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2 Buddhism in the West? Buddhist Indian Sailors on Socotra (Yemen) and the Role of Trade Contacts in the Spread of Buddhism

2.1 Introduction

The spread of Buddhism is usually associated with two main factors: first, the patronage by political elites who fostered missionary activities within the Indian subcontinent and beyond; second, the economic support by merchants and traders, who since the days of the Buddha had formed one of the most influential social groups in the Buddhist lay community. The specific manifestation of these two factors is reflected by the different stages in the spread of Buddhism as an institutional religion. The Mauryan empire united for the first time in history large parts of the Indian subcontinent under a coherent political and administrative structure. In the case of Buddhism, this development was accompanied by a huge missionary endeavor, promoted by the ruling elite, that embraced almost all of the Indian subcontinent but hardly involved the mercantile groups nor touched territories outside India.[1]

A completely new quality was reached in the period, when the Indian subcontinent became part of larger political and economic units that embraced the regions further north and east of India. Under the rule of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, the Indian north was part of a huge empire that united territories of Eastern Iran and North-West and North India and had important political and economic influence even in Central Asia (Xinjiang). The heart of India was dominated by two other mighty empires: the Western Kṣatrapas and the Sātavāhanas. These three Indian powers were "global players": via an extensive network of land and sea-routes they profited from the international trade activities along the so-called Silk Road. It is not surprising that this political and economic internationalization did also have its impact on the fate of Buddhism.

It is well-known that along the Silk Road, Buddhism spread eastwards. Buddhist merchants and pilgrims used the trade routes to propagate Buddhist ideas and to establish Buddhist institutions. Rulers along the "Silk Road"

1 For the limited success of Buddhist mission in the Hellenistic regions neighboring the Mauryan empire in the west, see Lamotte (1958, 338) and Seldeslachts (2007, 136–138).

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converted and promoted Buddhism in their territories. For the role of traders in this development, we draw on an extraordinarily rich source: the corpus of epigraphs and petroglyphs discovered in the Upper Indus Valley along the Karakorum Highway in Northern Pakistan. This material has been documented and studied in a project run by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. The epigraphical material from the Upper Indus Valley covers a period of nearly a millennium, beginning with the inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭhī, which can be dated to the first century BCE. The corpus comprises several thousand texts in different scripts and languages, including Indian, Sogdian, Chinese, and Tibetan material, and thus reflects the different lines of trade and commerce which met in this transitory space at the crossroads between India, Tibet, China, and Central Asia. Many of the texts and drawings along the Upper Indus Valley bear an explicit Buddhist character: drawings of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and *stūpa*s; and inscriptions by Buddhist pilgrims or lay people. The evidence of this huge corpus is now almost completely available in the excellent publications of the Heidelberg Academy project, "Rock Carvings and Inscriptions along the Karakorum Highway," that documented this material from the 1980-ies up to 2012.[2]

But the Silk Road connected India not only with the East – with Central Asia and China – but also with the West. Literary and archaeological data bear impressive witness to the western branch of these trade networks and to the intensive participation of Indians in these activities.[3] However, there is hardly any evidence for the specific Buddhist character of these traders. Concerning the role of trade contacts in his study about the western expansion of Buddhism during this period, Erik Seldeslachts concludes:

> There is also a lot of literary and epigraphical evidence for the presence of Indian traders and other visitors, even whole communities, in Armenia, the Northern Black Sea area, Socotra, Arabia, the Red Sea area, and across the Mediterranean (. . .). One, however, looks in vain for something specifically Buddhistic about these people, whereas it is often possible to clearly identify Hindu elements (. . .) On the whole, the available evidence of the popularity of Buddhism among "Western" business communities is thus meagre. (Seldeslachts 2007, 148–149)

This picture has now considerably changed. A few years ago, in 2000, Belgian speleologists discovered in one of the karst caves on the island of Socotra

2 Bemmann and König (1994); Fussman and König (1997); Bandini-König (1999); Bandini-König and von Hinüber (2001); Bandini-König (2003); Bandini-König (2005); Bandini-König (2007); Bandini-König (2009); Bandini-König (2011).

3 For a short survey about Indian traders along the western routes of the Indian Ocean sea trade and further references, see Strauch (2012, 367–377).

(Yemen) a considerable number of inscriptions and drawings, which date back to the second through the fourth or early fifth centuries CE – the heyday period of the Silk Road. A comprehensive, annotated catalogue of these inscriptions and drawings was published in 2012 (Strauch 2012, 25–218).[4] The majority of them can be attributed to Indian mariners, who visited Socotra on their way to South Arabia or the Red Sea. For the first time, this corpus thus provides the opportunity to have a closer look at the Indian participants of the Indian Ocean sea contacts between India and the West.

It is the aim of this paper to investigate the Buddhist material from Socotra. Based on the comparison of the Socotran evidence with the Upper Indus material, we will try to determine the specific conditions that accompanied the spread of Buddhist ideas and institutions along the western routes of the Silk Road. In the final part, the results of this comparison will be evaluated against the background of the broader discussion about the presence of Buddhists and Buddhist ideas in the Hellenistic and Roman western world.

It should be stressed right from the outset that as welcome and important as the data from Socotra are, they hardly allow a comprehensive view of the variety of aspects to be considered here. But they can certainly help to better understand some of the issues that have to be addressed in this context.

2.2 The corpus of Socotran inscriptions and drawings

While exploring a huge underground cave on the island Socotra, Belgian speleologists discovered a large number of graffiti and drawings inscribed on the walls, stalagmites, stalactites and floors of the cave. As subsequent research showed, the inscriptions were written in South-Arabian, Ethiopian, Greek, Palmyrene, Bactrian, and Indian scripts and languages and can be dated to the first half of the first millennium CE.[5]

It has been known for a long time that Socotra was part of the intercontinental Silk Road network from the Hellenistic period onwards. The anonymous

4 The references to inscriptions and drawings used here follow the system of this catalogue.

5 The preliminary results of this first exploration were communicated in Robin and Gorea (2002); Dridi (2002); Strauch and Bukharin (2004). Some years later – in December 2005 and January 2006 – I had the chance to visit the cave myself and to prepare a new documentation, which could provide much additional material and is the basis of the catalogue published in 2012.

Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, written in the middle of the first century CE, describes the island's population as a kind of multiethnic community consisting of Arabs, Indians, and Greeks who settled there for the purposes of commerce (PME 30 + 31, Casson 1989, 67–69). The island's main products listed by the *Periplus* are tortoise and dragon-blood. According to this text, Socotra was connected through two routes with the Indo-Roman world; to the west, trade was conducted via Muza, i.e. the South-Arabian harbor at the mouth of the Red Sea. The Indian subcontinent was accessed via the ports of Western India, namely Barygaza, the ancient Bharukaccha, and Limyrike, which can be identified with the Malabar coast of South India. Thus the island was a kind of crossroad or meeting point for trade routes from east and west.

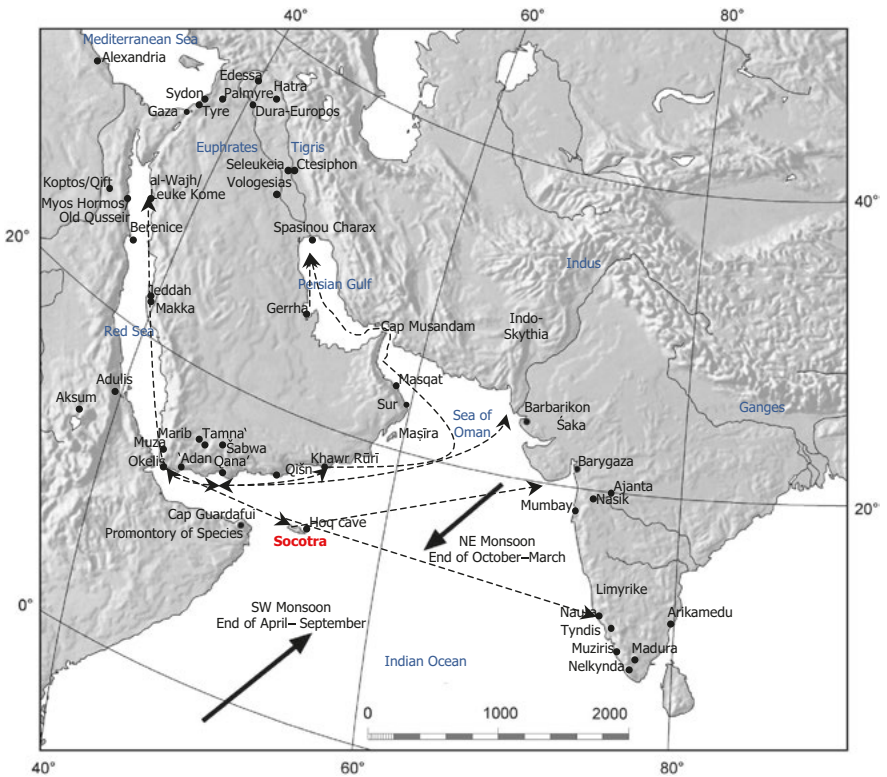

Figure 2.1: Map of the Western Indian Ocean, with the routes indicated by the *Periplus* [courtesy: Mikhail Bukharin].

The cave, Hoq, is situated at a height of about 350 m in the granite plateau on the northern shore of the island Socotra.

Figure 2.2: View of the cave's entrance from below [courtesy: Socotra Karst Project].

Its entrance faces the sea, and as remains of soot on the ceiling of the plateau in front of the cave show, fires were perhaps used for navigating bypassing ships. This function might be one of the reasons for the cave's attraction to visitors from foreign countries. However, soon after entering the huge portal, other reasons for attracting people's interest become obvious. Shaped as a long corridor – ca. 2 km long and up to 37 m high – the cave houses a large number of speleological formations – multifarious stalagmites and stalactites forming impressive structures of an extraordinary beauty.

The inscriptions and drawings are located in the back part of the cave, nearly one kilometer from the entrance. They were usually inscribed by visitors at places along the path using the material available on the spot, such as mud from the cave's floor, broken pieces of stalactites or stalagmites or even charcoal taken from the torches that were necessary to illuminate the way through the absolutely dark interior of the cave. Among the numerous traces of inscribed texts, I could identify 193 inscriptions from 117 Indian visitors. With the exception of a single Kharoṣṭhī graffito, all of them are written in a variety of Brāhmī. According to their paleographical features, the Brāhmī epigraphs can be dated to the second through the early fifth century CE. The paleography also helps to determine the geographical provenance of the visitors. The majority of them used a variety of Brāhmī that is typical for the Gujarat-Western Deccan

Figure 2.3: Inside the cave [courtesy: Dirk Vandorpe].

region during later Sātavāhana and Western Kṣatrapa rule. There is hardly any strong evidence for a participation of traders from the Indian South – a fact that might be surprising considering the strong presence of South Indian mariners in the few epigraphical materials from Red Sea ports. This western origin is corroborated by the occasional indication of provenances in the texts themselves. Five of the visitors call themselves *bhārukacchaka* "from Bharukaccha," thus clearly confirming the statement of the *Periplus* with regard to the significance of this important West Indian harbor. One of the Indian visitors identifies his hometown as Hastakavapra, another important West Indian port of this period. Some of the Indians also point to their professional status and add to their names the words *nāvika* or *niryāmaka*, both terms referring to maritime titles.

As mentioned above, in many places, the Indian inscriptions were accompanied by graffiti in South Arabian, Ethiopian, Palmyrene, Greek and Bactrian scripts and languages. This clearly underlines the character of Socotra as a meeting point of traders from different ends of the maritime Indian Ocean networks.

Due to their general character – being commemorative text left by travelers – it can be expected that the formal features of the inscriptions from Hoq correspond to those of the Upper Indus Valley. The formal characteristics of the Karakorum Brāhmī corpus were systematically described by Oskar von Hinüber (1989a). Von Hinüber distinguished three major types: Type 1, which "contains only names either in the nominative or endingless, or less often in the genitive case" (1989a, 43); Type 2, which combines the names "with verbs meaning 'has

come, has arrived'" (1989a, 44); and Type 3, where additional information is indicated, like "a) professions, b) castes and tribes, c) religious status, d) official titles" (1989a, 46). Applying von Hinüber's categorization to the specific evidence of the personal inscriptions of Hoq, it is possible to distinguish the following four groups:

1. The first group contains only the name of the visitor, e.g.

   pālaputro "Pālaputra." (10:8)

2. The second group adds the father's name, e.g.

   viṣṇubhaṭṭiputro skaṃdamitro "Skandamitra, son of Viṣṇubhaṭṭi." (10:7)

3. In the third group, the personal name, with or without the father's name, is supplemented by additional information concerning either the origin, profession, ethnic affiliation, or religious and official titles, e.g.

   bhārukacchaka niryyāmaka viṣṇudharo "The captain Viṣṇudhara from Bharukaccha." (11:12)

4. The last group is characterized by the use of verbal forms in the meaning of "has come, has arrived," thus forming complete sentences, e.g.

   śivaghoṣaputro rudranandi prāptaḥ "Rudranandi, son of Śivaghoṣa, arrived." (10:1)

The large group of personal inscriptions, which forms the overwhelming majority of texts at Hoq (89%), is supplemented by a small number of texts with different contents. They can be characterized as religious or devotional texts and are, of course, of special interest for the topic of this paper.

In some places, the inscriptions are accompanied by drawings. While most of them depict well-known and religiously unspecific auspicious symbols, such as the *pūrṇaghaṭa* or the *nandyāvarta*, others can be associated with a clearly identifiable religious background. Thus, it can be assumed that the *triśūla* drawings at different spots were left by Śaiva visitors, while drawings of *stūpa*s clearly point to the Buddhist character of these objects.

2.3 Buddhism among the Traders at Socotra

2.3.1 Buddhist Names

It is known that in many cases, Indian names refer to the religious and, to a certain degree, social status of a person. In Indian onomastics, Buddhist personal names are often formed by using the designation of one of the three jewels – Buddha, Dharma, Saṃgha. We find among the Hoq visitors only five persons with a name formed in this way:

Buddhanandin (= scribe 50, 9:8)
Saṃghadāsa (= scribe 19, 2:23), son of Jayasena, from Hastakavapra
Saṃghanandin (= scribe 96, 14:19)
*Buddhăsăkă[6] (= scribe 97, 14:20)
Dharma (scribe 33, 6:5 and 11:40)

Among the patronyms, three further Buddhist names are attested:

Buddhamitra, father of Bhaṭṭikumāra (scribe 54, 10:3 and 12:2)
Dharma, father of Halla (= scribe 34, 6:6)
Saṃgharaṅgin, father of Ajitivarman (= scribe 35, 6:7), a *śaka*

Thus, it is probable that at least eight persons among the visitors of Hoq were Buddhists or belonged to Buddhist families. It is possible, that the personal names Aśoka – attested twice, once as a visitor's name, once as a father's name – and Upāli also indicate a Buddhist background of the visitors. Due to the popularity the Mauryan king and the disciple enjoyed among Buddhists, both names were frequently chosen by followers of Buddhism (cf. Malasekara 1937–1938, s.vv.). However, Aśoka is also attested as a *brāhmaṇa's* name in Oshibat: *aśokaḥ brahmaṇa* (18:15, Bemmann and König 1994, 55) and Chilas, Camp Site: *aśokaḥ vipriḥ* (von Hinüber 1989a, 53, no. 46).[7] Consequently, with certain reservations, a Buddhist background might be attributed to a total of eleven persons.

The informative value of the names is, of course, rather limited. We have to take into account that a Buddhist does not necessarily have to bear an explicit Buddhist name. Thus, the visitor who probably completed the *stūpa* drawings at Hoq is called *iśaradasa* (Skt. Īśvaradāsa), bearing a name with a clear Śaiva affiliation.

These uncertainties left aside, it is possible to present at least an estimation of the percentage of Buddhists among the visitors of Hoq cave. Compared with the presence of other clearly identifiable religious communities – such as the Vaiṣṇavas (seven names) and the Śaivas (eight names) – the eleven (+ x) Buddhists formed a considerable – but not the major – proportion of the sailors who participated in the expeditions to Socotra.

6 Due to the unclear notation of vowel lengths the final element of this composite name cannot be determined. Cf. Strauch 2012: 185.

7 It is interesting to notice that the name Aśoka is perhaps also attested among the so-called Oxyrhynchos paypri from Egypt (P.Oxy 3868, ed. Sirivianou 1989, 150–153, cf. Seldeslachts 2007, 149). The papyri from Oxyrhynchos contain more important material which points to the presence of Indians in Egypt during the first centuries CE (cf. Strauch 2012, 371–372).

If we have a closer look at the family relations of these persons, we might get an idea about their social background. Saṃghadāsa's father is called Jayasena, a name that clearly points to a *kṣatriya* background of the family. The same is true for Ajitivarman, whose father was obviously a Buddhist named Saṃgharaṅgin. Moreover, the ethnonym *śaka* used by Ajitivarman indicates his Iranian background. The *śaka*s were very influential in Western India. Several of them are found among the donors for Buddhist monasteries in the Western Ghat cave inscriptions of the Sātavāhana and Western Kṣatrapa periods (cf. e.g. Lüders 1912, 209, Index s.v. *śaka*/*saka*).

More complicated is the case of Bhaṭṭikumāra, the son of (the Buddhist) Buddhamitra. Bhaṭṭikumāra visited the cave together with a man who calls himself Bhaṭṭiṣena, son of Śivamitra. The little group left two graffiti in the cave. Contrary to other visitors, they did not write their names separately, but only one of them incised both names connected by the conjunction *ca*.

Figure 2.4 : Inscription 12:2.

In one of their two graffiti (12:2) – incised on the top of a small stalagmite – Bhaṭṭiṣena is called *kṣatrapa*, thus pointing to his affiliation to the nobility of the Western Indian *kṣatrapas*:

> *śivamitraputro bhaṭṭiṣeno kṣatrapo buddhamitraputraś ca bhaṭṭiku[mā]ro*
> "The *kṣatrapa* Bhaṭṭiṣena, son of Śivamitra, and Bhaṭṭikumāra, son of Buddhamitra."

Figure 2.5: Inscription 12:2 with text indicated by hand-drawing.

The exact relation between the two men cannot be established on the basis of their two little texts. The fact that both visited the cave together and wrote their names within a single text, shows their rather close relationship. As their fathers' names indicate (Buddhamitra, Śivamitra), their core families seem to have belonged to different religious groups. But as in the case of Īśvaradāsa cited above, it is also possible that the father's "Śaiva" name does not indicate his religious attitude. The Śaiva name can also be explained by the *kṣatrapa* status of Bhaṭṭiṣena. As names of Western Kṣatrapa rulers (Rudradāman, Rudrasena) show, their demonstrated Śaiva identity was clearly one of their strategies of assimilation within the – originally remote – Indian context. Remarkably, the second *kṣatrapa* at Hoq cave also bears a Śaiva name (15:5).

On the other hand, the close association of Buddhist and Śaiva elements is also reflected in the onomastic material from the Upper Indus and the subcontinent. Beside typical Buddhist names, there are many persons whose names seem to indicate a different religious affinity. As Fussman pointed out, "(l)es noms śivaïtes sont maintenant bien attestés dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Inde et particulièrement en contexte bouddhique: de nombreuses dédicaces ont pour auteur un personnage dont le nom signifie 'esclave de Śiva' (*Śiva-dāsa*) ou 'protégé par Śiva' (*Śiva-rakṣita*)" (1989, 12). As in the case of the *stūpa* drawings from Hoq, a *stūpa* drawing at Chilas II was carried out by a person bearing a Śaiva name, Śivadasa (Skt. Śivadāsa) (Fussman 1989, 12, no. 4,1). Referring to other inscriptions from the Indian northwest and to the report by the Chinese

pilgrim Sun Yün (520 CE), Fussman concludes: "Il semble bien que dès cette époque, dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Inde, śivaïsme et bouddhisme aient fait bon ménage" (1989, 12). Based on the evidence from other inscriptional corpora, it is possible to extend the validity of Fussman's observation. Thus we find numerous persons with Śaiva names among the donors mentioned in the Western Ghat inscriptions.[8] As some of the inscriptions show, an explicit Śaiva name does not exclude a person's status as a Buddhist lay follower or even monk. Thus we find among the Western Ghat inscriptions a Sivabhuti (Śivabhūti), who is the son of the *upāsaka* Sāmaḍa (Śyāmala) (Junnar, Lüders 1912, 134, no. 1175). In Kuḍā, a *thera bhadanta* bears the name Sivadata (Śivadatta) (Lüders 1912, 109, no. 1040). It is therefore possible that also the Hoq visitor Bhaṭṭikumāra, son of Buddhamitra, and his companion Bhaṭṭiṣena, son of Śivamitra, belonged to such a milieu of a strong interaction between Buddhist and Śaiva communities.

It is tempting to suggest that names can also reflect a kind of multiple religious identity. Von Hinüber refers to Buddhist names like Dharmaviṣṇu and Dharmaśiva, attested in North-West and Central India (von Hinüber 1989a, 53). In the case of Dharmaviṣṇu from Shatial, his companion (father/brother?) Viṣṇubhadra bears a distinct Vaiṣṇava name (12:3–4, Fussman and König 1997, 132), while the peculiar combination Dharmaviṣṇu seems to preserve the family's Vaiṣṇava tradition on the one hand, and introduces the new Buddhist identity at the same time.

2.3.2 Buddhist Devotional Texts and Drawings

While the Buddhist names bear testimony only to a person's alleged religious identity as a matter of fact, the texts of the second group and the drawings can help to determine the character of this identity. Two of the Hoq graffiti are especially important here. They are left by a visitor, who calls himself Rahavasu, a name which lacks a definite etymology but seems to have no clearly discernible Buddhist background. His two short texts contain terms that clearly signify the historical Buddha Śākyamuni.

One of them (11:43) uses a well-known epithet and designates the Buddha as *mahāmuṇi* "Great Sage." It runs in Middle Indian phonology: *bhagavato mahamuṇi[sa]*, "For the Lord Great Sage." In Buddhist literature, the use of this

8 See for example in Junnar, the *gahapati* Sivadāsa (Lüders 1912, 133, no. 1170) and Sivabhuti (Śivabhūti), son of Sivasama (Śivaśarman) (Lüders 1912, 134, no. 1173). In Kuḍā, an entire Śaiva family donated a cave with stone carvings and pillars (Lüders 1912, 110, no. 1045).

epithet is not restricted to the historical Buddha. In the *Mahāvastu*, it is used as a generic attribute to qualify a Tathāgata: Śākyamuni (1.99, 1.78), Sarvadarśin (1.123), Cārunetra (1.123), Sahasranetra (1.167), etc. There is also a former Buddha bearing the name Mahāmuni.[9] It can therefore be assumed that the little text at Hoq cave has to be understood in a quite general sense "For the Lord Buddha." Due to the lack of references to any other Buddhas besides the historical one, this formula most probably refers to the Buddha Śākyamuni.

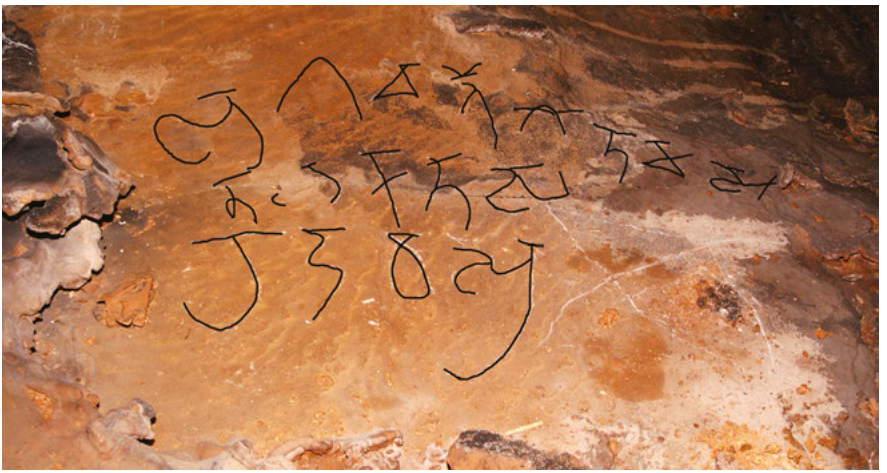

Figure 2.6: Inscription 14:28 indicated by hand drawing.

The second of Rahavasu's short texts (14:28) mentions the Buddha by his birth name – Gotama/Skt. Gautama: *bhagavato gotamasa*. Only in high resolution can a second line between this text and the visitors's name *rahavasu* be made out on the photograph. Although the letters are hard to distinguish, this line can be quite safely reconstructed as *na[bha]katasa*. Given the Middle Indic character of the inscription, this term can perhaps be associated with a Skt. lexeme *nabhaḥkrānta*, a term which later lexicographers explain as "lion." Although the earliest attestation of this meaning is rather late – it belongs to the 12th century lexicographer Hemacandra – it cannot be excluded that Hemacandra here relies on a much older usage. Moreover, Hemacandra lived in Gujarat: exactly the region from where the visitors of Socotra came. If this interpretation can be accepted, the word "lion" here refers to a popular epithet of the Buddha, who was

9 Mahāvastu 3.230: *nāgamunir ānaṃda tathāgato mahāmuniṃ tathāgataṃ vyākārṣīt*. "The Tathāgata Nāgamuni, Ānanda, predicted the Tathāgata Mahāmuni."

also known among his followers as *śākyasiṃha* "the lion of the Śākya family." Although this interpretation of *nabhakata* is not beyond doubt, it would at least not contradict the context of this small devotional text.[10]

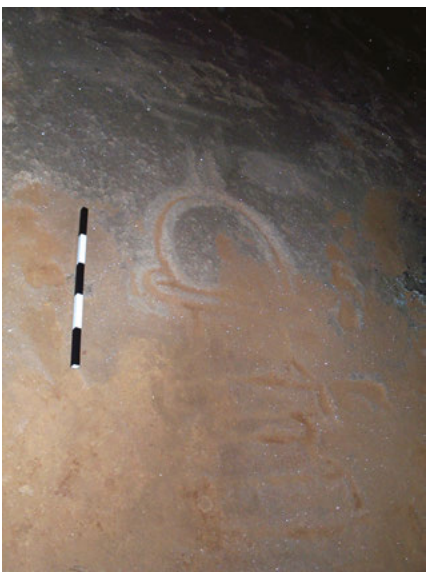

Figure 2.7: Drawing of a *stūpa* A at site 13.

The Buddhists among the Hoq visitors also left behind one of the most impressive remains: two drawings of *stūpa*s made in the sand of the cave's floor, several meters away from the main path and therefore completely unaffected by later visitors (13:5-A, 13:5-B).

The surface of the drawings has been mineralized as has the surface of the footprints, which are found beside the drawings and certainly belong to the person who made them. The first explorers discovered just beside the drawings and the footprints a name written in the sand (13:5C). In the preserved images of this writing, the name can be identified as that of Iśaradasa (Skt. Īśvaradāsa), who left his name at different spots inside the cave (11:6, 11:7, 11:39). It is remarkable,

10 The meaning of the small text *saṃgha[sya nama]* (16:20) is difficult to evaluate. Although the element *nama* recalls the frequently attested *namo* in other Indian epigraphs – among them numerous Upper Indus inscriptions – the word order as well as the genitive of *saṃghasya* leave serious doubts about interpreting it as *namo saṃghāya* "Veneration to the Order." It is also possible to regard *saṃghasya* as hypocoristic form of a name with *saṃgha* as an initial element, leaving *nama* unexplained or regarding it as a possible miswriting.

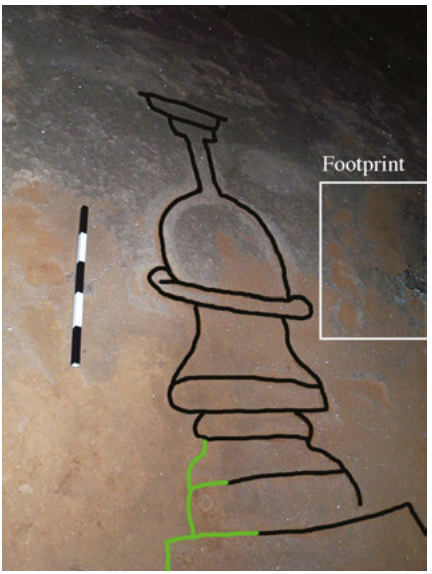

Figure 2.8: *Stūpa* drawing A indicated by hand drawing.

Figure 2.9: Drawing of a *stūpa* B at site 13.

that his name bears an explicit Śaiva character. This fact either proves the close connections between Buddhism and Śaivism pointed out by Fussman (see above) or it confirms our observation, that a personal name *can* indicate the religious affinity of a person, but it does not necessarily have to do so.

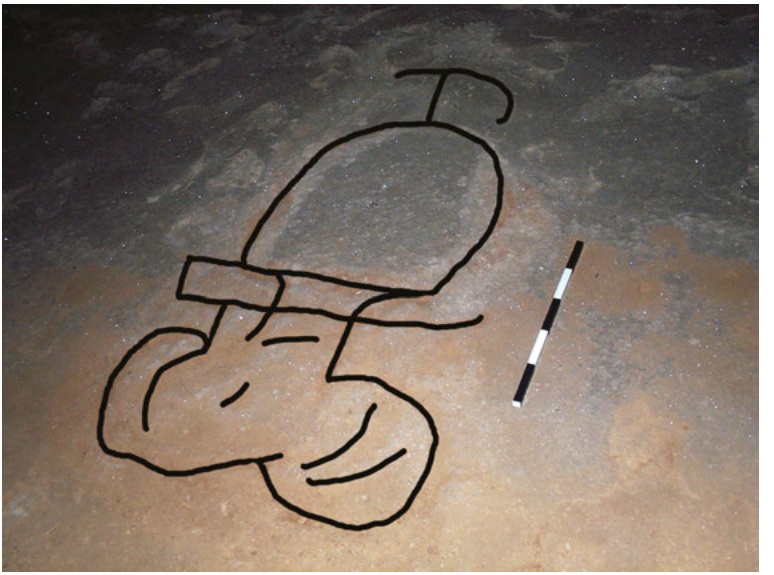

Figure 2.10: *Stūpa* drawing b indicated by hand drawing.

If we compare these drawings with the numerous depictions of *stūpa*s found along the Upper Indus Valley at the Karakorum Highway – and in particular in the area around Chilas – their parallelism is obvious.

It seems that the Hoq painters drew on a popular inventory of *stūpa* drawings which could be used for ritual purposes. In the case of the Karakorum petroglyphs, Volker Thewalt noticed:

> Many of these elaborate rock-carvings must be attributed to highly skilled craftsmen who received their artistic training in the great monasteries of Gandhāra, while others are crude imitations, executed by traveling laymen or the inhabitants of neighboring villages, wishing to gain some spiritual merit by reproducing these sacred monuments. (Thewalt 1985, 782)

According to the external circumstances and the poor quality of the drawings, the "artist" of the Hoq *stūpa* drawings – probably named Iśaradasa – certainly belonged to the second group referred to by Thewalt: "traveling laymen."

Thewalt indicates one major purpose of these *stūpa* drawings: the generation of merit. In the case of the Karakorum drawings, this purpose is repeatedly indicated by the accompanying inscriptions, where the drawing of the *stūpa* is designated as *deya-* or *devadharma* "religious donation."[11] See e.g.:

11 For the meaning of *deyadharma*, see Bhattacharya (1987).

Figure 2.11: *Stūpa* petroglyph 30:20 at Thalpan [Bandini-König 2003, Tafel 71].

Figure 2.12: *Stūpa* petroglyph 34:9 at Shing Nala [Bandini-König and von Hinüber 2001, Tafel 26].

devadharmo yam priyanandaputra dharmasihe
"This is the religious donation of Dharmasiṃha, son of Priyananda."
"Dies ist die religiöse Stiftung des Sohnes des Priyananda, Dharmasiṃha." (Ziyarat 89:2 + 100:8, Bandini-König 2011, 76 + 80)

In some cases, a special formula is added which refers to the generation of merit to be transferred to all sentient beings. Thus the donor Kuberavāhana wrote at Thalpan:

(devadha)[rmo yaṃ] kueravāhanasya yad atra bha<va>tu puṇyaṃ (ta)[t ////] (prāptāya) st[u]
"This is the religious donation of Kuberavāhana. What here is the merit, may that be (for the obtaining)..." (Thalpan 30:27, Bandini-König 2003, 128)

Von Hinüber (1989b, 78) interprets this text convincingly as a variant of the well-known formula *yad atra bhavatu puṇyaṃ tat sarvasattvānām anuttarajñānāvaptaye stu*. ("What here is the merit, may that be for the obtaining of supreme knowledge by all beings.")[12]

The complete formula is also preserved, as e.g. in

yad atra puṇyaṃ bhavatu sarvasatvānāṃ (a)nutarajñānāvāptaye stu-r-itī
"What here is the merit, may that be for the obtaining of supreme knowledge by all beings." (Hodar 4:1, Bandini-König 1999, 149)[13]

Beside this aspect of generating merit, another function of these *stūpa* drawings has been repeatedly stressed. As Oskar von Hinüber noted:

Bereits M.A. Stein hat jedoch vermutet, daß die Felszeichnungen von Stūpas als Ersatz für Votivstūpas gedeutet werden können (...). So scheint es denkbar, daß von Anfang an die Kultobjekte eben die Felsbilder waren, die nur hier Buddhas, Bodhisattvas und kunstvolle Stūpas in großer Zahl zeigen. (von Hinüber 1989b, 75)[14]

The same idea was expressed by Volker Thewalt:

So kann es keinen vernünftigen Zweifel geben, daß die *stūpa*-Zeichnungen sehr häufig als Ersatz für monumentale *stūpas* angefertigt worden sind, wenn die zeitlichen und finanziellen Ressourcen der Stifter begrenzt waren. (Thewalt 2008, 10)

12 Von Hinüber's reconstruction: *yad atra bhavatu puṇyaṃ tad anuttarajñānaprāptāya syāt*. It is, however, not evident for me why von Hinüber chose the less attested form *prāptāya* instead of the more common °*āvāptaye*. For the Mahāyāna character of this formula cf. Schopen (1979, 4–15 [= 2005, 227–239]). See also Ruegg (2004, 13–14 and n.17) and Ruegg (2005, 5–7).
13 Cf. also Shatial 140:23 (Fussman and König 1997, 293).
14 This aspect was also highlighted by Neelis, who remarked that these drawings certainly also "provided a focus for veneration" (Neelis 2010, 282, see also Neelis 2014).

Regarding the function of these drawings he adds:

> ... selbst einfachste Zeichnungen von *stūpa*s dienten den reisenden Gläubigen als Meditationsobjekte und machten so die Ausübung des Glaubens selbst an Orten möglich, an denen es anders keine Gelegenheit gab, den *stūpa* zu verehren. Dem gleichen Zweck dienten übrigens auch kleine transportable Votiv*stūpa*. (Thewalt 2008, 15)

Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish two main functions of the activity of drawing *stūpa*s on rock and other surfaces:

1. They mark a – probably – temporary place of Buddhist worship and thus create a sacred space.
2. They are assumed to generate merit for the artist, his relatives, his parents up to all sentient beings.[15]

It is possible that both these intentions also motivated the drawings at Hoq. Due to the absence of any other places of Buddhist worship on the island, it is quite natural to assume that the visitor created such a place by drawing these *stūpa*s as objects of veneration. By doing so, he also produced religious merit. However, both a qualifying label as *deyadharma* or a note regarding the expected merit are missing. Moreover, the drawings were executed in the soft sand of the cave's floor. Even the footprints of the artist are visible. If the *stūpa* drawings would have fulfilled any ritual function in a kind of *pradakṣiṇa* ritual, the traces of such a circumambulation would have been visible. But the surface of the sand surrounding the images is completely untouched. If the artist indeed intended to create a "temporary place of worship," this intention was never realized.

According to the data discussed so far, the Buddhists among the oversea traders from India practiced a rather simplistic form of Buddhism, that centered around the worship of the Buddha Śākyamuni and of the *stūpa*. There is not the slightest trace of any "advanced" form of Buddhism, which is generally related to Mahāyāna tendencies. There is no reference to Bodhisattvas – such as Maitreya, Mañjuśri or Avalokiteśvara – nor are any of the "new Buddhas" mentioned by name, ex. Amitābha or Akṣobhya. This evidence clearly distinguishes the Hoq corpus from the material from the Upper Indus, where these new Buddhist ideas are repeatedly addressed (cf. von Hinüber 1989b, 83–99). Thus we find among the inscriptions from Chilas-Thalpan references to Lokeśvara/Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Amitābha and Akṣobhya. Beside these well-known and popular names, the inscriptions contain a number of Tathāgata names, which are much less attested and show frequently parallels to texts preserved among the Gilgit and Central Asian manuscripts.

15 For the concept of the "transference of merit" in Buddhist epigraphical records, cf. Schopen (1985).

Material of this kind is completely absent in the Hoq corpus. It is possible, that ideas such as those expressed in the Upper Indus material were not present among the Buddhists in Western India who would have followed a much more conservative approach in their religious belief and practice. It is equally possible to ascribe this fact to the social status of the sailors; this would put aside the hypothesis of a distinct lay element in the emergence and distribution of Mahāyāna ideas. The drawings of Bodhisattvas and Tathāgatas at the Upper Indus, which are usually labelled with inscriptions containing their names, are very artistic and can hardly be ascribed to traveling merchants. According to Thewalt's observations, they should be attributed to the "highly skilled craftsmen who received their artistic training in the great monasteries of Gandhāra" (Thewalt 1985, 782). In other words, they have certainly a monastic background and represent donations, commissioned either by locals or by traders on their way through this area. In some cases, many of the Bodhisattva and Tathāgata drawings can be ascribed to a single donor, as for example Siṃhoṭa who was, according to the name suffix *-oṭa*, certainly a local patron.[16]

2.3.3 Buddhist Monks at Socotra?

As argued above, the rather simplistic perception of Buddhism revealed by the short "devotional" texts and the *stūpa* drawings could hardly indicate the presence of monastics among the Hoq visitors. On the other hand, it is well known that the travelers along the trade routes to the north also comprised Buddhist monks accompanying the caravans. Many of the graffiti on those routes designate the scribes explicitly as Buddhist monastics using titles like *bhikṣu, ācārya* (von Hinüber 1989a, 50–51) or *śramaṇa* (Kharoṣṭhī, Fussman 1989, 27–28). References to the first two terms are completely missing in Hoq. Only the less distinct term *śramaṇa* is attested in two epigraphs from the cave. A clear interpretation of both texts is hindered by the fact that the term can also be used as a personal name, as Heinrich Lüders remarked with regard to personal names like Samaṇa, Samanā, Śramaṇaka and Śamanika in early Indian inscriptions (1940, 618). The name Śramaṇa occurs also as a monk's (*bhikṣusya*) name on an inscribed slab from Mathurā.[17] It is therefore possible to

16 For the local suffix *-oṭ(ṭ)a(ka)* see von Hinüber (1983, 273).

17 See Falk (2000, 32–34 [= Falk 2013, 312–314]), with further references for epigraphical and literary attestations of this name. It is possible that also the name of the Indian Zarmanokhēgas, who according to Strabo committed suicide in Athens in front of the Roman emperor Augustus (63–14 BCE), goes back to an Indian name containing the element *śramaṇa*. Interestingly, Zarmanokhēgas is reported to hail from Bargosa (Bharukaccha) (cf. Reed 2014,

interpret both occurrences of the term *śramaṇa* at Hoq along these lines without their indicating any presence of Buddhist monks on Socotra.

In the first case, the visitor Dhruva, whose texts are attested at five different spots inside the cave, extended his usual text (reconstructed here as Sanskrit) *dhruvaḥ prāptaḥ* "Dhruva arrived" by the wording *śrama[ṇa]sya ma* ? ? ? (11:32). Neither the function nor the meaning of this extension can be established. It is therefore not possible to draw any reliable information out of this evidence.

The reading of the second text containing the word *śramaṇa* is somewhat clearer, but its interpretation is equally difficult. It reads:

śakaśramaṇo āga[to] "The *śakaśramaṇa* has come." (14:16)

The interpretation of *śakaśramaṇa* is not beyond doubt. If we understand *śramaṇa* here as personal name, the text could easily be understood as "The Śaka (Scythian) Śramaṇa has come." The text would thus contain a valuable information about the ethnic background of this (probably) Buddhist visitor, but no indication about an assumed monastic background.

The second uncertainty in this compound concerns the initial segment. If *śaka* here instantiates the well-known ethnonym, the interpretation suggested above is surely the preferable one. But due to the rather corrupt character of the orthography and language used in the Hoq graffiti it cannot be ruled out, that *śaka* goes back to a Middle Indic influenced form of Skt. *śākya*. Based on this – hypothetical – reconstruction one might compare the wording *śakaśramaṇa* with the otherwise attested term *śākyaśramaṇa* "monk of the Śākya, Buddhist monk."

This term is used in several Avadāna works and in the astronomical text *Yavanajātaka*, written in the second to third centuries CE by Sphujiddhvaja. In both text groups, it designates a Buddhist monk. The *Mṛcchakaṭikā* uses the term in its Middle Indic spelling *śakkaśaṃaṇake*.[18] However, like in the first instance, this interpretation is rather speculative and should also not serve as indisputable evidence for the presence of Buddhist monks on Socotra.

2.4 Socotra and the Diffusion of Buddhism to the West

It is generally accepted that the expeditions of Buddhists in the scope of early Western Indian Ocean trade did not result in a durable success of this religion in

275–276). Seldeslachts, who refuses this explanation of the name, regards the identification of Zarmanokhēgas as Buddhist unconvincing (2007, 148).

18 For a more detailed discussion and references, see Strauch (2012, 182).

the West. This paper is not the place to comprehensively discuss the multiple reasons for this historical development. It is also not our aim to address here the numerous theories on the impact of Buddhist ideas on philosophical developments in the West. Although much of the material discussed in this context is difficult to evaluate and speculations often outnumber "hard" historical facts, there can be no doubt that the intense contacts between the Mediterranean and India in the centuries following Alexander the Great's campaign to the East left traces in the cultures of the involved parties.[19]

In the following discussion, I want to narrow the scope to the actual transmitters of these transcultural phenomena: Who were the people who actually conducted this exchange of Buddhist ideas and concepts? Are Buddhist traders the main agents, or communities of Buddhists settling abroad for trading purposes?

The significance of trade networks for the early spread of Buddhism towards China was recently studied by Jason Neelis in his remarkable monograph *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks. Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (2010). Investigating the historical contexts of the diffusion of Buddhism towards China, Neelis appeals to the dual model developed by Erik Zürcher. Zürcher juxtaposes the mode of "contact expansion" as a kind of "diffusion, in which wandering Buddhist ascetics established residential monasteries near agricultural and commercial centers along trade and travel routes" with a "long-distance transmission," where Buddhist ideas and doctrines were transmitted over various, inconsistent routes of communication (Neelis 2010, 5–6). Neelis says:

> During the early phases of Buddhism in China in the Later Han period, the first Iranian and western Central Asian foreign monks and translators were active in Loyang about a century before residential monasteries were established in the Tarim Basin. The paucity of archaeological evidence in the transit zone of Xinjiang does not corroborate a pattern of diffusion by contact expansion from monastery to monastery following major trade routes. Élite centers of Buddhist literary and artistic production only develop later when sufficient economic surpluses are available for making donations to support year-round monastic institutions. However, such a network of monasteries was not necessary for sub-élite agents of Buddhist transmission who crossed formidable boundaries in the mountainous northwestern frontiers of South Asia and the Takla Makan desert in eastern Central Asia, but who remain largely anonymous in literary traditions. (Neelis 2010, 308)

The Upper Indus routes formed an important part of this long-distance transmission of Buddhism to China. The inscriptions and drawings along these trade

19 The most recent and very detailed study on this subject is Seldeslachts (2007). Other relevant works are Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk (1982); Webb (1993); and Halkias (2014). Most of the earlier literature devoted to this subject is quoted in these studies.

routes represent these sub-élite agents that are mainly responsible for the diffusion of Buddhism in this initial phase. At the same time, the data from the Upper Indus show a beginning process of localization and assimilation of Buddhism in this region:

> . . . socioeconomic conditions in the upper Indus apparently did not support a pattern of monastic settlement before a period of élite patronage by the Palola Ṣāhi dynasty of Gilgit from the 7th to early 8th century. The enigmatic absence of a Buddhist institutional presence before this period did not mean that Buddhists were missing from the transit zone of the upper Indus. Instead, this overview of Buddhist petroglyphs and inscriptions has demonstrated that traders, itinerant monks, and local patrons began to localize religious topologies and narratives long before élite patronage led to increased levels of Buddhist literary and artistic production in Gilgit. (Neelis 2010, 287)

Applying these two models of diffusion described for China and for the Upper Indus to the evidence from Hoq, it becomes obvious that neither of them corresponds to the conditions we observed with regard to the Hoq inscriptions. There is no indication of the existence of monastic institutions or of an involvement of élite or sub-élite agents that could be responsible for the distribution of Buddhism among the local population. A successful spread of Buddhism presupposes the presence of "professionals," i.e. monastics, who could adequately propagate their ideas among the local population and the socioeconomic élite and who could initiate the establishment of monastic institutions and networks to perpetuate a Buddhist presence in these regions. Trade and traders could act as initial and supportive factors in the spread of Buddhism, but they were hardly in the position to substantiate this religious impact.

Evaluating the specific situation of Socotra, another factor has to be taken into account. Sailors came here to undertake certain trading activities and used their stay on the island for a visit of the supposedly sacred and, of course, naturally beautiful cave. They had to wait for the next monsoon, which would allow them to continue their journey to India or to the Mediterranean.[20] It is hardly

20 The exact duration of their stay cannot be determined on the basis of the Hoq material. But the data of Gujarati inscriptions from a much later period (seventeenth to eighteenth century CE) that were discovered at Ras Howlef on the northern coast of Socotra, can perhaps be projected to the earlier period (Shelat 2012). These later inscriptions give information about the average duration of a voyage from Western India to Socotra (about 50 days) and the stay of the sailors on the island (4–5 months). According to these documents, the sailors had to leave Gujarat in the month Jyeṣṭha (May–June) and had to return from Socotra before the storms of the south-west monsoon (between June and August) began (Shelat 2012, 431). An alternative schedule that delays the departure from Socotra to September, i.e. after the south-west monsoon, is attested in Arab and English sources (Shelat 2012, 431). In any case, a longer stay on the island seems unavoidable.

imaginable that they felt the need to erect a monastery on the island. Such an institution would need much more constant support than temporary visits of bypassing Indian ships could supply. The *Periplus'* statement that Indians lived permanently on the island is certainly not to be taken as accurate.

With regard to the permanent settlements of Indians in other parts of the Western Indian Ocean network the situation is different. But unfortunately, our knowledge about them is much more limited. Although there are indications that Indian communities settled permanently or at least for a longer time in harbour sites like Myos Hormos and Berenike and along the South-Arabian coast,[21] there are no archaeological traces of any Buddhist institutions, be it a *stūpa*, a monastery or another cultic edifice or even object. None of the few Indian inscriptions discovered along the Red Sea coast refers to Buddhism.[22] It is possible that there were Buddhists among the Indian traders and settlers in the west, but how they were organized and how they practiced their religion in the foreign environment is completely unknown.

In general, much of the "evidence" for the presence of Buddhists and Buddhist ideas in the Hellenistic and Roman West is rather hypothetical or even speculative. In the following, I will evaluate only some of the most current and repeatedly quoted pieces of "evidence."

a) "Buddhist merchants in Alexandria" – Dio Chrysostom (ca. 40 CE–ca. 112 CE)

According to Webb, "a community of Indian Buddhist merchants (even bhikṣus) could establish itself in" Alexandria (1993, 64). In support of this statement, he refers to two passages in the work of the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom[23] and the interpretation given by Jean W. Sedlar in his monograph *India and the Greek World* (1980). Sedlar writes:

> . . . he mentions "a few Indians" among the men of many nationalities who listened to his speech. Dio's statement that the Indian merchants of Alexandreia belonged to a class

21 Regarding the Indian inhabitants of Berenike, Sidebotham remarks: "Indian sailors or merchants, and like their Sinhalese contemporaries, visited Berenike and either stayed for a few months, arriving in early summer and catching the monsoon back to India in August, or resided there on a more permanent basis" (2011, 69).

22 See Salomon (1991). For more – sometimes disputed – epigraphical evidence for the Indian presence in Egypt and East Africa, see Strauch (2012, 369–372).

23 Webb (1993, 64–65, n. 22). Cf. Halkias, who refers to "Chrysostomos' reference to a class of Indian merchants in Alexandria" (2014, 73, n. 22).

> held "in low repute" by the rest of their countrymen, who "say harsh things about them," may perhaps indicate that they were Buddhists or Jains – heretics from the orthodox Brahmin viewpoint. Tending to support this identification is the fact that in this period Brahmins were forbidden to cross the sea on pain of incurring ritual pollution and possible expulsion from caste membership. (Sedlar 1980, 81)

As we will see, both scholars here mingled up two different texts by Dio and created thus the existence of "Indian merchants of Alexandreia" with "a low repute" that is not based on any textual evidence.

In his *Oratio* 32 ("To the People of Alexandria"), Dio lists:

> not merely Greeks and Italians and people from neighbouring Syria, Libya, Cilicia, nor yet Ethiopians and Arabs from more distant regions, but even Bactrians and Scythians and Persians and a few Indians, and all these help to make up the audience in your theatre and sit beside you on each occasion. (Cohoon and Lamar Crosby [1940] 1961, 211)

Sedlar and Webb link this remark with Dio's *Oratio* 35 ("Delivered in Celaenae in Phrygia"). Here, Dio refers to India as the only place in the world which had more favorable conditions than those of Celaena:

> Accordingly I know of no city that is more favoured by fortune than Celaenae and no people that leads a better existence – save only the people of India. (Cohoon and Lamar Crosby [1940] 1961, 407)
>
> (. . .) though only a few do go there, in pursuit of trade, and they mingle only with the people of the coast. And that branch of the Indian race is in low repute, and all the others say harsh things of them. (Cohoon and Lamar Crosby [1940] 1961, 413)

There is no need to assume that the people at India's coast have anything to do with the Indians of Alexandria. That their low reputation would hint at their Buddhist (or Jain) identity is mere speculation. But even if we accepted this speculation, it cannot help to determine the character of the Alexandrian Indians. Whether they were Buddhists or not, merchants or monastics, we simply don't know. Thus any conclusion that Dio explicitly refers in his *Oratio* 32 to Buddhist merchants is completely unjustified.

b) The *therapeutai* of Alexandria: a Buddhist sect? – Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE)

While Dio's *Oratio* 32 gives an impressive account on the cosmopolitan character of first century Alexandria, the Jewish *Therapeutai* community of Alexandria, as described a century earlier by Philo of Alexandria in his *De Vita Contemplativa,*

can hardly contribute to our discussion. Although their ascetic character together with certain other features allow for a comparison with Buddhism, there is not the slightest evidence that this community had any direct relation with Buddhism or can be linked to Buddhist groups settling in Egypt.[24] Even if we were to assume an influence of Buddhist ideas and concepts on this Jewish sect, we have no clue to determine the source of this influence on the basis of Philo's account.

c) The gymnosophists of Ethiopia in the biography of Apollonius of Tyana: a formerly Buddhist community? – Philostratus (ca. 170–247 CE)

Philo's description of the *Therapeutai* has been compared with that of a group of "Naked Ones" in Ethiopia found in the fictional biography of Apollonius of Tyana (1st c. CE) written by the sophist Philostratus ca. 225–235 CE (Anderson 1986, 216–217, Sedlar 1980, 190–207). The character of Philostratus' work is highly complicated, intermingling information inherited from Megasthenes' *Indika* and other earlier accounts with more recent data whose source is mostly unclear (Karttunen 1997, 7–8). While his description of India contains much authentic information, the Ethiopian part of Philostratus' work abounds in inaccuracies and fantastic elements (Anderson 1986, 215–220). In his book on Ethiopia (Book VI), Philostratus describes a community of naked ascetics and reports about a discussion Apollonius had with Thespesion, the oldest of the sect's followers. Apollonius is praising his own philosophy, which he describes as "constituted in the way Pythagoras ordained, and (...) divinely inspired in the way the Indians ordained before Pythagoras" (6.11.12, tr. Jones 2005, 131). Further on, he blames the Ethiopian gymnosophists to deny their Indian origin:

24 Cf. the discussion of this theory by Seldeslachts (2007, 158–160), who calls "the comparison between the sect of the *Therapeutai*, and Buddhism most interesting" (2007, 158). His conclusions remain, however, rather vague. Halkias is completely misleading when he writes: "As recorded by Philo of Alexandria (...), the presence of early Buddhist settlements in the West could explain the unusual convictions of an active sect in Alexandria of Egypt, the Therapeutai ..." (2014, 73, n. 22). More reliable studies of this sect are now available with Taylor and Davies (1998), and Taylor (2003). Although Taylor admits certain parallels with Buddhism and a possible influence "of Buddhism and other Indian philosophies on the intellectual world of Alexandria" (2003, 64, n. 23), she says: "To what extent those who followed the contemplative life copied any forms or ideas from the norms of Eastern philosophy cannot be known" (2003, 74).

> You yourselves supported Pythagoras in this wisdom so long as you spoke well of the Indians, since you too were originally Indians. But when you were shamed by the report that the displeasure of the Earth caused you to come here, and you preferred to be anything rather than Ethiopians arrived from India, then all your actions were directed to that. You stripped yourselves of your original clothing, as if simultaneously casting off your Ethiopian identity, you determined to worship the gods in the Egyptian way rather than your own, and you began to tell unseemly stories about the Indians, as if you yourselves were not discredited by having come from discreditable people. (6.11.13, tr. Jones 2005, 131+133)

Two frequently used *topoi* characterize Apollonius' appeal. The first is the general admiration for Indian wisdom and Indian sages as holy men *par excellence* that began to dominate the western image of India in the Hellenistic period and reached its climax in the late-antique period (Parker 2008, 251–307, see also Karttunen 1997, 55–64).[25] The second *topos* concerns the equation of India and Ethiopia that is found in a number of classical sources and hardly reflects any historic authenticity (Parker 2008, 54; Schneider 2004).

The same two motifs can also be observed in a later passage of this account when Nilus, the youngest of the Ethiopian gymnosophists, approaches Apollonius and tells him about the reason why he decided to become a member of this group:

> My father once sailed to the Red Sea of his own free will, since he commanded the ship that the Egyptians send to the land of India. He conversed with the Indians of the shore, and brought back accounts of the wise men there similar to those that you recounted to us. I also heard from him some such story as this, that the Indians were the wisest people in the world, and that the Ethiopians were migrants from India who maintained their ancestral wisdom and respected their origins. So on entering manhood I gave my inheritance to anyone wanting it, and joined these Naked Ones as naked as they were, expecting to learn Indian wisdom or something close to it. (6.16.3, tr. Jones 2005, 149+151)

Nilus' report here simply reiterates the *topoi* previously introduced in Apollonius' speech. The reference to Egyptian merchants travelling to Indian coastal areas is possibly based on historical facts and confirms what we learned above from Dio Chrysostom. It is also possible that these merchants transmitted Indian ideas to the West. But the reference to the Indian origin of Ethiopians can hardly claim

25 Cf. especially Parker (2008, 303–304): "By the end of the late-antique period it had become impossible to think of Brahmans without the intervening lens of Christian asceticism (and indeed of its polytheist competitors) (. . .). To speak of the Brahmans and Gymnosophists as a Hellenistic fiction might seem unnecessarily skeptical (. . .). Yet on the other hand, we must be very aware of the ways in which these ascetics filled a need on the part of Greeks and Romans: the need for holy people, leading a gloriously independent existence within their own social worlds."

any historical value. Thus Philostratus' account can tell us nothing about the presence of Indians or even Buddhists in first century Ethiopia.[26]

d) Buddhist symbols on a gravestone from Dendera?

In the monograph on the 1898 excavations in ancient Dendera, F. Ll. Griffiths, while discussing the inscription on a Demotic gravestone, refers to the opinion of the Egyptologist Flinders Petrie who was "inclined to see in the crossed circle and object resembling a four pronged fork the Buddhist symbols of the wheel of life and the trisul" (Flinders Petrie 1900, 54). This interpretation had already been dismissed by Rapson, who was shown a copy of the symbols, and should not be taken seriously into account when discussing the evidence of a Buddhist presence in Ptolemaic Egypt.[27] According to a recent study by Jan Moje, both symbols are purely Egyptian. Moje interpreted the first sign ("the fork") as offering table with four breads, the second ("the wheel") could also represent a bread, although Moje here prefers another interpretation that links the shape

26 As an example for such an imaginative interpretation of Nilus' report, I quote G.R.S Mead (1901, 102–103, Chapter 10: "The Gymnosophists of Upper Egypt"): "If there be any truth in this story it follows that the founders of this way of life had been Indian ascetics, and if so they must have belonged to the only propagandising form of Indian religion, namely, the Buddhist. After the impulse had been given, the communities, which were presumably recruited from generations of Egyptians, Arabs, and Ethiopians, were probably left entirely to themselves, and so in course of time forgot their origin, and even perhaps their original rule. Such speculations are permissible, owing to the repeated assertion of the original connection between these Gymnosophists and India. The whole burden of the story is that they were Indians who had forgotten their origin and fallen away from the wisdom."

27 Cf. the short discussion of Salomon (1991, 736, n. 33). Flinders Petrie is also responsible for another piece of "evidence" for an Indian presence in Egypt. In 1908, he briefly introduced some "Indian" terracotta figurines from Memphis, which according to him "are the first remains of Indians known on the Mediterranean. Hitherto there have been no material evidences for that connection which is stated to have existed, both by embassies from Egypt and Syria to India, and by the great Buddhist mission sent by Asoka as far west as Greece and Cyrene. We seem now to have touched the Indian colony in Memphis, and we may hope for more light on that connection which seems to have been so momentous for Western thought" (1908, 129). Although some scholars of Indian Art are inclined to accept his interpretation of some of the Memphis terracotta figurines as Indian and even consider the possibility that they might be products of a local Indian community (especially Harle 1991, 1992), these figurines can at most indicate a certain Indian influence on the aesthetic concepts used by the local artists in Memphis. The channels of this influence remain obscure – whether it was local Indians or local Egyptian artists acquainted with Indian art through direct or indirect contact with Indian models. For our discussion about the presence of Buddhists in the West, these figurines are of no relevance.

of the symbol to that of the Demotic hieroglyph for "underworld." Hence he considers this symbol to be a cryptographic representation of Osiris, the god of the underworld (Moje 2008, 40–43).[28]

Based on this short review, Seldeslachts' statement about "patches of practicing Buddhists in Egypt and elsewhere ... left to themselves, except for the support of traders and converted locals" (2007, 161) must remain hypothetical until further confirming evidence can be procured.[29] There is no positive evidence for the existence of "practicing Buddhists" in the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean, not to speak of Buddhist monasteries.

If we look at the detectable impact Buddhism had on western conceptions, there is hardly anything that could prove a strong presence of Buddhist ideas in the intellectual circles of the West.[30] But the little evidence we have can perhaps help to better evaluate the assumed role of Indian traders in the process of the Buddhist-western encounter.

The first western author who explicitly mentioned Buddhism was the Christian, Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the late second or early third century CE (Seldeslachts 2007, 154–155, cf. also Parker 2008, 252).[31] Of course, given the possible presence of Indians – and Buddhists – in this part of the Roman Empire, it is tempting to assume a kind of first-hand information that Clement could have obtained from his Indian "neighbors." This was indeed recently suggested by Annika Yoshida Reed, who "wonder(s) whether Clement's own context in Roman Egypt, in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, may have afforded him opportunities to hear travelers' tales of the Indian subcontinent, or perhaps even to encounter South Asian traders of the sort attested by the epigraphical evidence adduced by Richard Salomon" (Reed 2014, 272).

But if one takes a closer look at the relevant statements found in his monumental work *Stromateis*, it becomes obvious that Clement uses all sort of sources, but none of them can be characterized as first-hand accounts and none of

28 The stele is listed as no. 20 in Moje's catalogue (2008, 33). A depiction can be found on Table 21. I have to thank Alexandra von Lieven for this reference.

29 This statement clearly contradicts the above cited passage, according to which one "looks in vain for something specifically Buddhistic about these people" (Seldeslachts 2007, 148).

30 Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk, who investigated the influence of Buddhism on Hellenistic and Roman literature, concluded: "As a whole, Buddhism did not execute any remarkable influence on the ancient world" (1982, 50, tr. I.S.). The same conclusion was drawn by other scholars, such as E. Lamotte and Loucette Boulnois (Webb 1993, 81–82).

31 According to Rawlinson, Clement is even "the first writer to shew any real knowledge of Eastern philosophy, in addition to the commonplaces repeated by successive writers since the time of Megasthenes" (1916, 174).

them can be traced back to the assumed presence of Indian Buddhists in the Alexandrian region.

Clement's first explicit Buddhist reference is embedded in a longer passage about Indian religions that is otherwise based on Megasthenes' *Indika*. In a single sentence Clement refers to the Buddha:

> Some, too, of the Indians obey the precepts of *Boutta* whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have raised to divine honors. (Clement, *Stromateis* 1.15.71, cited after Reed 2014, 273)

As a possible source for his information about Buddhism, Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk (1982, 47) referred to Clement's teacher, Pantaenus, who travelled at the end of the second century CE as a missionary to India (see also Reed 2014, 273). According to Seldeslachts (2007, 154), Clement's transcription of Buddha as *Bouttas* could also indicate that he did not get his information directly from Indians, but rather through Iranian intermediaries.[32] There is no evidence, at least, that Clement's reference goes back to Indians living in or near Alexandria.

The second, rather large and detailed description of the Buddhist religion in Clement's work was clearly borrowed from an earlier source. Clement himself refers to Alexander Polyhistor (first century BCE).[33]

> And those called holy men (*semnoi*) go naked throughout their entire life. They seek for the truth, and predict the future, and reverence a certain pyramid beneath which, they think, lie the bones of a certain god. Neither the gymnosophists nor the so-called holy men have wives. They think sexual relations are unnatural and contrary to law. For this cause, they keep themselves chaste. The holy men are also virgins. They observe, it seems, the heavenly bodies and from what they indicate foretell future events. (Clement, *Stromateis* 3.7.60, cited after Reed 2014, 273–274)

Although this passage might well refer to Indian (or Indo-Greek) Buddhists – but Jains or Ājīvikas are equally potential candidates – it hardly reveals any profound knowledge of this religion. Still less can it serve as proof for Clement's direct acquaintance with Buddhists or Buddhism.

32 Such a source was also suggested by Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk (1982, 47) for the initial part of Clement's description of Indian religions, where he refers to Bactrian *samanaioi (Samanaioi Bactrôn)*. For this term, Dihle had already suggested a Middle Persian intermediary form *ssamana*. For this passage, which some scholars also ascribed to Megasthenes, cf. Karttunen (1997, 63, n. 266).

33 See Karttunen (1997, 63) and Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk (1982, 48). Dihle even considers these passages as going back to Megasthenes (Karttunen 1997, 63, n. 265).

In fact, most of the early western sources referring to Buddhism are Christian texts. As Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk have stressed (1982, 50), this predilection can be understood as a kind of counter-reaction against the somewhat uncritical and idealistic way in which Brahmans were described in non-Christian texts. The assumed "monotheism" of Buddhism made this religion a natural partner in the struggle against the polytheistic cults of the Roman Empire.

Another important Christian author who wrote extensively about India was the Syrian Christian, Bardesanes (154–222 CE), a contemporary of Clement.[34] He is said to have written an entire book about India, which is unfortunately not preserved. Fragments of it, cited by later authors, show that Bardesanes indeed added much new information about India to the classical canon inherited by Megasthenes. According to Porphyry, who used much of Bardesanes' work, his information goes back to "one Sandanes, Sandalis, Dandamis or Damadamis, an Indian who came with an embassy to Syria to welcome the Emperor Elagabalus to the throne in 218 A.D." (Rawlinson 1916, 143, see also Bongard-Levin and Karpyuk 1982, 48). According to the passages preserved in Porphyry's work, Bardesanes described the mode of life of Brahmins and *samanaioi* (< *śramaṇa*). He wrote about the *samanaioi*:

> But the Samanaeans are elected, and consist of those who wish to possess divine knowledge (...) When, however, any one is desirous of being enrolled in their order, he proceeds to the rulers of the city; but abandons the city or village that he inhabited, and the wealth and all the other property that he possessed. Having likewise the superfluities of his body cut off, he receives a garment, and departs to the Samanaeans, but does not return either to his wife or children, if he happens to have any, nor does he pay any attention to them, or think that they at all pertain to him. And, with respect to his children indeed, the king provides what is necessary for them, and the relatives provide for the wife. And such is the life of the Samanaeans. But they live out of the city, and spend the whole day in conversation pertaining to divinity. They have also houses and temples, built by the king, in which they are stewards, who receive a certain emolument from the king, for the purpose of supplying those that dwell in them with nutriment. But their food consists of rice, bread, autumnal fruits, and pot-herbs. And when they enter into their house, the sound of a bell being the signal of their entrance, those that are not Samanaeans depart from it, and the Samanaeans begin immediately to pray. But having prayed, again, on the bell sounding as a signal, the servants give to each Samanaean a platter, (for two of them do not eat out of the same dish,) and feed them with rice. And to him who is in want of a variety of food, a pot-herb is added, or some autumnal fruit. But having eaten as much as is requisite, without any delay they proceed to their accustomed employments. All of them likewise are unmarried, and have no possessions: and so much are both these and the Bramins venerated by the other Indians, that the king also visits them, and requests them to pray to and supplicate the Gods, when any

34 For the life and work of Bardesanes, see Skjærvø (1988).

> calamity befalls the country, or to advise him how to act. (Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*, 4, tr. Taylor [1823] 1994)

The information Bardesanes got from the ambassadors shows a rather detailed knowledge of the monastic life-style and the social and economic conditions of monasticism and its relation to state institutions, but hardly any familiarity with Buddhist doctrines and rituals. As Deeg and Gardener (2009, 5–11) have shown, this description – and in particular the following references to the *samanaioi*'s ritual suicide – even better fit a Jain context. It is exactly the kind of rather generic information one would expect from a diplomat in royal service.[35] Again there is nothing to indicate a personal encounter between Bardesanes and Buddhist institutions or practitioners.

Information about Buddhism and Buddhist conceptions was at that time not only available from Buddhists themselves or from Indians who were acquainted with Buddhist culture and ideas. Several religious communities such as the Manichaeans from Iran were influenced by Buddhism and transmitted certain ideas to the West. The personal contacts of the religion's founder Mani (216–277 CE) with Buddhists, whom he met on his tour to India, and the influence of Buddhist conceptions on Manichaeism are well known.[36] More disputed is the Buddhist impact on the teachings of the early Christian Gnostic Basilides (ca. 85–ca. 145 CE), as argued by Kennedy (1902).[37] Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about Basilides' possible contacts with Buddhism.[38]

Through the close interaction between Manichaean, Gnostic, Jewish, and early Christian communities, Buddhist ideas and conceptions could enter the "Western world" in a modified form. In most cases, their Buddhist background

35 Reed's assumption that he got this information from an "Indian sage" (2014, 276) can hardly be substantiated on the basis of the available evidence.

36 For the Buddhist impact on early Manichaeism, see Sundermann (1997).

37 See Webb (1993, 75–76) and Seldeslachts (2007, 151–154). Richard Garbe (1914) even says: "Vollkommen vom Buddhismus durchtränkt ist das System des Basilides (aus der ersten Hälfte des zweiten Jahrhunderts), der das Leiden für den Grundzug alles Daseins erklärte, die Seelenwanderung mit dem Gesetz der Vergeltung annahm und die Persönlichkeit als einen Komplex aus fünf Bestandteilen auffaßte (entsprechend den fünf buddhistischen Khandas oder Daseinselementen) – um nur die hauptsächlichsten Entlehnungen aus dem Buddhismus zu erwähnen" (1914, 72). A comprehensive survey about Basilides' teachings and life in the context of Alexandrian Gnosticism and early Christianity is found in Pearson (2008), who does not even consider the possibility of a Buddhist influence.

38 Webb refers to "Indian merchants from the port of Barygaza in Gujarat and from Ceylon" as Basilides' source (1993, 75). This information is not based on any historical evidence. Webb here takes Kennedy's assumption that Basilides might have heard about Buddhism from Indian merchants in Alexandria as described by Dio Chrysostom (see above) as historical fact.

was not explicitly marked nor were these ideas directly linked with Buddhist practitioners. As Seldeslachts rightly remarks, "many such apparently Buddhist elements are found on the crossroads between Judaism, Gnosticism, Christianity, Neo-Platonism, and similar agents of the orientalisation of the West (2007, 150)."

According to this short overview, several sources of information about Buddhism can be identified in Hellenistic, Roman and early Christian literature. Based on rather generic ideas about Indian ascetics (*śramaṇa*) inherited from Alexandrian historians and the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes, western conceptions about Buddhism were gradually augmented by specific information, mainly through the following three channels:

1. Indian diplomats traveling west.
2. Westerners traveling east.
3. Indirect information from religious communities that had contact with both spheres, such as Manichaeans, and Gnostic and early Christian groups.

There is no evidence that Indian Buddhists settling in the West or Indian Buddhist monks traveling west were ever referred to as a source of information about this religion. At the same time, none of the sources confirm the existence of Buddhist communities in the Mediterranean.[39]

2.5 Conclusion

If it is permissible to generalize the evidence of the Hoq corpus for India's oversea trade contacts with the West in the first centuries of our era, the following points can be highlighted:

1. A considerable portion of the merchants and sailors travelling west were Buddhists. Projecting the evidence from Hoq, their percentage might have reached nearly 30%.

39 See also the rather clear statement made by Russell Webb: "Summing up, a Buddhist community, recognizable as such, was never established in the Mediterranean area, or, indeed, anywhere in the West proper" (1993, 80). He continues, "(t)he only exception might be made in the case of the international emporium of Alexandria in Egypt, where individual Buddhist merchants from India could well have formed part of the transient population" (Webb 1993, 80–81). As we stated above, the probability of Buddhist merchants among the Indian trading communities along the Western Indian Ocean trade routes does not automatically imply the existence of Buddhist communities, which *per definitionem* must include monastics. Evidence for such monastic communities is completely absent.

2. According to the devotional texts and drawings left at Hoq, the Buddhist merchants practiced a rather simplistic form of Buddhism where the figure of the historical Buddha Gautama and the object of the *stūpa* represented the core of the religious and ritual activities. There is not a single text, which would refer to any kind of dogmatic issues. At the same time the corpus does not give any indication of Mahāyāna ideas.
3. There is no definitive evidence that could indicate the presence of Buddhist monastics among the participants of oversea trade with the west.
4. According to the evidence from Hoq, where texts of various sea-trading communities – including South-Arabians, Ethiopians and Greeks – are attested, neither the local population (including the local élites) nor any of the other attested ethnic groups were involved in any kind of Buddhist activities.

When compared to the literary, archaeological and epigraphical evidence, the information from Hoq fits well with the general picture. As the sources show, the participation of Buddhist sailors and merchants in the western Indian Ocean sea-trade was not accompanied by the establishment of Buddhist religious institutions. Only a process that involved the active engagement of religious professionals could have supplied the basis for the diffusion of Buddhism as an institutional religion. Temporary settlements of traders along the sea trade routes in South Arabia and the Red Sea coast were hardly able to provide the necessary economic support for permanent Buddhist institutions.

Although it is highly probable that there were Buddhists among the Indian traders and settlers, there is no evidence that Buddhism ever left the boundaries of these Indian communities or was accepted by the local population or the local economic or political élite. This missing "localization" is certainly also due to the apparent lack of Buddhist monastics among the Indian travelers. Consequently, the conditions along the western Indian Ocean trade routes were nearly diametrically opposite to the situation in the Indian northwest, where Buddhist monastics actively participated in the movements along the trade routes and where local patrons lively supported the Buddhist activities.

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