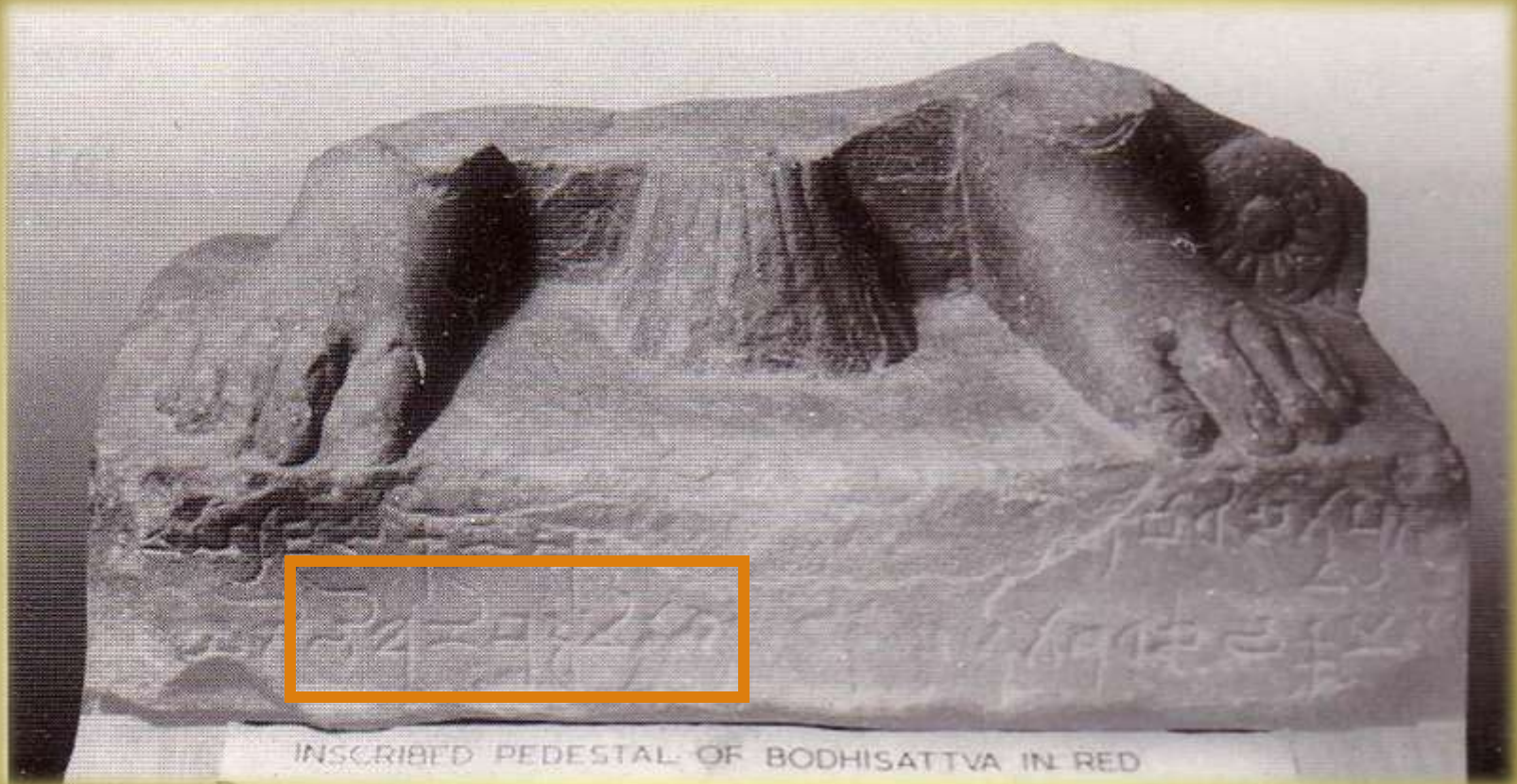
Image dedicated by Bhiksuni
Buddhamitra the Tripiṭaka
master during the reign of
Kanishka (Kusana period,
Kausambi):

Bodhisatvo pratiṣṭhāpayati
bhikṣuṇi Buddhamitrā
trepīṭikā bhagavato
Buddhasa caṅkrame.

(112 cm in height. Tripathi
2003, p. 84 and Fig. 54;
Tsukamoto IV Kosa 2)



Pedestal of image dedicated by Bhiksuni Buddhamitra, from
Ghoṣitārāma, Kusana period, Kausambi, (*Tripathi 2003, p. 86*
and Col. Ill. 3)



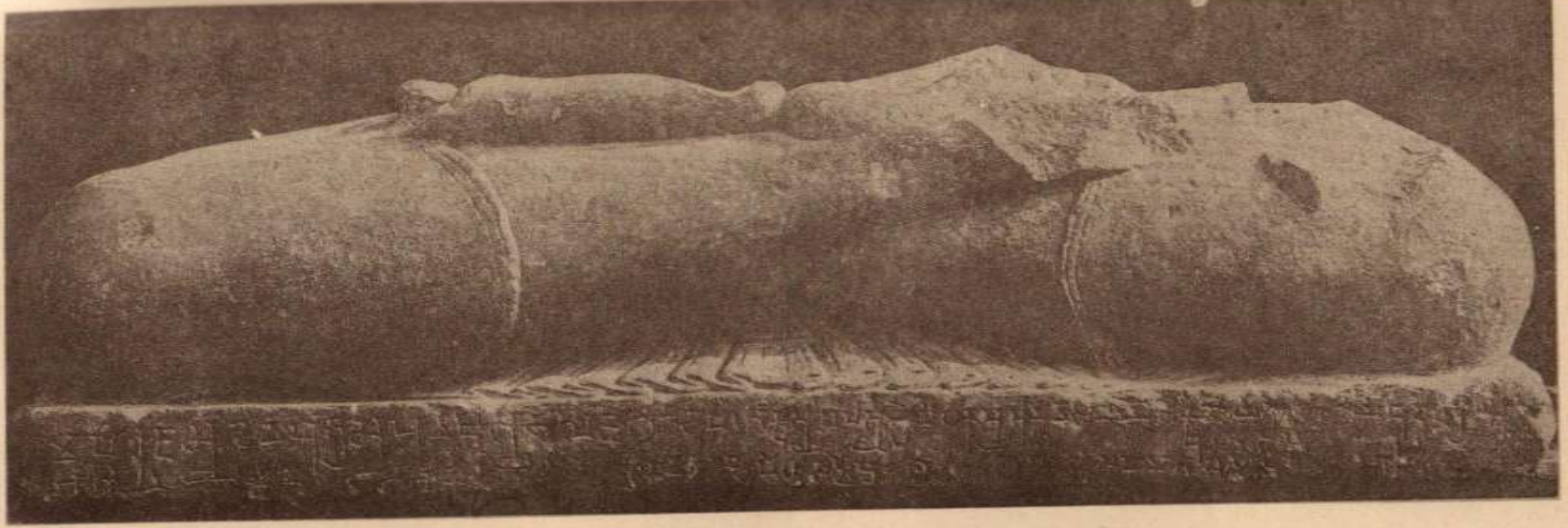
Pedestal of image dedicated by Bhiksuni Buddhamitra,
Master of the Tripitaka, Kusana period, Kausambi, (*Tripathi*
2003, p. 86–7 and Fig. 56)



Bodhisattva dedicated by
Bhikṣu Bala, Mathura
(*Vogel 1930, pl. xxviii a*)

Bhikṣu Bala, a Sarvāstivādin
Tripiṭaka master, set up 2
images with sheltering
parasol at Śrāvastī
(Tsukamoto IV SaMa 2.2,
3,4) and 2 at Sarnath
(Tsukamoto IV Sarn 4, 5).

Bhikṣuṇī Buddhāmitrā
was one of his disciples
(Tsukamoto IV Math 11.1)



From a photograph supplied by Mr. G. D. Ganguli.



E. Hultzsch.

Scale one-fourth.

Collotype by Gebr. Plettner, Halle-Saale.

From a rubbing supplied by Dr. J. Ph. Vogel.

Bodhisatva image dedicated by Bhikhuni Dhanavati, disciple of Buddhāmitrā the disciple of Bhikṣu Bala. From Mathura. (EI VIII, 181–183; Tsukamoto IV Math 11).



Buddhadāsi Bhikṣuṇī, “for the benefit and happiness of all beings” (*sarvasatvānaṃ hitasukhāye*). Seated Buddha, Mathura.

(Tsukamoto IV Math 114; Shrava 1993, No. 239)



Pedestal of Bodhisattva

dedicated by Bhiksuni Pusahathina and Bhiksuni
Buddhadeva, Huviska year 39.

(Shrava 1993, No. 85)



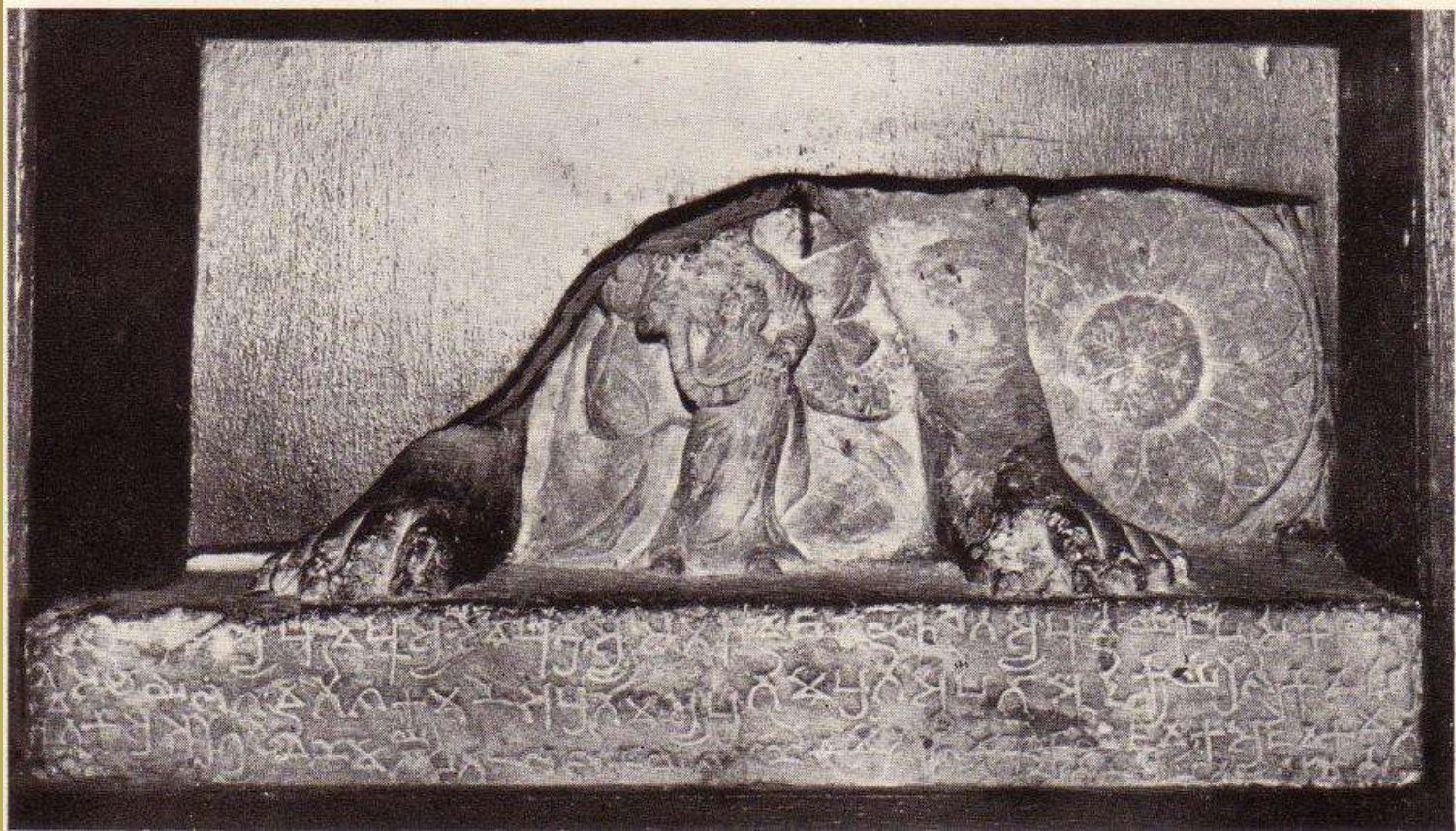
Bhiksuni Buddhadeva's image of seated Buddha, dedicated
“for the welfare and happiness of all beings”.

Mathura, reign of Huvishka [Vogel 1930, pl. XXVIb.]



**Standing Buddha dedicated by Upasika Khvasicha,
Huviska year 45**

(Shrava 1993, No. 89)



Surviving portion of large standing image of “the Blessed One, the Incomparable Sakyamuni” dedicated by Upasika Khvasicha, Huviska year 45.

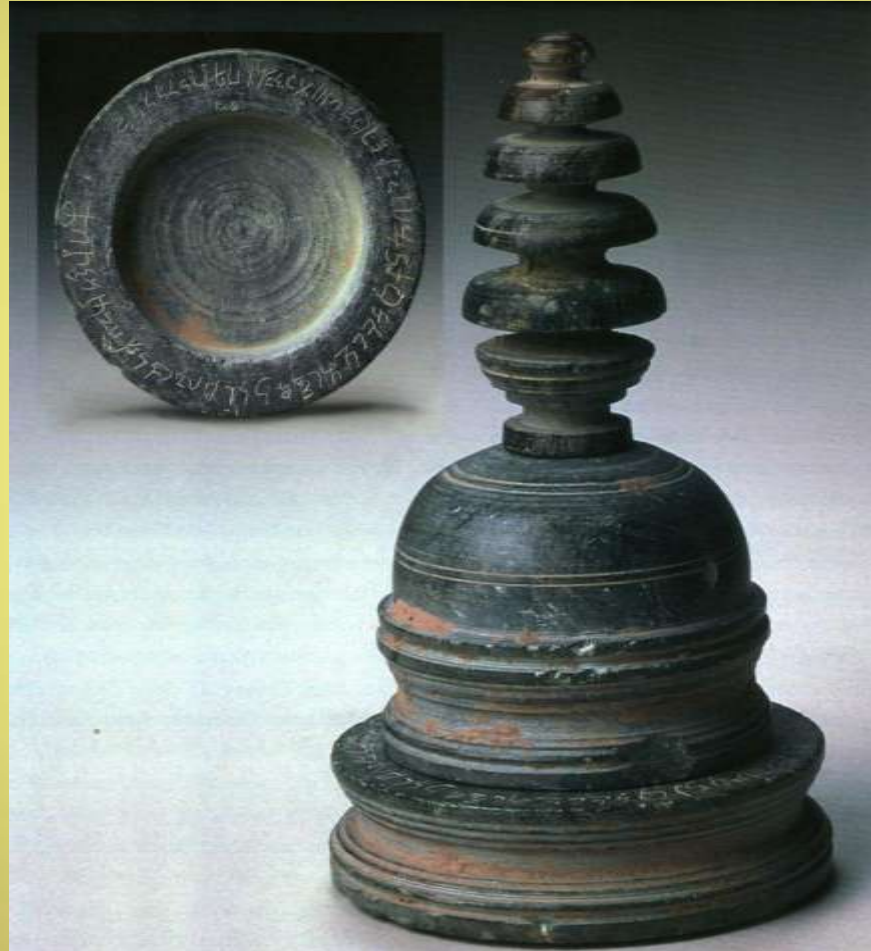
Mathura, red sandstone. 74.5 x 33.5 cm. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai. (Chandra 1974, pl. 61)

Image dedicated by Śākya Bhikṣuṇī Jayabhaṭṭā at
Yaśavihāra, Mathura

- Tsukamoto IV Math 9; Joanna Williams, *A Mathura Gupta Buddha Reconsidered*, *Lalit Kalā* 17, 28–32, Pl. XI. Rubbing, Fleet CII V pl. xl D.
- (R.C. Sharma, *Buddhist Art: Mathura School* (New Delhi, 1995), fig. 125).



Donatory inscriptions of nuns in Gandhara are rare. According to the Kharosthi inscription, this reliquary, from Hazara Dist., Pakistan, was donated by Bhikṣuṇī Uttarā



This gilded schist reliquary from Swat, Pakistan, contained an inscribed gold plate as well as golden flowers and jewelry.



Fig. 3.26a. *Gilded miniature-stūpa reliquary*
Gandhara
Gilded schist; h. 78 cm
Private collection



3.26b:1

Fig. 3.26b:1-5. *Inscribed plate and stūpa reliquary contents*
Gandhara
Gold plate: gold, silver, crystal, and stone caskets; gold jewelry
Private collection

The gold plate bears a long inscription recording the meritorious deeds of King Senavarma, addressed to the “twofold community that has assembled”. This refers to the presence of the community of monks and the community of nuns.





Bronze Buddha Dedicated
by Sakya Bhiksuni
Parisuddhamati at
Yamgval Monastery CE
539 Nepal/Eastern Uttar
Pradesh, 7th century.

(Cleveland Museum of
Art. Ray et al. 1986,
Fig. 26)



**Tara from
Kurkihar,
dedicated by
Shakya-
bhiksuni
Gunamati**

(Bhattacharya 1996,
Fig. 5)



Bronze image of standing Buddha dedicated by Vidyadharasvamini, mother of Mahapratihara Anandavatsa. From Phophnar, Madhya Pradesh; height 45.7 cm including pedestal. 5th-6th century.

[Venkataramayya 2005, fig. 9]



Tara, perhaps from Kurkihara (Bihar), now in Russek collection, Switzerland. 9th century.

“Gift of Umaduka, wife of Eddaka.”

Bhattacharya in Haque (ed.) 2000, fig. 50.9



Ibid., pl. 50.10



- Simhanada Lokeshvara dedicated by Sakya-Sthavira Vijaya-sri-bhadra. 12th century. Lakhai Sarai, Bihar.
- (MIK, Berlin. Bautze-Picron 1998, Cat. no. 72.)



Thank you!