

CHAPTER IV

Stairway to Heaven and the Path to Buddhahood: Donors and Their Aspirations in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Ajanta*

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Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo
per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,
metter potete ben per l'alto sale
vostro navigio, servando mio solco
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna eguale.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*,
Paradiso 2:10–15

Dedicato alla memoria di Stefano Zacchetti

Introduction

The important soteriological trend placing at its core the ambition to become a perfect *buddha* progressively suffused Indian Buddhism throughout the Middle Period, that is, between the first and sixth centuries CE. At the beginning of this period, the ambitious *virtuosi* embarking on and promoting this Bodhisattvayāna were likely a minority, although their dynamism and

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influence in some regional centres such as Greater Gandhāra was far from negligible. Across South Asia, evidence of various kinds concurs in identifying the late fourth to early sixth century as marking a shift, when the ideas propounded by the Bodhisattva movement became, so to speak, the “main stream”. Through a stratigraphic study of some of the canons, whose boundaries were the object of a constant effort of definition during this period, one can observe how this ideal was endorsed by several monastic orders.¹ At the same time, the study of manuscript troves such as those found in Gilgit and in the Bāmiyān valley allows a glimpse into the religious eclecticism of local communities, and into the stratification of archives.

The public impact of the Bodhisattva movement may also be measured by tracing shifts in the ideology of merit. To explore this issue historically, literary sources—and in particular those texts concerned with the generation and assignment of merit—need to be considered in close connection with epigraphical, visual, and archaeological evidence. These sources generally do not present a coherent picture of a gradual path to liberation in the same way as doctrinal works. Yet, the study of what religious agents define as their goal(s) may allow some understanding of the multi-life trajectory that *bodhisattvas* expected for themselves. It is particularly informative to scrutinize statements of motivation that accompanied pious donations: these contain numerous expressions marking donors’ aspiration to Awakening (*prañidhāna*) or other indications of their soteriological outlook.

Inscriptions, which are predominantly donative in genre, yield very interesting information on the evolution of religious aspirations among Buddhists, and thus constitute the primary material of this enquiry.² In the epigraphic corpus of the Deccan, on which my research currently focuses, these donative inscriptions can be subsumed under two main categories:³ (1) Formulaic records in prose, sometimes accompanied by verse quotations. These are generally written in Sanskrit from the fourth century onwards, but this language remains heavily permeated by Middle Indo-Aryan features and is subject to the influence of the vernaculars. (2) Ornate *ad hoc* compositions, whether copper-plate land grants or stone inscriptions. After the fading of

¹ For a contribution to that issue, with a focus on the Mahāsāṅghika schools, see Tournier 2017: 255–351.

² For a survey of donative inscriptions of the Eastern Ghats, across the whole of the Middle Period, see: Tournier in preparation.

³ For a typology of epigraphic records across South Asia, see Salomon 1998: 110–126.

Middle Indo-Aryan languages in the epigraphic medium, they are usually composed in a more polished kind of Sanskrit and not uncommonly in verse. While short donative inscriptions have proven useful to map the spread of formulae employed to express religious aspirations, ornate records are qualitatively important, since they showcase the background and motivations of individual donors. Both types also draw on a pool of literary and scriptural tropes, which provide us with glimpses of the circulation of texts and the evolution of normative discourses. This is especially valuable in regions like the Deccan, where so little is known of the literary traditions of the regional Buddhist communities. Both epigraphic text-types attest to the spread of formal assignment of the merit arising from a gift to the goal of Buddhahood in the fifth and sixth centuries.

This phenomenon might in turn be related to broader evolutions in *mentalités* and ritual praxis, such as the increasing identification at that time of the Buddha with his image. Gérard Colas has suggested that, by the fifth century, the identification of the icon as a sentient and a juridical person had spread widely across Indian religious traditions.⁴ In the Buddhist case, this was anticipated by several centuries, with the treatment of the relics—and, by extension, the *stūpa*—as a sacred receptacle of his qualities and as a legal substitute. But the understanding of the Buddha's image as (one of) his *corps substitué(s)*—to borrow Paul Mus' famous expression—indeed would appear to come into full bloom around the period identified by Colas. This phenomenon is also accompanied, between the third and the fifth century, by evolutions in monastery layout. The mature plan ensuing from these developments allocates the “perfumed chamber” (*gandhakuṭī*) or *cella* where the Buddha(-image) is established to the centre of the back wall of monasteries.⁵ As noticed by Gregory Schopen, this period is also marked by unambiguous references in inscriptions to the Buddha as a permanent resident.⁶

The evolution sketched here may in part account for the spread of aspirations to Buddhahood in the epigraphic record. Indeed, a crucial concern for candidates to Awakening was precisely that their aspiration be somehow *witnessed* and *validated* by a *buddha*. In narrative literature, *praṇidhānas*

⁴ Colas 2012: 109–122. As specified by the author, this identification was also contested in some circles, for instance among Mīmāṃsakas.

⁵ On the antecedents to this layout, see Dhavalikar 1981; Owen 2001. On the term *gandhakuṭī*, see recently Schopen 2015.

⁶ Schopen 1990.

are generally conceived in the presence of a *buddha*, and they have a strongly emulative tone. There was no agreement at the time about what or who qualified as a valid witness, and while a conservative point of view insisted that it be a living *buddha*, others recognized the possibility of aspirations formulated in front of a *stūpa*, an image, or at the *bodhimaṇḍa*.⁷ And indeed, manuals for *bodhisattvas* and ritual texts used in their daily practice also make frequent reference to the presence of images in the ceremonies during which the practitioner conceives the aspiration to Buddhahood, or receives the rules of *bodhisattva* training (*bodhisattvaśikṣā*).⁸ Moreover, some of the iconographic types that were especially popular in the period considered here were inspired by the donors' wish to identify themselves with the awakened state they were aiming at, or by their eagerness to gain assurance that their wish would be fulfilled.⁹

Although the representation of and identifications with Buddhahood may have played a central role in devotional activities of the late Middle Period, it would seem far too schematic to suppose that perfect Awakening was the sole goal motivating the act of giving. The present contribution will attempt to determine how donors self-identifying as *bodhisattvas* in fact harmoniously combined and hierarchically structured mundane and supramundane goals. I will argue that both categories of expectations are in fact reconciled by an implied multi-life path to liberation, whereby benefits such as auspicious rebirths serve, *inter alia*, as markers of one's progress toward Awakening. I will also suggest that, at the prominent and well-documented site of Ajanta, the concern for rebirth among gods and high-born, beautiful human beings, may well relate to the commemorative dimension of many of the fifth- and sixth-century cave dedications. The jewel of a site that is Ajanta has been scrutinized from multiple angles and has been the focus of an intimidating number of publications. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that a close, context-sensitive, (re-)reading of the epigraphic record can still yield precious clues for the historian of Buddhism. To illustrate my point, I will draw on two examples: (1) a series of short donative inscriptions transmitting a formulaic assignment of merit along with a scriptural quotation; (2) an elaborate record in verse composed by a prominent monastic donor and rep-

⁷ See Tournier 2014: 38–40.

⁸ See, for instance, the discussion in Griffiths 2020.

⁹ On the Māravijaya iconographic type and its coexistence with inscriptions expressing aspirations to reach the Awakening of a perfect *buddha*, see Tournier 2014.

resenting a unique document for understanding the ideology of the gift current in that time and place.

Part 1: For the Supreme Knowledge, and High Births Along the Way

Gregory Schopen, whose ground-breaking scholarship has inspired much of the present study, has analysed on several occasions the spread of a donative formula from the fourth century onwards in inscriptions and manuscripts colophons.¹⁰ The formula patches together two textual blocks,¹¹ one presenting the gift itself (with *deyadharmo 'yaṃ* followed by title and name), the other by assigning the merit (*punya*) arising from it to a given goal. This goal is most commonly the attainment of “supreme knowledge” (*anuttara-jñāna-avāpti*), typically—if not always clearly¹²—by all beings. Following a pan-Indian conception according to which merit can be divided into shares,¹³ a supplementary clause (typically constructed with *-pūrvāṅgamam kṛtvā*) commonly identifies a group of persons that are prioritized as beneficiaries. The “supreme knowledge” can now safely be equated with perfect Awakening, which implies that donors adopting this formula may have espoused a soteriological model consistent with the Bodhisattvayāna. The supramundane aspirations that this formula conveys diverge at first sight from what is found in earlier donative records. According to Schopen, these records, when they contain a formal assignment of merit towards a specific aim, mention a variety of goals, such as health or the well-being of one’s dead parents, and more rarely *nirvāṇa*. Schopen therefore contrasted earlier “Hīnayāna inscriptions” where dedications of merits are concerned with “something less than the religious goal sanctioned by the literary tradition”, with “Mahāyāna inscriptions” where “the merit of the act [...] is always said to be intended specifically for the attainment of *anuttarajñāna*”.¹⁴ He continued that “in none of our Mahāyāna inscriptions is merit ever transferred to deceased par-

¹⁰ See Schopen 1979; 1985; 2000. For further references, see Tournier 2018: 44–45, nn. 60, 66, 70.

¹¹ See the outline in Tournier 2018: 44.

¹² Tournier 2014: 36–42.

¹³ See, e.g., Hara 2002: 106ff.

¹⁴ Schopen 1985: 38–39.

ents or for such things as conferring health or granting long life”.¹⁵ Schopen’s presentation did not do full justice to the complexity of the data, and this was in part due to a division of the record—very common in the 1980s, but now outdated—into discrete entities labelled Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. First, even before the influence of the Bodhisattva movement became significant, the soteriological goal of *nirvāṇa* gained some currency in certain regional corpora, at least from the third century onwards.¹⁶ Moreover, mundane benefits do occasionally coexist with the supreme goal—whether it be *nirvāṇa* or *samyaksambodhi*—in epigraphic formulae.¹⁷ While Schopen’s assumption with respect to so-called formulas of “merit-transfer” is essentially correct for fourth to sixth-century donative records aiming at Buddhahood, consideration of the formulae in their broader context at Ajanta allows for a refinement of our understanding of donors’ motivations. Indeed, a qualitative approach to individual inscriptions reveals that donors who considered themselves as *en route* for Awakening at the same time nourished lower expectations, and in particular aimed at auspicious rebirths for themselves and for their relatives.

Out of the ninety-seven inscriptions recovered so far from Ajanta, forty-seven—whose beginning is preserved—introduce the gift with *deya-dharmo ’yaṃ*. All of these inscriptions—save one, AġI 17, to be considered below—are engraved in relation to images described by Walter Spink as “intrusive” in the sense that they seem not to have been part of the original iconographic planning of the caves in which they were found. According to

¹⁵ Schopen 1985: 43.

¹⁶ Half of the forty-four inscriptions from Āndhradeśa engraved during the period roughly coinciding with the Ikṣvāku rule, which mention donors’ motivations, hence identify *nirvāṇa* as a goal. One has to account for the fact that many of these inscriptions are connected to a single individual, the prominent *upāsikā* Cāntisirī, and were engraved at the *mahācaitya* of Nagarjunakonda. But if we consider the single individuals involved in patronage, still eight of the twenty-two donors mention *nirvāṇa* as a goal in their records. None of the inscriptions of this sub-corpus mention *anuttarajñāna* or Buddhahood. For more details, see: Tournier in preparation.

¹⁷ In the Nagarjunakonda corpus, see for instance inscriptions EIAD 24 and 28 in the online corpus *Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa* (<http://epigraphia.efeo.fr/andhra>), where Cāntisirī’s aim at *nirvāṇa* coexists with the granting of long life and victory of the king, who was the donor’s son-in-law. I will return to the interesting formula used in EIAD 136, a sixth-century inscription from Jaggayyapeta, in the conclusion to this study, pp. 219–220.

Spink, these intrusive dedications appeared around the year 480 CE, shortly after the demise of the last significant ruler of the Vatsagulma branch of the Vākātakas, Hariṣeṇa (ca 477–478).¹⁸ Spink’s chronology year by year—and even month by month!—of the developments at the site represents, in the words of Oskar von Hinüber, a “chronological wonderland”.¹⁹ It cannot however be simply dismissed as a work of historical fiction, for the rich evidence Spink has accumulated over decades may still serve our understanding of the development of the site, as long as *relative chronology* is concerned.²⁰ Thus, it seems indeed possible that many of the small donative inscriptions in the major caves may have flourished once the patronage of whole caves by elite donors had dwindled. Until a detailed palaeographic analysis of the corpus is carried out, we can provisionally assume a tentative dating of this sub-corpus to the late fifth and the sixth century. Out of these donative inscriptions, at least twelve included the formula assigning the merit produced by the gift to the attainment of supreme knowledge.²¹ Two of these inscriptions, as well as a third one containing the simpler *deyadharmo ’yam* phrase, have in common an additional stanza, placed either before or after the donative formula. The first of these inscriptions (AjI 90) is found on the right wall of the *cella* of the small cave XXII, below what is certainly the best example of a popular motif at the site, namely the series of eight *buddhas*, including Śākyamuni, his six predecessors, and Maitreya.²² Each *buddha* is seated under his *bodhi*-tree, of a distinct kind, and above each tree a label indicating its name was painted. In a first band below each *buddha*, another set of labels state their names. It is below a frieze with geometrical patterns that the donative record

¹⁸ This dating of Hariṣeṇa’s death is accepted by Bakker 1997: 49. Ajay Mitra Shastri (1997: 203–205) situates instead the ruler’s death around 510.

¹⁹ See Hinüber 2008: 66. For a detailed unpacking of this chronology, see Spink 2005–2016, vol. IV.

²⁰ See the remarks in that sense, formulated in a letter by H. Stietencron, reproduced in Spink 2005–2016, vol. I: 23–26.

²¹ These are nos. 11, 14–18, 65, 70–71, 73, 90, and 94 in Cohen’s catalogue (2006), the numbering of which I follow here (referring to individual inscriptions with the abbreviation AjI). The exact number of cases is very difficult to evaluate, since the later part of these records is often lost. As previously noted, some of the Ajanta inscriptions end before the mention of *anuttarajñāna*, merely directing the merit produced to all beings (*sarvasattvānām*), without further characterizing the benefit. See Tournier 2014: 40, n. 158. Cf. McCombs 2014: 350–351, 357–358.

²² On this motif at Ajanta, see Zin 2003: 457–469.

... *nīyasya* ... [*u*]tranya . [*o*] [*sa*]rvvasatvānām C.²⁴ -**paṃnnā** Ch, C; -**pannā** I. Emend -**pannā**. **guptendriye** *guṇendriyair* I; *guṇendriye* Ch, C. This is unlikely to constitute a rare case of nom. pl. in -e (on which, see BHSG § 8.80). Following the reading of the parallel in AjI 52, emend *guptendriyā*. **bhāsvaṛadīpta**[**yas te**] Ch, C; *bhāsvaṛadīptayaṣṭe* I. **bhavaṃnti** [**lo**](**ke**) *bhavanti te* I, Ch, C. Ch suggests reading [*cai*]te. **nayanābhirāmā** – *nayanābhirāmā* I, C; *nayanābhirāmā* | Ch. The sign –, besides marking the end of a *pāda*, points here at the continuation of the text in the line below. **2. bimbam** | Ch; *bimbam* I, C.

This is the pious gift of the *śākyabhikṣu* Maṣa... for the attainment of the supreme knowledge (by all beings—priority being given to ... his parents?).

Reborn²⁵ with the qualities of beauty and prosperity, they become of well-protected senses and, resplendent as the sun, are a delight to look at in the world, they who commission here (i.e., in this life) an image of the Jina.

The interpretation of the word coming immediately after the monastic title *śākyabhikṣu* has been much debated. Only the first *akṣara* and part of the second are preserved today (see fig. 3), and so it is impossible to be sure what this part of the formula originally read. To me, the most likely hypothesis is that the word following the monastic title was either an indication of the

²⁴ The lacuna of *ca* 24 *akṣaras* after the space, and before (*sarvasatvā*)*nām*, whose reconstruction is rather secure, suggests there was a formula of assignment of merit starting with *yad atra puṇyam tad bhavatu*, followed by a clause determining the primary beneficiaries of the gift. In light of their common mention at Ajanta, these would have probably consisted of the donor's parents, as also suggested by the hand copy on which Indrajī's and Cohen's readings are based. Perhaps the formula originally read *mātāpitṛpūrvāṅgamaṃ kṛtvā* since this parenthetical clause—common outside Ajanta—is also partly attested in AjI 65, to be discussed below. But this is unsure.

²⁵ Previous translations of this oft-cited stanza have rendered *upapanna* as “possessed of” (Salomon and Schopen 1984: 120; DeCaroli 2015: 129), “endowed with” (Cohen 2006a: 331; Skilling 2017: 28) or “possess” (Vinītā 2010: 217). In Pāli (DP, s.v. *upapajjati*) and Buddhist Sanskrit (BHSD, s.v. *upapadyate*), this past participle can both mean “reborn” and “endowed with”. I am inclined to opt for the first interpretation on three grounds: (1) the use of *iha* in *pāda* d implies a contrast between the present condition of the donor and his future enjoyment; (2) the scriptural context of the stanza (on which see below, pp. 191–192) makes it clear that the stanza is concerned with future rebirths; (3) *upapanna* is unambiguously used, in composition with *abhijana*-, in the sense of being (re)born, in st. 14 of AjI 93, thereby proving that this meaning of the word was current at the site.

monk's name or a toponym pointing to his origin or place of residence.²⁶ It is much less likely that precisely this damaged word was the only occurrence of the word *mahāyāna* at the site.²⁷ Similarly, it is highly problematic to see in it a rare mention of a Buddhist *nikāya*—that of the *Aparaśailas*.²⁸ Indeed, no Buddhist order is otherwise named in the epigraphic record of Ajanta,

²⁶ This is already the interpretation of Burgess and Indraji 1881: 88, which is also followed by Morrissey 2009: 69–71 and McCombs 2014: 342, n. 86.

²⁷ Chakravarti (1955: 112), who affirms he read the inscription from the original, proposes that the reading “may have been the usual *Mahāyānayāyinaḥ*”. There is however a clear vertical stroke to the right of the second *akṣara*, which excludes its being read *hā*. Moreover, in inscriptions where the epithet *pravaramahāyānayāyin* occurs, it generally precedes the title *śākyabhikṣu* (or, for that matter, *paramopāsaka*). See Schopen 1979: 10, where the only apparent exception to this pattern is provided by the inscription under discussion. See also Mitra 1998: 285.

²⁸ Cohen (1995a: 11) confidently claimed that “[i]n the place where the previous epigrapher had found ‘Mahāyāna,’ I discovered the term *Aparaśaila*”, which he interprets as pointing to the *nikāya* belonging to the Mahāsāṅghika fold. There are reasons to be suspicious of Cohen’s edition of this inscription, since in particular he does not use any bracket indicating the parts of the word that were damaged or lost on the wall that he claims to have examined. Cohen expresses his intention “to publish a more technical assessment in the near future”, but when indeed he did in his 2006 publication of the Ajanta corpus, he kept his reading *aparaśaila* (without brackets), ignoring the fair criticism of method formulated in Schopen 2000: 17, n. 31. There is no reason to suspect that Cohen saw and recorded the inscription in a better state than it was in 2012, when I could access it. Indeed, the only picture of the cave XXII painting he published, in support of an unrelated argument (2006b: 76, fig. 3.2), shows the fresco in a similar state to the one I myself witnessed. That the portion of plaster bearing the word in question was already lost to the epigrapher by 1991 at the latest is shown by Leese 1991: fig. 18. One cannot escape the conclusion that Cohen has in fact relied on the eye-copy published in Griffiths 1896: pl. 91, which he holds (2006a: 331) to provide “the best evidence for the first part of the inscription”. Since, for the second part of the inscription, where the eye-copy can be compared to the preserved inscription, Cohen has to admit that the former “clearly deviates from the actual inscription here”, there is no particular reason to trust that it was reliable only in the half of the inscription that is lost. It should thus be altogether discarded. Even admitting the possibility of reading *pa* instead of *ṣa*, Cohen does not account for the fact that the *akṣara* following *kṣo* is not an initial *ṛa* or a *ra*, but a clear *ma*. In his 2006 edition, he seems to be treating it as an epenthesis (although he does not say so), but the use of the *sandhi* consonant *-m-* after an *-o-*—itself an odd gen. sg. ending—is extremely rare; see BHS § 4.59; von Hinüber 2014: 87. This rarity even further complicates Cohen’s hypothesis.

and the other presumed exception is also almost certainly a red herring.²⁹ Furthermore, the Aparāsailas are otherwise only known in inscriptions from Āndhra,³⁰ the other presumed exception from Maharashtra being—once again—the result of a fanciful reading.³¹ Therefore, while Schopen ought, as I have argued elsewhere, probably not to have dismissed the possible co-

²⁹ Ajl 58, an inscription painted at the feet of a *buddha* on a pillar from cave X, reads as follows, according to Cohen: *vi(pa)[śvī] samya[k]sambu[ddha] cetika ? rikasya*. My inspection of the inscribed pillar did not allow me to improve this reading substantially. After the genitive, the inscription breaks off, and the formula must at least have originally included the name of the donor. Dikshit has suggested (1942: 63) identifying the word *cetika* with the name of the Caitika/Śaila school, a hypothesis developed by Leese (1991: 136–140) and Cohen (1995a: 9–11 and, less forcefully, 2006a: 304). See also Zin 2003: 374f. However, the compound in the genitive must probably be reconstructed as *cetika(vā)rikasya* and be considered a monastic title pointing to the monk in charge of a shrine. On monastic titles in *-vārika/-cāraka*, see Silk 2008a: 101–125; Kieffer-Pülz 2010: 78–79. Dikshit's theory according to which the Caitika school of Āndhra was also attested in Junnar (IBH, Junnar no. 18) and Nasik (IBH, Nāsik no. 9) is equally speculative.

³⁰ I return to this evidence in: Tournier forthcoming.

³¹ Dikshit (1942) again has argued for the occurrence of this school's name in Kanheri cave LXXVI. However, upon personal inspection of the stone (see also fig. 4) his reading *atha aparīselesu*, accepted by Gokhale (1991: 91), whose reading is reproduced in Tsukamoto's corpus (IBH, Kanheri no. 38, l. 6), is clearly mistaken. Bracketing the details about the donor's relatives, the donative formula may be read as follows (with the variant readings of Gokhale [G] and Bühler [B] in Burgess 1883: 85):

(2) pava°itikāya sā[pā](ya) [...] (4) leṇa deyadhama ◊ pāṇiyapoḍhi ca ◊ [...] (6) cātudise bhikhusaghe ◊ °aṭhasu puri[s](esu) + + (7) lesu ◊ paṭiṭhāpita ...

2. pava°itikāya G; pavaṭtikāya B. 4. pāṇiya- B; pāṇiya- G. 6. °aṭhasu puri[s](esu) + + lesu- aṭhasu puri[s]esu lesu B; atha aparīselesu G. Comparison with the following line makes it clear that at least one and probably two more *akṣaras* were originally engraved after *puri[s](esu)*, thus making G's reading all the more unlikely. The frequent occurrence of the term *śapurisa* (Skt. *satpuruṣa*) in early epigraphic records, and the possibility that *sa* has been dropped after *su* in the engraving process through pseudo-haplography, make it tempting to restore (sa)puri[s](esu).

The female renunciant Sāpā [...] has established as pious gift this cave as well as a cistern [...] for the community of the four directions, for [use by] eight (excellent?) individuals...

There is thus nothing in this donative formula that hints at the monastic order of the recipients.

existence of the *anuttarajñāna* formula with named *nikāyas*,³² epigraphic evidence from Ajanta cannot be safely used as evidence against his claim.

As far as this site is concerned, the Mūlasarvāstivāda is the only *nikāya* which we can reasonably suspect to have been present at Ajanta in the fifth to sixth centuries. The (or rather a) *Vinaya* of this school was likely the most influential source for visual narratives painted at the site, and its prescriptions for the decoration of a monastery likely informed the iconographic programs of the fully painted caves (i.e., caves I, II, XVI, and XVII).³³ As we shall shortly see, the source of the stanza featured in the second part of the cave XXII inscription was transmitted along with Mūlasarvāstivāda scriptures in the region of Gilgit.³⁴

Indeed, the importance of this inscription lies not so much in the elusive word following the title *sākyabhikṣu*, but in the well-preserved second part. The stanza in Upajāti meter it contains, connecting image dedication to auspicious rebirth, is known to occur in one other painted inscription (Ajl 52), found on a lotus below a standing *buddha* in *varadamudrā* painted on a pillar of cave X (figs. 5 and 6). In light of the better-preserved inscription at cave XXII, I would propose the following edition, distinguishing as above between the two textual blocks:³⁵

³² Tournier 2018: 43–46, confirming a suggestion first made in Tournier 2014: 42–43, with n. 163.

³³ See Przyluski 1920; Lalou 1925 and 1928; Schlingloff 1988; Zin and Schlingloff 2007. Mention should also be made of Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*, verses of which are quoted *in extenso* in three captions of cave II. See Lüders 1903; Schlingloff 1988, esp. chap. 14, 15, 23; Hanisch 2005, vol. I: xiii, n. 1. On roughly coeval manuscript fragments from Bāmiyān and the Turfan region, see Hartmann 2002. Besides this source, other “Buddhist classics” such as Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* and Āśvaghoṣa's *Saundarananda* might also have been known and used at Ajanta. See Schlingloff 1988: 49–58, 117–122. Affinities interestingly exist between Kumāralāta and Āśvaghoṣa and the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin scriptural traditions. See respectively Hahn 1985: 255–256 and Eltschinger 2013a and 2013b. On Āryaśūra, see Hanisch 2005, vol. I: xvii–xx. Among Mahāyāna scriptures, the possibility of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* having informed the imagery of the site is discussed in Schlingloff 1988: 175–180; Schopen 2005.

³⁴ On the fruitfulness of reading Ajanta paintings in connection with Gilgit manuscripts, see the observations of Cohen 1995b: 130.

³⁵ Variants indicated for Indrajī (I, in Burgess and Indrajī 1881: 86), Chakravartī (1946: 92; Ch), and Cohen (C) are given.

- A. (1) (saurū)[pya](saubhāgya)g[uṇo](papannā)
 (guptendri)y[ā] bhāsva[rad](ī)ptayas te
 (2) + + + + + (na)[yanābh](irāmā ◊)
 [ye] kārayant[īha] [j]inasya bi[m]baṃ ||
- B. (3) (deyadha)rm[m]o [yaṃ ś]ākyabhikṣo(h) [°ācā]ryabhada(m)ta-
 (bu)ddhasenasya
1. (saurū)[pya](saubhāgya)g[uṇo](papannā) ... I; ... *guṇo* ... Ch, C; (guptendri)-
 y[ā] bhāsva[rad](ī)ptayas ... *ndriyā bhāsura[dī]ptayas* I; ... *yā bhāsuraḍṭipayas* Ch; *bhāsuraḍṭipayas* C. 2. (na)[yanābh](irāmā ◊) ... I; ... *yanābh*... Ch, C. [ye]
 kārayant[īha] ... *kārayamīha* I; *ye kārayamīha* Ch, C. 3. (deyadha)rm[m]o
 [yaṃ] [*deyadha*]rm[m]o *yaṃ* I; [*deyadha*]rm[m]o *yaṃ* Ch; [*deyadha*]rm[m]o 'yaṃ
 C. [ś]ākyabhikṣo(h) *śākyabhikṣor* I; [*ś*]ākyabhikṣo(r) Ch, C. [°ācā]ryabhada(m)-
 ta(bu)ddha- *ācāryabhadantabuddhasenasya* I; (*ācārya*)*bhada(m)ta(bu)ddha-* Ch;
 (*ācā*)*r[ya]bhada(m)ta(bu)ddha-* C.

What was not noticed so far is that a few *akṣaras* of the *saurūpyasaubhāgya* stanza can also be recognized in a third inscription from cave XI (Ajl 65), painted below a badly damaged Buddha image (fig. 7).³⁶ This inscription was first edited by Cohen, but he misread the few remaining *akṣaras* (see fig. 8) that make it clear that the same stanza was represented in that inscription as well:

- A. (1) (deya)dha[rmm]o (yaṃ) + + + + + + + + + + (mātāpitṛ)-
 [p]ūrvvaṅga(maṃ) [kr]tvā + + + + + + + + + + ? + ? + sarvvasatvānā(m)
 anuṭṭa[ra]jñānāvāpta[y]e stu ◊
- B. [saur]ūpyasau(bhā)gyag(uṇopa)[pan]n[ā]
 + + + + + + + + + + ?
 (bha)[va](m)[t](i) lok[e na](yanābhirāmā)
 + + + + + + + + + +
1. (deya)dha[rmm]o (*deya*)*ddha[rmm]o* C. + + + + + + + + + + There seems to be little more than the space needed here for the expected formula *yad atra puṇyaṃ tad bhavatu*. This implies either that the name of the donor was very short (i.e., disyllabic) or that something was omitted. (mātāpitṛ)[p]ūrvvaṅga(maṃ) (*mātā*)-
 [p]itṛ[pū]rvvaṅga(ma) C. + + + + + + + + + + ? + ? + (*yad atra puṇyaṃ tad bha*)*va(tu)*
 C. C's reconstruction is dubious here, since the clause marking a priority among

³⁶ Spink (2005–2016, vol. III: 113) describes it as follows: “Near the left end of the rear wall, there was once a standing Buddha, with bodhisattva attendants, and flying dwarfs above. This group, except for the very upper portions[,] is obliterated, but one can still make out the ja[tā] headdress of Avalokite[ś]vara at the left of the ruined main image.”

the recipients of the merit produced as a rule occurs after *tad bhavatu*. Moreover, C does not remark that the lacuna extends over *ca* 13 *akṣaras*, whereas his reconstruction implies only 9 missing *akṣaras*. [saur]ūpyasau(bhā)gyag(uṇopa)[pan]n[ā] ... [tā]py asau tya ... C. (bha)[va](ṃ)[t](i) lok[e na](yanābhirāmā) ... [va]tālo ... C.

That the epigraphic corpus of Ajanta yields three examples of the same stanza alone suffices to suggest it was considered a particularly appropriate companion to inscriptions recording image donations. Given the presence of the stanza in three different caves and taking into consideration the fragmentary nature of many donative inscriptions, it is fairly likely that the same stanza originally accompanied other image dedications as well. That this stanza was extracted from an authoritative textual source was already suspected by Salomon and Schopen, who noticed its proximity with verses found in the *Tathāgatabimbakārāṇasūtra* preserved in Gilgit.³⁷ Its exact source, the *Prasenajidgāthā* or *Prasenajitparipṛcchā*, was only recently identified, thanks to its presence within a sūtra collection preserved in a thirteenth-century palm-leaf manuscript recovered from the Potala palace. An earlier recension of this short verse-text was in fact already known from two unpublished Gilgit witnesses, being part of two different *Sammelhandschriften*. The editor of the Potala sūtra collection, *bhikṣuṇī* Vinītā, collated the Gilgit folios with her main witness and, for the verse that concerns us here, included the text of part B of AjI 90.³⁸ Focused as she was on establishing an edition

³⁷ Salomon and Schopen 1984: 120.

³⁸ Prp 214–215. On the two copies of the text from Gilgit, one complete, the other fragmentary, see Hinüber 2014: 100, no. 13d.5; 110, no. 59c. Both copies are written in Gilgit/Bāmiyān Type II script and can thus approximately be dated to the seventh/eighth century. On palaeographical features of the complete version of the *Caitya-pradakṣiṇagāthā*, transmitted in the same manuscript as the complete version of the *Prasenajidgāthā*, see Melzer in Tropper 2010: 56–57. The stanza that interests us here is only preserved in the complete copy, and, on the basis of colour pictures newly published by Kudo (2017: 62, fol. 281b8–282a1) one can edit it as follows:

saurūpyasaubhāgyaguṇopapannaṃ
gu(p)[t]endriyā bhāskaradiptayas te •
bhavaṃti loke nayanābhirāmā
ye kārayaṃtīha jina(sya) bimbam •

saurūpyasaubhāgyaguṇopapannaṃ Emend -pannā. -dipta- Emend -dīpta-. gu(p)[t]endriyā gu ? ndriyā Vinītā.

In the beginning of *pāda* b, there is enough of the subscript *-ta* to suggest that the reading in the Gilgit manuscript was originally *gu(p)[t]endriyā*, as is also the case in the Tibetan translation (reading *dbang po bsdams*) and in AjI 52. Thus *guṇendriyair/guṇendriye* should be considered simply a misreading of the cave XXII inscription

and translation of this text, Vinītā simply reproduced Chakravartī's reading and did not comment on this identification. It thus remained little-noticed,³⁹ and the *Prasenajidgāthā*'s importance for both the history of Ajanta and that of donors' aspirations in the Middle Period has yet to be fully established.

To that end, one needs first to determine whether the one stanza quoted at Ajanta may be attributed with confidence to the *Prasenajidgāthā* and not to another, unknown, collection of floating verses. There is in fact enough evidence to consider the *Prasenajidgāthā* as the ultimate source of the quote. In the two Sanskrit recensions, the stanza occurs as the fifth of the work, and occupies a key position. Indeed, it occurs immediately after a brief preamble describing the encounter between king Prasenajit and the Buddha: the former asks the latter how to secure one's happiness in future rebirths, in a post-*parinirvāṇa* world.⁴⁰ In stanza 4, the Buddha invites his royal disciple to listen carefully to

by previous editors, and *guhyaendriyā* preserved in the later palm-leaf manuscript from the Potala is likely the result of a scribal confusion between the *akṣaras pta* and *hya* at some point in the manuscript transmission. In other words, all early Indic witnesses support Vinītā's emendation of her copy-text.

³⁹ The source of the Ajanta stanza is thus not known to DeCaroli (2015: 129) and Skill-ing (2017: 27–28), even if the latter refers (p. 33, and n. 132) to the *Prasenajidgāthā* as an important representative of what he identifies as the *anuśaṃsa* genre.

⁴⁰ Prp 212–213, st. 2:

hitāśayānām karuṇātmakānām
tathāgatānām parinirvṛtānām |
vidhāya pūjām katham agrabuddhe
sukhaṃ labhante 'nyabhavēṣu martyāḥ ||

agrabuddhe Ms.; *agrabuddheḥ* em. Vinītā. My understanding of *agrabuddhe* as a vocative is also supported by the one Gilgit manuscript preserving this verse (fol. 281b6: *agryabuddhe*) and by the syntax of the Tibetan parallel. Compare Silk 2013: 71.

How, supremely sagacious one, would mortals obtain happiness in other existences, by paying homage to *tathāgatas*—who are intent on the well-being [of others], and who have compassion as their nature—when they have entered *parinirvāṇa*.

A comparable conversation, in verse, on the merit associated with image-dedication, is for example found at the end of sūtra no. 36.5 in the **Ekottarikāgama*. The conversation takes place between the Buddha and king Udayana, but four other kings including Prasenajit are present. See T 125, II, 708a21–b12. The *Maitreyamahāśiṃhanādasūtra* features a dialogue between the Buddha and Mahākāśyapa disparaging monks that would seek to make profits out of the business of *buddha* images. In that context, the great disciple alludes to an earlier discourse delivered by the Buddha to Prasenajit, according to which great merit ensues from making an image of the Buddha. See T 310, XI, 512b26–27, trans. Demiéville 1937: 213; D 67, *dKon brtsegs*, Ca 108a1–2,

his answer, and what follows—the *sauryāpyasaubhāgya* stanza under discussion—consequently marks the beginning of his teaching. The contents of the stanza itself moreover anticipates most of the meritorious fruits that are produced by the cult of images, *stūpas*, or *caityas*, that form the central topic of the whole text.⁴¹ In other words, this stanza does not merely introduce the teaching attributed to the Buddha in the *Prasenajidgāthā*, but it actually epitomizes its content. Given the importance of this stanza in the architecture of the work, it thus seems difficult to consider it merely as a free-floating module. Therefore, we can reasonably consider that the knowledge of the verse at Ajanta presupposed that of (one version of) the text as a whole. The *Prasenajidgāthā* is thus, together with Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*, the only known work to be quoted in the Ajanta corpus. It should be considered a critical source to understand what informed the numerous individual dedications of images at the site.

When the stanza is compared to the donative formula, which it accompanies in the inscriptions of cave XI and XXII, what is striking is the coexistence of mundane and supramundane benefits expected from the gift. In the *Prasenajidgāthā*, both categories of benefits also appear to coexist harmoniously, although mundane outcomes are expounded in much greater detail. Indeed, the ritual interactions with the Buddha's "substitutes" encouraged in this text are often connected with positive outcomes in future rebirths, including the guarantee not ever to be reborn as a poor person (*daridra*), a slave (*dāsa*), or as someone whose faculties are deficient (*vaikalya-indriya*).⁴² Only one stanza shared by both Sanskrit recensions promises liberation as the final outcome of devotional engagement with a *caitya*.⁴³

narendralakṣmīm amarendralakṣmīm
prāpyottamām apy anubhūya saukhyām |
vimuktiṣaṁ labhate viśiṣṭam
vibaddhaṣaṁ sugatasya caitye ||

trans. Schopen 2005: 124. This allusion is too vague to connect this sūtra specifically to (a version of) the *Prasenajidgāthā*, but it illustrates that the Buddha's prescriptions to the king were considered representative of the promotion of image dedication.

⁴¹ Only the last four stanzas of the text, in its two Sanskrit recensions, have a slightly different focus since they address the benefits of honouring the Saṅgha. See Prp 244–247, st. 30–33.

⁴² Prp 228–230, st. 18.

⁴³ Prp 218–219, st. 7.

Having attained the fortune of the lords among men, and of the lords among gods, and having also experienced the supreme happiness, he obtains the distinguished turban of liberation, he who ties a turban at the shrine of the Sugata.

The integration of rebirth among prominent men and gods into a broader path leading to liberation is commonly met in texts which address karmic fruition of pious actions across various lives.⁴⁴ It provides a key for determining how both outcomes were meant to coexist in the inscriptions of caves XI and XXII. It is unsure to what extent the expression “turban of liberation” (*vimuktipaṭṭa*) may match here the *anuttarajñāna* of the epigraphic record. In the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, we encounter the same motif where the tying (*√bandh*) of a turban—in this context, on the head of a *dharmabhāṇaka*—leads one to the state of being “bound [to perfect Awakening] by one rebirth” (*ekajātipratibaddha*), with the “status of crown prince” (*yuvarāja*). Further in the same chapter, Maitreya is similarly characterized as a “crown prince” wearing the “turban of liberation”.⁴⁵ Thus, *vimuktipaṭṭa* functions there as a marker of future Awakening, with the guarantee, after countless royal rebirths among gods and men, to be the next in line in a dynasty of *buddhas* understood as Dharma-kings. But *vimuktipaṭṭa* in the *Prasenajidgāthā* could more simply point to the guarantee of reaching *nirvāṇa*—a common goal to the followers of all paths⁴⁶—and not the omniscient state exclusive to *buddhas*. Consequently, the soteriological outlook of the Sanskrit version of the *Prasenajidgāthā* is unclear.⁴⁷ The *versio ornatior* of this text preserved in Tibetan, however, does include a clear allusion to the specific goal of *bodhisattvas*. In this

⁴⁴ See below, pp. 203–205.

⁴⁵ See Kpu 29.15–18, 42.13–15. The passage is discussed in Tournier 2017: 248, n. 429.

⁴⁶ It is as a generic equivalent of liberation that the same compound occurs (as a *karmadhāraya*) in two of the Indic versions of the dreams of Kṛkin, preserved in the *Sumāgadhāvadāna* and the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*. See AKV 278.26–28 and, for the Gilgit recension of the *Sumāgadhāvadāna*, Kudo 2016: 341. The version of the story cited in Śamathadeva’s *Abhidharmakośopāyika-ṭīkā* and attributed to a **Kāñcanamālāvadāna* (gSer phreng can gyi rtogs pa brjod pa) similarly refers to the turban of liberation (Tib. *rnam par grol ba’i snam bu*). See D 4095, *mNgon pa*, Ju 128b2–3. See also Dhammaddinā 2016b: 77 and n. 36. On the dream of Kṛkin in general and the version preserved in Pelliot tibétain 977 in particular, see Silk 2018.

⁴⁷ Compare McCombs’s statement (2014: 359) that “the *Prasenajit-gāthā* does not appear to be a Mahāyāna text.”

recension, two stanzas are inserted within the work's preamble, so as to immediately precede the *sauryūpyasaubhāgya* verse:⁴⁸

bcom ldan 'das kyi mchod rten rnams dang ni |
 sku gzugs rnams la rdul phran ci song ba |
 de yi grangs snyed de byed mi rnams kyis |
 lha yul sa steng nges par rgyal srid 'thob |
 gzugs dang gzugs med kham s kyis ting nge 'dzin |
 phun sum tshogs pa'i sa mchog kun myong nas |
 tha mar skye dang rga la sogs pa yi |
 sdug bsngal med pa'i sangs rgyas go 'phang 'thob |

Men who make a great number of reliquaries of the Bhagavant [as well as] images, [even the size] of a seed, they will certainly obtain the status of a king in heaven [or] on earth.

Having experienced all the supreme stage of accomplishment of the *samādhi* of the form and formless realms, they will thereafter obtain the station of *buddha* (**buddhapada*) that is free of the suffering of birth and old age.

The composers and early transmitters of the *Prasenajidgāthā* may not have considered Buddhahood to be a possible outcome of the ritual engagement with an image and *stūpa* cult. Yet, it is clear from the above stanzas that one version at least of this work was influenced by the outlook of the Bodhisattvayāna. The closely related *Tathāgatabimbakārāpaṇasūtra*, also transmitted in Gilgit, likewise appears to have first identified *nirvāṇa* as a goal before being “updated” to be aligned with the ideals spearheaded by *bodhisattvas*. Indeed, in the frame-story of this text, prince Suvarṇaprabha, the main interlocutor of the Buddha Śākyamuni, is told how, as a result of making an image of the Buddha Vipaśyin in his former existence, he was re-born thousands of times as Indra, Brahmā, and as king, before taking rebirth in his present condition.⁴⁹ Then he is predicted to soon reach, “in the midst of gods and humans, the state that is imperishable, not characterized by old age or death, beneficial, and peaceful”.⁵⁰ And indeed, at the end of this story, Suvarṇaprabha is said to enter the religious life and to realize the state of *arh-*

⁴⁸ See Vinīta 2010, vol. I: 250.

⁴⁹ Tbk 135.15–136.12, fol. 2a6–3a5.

⁵⁰ Tbk 136.13–14, fol. 3a6: *suvarṇaprabho rājakumāraḥ antike devamanu(ṣyāṇā)ṃ [a]cyutaṃ ajaraṃ amaraṇaṃ śivaṃ śāntaṃ padaṃ labhiṣyatīti*.

*ant.*⁵¹ So there is no hint, from this story, at anyone following the *bodhisattva* path, and it is only the central part of the sūtra that presents perfect Buddhahood as a “generalized goal”⁵² achievable through merit-making. This part has loose ties with the frame story and clearly patches together materials of various provenances. It starts by prescribing to whomever aims at one’s own as well as others’ well-being (*ātmahitaparahitakāma*) to commission a *buddha*-image: whatever the material, the size, or the manner in which the image is consecrated (with bodily relics or the *pratītyasamutpāda*[*gāthā*]), he or she who commissions and honours an image will obtain a great mass of merit.⁵³ The sūtra then proceeds to give further details on the positive outcomes derived from this practice, thereby sketching a “fast track” to Awakening.⁵⁴

(3a7) punar aparaṃ bhikṣavaḥ yaḥ kaścīd bhikṣur vā bhikṣuṇī vā upāsako (vā) upāsikā vā • kṣatṛyo vā brāhmaṇo vā • vaiśyo vā • śūdro vā evaṃrūpā(3b1)su jātiṣu • śrutidharo bhavati • jātismaro bhavati • svajanaparijanadāsīdāsakarmmakarānauṣeyaprabhṛtiṣu sa ādeyavākyo bhavati • (2) sarvasatvapṛyadarśanaharo bhavati • sarvagūṇalakṣaṇadharo bhavati sarvasatvādhipatir bhavati • sarvabuddhapratyeka-buddhaśrāvakārhadgūṇa(3)samāga[to] bhavati • nityaṃ bodhicitta-parāyaṇo bhavati • yasya yatrābhikāṃkṣati • tatra tatra-m-etaṃ labhati • rāgadveṣamoherṣyāmātsar[y]a(4)lobhatṛṣṇādikleśādibhi(h) • vivarjito bhavati • ○ buddhatvam anuttaraṃ adhigacchati • kṣipraṃ ca parinirvāṇaṃ śāntaṃ adhigacchatīti vadāmi bhikṣava(h) •

3a7. *kṣatṛyo* Understand *kṣatriyo*. 3b1 -*nauruṣeya*- *-pauruṣeya*- M (silent emendation). Emend accordingly. 3b2 -*pṛya*- Understand *-pṛiya*-. -*darśanaharo*- *-darśanadharo* M (silent emendation). Emend accordingly. 3b4 *anuttaraṃ* *anvantaram* M. *ādeyavākyo* *ādeyavādyo* M.

⁵¹ Tbk 138.14–22, fol. 5a3–7.

⁵² On this notion, see Schopen 1977 and 1983.

⁵³ Tbk 136.15–28, fol. 2b6–3a6. The list of materials from which an image of the Buddha can be prepared bears some similarities with that of the *Tathāgatabimbaparivarta* quotation preserved in the *Sūtrasamuccaya* and with a recently published scripture of the same genre from the Schøyen collection. See Harrison, Hartmann, and Matsuda 2016: 289 with n. 21.

⁵⁴ Tbk 138.29–139.7, fol. 3a7–b4. Readings by the first editor Adelheid Mette (M) are indicated in the apparatus.

Moreover, monks, whomever he(/she) [who commissions an image] is, whether a monk, or a nun, a male or a female lay follower, whether a *kṣatriya*, a *brāhmaṇa*, a *vaiśya* or a *śūdra*, in these very existences he becomes learned, able to recall his [former] existences, his speech becomes authoritative to his people, his entourage, his male and female slaves, his servants, his men, and so on, he becomes pleasing to the sight of all beings, possessed with all qualities and external marks, [and] he becomes an overlord for all beings. He gathers the qualities of all [perfect] *buddhas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and the *buddhas*’ *śrāvakas*—[that is,] *arhants*—, is constantly intent upon the thought of Awakening and he obtains whatever he wishes for, he rejects the impurities such as lust, aversion, delusion, jealousy, selfishness, avarice, and avidity; he realizes supreme Buddhahood and quickly realizes peace, that is, *parinirvāṇa*. Thus, I say, o monks.

It is therefore quite clear that the textual layers of the *Tathāgatabimbakārāṇasūtra* testify to an evolution in soteriological outlook. Both this work and the *Prasenajidgāthā* apparently followed a comparable trajectory, being progressively invested with vocabulary typical of the Bodhisattvayāna. While we cannot determine which recension would have been known to the monks at Ajanta, it must at least have been considered by them as compatible with their self-representation as *bodhisattvas* and, possibly, as Mūlasarvāstivādin monks.⁵⁵ At roughly the same time, monks belonging to other *nikāyas* similarly engaged in the cult of *stūpas* and images with similar expectations. This is suggested, for instance, by the *Avalokitasūtra/Avalokanasūtra*, another product of the Middle Period, promoting especially the cult of *caityas*, whose wide dissemination attests to its influence. Indeed, a version of this sūtra was incorporated into the *Vinaya* of the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādins, around the fourth or fifth century, as an “appendix” (*parivāra*) to the *Mahāvastu* (II.293.16–397.7); a parallel version to the final verse section of this scripture (II.362.3–397.7) is transmitted as a self-standing work, prefaced by a prose *nidāna*, in the bKa’ ’gyur under the name *Āryāvalokana-mahāyānasūtra* (D 195); segments of these verses are also cited at length in Śāntideva’s *Śikṣā-samuccaya*.⁵⁶ In these verses, the guarantee to reach supreme Awakening,

⁵⁵ On the spread of Buddhahood as a soteriological goal in (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin scriptures, see, e.g., Dhammaddinā 2016a.

⁵⁶ Śikṣ 89.15–90.3; 297.10–309.4. See Tournier 2017: 114–118, 272–278. For a synoptic presentation of the three versions, together with the Chinese translation of the

after many “mundane” (including celestial) enjoyments, as a result of ritual engagement with the Buddha’s *caityas*, occurs repeatedly as a refrain.⁵⁷

The textual development of the *Prasenajidgāthā* and related works allows for the coexistence of auspicious rebirths and the ultimate goal of Buddhahood as outcomes of karmic activity, the former serving as a stepping stone to the latter. Their different status in the hierarchy of religious goals can be better inferred by the epigraphic context of the quotes at Ajanta. Indeed, it is certainly significant that—as remarked by Schopen—inscriptions of the period generally assign the merit produced by the gift to the achievement of supreme knowledge. Expectations with respect to auspicious rebirths, when articulated as in the inscriptions at caves XI and XII, are merely presented as a natural outcome of the gift. In doing so, the formulaic part of these two records may have been informed by prescriptions surrounding the “perfection of giving” (*dānapāramitā*) found in *bodhisattva* manuals. For example, the influential *Bodhisattvabhūmi* exhorts that the *bodhisattva* “direct all gift to the supreme and perfect Awakening”,⁵⁸ while the *Pāramitāsamāsa*, attributed to Āryaśūra, prescribes him never to give “what is not assigned to

Śikṣāsamuccaya, see Sugimoto 1984: Appendix I. On the verses shared between this work and the popular *Caityapradakṣiṇagāthā*, see Belanger 2000: 8–14, 27ff.; Melzer in Tropper 2010: 54–55, 58.

⁵⁷ See for instance, Mvu II.367.1–2/Ms. Sa, fol. 229a5–6:

kalpakoṭṣahasrāṇi śatāni nayutāni ca |
bhuñjītvā saukhya saprajño budhyate bodhim uttamām ||

saukhya *saukhyam* em. Senart. This however leads to an irregular scansion. It is thus preferable to take *saukhya* as an uninflected form of acc. sg., common in the *Mahāvastu*’s verses. See BHSD, § 8.34.

Having enjoyed bliss for thousands of crores of eons, and hundreds of *nayutas* [of them], possessed of wisdom he awakens to the supreme Awakening.

A partial parallel to this stanza (not noticed by Belanger) is *Caityapradakṣiṇagāthā* 50, st. 32. For stanzas of similar content in the *Avalokitasūtra*, see Mvu II.375.1–4; 377.2–5; 378.17–20; 389.3–6. While most of these verses occur in the Tibetan parallel, none of them feature in the extracts of the *Avalokanasūtra* cited in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. These passages do not relate the cult of *stūpa* to the attainment of Awakening. Whether this has any bearing on the issue of the particular recension of the work available to Śāntideva remains to be investigated.

⁵⁸ BoBhū (W) 121.2–3; (D) 84.21–22: *sarvaṃ ca dānam anuttarasamyaksambodhau pariṇāmayati* |.

omniscience” (*sarvajñabhāva-apariṇāmita*).⁵⁹ A more elaborate articulation of both mundane and supramundane religious goals into a multi-life path is encountered in a unique record from the same site and period. It was composed by the most prominent monastic donor to have left traces of his activity at Ajanta. This donor, as we shall see, was moved by complex motivations, including filial piety, the promotion of his social standing, as well as an eagerness to contrast his soteriological outlook with that of the Śrāvakayāna.

Part 2: Memorials on Earth, Residences in Heaven, and Awakening Beyond

Buddhabhadra is the sole sponsor of cave XXVI, a majestic apsidal shrine (*caityagrha*) sheltering a monolithic *stūpa* with a protruding Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana*.⁶⁰ The inscription (AjI 93) commemorating the foundation is carved in neat Southern Brāhmī script on the rear wall of the cave, above and to the right of the shrine’s porch. On palaeographical grounds, it can be dated to the late fifth or the first half of the sixth century (fig. 9).⁶¹ This Sanskrit record, composed by Buddhabhadra himself,⁶² consists of seventeen lines and nineteen stanzas composed in nine different metres. The donor provides interesting details about himself: he claims to have been born into

⁵⁹ Psam 1:43. On the problematic attribution of this work to the fourth-century author known in Ajanta, see for instance Meadows 1986: 1–21; Hahn 1993: 36–40. The earliest witness of this text, preserving the stanza referred to here, is a recently identified manuscript from Gilgit, in Gilgit/Bāmiyān type II script datable to the seventh/eighth century. See Kudo 2013: 264f.

⁶⁰ For detailed discussions of this cave, see Spink 2005–2016, vol. II: 22–96; vol. V: 311–342; Singh 2012. Both authors argue that this cave belongs to a vaster complex sponsored by Buddhabhadra, involving at least caves XXV and XXVII, if not the whole series of caves ranging from cave XXI to XXIX. I fail to see in their writings any compelling evidence of Buddhabhadra’s involvement in the excavation of any cave other than XXVI, for the only historical record left by him—the inscription under discussion—mentions a single “mansion” (*veśman*, stt. 14, 18), also called “residence of the Sugata” (*sugatālaya*, st. 13); no *vihāra* or monastic cell is anywhere alluded to in this detailed record.

⁶¹ Chhabra (1955: 450) proposes a range between 450 and 525 CE.

⁶² AjI 93, st. 19ab: *pūrvvāpi ceya[m] tenaiva dribddhācāryyena saugatī* |, “And the above [eulogy] of the Sugata has also been composed by this master [i.e., Buddhabhadra].” On the common use of *pūrvā* as a referent to a *prāśasti*, see IEG, s.v.

a noble family and to have been ordained as a monk at a young age (st. 16). He moreover presents himself as a close friend of Bhavirāja, minister of the Aśmaka king (stt. 9–13).⁶³ By contrast to the other major inscriptions at caves XVI and XVII, no mention is made of Hariṣeṇa or of Vākāṭaka suzerainty. This may imply that the cave XXVI inscription was issued after the demise of Hariṣeṇa and the loss of Vākāṭaka control over the Ajanta region, in favour of one of their previous feudatories.⁶⁴ Buddhabhadra's prominent background and connections explain why he is the only monk epigraphically recorded at Ajanta who sponsored the excavation of a whole cave.⁶⁵ Not only did he have the means to carry out this costly undertaking, but he also had two assistants—named Dharmadatta and Bhadrabandhu⁶⁶—overseeing the

⁶³ On the identification of the Aśmaka country with the present-day Ahmednagar and Beed districts of Maharashtra, to the South of Ajanta, see Mirashi 1962: 160–163. Compare Sircar 1971: 189–193. The other mention of the Aśmakas at the site, in the fragmentary *praśasti* of cave XVII, st. 10, has been the object of competing interpretations among historians. See CII V 122ff.; Bakker 1997: 37ff.; Shastri 1997: 46–49; Cohen 1997: 130–134.

⁶⁴ See Bakker 1997: 50. This naturally has bearing on the chronology of the caves, a highly complex and contentious issue. Cave XXVI has been generally understood to be one of the latest excavations at the site. See, e.g., Stern 1972: 52ff.; Williams 1982: 181–187. Features interpreted as early, observed primarily at caves XXV and XXVII, led Spink to suggest that the cave XXVI complex was an “inaugural” monument, initiated in the beginning of the revival of the site, in the 460s, before being discontinued (between 468 and 475) and completed by 478, the inscription being dated by him to “mid-478” (!). Since the dating of possible phases of the excavation of cave XXVI has little implication for the understanding of its inscription, I prefer to leave to experts in art and architecture of the cave sites the evaluation of Spink's intricately detailed—if impressionistic and often confusing—arguments. For an uncompromising criticism of Spink's dating of cave XXVI, see Khandalavala 1991, in addition to the responses reproduced in Spink 2005–2016, vol. II.

⁶⁵ The much smaller cave XI may have been sponsored by a monk as well, if the portrait of a single, individualized devotee, in the *cella* at the feet of the Buddha, may be taken as evidence of actual patronage. Spink 2005–2016, vol. II: 222–224; VI: 66, fig. 1. But there is no inscription left in that cave that would substantiate this possibility.

⁶⁶ A monk also named Dharmadatta, bearing the title *bhadanta*, is mentioned in a set of inscriptions at cave XVI (Ajl 70–72), recording the gift of two series of two *buddhas* on both sides of a single monastic cell. It is impossible to be sure that this Dharmadatta was the individual involved in cave XXVI, given the commonness of this name. See Zin 2003: 379; Cohen 2006a: 315–316; Spink 2005–2016,

work in his stead (st. 14), presumably while he was closer to the Aśmaka court. Finally, Buddhahadra had the learning and ambition to compose an *ad hoc* record commemorating his generosity (stt. 16, 19).

Several key stanzas in this record reveal a rather sophisticated conception of Buddhahadra's gift, its recipient, beneficiaries, and outcomes. Since the inscription as a whole has been served with a good edition by B. C. Chhabra, I shall focus only on the stanzas that deserve a closer reading for the present discussion. Buddhahadra's composition opens with a well-crafted homage to the Buddha. The second stanza (in Aupacchandāsaka meter), in particular, is key to the definition of the Tathāgata.⁶⁷

(2) punar api maraṇādi yena samya[g]
[j]itam ajarāmaradharmmatā ca labdhā ◊
śivam abhayam anālayaṃ gato pi
praśamapuraṃ jagatāṃ karoti cārttha[m]

Moreover, he is also the one who perfectly conquered death and so on and realized the fundamental nature of things (*dharmatā*), which is free from old age and death. Although he entered the city of appeasement that is beneficial, without fear and without a basis, he [still] benefits the world.

This stanza insists on the Buddha's transcending of death in particular, and on his ability to make himself available to beings beyond his *parinirvāṇa*. This praise may appear slightly banal at first sight, but its rich implications become apparent when the stanza is read in its broader textual and physical context. Among the various reliefs covering the wall of the shrine's portico, the most prominent—and the first to be found, in the southern ambulatory, by a devotee entering the cave to perform the *pradakṣiṇa*—is the largest depiction of the Buddha's final extinction at the site.⁶⁸ The proximity

vol. III: 122–123. As for Bhadrabandhu, he is identified by st. 14 as the good disciple (*sacchiṣya*) of Buddhahadra, from whom he must have inherited the element *bhadra-* of his ordination name.

⁶⁷ Only the occasional variants in Chhabra's edition (1955: 115–116) are systematically indicated in the apparatus. Cf. Cohen 2006a: 333–334.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Behl 1998: 51. For an argument according to which this image was part of the programme envisioned by Buddhahadra, see Spink 2005–2016, vol. III: 259. The second major and likely “programmatic” image, in the ambulatory, is a finely executed Māravijaya. See, e.g., Bautze-Picron 1998: 36–37 and pl. XIX. This episode is also hinted at in the first hemistich of this stanza. On other epigraphic allu-

between the inscription and the figuration suggests that the eulogy may in part have served as a “preface” framing the cave’s visual program, as has been proposed for the inscription at cave XVII.⁶⁹ The epithets used to define *nirvāṇa*, while drawn from a set of common canonical tropes, are skilfully chosen and are evocative in the wider context of this inscription: *śiva* and *abhaya*, for example, relate to stanza 5, in which the *buddhas* are praised as *bhayaavipramukta*, “freed from fear”, contrasted in that regard to the gods like Śambhu (i.e., Śiva) and Kṛṣṇa, both of whom demonstrated their deficiencies.⁷⁰ Similarly, the description of *nirvāṇa* as the city of appeasement that is “without a basis” (*anālaya*) is echoed by the qualification of the cave excavated by the donor as a *sugatālaya*, “residence of the Sugata” (st. 13). This echo, if it is indeed intentional, would suggest a learned strategy employed in order to evoke the Buddha’s dynamic presence. The two other major donative inscriptions at Ajanta, namely the *praśastis* of caves XVI (AjI 67) and XVII (AjI 77), do not problematize the Buddha’s relation to his dwelling and image.⁷¹ A certain tension between absence and presence may

sions to this iconographic type in epigraphy, see Tournier 2014: 31–32 with n. 123, and Griffiths 2020: 239–240.

⁶⁹ See Wood 2004, with due notice of the reservations expressed in Hinüber 2008: 50.

⁷⁰ This stanza reads as follows:

(5) devā nirastavijayās savipattikatvāc chāpena śambhur api kācaralocano bhū(t·) ||
 kṛṣṇo vaśo pi vaśam āpatito ntakasya tasmā jaya[m]ti (6) sugatā bhayaavipramuktāḥ ||
kācaralocano Understand *kaccaralocano*, with Ch. **bhū(t·)** *bhūt* Ch.

Gods, because they are subject to misfortunes, are deprived from [lasting] victory; even Śambhu, because of a spell, became the horrid-eyed one (i.e., Virūpākṣa); Kṛṣṇa, although he was of unrestrained power, fell to the power of Death. Thus, victorious [only] are the *sugatas*, being entirely freed from fear.

The apologetic stance adopted by Buddhābhaddra, clearly responding to the two dominant cults of the day, runs closely parallel to that articulated already in the early fourth century, in the bilingual inscription engraved on a Dharmacakra-pillar at Phanigiri (EIAD 104). See Baums et al. 2016: 369ff., with slight modifications updated in the record dedicated to that inscription on the EIAD website. Both Śiva and Kṛṣṇa’s vulnerability is also contrasted in a single stanza with the Buddha’s immunity in the *Viśeṣastava* by Udbhaṭasiddhasvāmin, a work of uncertain dating but whose *terminus ante quem* is the early ninth century. See Schneider 1993: 54–55 (st. 9), 96–103. On the presentation of the Buddha as the “real” Śiva(/*śivaṃkara*) in the *Sarvajñamaheśvarastotra* by the same author, see Schneider 1995, esp. pp. 178–179.

⁷¹ On the vocabulary used to refer to the Buddha’s residence at caves XVI and XVII, see below, nn. 90, 99. See also Schopen 1990: 183–184; DeCaroli 2015: 134.

have been expressed there through visual means, for instance by pairing representations of the Śrāvastī and Sāṅkāśya miracles.⁷² Buddhahadra, as a learned monastic *bodhisattva*, may have been willing to stress further that the Buddha is not anywhere a “permanent resident”, since he transcends the constraints of space and time and is “not fixed in duality” (*advayaṇīśrita*), to borrow an expression from the *Ratnāvalī* (1:51).⁷³ The latter work may in fact be relevant to the present context for, as noted by Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, “[t]he inscription of cave XXVI at Ajanta [...] is very close in its phraseology and meaning to the *Ratnāvalī*’s bodhisattva and political program.”⁷⁴ The following stanzas of the *Ratnāvalī* may support this hypothesis:⁷⁵

sarvajña iti sarvajño budhais tenaiva gamyate |
 yenaitad dharmagāmbhīryaṃ novācābhājane jane || [74]
 iti naiḥśreyaso dharmo gambhīro niṣparigrahaḥ |
 anālaya ity proktaḥ saṃbuddhais sarvadarśibhiḥ || [75]
 tasmād anālayād dharmād ālayābhiratā janāḥ |
 astināstyavyatikrāntā bhītā naśyanty amedhasaḥ || [76]
 te naṣṭā nāśyanty anyān abhayasthānabhīraṇaḥ |
 tathā kuru yathā rājan †naṣṭair na vipraṇāśyase† || [77]

75d sarvadarśibhiḥ E; *tattvadarśibhiḥ* H. **77c rājan** H; *rājams* E. **77d †naṣṭair na vipraṇāśyase†** H; (*tair naṣṭair na praṇāśyase*) E; *ci nas mi phung de ltar gyis* Tib.

This is precisely why the wise ones understand the omniscient as omniscient, given that [the Buddha] did not teach the depth of the teaching to those people who were unfit receptacles. Thus, the *sambuddhas*, who see everything, have declared the teaching leading to the *summum bonum* as deep, without grasping, and without a basis.⁷⁶ People who hold onto a basis, fear this teaching that is without a basis. [Thus,] not transcending being and non-being,⁷⁷ these foolish

⁷² See Cohen 1995b: 271–297; Strong 2010. For a detailed survey of the visual representation of both miracles at Ajanta, see Schlingloff 2000: 476–515.

⁷³ On this notion, see Scherrer-Schaub 2007: 766 and n. 30.

⁷⁴ Scherrer-Schaub 2007: 788, n. 105.

⁷⁵ Rā 1:74–77. I cite variant readings by the editor M. Hahn (H) and in Eda 2005: 245–254 (E). The first two of these stanzas are also briefly discussed in Shulman 2011: 319–320.

⁷⁶ See also Ast 37–39.

⁷⁷ See Scherrer-Schaub 1991: 116.

people go astray. Lost, terrified of that which is without fear, they lead others astray. O king, act so that those lost people won't cause your loss!

The common articulation, in both texts, of the key notions of (*a*)*bhaya* and (*an*)*ālaya*, and their use to contrast those perceiving the ultimate truth and those shrouded in misconceptions, make it tempting to suggest—however difficult it remains to prove such an idea—that this passage might have informed Buddhābhadrā's composition.⁷⁸

By their superior nature (*māhātmya*), also expressed through their accessibility-in-transcendence and their deep compassion,⁷⁹ the *tathāgatas* are established as the best possible recipients of human devotion (*bhakti*, st. 4). Within this framework, the third stanza of the Ajanta inscription extols the merit of cultic activities directed in particular to “our” Buddha:

(3) tato namaskāraguṇābhīdhānaṃ ◊
bhavaty avandhyaṃ vipulaṃ mahārthaṃ
pradattam ekaṃ kusumaṃ ca yatra
svarggāpava[rggā]khyaphalasya hetu[h]

Therefore, expressing homage and praises [to him] leads to a great result, profuse and abundant, and [even] a single flower offered to him yields a [double] fruit called heaven (*svarga*) and final emancipation (*apavarga*).

The first hemistich of this Upajāti situates the homage that Buddhābhadrā is paying to the Buddha within the broader accumulation of merit he is aiming at.⁸⁰ The second half of the stanza recalls the mass of merit arising from the

⁷⁸ Among the works by Nāgārjuna, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* at least appear to have circulated widely in the period under consideration, as is suggested, in the realm of epigraphy, by the quotation of its *maṅgalaśloka* in the Schøyen copper scroll, dating from 492/93 or 495/96 CE. See Melzer 2006: 273. For a detailed discussion of the relevance and implications of this quotation, see Scherrer-Schaub 2018. Note also that, closer to the Aśmaka domain, the legacy of Nāgārjuna in the period considered might be suggested by two sixth/seventh-century inscriptions of Āndhradeśa. See EIAD 125, edited in Baums et al. 2016: 362; EIAD 136, discussed below, pp. 219–220.

⁷⁹ Scherrer-Schaub 2007: 780.

⁸⁰ On the merit associated with the paying of homage, see for instance Prp 232, st. 21. Note that the compound *guṇābhīdhāna* also occurs in the introductory stanza of the cave XVII *prāśasti* (Ajl 77). There, it announces the unfolding of the qualities of the

slightest possible gift presented to him. The motif of the offering of a single flower and its result may at first appear as a common trope, yet it is interestingly found in a very similar phrasing, mentioning both divine rebirth and liberation, within the *Anavataptagāthā*.⁸¹ Sumanas (also known as [Karṇe-] Sumana and Kusuma) is one of the elders to unfold the “fabric of his [past] actions” (*karmaploti*) at this Himalayan synod. He relates the offering of a flower (*kusuma*) to the *stūpa* of Vipāśyin in a former rebirth to his spiritual progress and final emancipation. The Gilgit version of the work concludes thus:⁸²

ekapuṣpaṃ parityajya varṣakoṭīśatāny aham
deveṣu paricaryeva śeṣeṇa parinirvṛtaḥ [66]

[...]

na hi cittaprasādasya svalpā bhavati dakṣiṇā
tathāgate vā saṃbuddhe buddhānāṃ śrāvakeṣu vā [69]

(66) Having offered one single flower, I revelled among the gods for hundreds of crores of years, and through the remainder of [this merit] I entered complete extinction.

[...]

(69) For there is no small gift for him who conceives faithful clarity (*prasāda*) in his mind towards a *tathāgata*, a complete *buddha*, or towards the disciples of *buddhas*.

donor of the monastery (*vihāradātr*). This lay *bodhisattva* is apparently unnamed, but he is called a ruler (*dharādhipa*), whose brother was named Ravisāmba. See CII V 124, st. 1. On the issue of the donor’s name, see Bakker 1997: 36, n. 124.

⁸¹ This work is preserved in the three versions—Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan—of the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, in Turfan fragments, in the *Fo wubai dizi zishuo benqi jing* (佛五百弟子自說本起經, T 199) a Chinese translation by Dharmarakṣa, and in two Gāndhārī manuscripts, one of which preserves the chapter I will briefly touch upon here. For a survey of this textual family and its complex ramifications, see Salomon 2009: 5–80. Since there is reason to believe that a Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* was in use at Ajanta and given that the usefulness of approaching this site in light of the textual collection found in Gilgit has already been demonstrated, I privilege here that particular version.

⁸² AnG 83. Cf. T 199, IV, 191c7–8, 11–12; T 1448, XXIV, 79c13–15, 17–19. The stanza is not preserved in the Turfan fragments; see Bechert 1961: 112. A parallel version of the first stanza is attributed to Kusuma in the British Library Gāndhārī version of the *Anavataptagāthā* and to Khaṇḍa-Sumana in the *Theragāthā*. See Salomon 2009: 322–323; Th 14.16–17, st. 96.

That Sumanas' offering of a single flower had become somewhat proverbial is suggested by the *Karmavibhaṅga*. This influential treatise on karmic retribution indeed contains a section dedicated to the offering of a single flower. There, after listing ten benefits arising from this meritorious deed which culminates—like many other similar gifts—in rebirth in heaven and swift attainment of *nirvāṇa* thereafter, a reference to the same monk is made, illustrated by a different version of stanza 66 above.⁸³ Therefore, whether directly or mediated by a *Karmavibhaṅga*-type treatise, there is some ground to speculate that the story of Sumanas may have been part of Buddhahadra's cultural background.

The remaining of the inscription makes it likely that the Aśmaka monk associated the gift of a flower to someone with a more modest background, and indeed a lesser goal than his own. Stanzas 6–8 of the cave XXVI inscription, forming a textual block in Āryā metre, return to both outcomes of *svarga* and *apavarga*, and refer—this time explicitly—to the deeds of yet another *arhant*:

⁸³ See Kv 101.2–4:

atra karṇesumanasya pūrvajanmani prasāde jāte ekaikapuṣpapradānasya vipāko
vaktavyaḥ. yathā sa eva āha:
ekapuṣpapradānena aśītikalpakoṭayaḥ
durgatiṃ nābhijānāmi buddhapūjāya tat phalam.

Compare Kudo 2004: 204. Lévi translates as follows (1932: 149):

Il faut rappeler ici comment Karṇesumana, étant devenu pieux dans une vie antérieure, fit don d'une simple fleur, et quelles conséquences il en eut. Comme lui-même l'a dit :

« Par le don d'une seule fleur, pendant quatre-vingts dizaines de millions d'Eons — je n'ai pas connu de mauvaise destination, tel est le fruit du culte du Buddha. »

See also Kv-u 154.11–13; Kudo 2009: 25. This stanza, like the one attributed to Sundarananda by the same work (Kv 38.18–19), likely stems from a distinct recension of the *Anavataptagāthā*. Cf. Salomon 2009: 36. The second hemistich is also found among the verses attributed to Sumana and the well-named Ekapupphiya in the *Apadāna*. See Ap 117.20–21, 240.14–15. On the various versions of these verses, see Bechert 1961: 109–111; Kudo 2004: 320–322. On Sumanas, see also Lamotte 1944–1980, vol. III: 1426–1427, n. 3; vol. IV: 1894–1895. In addition to the references provided by Lamotte, see also a brief allusion to this story in the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Dṛṣṭāntapaṅkti*, T 201, IV, 263a20–22. On a non-canonical Pāli stanza connecting the gift of one flower with liberation (P. *mokkha*) and used in a devotional context in modern Sri Lanka, see Gombrich 1971: 136. Dhammadinnā confirmed to me (personal communication, 07/2018) that it is still very commonly chanted on the island at daily *pūjās* today.

(6) sthaviṛācalena muninā śāsanam udbhāvayaṃ kṛtajñena
kṛtakṛtyenāpi satā śailagṛhaṃ kāritaṃ śāstuḥ || [6]

(7) prāḡ eva bodhisatvair bhavasukhakāmaś ca mokṣakāmaś ca
saṃvidyamānavibhavañ katha[m] na kāryyā bhavet kīrtti⟨h⟩ || [7]
yāvat kīrttir lloke tāvat svargge(8)ṣu modati ca dehī
candrārkkakālakalpā kāryyā kīrttir mahīdhreṣu || [8]

6. udbhāvayaṃ Understand *udbhāvayat*, as suggested by Ch. 7. **kīrtti⟨h⟩** *kīrttiḥ* Ch. The *visarga* is inserted slightly below the line, suggesting it is a secondary insertion.

(6) The venerable Acala, a Sage, even though he had done what had to be done (and was thus an *arhant*), out of gratitude [to his mother]⁸⁴ made a dwelling in stone for the Teacher that makes apparent [his] Teaching.

(7) All the more, why should *bodhisattvas*, who desire happiness for the world (or: in worldly existences) as well as liberation, and who possess abundant wealth, not establish a memorial (*kīrti*)?

(8) As long as [his] renown (or: a memorial, *kīrti*) is present in the world, so long a man revels in the heavens. A memorial (*kīrti*) should [therefore] be established inside mountains, [since a foundation of that sort is] fit to endure as long as the sun and the moon.

Stanzas 7 and 8 clearly play on the semantic multivalence of the word *kīrti*, which means at the same time “renown” or “legacy” and a “memorial” or “temple”.⁸⁵ By connecting the durability of the karmic outcome to that of one’s *kīrti*, stanza 8 presents the cave temple as the ideal expression of donors’ devotion and generosity: while the gift of a putrescible flower is enough to cause rebirth in heaven, this majestic and unperishable foundation ensures the lasting of the rebirth that is sought after. This stanza provides, as far as I know, the clearest articulation of a rationale for cave excavation in the Buddhist inscriptions of the Western Ghats.⁸⁶

Let us consider briefly the web of related ideas that may lie behind this statement. One of the possible ways for donors—especially lay donors—

⁸⁴ For a justification of this commentarial interpolation, see below pp. 215–216.

⁸⁵ On this word, see Vogel 1906 and the references cited in Willis 2009: 300, n. 236.

⁸⁶ It may incidentally be compared to the insistence on the durability of images carved into stone at the Longmen 龍門 cliffs in China. See, for instance, the long inscription of the Binyang 賓陽 South Grotto (dated to 648 CE) cited in McNair 2007: 173–177, esp. § 5D.

to earn their way to heaven was to sponsor a *caitya* or a *vihāra*.⁸⁷ A trope circulating in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* as well as in Ajanta and other coeval epigraphic records likens the beauty of monasteries to that of celestial residences.⁸⁸ Ajanta's pictorial language also makes especially obvious the analogies existing between the royal and divine palaces.⁸⁹ The Buddha, established in a palace-like and yet monastic environment, is regularly referred to as a royal ascetic in the inscriptions, and less frequently as the god among gods.⁹⁰ His partaking of a royal and (supra-)divine imagery is especially striking in the *bhadrāsana* iconographic type that spreads at the site in

⁸⁷ On the sub-category of *brāhmapuṇya*, see Tournier 2018: 35–37 and the references cited therein.

⁸⁸ The *Pravrajyāvastu*, for instance, preserves several instances of a set description of a richly adorned monastery “shining with splendour like the dwelling of gods” (*devabhavanam iva śriyā jvalantam*). See Vogel and Wille 1996: 254.30–31. For further references, see Schopen 1998: 168; 2004: 28, 32, 42–43, n. 60. This is close to the description of the *vihāras* built by the Viṣṇukuṇḍin ruler Govindavarman as “producing a brilliance rivalling with that of the dwellings of the gods” (*vibudhabhavanapratisparddhiśobhāsamudaya*), in the second set of Tummalagudem copper plates (EIAD 175), dated 566 CE. See Tournier 2018: 34–35. AjI 67 develops at greater length the analogy between monastery and celestial abodes. The fragmentary st. 28 says, for instance, that the *vihāra* “possesses the brilliance of Indra's palaces and is like the caves in Mount Mandara” (*surendramandirāṇāṃ ruciran mandarakanda[rānurūpaṃ]*). See CII V 109.

⁸⁹ Compare, for instance, the representation of the royal palace in the *Janakajātaka* mural of cave I, with the section of the *saṃsāracaakra* allotted to the realm of gods in the porch of cave XVII. See Schlingloff 2000: 218; Zin 2003: 455.

⁹⁰ Hence, cave XVII is described (AjI 77, st. 24) as a “monolithic jewel of a hall, within which a *caitya* of the king among Munis has been established” (*niveśitāntar-munirājacaityaṃ ekāśmakaṃ maṇḍaparatanṇaṃ*). See CII V 127. On the vocabulary employed in AjI 67, st. 22, see below, n. 99. The royal epithets attributed to the Buddha form part of an imagery that pervades these two inscriptions—and the iconographic programs of both caves XVI and XVII—but which is also attested in Buddhahadra's composition. Indeed, the fragmentary st. 18 of AjI 93 describes the slope of the mountain ridge where the cave has been excavated as being “presided upon by the lord of ascetics” (*yogīśvarādhyāsita*). Given the synonymy existing between *yogīśvara*, *yatīndra*, *munirāja*, as well as *munīndra* (AjI 77, st. 28), I take all these to refer to the Buddha. Compare Chhabra 1955: 118. On the Buddha as the “immortal among the immortals” (*amaro 'marāṇāṃ*), a variant of the more common *devātideva*, in the opening stanza of the Ghatotkacha cave, see CII V 115.

the later Vākāṭaka and post-Vākāṭaka caves. The main cult images at caves XVI and XXVI exemplify this type.⁹¹

Buddhabhadra's *kīrti* may therefore have been conceived as a "stairway to heaven" (*svargasopāna*) not merely because it was a meritorious gift,⁹² but also because it offered a glimpse on earth of heavenly abodes. More than offering a way to celestial rebirth, stanza 8 shows the concern to make this outcome as permanent as allowable within Buddhist cosmology. Both the longevity and the use of an object relinquished by a donor are crucial to the discourse on merit. According to a distinction known, for instance, in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, and an exceptional copper-plate inscription from Āndhra, the merit arising from the relinquishment (*tyāgānvaya*) is complemented by that arising from use (*paribhogānvaya*).⁹³ This leads the *Vinaya* to promote permanent endowments (*akṣayanīvī*), whose interest will ensure the upkeep of the foundation and facilitate its use. Grants in land or money are well represented epigraphically from the Sātavāhana period onwards, and commonly include a formula assigning part of the revenue to the maintenance and repairing of buildings.⁹⁴ Cave XXVI's inscription, although it says nothing of a permanent endowment—none of the Ajanta inscriptions contain such a reference—points at least to a solution to the problem of maintenance. In other words, the permanence of the cliff may be considered to respond to a similar concern to gifts in perpetuity in cases where brick and timber would constitute the main building material. This, to be sure, did not resolve the problem of use, and the endurance of *kīrti* should, if considered through the lens of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, imply the regular recitation of the names of deceased donors within formulas of assignment of the kar-

⁹¹ See Spink 2005–2016, vol. VI: 88–90, figs. 23–25. For an overview of *bhadrāsana buddhas* at Ajanta, see Revire 2016: 134–154.

⁹² For the comparison of gift-giving in general to a stairway to heaven, see, e.g., Cv 69.4–6. This motif also occurs twice in the *Dānaparikathā* of a Pseudo-Nāgārjuna (stt. 5, 9), on which see Hahn and Saito 2013.

⁹³ See AKBh 272.5–6; La Vallée Poussin 1924: 244. On the highly elaborate discourse on merit in the first set of Tummalagudem copper-plates, see EIAD 174, ll. 19–23. Only the Sanskrit term *paribhogānvaya* is preserved in the Gilgit manuscript of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, yet passages in the Tibetan version of the *Vibhaṅga* make it clear that the pair (*pari*)*tyāga* (Tib. *yongs su btang ba*)/*paribhoga* was also current in this work. See Schopen 1994: 546; 1996: 112ff., and the references cited in Kragh 2006: 247, n. 397.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Njammasch 1971; Schopen 1994; Hinüber 2013.

mic reward (*dakṣiṇā* + *āṇḍiś*)⁹⁵. But there may have been another way—not supported, as far as I know, by coeval prescriptive literature—for donors to ensure the generation of a continuous stream of merit. The exploration of this possibility requires us to turn to the commemorative dimension of most of the major foundations at Ajanta, and the use of portraiture therein.

Buddhabhadra's record specifies, before the formal assignment of merit to be considered below, that he had commissioned this cave “on behalf” (*uddiśya*, st. 13)⁹⁶ of his minister-friend Bhavirāja, as well as of his mother and father. The verb *udḍiś* possesses a very complex semantic range, partly overlapping with that of *āṇḍiś*.⁹⁷ When used in relation to gifts or pious foundations, it generally qualifies the assignment of a gift or the merit ensuing from a gift to a recipient or a beneficiary. In some—although by no means all—contexts, *uddiśya* may have been used to single out deceased individuals in whose memory an action is performed.⁹⁸ And indeed, in cave XXVI, we know from st. 12 that Bhavirāja had passed away, which makes one wonder whether Buddhabhadra's parents may not have been deceased as well. Here again, comparison with other major cave dedications at Ajanta is fruitful. Cave XVI was similarly built by Varāhadeva “on behalf” of his parents, and the context of the dedicatory stanza—dwelling on the donor's realization of impermanence—suggests that they were probably deceased.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁵ Śv 37.6–7, cited in Schopen 1994: 70; Hinüber 2014: 81.

⁹⁶ This stanza reads as follows:

(11) taṃ bhavvirājam uddiśya mātāpitaram eva ca
bhikṣuṇā buddhabhadreṇa (12) kāritaḥ sugatālaya(h) ||

sugatālaya(h) *sugatā[layam]* Ch, who rightly notices that the *la* is the result of a correction of a *ya*, before the engraver realized he had forgotten one syllable.

The monk Buddhabhadra has commissioned a residence of the Sugata, on behalf of this Bhavirāja as well as his [own] parents.

⁹⁷ See CPD, s.v. *uddisati*; Schmithausen 1986: 208–216; Schopen 1996: 92; 2004: 27 with n. 48; Fujimoto 2004 (with reservations); Hinüber and Skilling 2016: 25–26.

⁹⁸ See Schopen 1984: 118 with n. 33. The strongest evidence in support of this interpretation is in fact AJI 93 itself.

⁹⁹ See CII V 108–109 (AJI 67), st. 22:

°āyurva[yovi]ttasukhāṇi — —

≈ — — — — [cañca]lāni

°u[ddiśya] mātāpitārāv udāraṃ

nyavivīśad veśma yaṇḍirasevyam

a. -sukhāṇi Understand *sukhāni*. **d. nyavivīśad** C. *nyavīśad* M.

inscription at cave XVII insists on the loss of the donor's younger brother Ravisāmba, struck by the "lightning of impermanence" (*anityatāśani*). This marked a turning point in the older brother's life and led him to cultivate "the great tree of [his] merits" (*puṇyamahāmāhīruḥ*).¹⁰⁰ The monastery is not explicitly said to have been built in Ravisāmba's memory in what is left of the inscription, but the sculptural program strongly suggests it was.

Ajanta and Aurangabad (especially cave III) are well known for their exquisite representations of devotees in attendance to the Buddha, performing various acts of worship. These figures appear often to be rather standardized and cannot always be matched with the individuals named in accompanying inscriptions when they exist. In other cases, however, these representations are highly individualized and have been understood as portraits of the devotees involved, in one way or another, in the original gift.¹⁰¹ Cave XVII represents one such case, with two standing princely figures facing one another in the *cella*, each holding a bowl, at the Buddha's feet: these have been convincingly identified as figuring the donor and his departed brother.¹⁰² A similar composition may have been at work in cave XXVI. There remains, to the proper right of the Buddha, the lower parts of three figures: one kneeling, two cross-legged (fig. 10). To the Buddha's proper left remains only the hole for a tenon, where a group of devotees, carved separately, was probably slotted.¹⁰³ Assuming the distribution of devotees, on both sides of the Buddha's pedestal, to have been symmetrical, one could surmise that six individuals might initially have formed the whole group. This interestingly corresponds to the number of primary recipients of the assigned merit, in stanza 15 of the inscription. The fragmentary state of the group of devotees makes this reconstruction speculative, but it is at least conceivable, in light of the fact that the memorialization of donors and dedicatees—dead and alive—represented in the act of making *pūjā* is well attested at the site. These snapshots of Buddhist devotion, whether representing the ritual consecration of individual caves or a less formalized

[Realizing that] life, youth, wealth and happiness ... are unstable, he established this lofty mansion, to be used by the lord of ascetics, on behalf of his parents.

¹⁰⁰ See CII V 125–126 (AjI 77), st. 12–13.

¹⁰¹ On the representation of devotees at Ajanta and Aurangabad, see for instance Zin 2003: 380–384; Spink 2005–2016, vol. II: 223–227; Brancaccio 2011: 94–98; Bautze-Picron 2015.

¹⁰² See Wood 2004: 128, with pl. 9.13–14.

¹⁰³ Spink 2005–2016, vol. V: 337.

homage, could have been considered in themselves, as argued by Pia Brancaccio, “perennial producers of merit”.¹⁰⁴ Portraits of the individuals named in Buddhahadra’s inscriptions *could* thus have participated in the continuous production of merit in their stead, as they revelled in heaven.

The study of the main inscriptions of Ajanta in their broader context therefore suggests that the commemorative dimension of many excavations at the site may thus far have been underestimated. A related, and better appreciated dimension of donors’ motivations at Ajanta is the issue of filial piety. Indeed, while we cannot know for sure whether Buddhahadra’s parents were dead or alive at the moment of the cave’s inauguration, it is less disputable that he was—or wanted to appear as—a devoted son. This value is not exclusive to the Bodhisattva ideal that he embraced, yet it is fully compatible with it.¹⁰⁵ Filial piety cannot only be shown to have been a key motivation for Buddhahadra, but it also features prominently in the record left by another major patron. Cave IV, the largest *vihāra* ever excavated at Ajanta, is the fourth and last cave to be discussed here. It preserves an inscription (AjI 17) testifying to its being commissioned by a single donor.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps because it was unfinished, no large inscription was engraved by the cave’s entrance, but the donor left a short donative record on the pedestal of the Buddha image in the *cella* (figs. 11 and 12), thereby attesting that the main image cult had been ritually inaugurated. Despite its brevity, it contains some interesting information on the owner’s background and motivations, and it deserves to be re-read.¹⁰⁷

(1) [𑀧𑀺] deyadharmmo ya[𑀧𑀺] vihārasvāmīno bhayanandiskandavasupu[tra]sya māthurasya kārvvaṭe[ya]sagotrasya yad atra puṇya[𑀧𑀺]

¹⁰⁴ Brancaccio 2011: 95. A similar argument has, for instance, been made by Sharf (2013) with respect to donor’s portraits at Dunhuang. Sharf interestingly includes a brief allusion to Ajanta (p. 60) in his thought-provoking discussion of “funerary Buddhism”.

¹⁰⁵ Respect for parents features prominently, for instance, in the list of virtues to be cultivated by a *bodhisattva* during the first of the four phases of his career (*caryā*), according to the *Baḥubuddhakasūtra* I^A of the *Mahāvastu* and the *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 (T 190). See Tournier 2017: 206–208.

¹⁰⁶ I set here aside the inscription found on a porch’s pillar of cave XX, recording the gift of the cave, designated as a *maṇḍapa*, by a donor whose name starts with Upen-*dra*-, for it is too fragmentary for its analysis in the present context to be informative. See Cohen 1997: 134–137; 2006a: 327, no. 84.

¹⁰⁷ Variant readings by Sircar 1959–1960: 262 (S) and Cohen (C) are given in the apparatus.

(2) tad bhavatu mātāpitros tātāmbāyās cāgrāṇśatāyās tu ◊ + + s sarvvasatvānāṇ cā[nu]ttarajñāṇāvāptaye [ti]

1. kārvaṭe[ya]- C; kārvaṭi[ā]- S. 2. cāgrāṇśatāyās tu ◊ + + s sarvva- cāgrāṇ-va[vā]yasu + + + + + ssarvvasatvānāṇ S; cāgrāṇśatāyā STU s sarvva- C.¹⁰⁸ -jñāṇāvāptaye Understand -jñāṇā-, as indicated by S. [ti] S; C misinterprets this as an auspicious symbol or abbreviation.

This is the pious gift of the *vihārasvāmin* (i.e., the patron of the monastery) Māthura(?),¹⁰⁹ son of Abhayanandin [and] Skandavasū, of the *kārvaṭeya gotra*.¹¹⁰ The merit that there is in this [gift] may it be for the attainment of the supreme knowledge by his parents—the share of father and mother¹¹¹ being the first one—and (thereafter?) by all beings.

¹⁰⁸ As noticed by Cohen, Sircar was misled by his working from an estampage, not realizing that the space left in the middle of the second line was in part due to the fact that the engraver left some space uninscribed around the throne's *dharmacakra*, which cuts across the line of text. There is in fact only room for two *akṣaras* after the wheel, but the area of the stone is abraded in that area, and no trace of writing is left. However, Cohen's understanding of what he prints as *STU* as a character without "a grammatical or a syntactical function", but instead an indication that the text "continues after the physical break" is erroneous, as already stated in Tournier 2014: 41–42. Comparison with the Kura inscription cited below confirms that Cohen's interpretation is untenable. The same may allow us to suggest a possible reconstruction of the following as (*tata*)s.

¹⁰⁹ Although the reading seems secure enough, I wonder whether the *akṣara* *thu* may not be an engraving mistake for *ṭha*, considering that Māṭhara is a very common personal name, while Māthura is extremely rare.

¹¹⁰ As noted by Sircar (1959–1960: 260), no such *gotra* is attested elsewhere in the record. Cf. Cohen 1995b: 180–181.

¹¹¹ Sircar comments (1959–1960: 261): "The expression *tāt-āmbāyāḥ* in the singular may of course mean 'the *āmbā* (i.e. mother) of [one's] *tāta* (i.e. father)', that is to say, 'one's father's mother'. There are, however, words of common use in Sanskrit to indicate one's father's mother, and *tāt-āmbā* is not such an expression. It is, therefore, not improbable that the expression has been used in the inscription to convey a special meaning as that of one's father's step-mother or aunt." This interpretation has been accepted in NWS, s.v. *tātāmbā*. Cohen (2006a: 284) simply translates the compound as "maternal grandmother" without commenting. But the form *tātāmbau* (voc. du. nt.) is attested to point collectively to father and mother in the *Anavataptagāthā*. See AnG 100, st. 268. Thus, it seems more reasonable to take the present form as a gen. sg. fem. used in lieu of the gen. du.—probably under the influence of

The formula is too terse to allow us to understand whether the donor's parents were still alive, but it is in any case an eloquent expression of filial piety. Parents, as Gregory Schopen has already observed, feature prominently in the short donative records at the site.¹¹² The parenthetical statement *tātāmbāyās cāgrāṇśatāyās* uncovered here, according to which the first share of merit is owed to parents, is unique in the Ajanta corpus, and points us in the direction of prescriptive literature on filial duty. A related and more developed parenthetical statement is interestingly found in the roughly coeval inscription, found at Kura (Khevera) in the Salt Range and dating to the reign of Toramāṇa Śāhi (d. 515), recording the gift of yet another *viḥārasvāmin*.¹¹³

(8) yad atra puṇyaṃ tad bhavatu (9) mātāpitro āpāyaka poṣaka citrasya jaṃbudvīpasya darśayitāro agrebhāvapratyaṃśatāyās tu tathā viḥārasvāmino (10) roṭasiddhavṛddhi sarveṣāṃ bhrātaraṇāṃ bhaginīnāṃ patnīnāṃ putrāṇāṃ duhitṛṇāṃ [...] (11) ca sarvasatvānāṃ anuttara-jñānāvāptaye

9. āpāyaka poṣaka citrasya āpāyapoṣakacitrasya Bühler. agrebhāva- Emend agrebhāga-.¹¹⁴

The merit that there is in this [gift], may it be for the attainment of the supreme knowledge by his parents—a preferential share being allotted to them, who have nurtured and supported him, and who have shown him fair Jambudvīpa—as well as all the brothers, sisters,

the following abstract in *-tā*—and to interpret it as part of a parenthetical statement, developing upon the preceding expression.

¹¹² Schopen 1984: 117–119.

¹¹³ Bühler 1892: 240, ll. 8–11; Sircar 1942: 398–399.

¹¹⁴ Bühler suggests understanding *agrebhava-*, while Sircar proposes to understand the whole passage as *agrabhāgapratyaṃśāya* (or: *-śatāyai*) | *astu*. The relative proximity between *va* and *ga* in the nail-headed variety of Northern Brāhmī script suggests the emendation *-bhāga-* is less speculative than it may seem at first. It is moreover supported by the parallel Gāndhārī expression *agrabhagapadīyaṃśa* used in the Wardak reliquary dated year 51 of Kaniṣka. See Baums 2012: 243–244, no. 43. It is unproblematic to keep *agre-* and understand the compound as an *aluksamāsa*. As for the word division suggested by Sircar, which introduces a second imperative in the formula, it represents a viable alternative to the one tentatively favoured here for both the Kura and the Ajanta inscriptions. It does not, however, account well for the abstract *-tā*. It also implies in both cases to postulate either an irregular dat. sg. fem. in *-āya* or *-āyā*, which occurs only rarely in Buddhist Sanskrit prose (BHS § 9.54), or else an irregular *sandhi*, without the expected hiatus *-āyā astu*.

wives, sons and daughters of the *vihārasvāmin* Roṭasiddhavṛddhi¹¹⁵ [...] and by all beings.

This inscription contains a construction, using a rare abstract in *-(praty)-aṃśatā*, strikingly similar to the one at Ajanta. The phrase *āpāyaka poṣaka citrasya jambudvīpasya darśayitāro*, developing on the element *mātāpitroh* of the standard formula, does not employ the genitive dual forms one would expect (i.e., *āpāyakayoḥ poṣakayoḥ citrasya jambudvīpasya darśayitro*). The apparent irregularity of this phrase may in part be explained by the fact that it is a thus-far unnoticed scriptural pericope. This pericope may have been taken from a source where duals were represented by plurals (hence the apparent nom. pl. *darśayitārah*) and patched onto the record without being adapted to the syntactic environment. The closest formulation that I could locate to its epigraphic occurrence appears—once again—in narratives transmitted within or stemming from the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya*,¹¹⁶ while other versions of the trope are found in a sermon on filial piety transmitted within the *aṅguttara/ekottarika* section of the canons.¹¹⁷ In the *Pūrṇāva-*

¹¹⁵ The name of the donor is uninflected; the syntax implies taking it as gen. sg.

¹¹⁶ See, for instance, AvŚat I.204.16–205.1: *duṣkarakārakau hi bhikṣavaḥ putrasya mātāpitaraṁ āpāyakau [āpyāyakau ed.] poṣakau saṁvārdhakau stanyasya dātārau citrasya jambūdīvīpasya darśayitārau* |. I have been unable to locate the phrase in the *Vinaya* of the Mahīśāsakas, which is the school named later on in the record (l. 12)—possibly after the name of another *nikāya* was erased. But that a version of the sūtra was known to the Mahīśāsakas is certain. See T 1421, XXII, 140c16–20. Besides the *Pūrṇāvadāna* cited below, for further references to this trope in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin*, see Schopen 1995: 112–113 and n. 31; 2007: 124 and n. 40, 128. A close parallel to the first compound of this pericope is also found in a much shorter statement featuring in the first-century Senavarman inscription. In this record, the section of the inscription where the ruler of Oḍi pays homage to his parents and his other relatives is introduced by the nominal sentence *matāpita dukaracara* (Skt. *mātāpitaraṁ duṣkaracārau*). See Salomon 1986: 279; Hinüber 2003: 28, § 8d. This passage thus seems to represent an early echo of a pervasive prescriptive statement on filial piety. For its occurrence in Gilgit colophons, see Hinüber 2004: 77–79.

¹¹⁷ The Pāli version of the sentence reads instead: *bahukārā bhikkhave mātāpitaraṁ puttānaṁ āpādakā poṣakā imassa lokassa dassetāro*. See, e.g., AN I.62.8–9. Cf. T 125, II, 601a16–17: 父母恩重, 抱之、育之, 隨時將護, 不失時節, 得見日月。Chinese 日月 probably renders a term corresponding to P. *loka*, while Jambudvīpa is generally transcribed in this work as *Yanfuti* 閻浮提。This means that, of all the canonical versions of the phrase known to me, the Mūlasarvāstivādin one aligns most closely to that quoted in the Kura inscription.

dāna, the Buddha's teaching on the matter is recalled by Maudgalyāyana. This leads the great disciple to set out to visit his mother in the Marīcika world-system where she has been reborn after her passing, in order to introduce her to the teaching, which is considered the best possible way for a son to repay his debt.¹¹⁸ The same principle, identified—in Mahāsāṅghika and Mūlasarvāstivādin circles, at least—as one of the necessary deeds any *buddha* must perform (*buddhakārya*, *avaśyakaraṇīya*), leads Śākyamuni himself to pay a visit to his mother Māyā in Trāyastriṃśa heaven.¹¹⁹

To return to Ajanta, the motif of filial piety is key to the very origins of the site according to a local legend which, I believe, is reflected in Aji 93 itself. The *arhant* Acala mentioned in st. 6 of Buddhābhadrā's inscription appears indeed to have been known to Xuanzang.¹²⁰ He is mentioned three times in the *Datang Xiyuji*, as the founder of three large monasteries: in "Greater Āndhra" (*Da Andalu* 大安達邏), near Veṅgīpura,¹²¹ in Lāṭa near

¹¹⁸ The sentence under discussion is cited at Divy 51.19–22; Burnouf 1844: 270. See also T 1448, XXIV, 16a19–20; D 1, *Dul 'ba*, Kha 5b1–2. On the passage immediately following this sentence, in the *Pūrṇāvadāna*, see Silk 2007: 173–175; 2008b. On this account more generally, see Tatelman 2000. The connection in this discourse between Maudgalyāyana's ability to see and visit other worlds and his filial piety had, as is well known, a considerable legacy in China. See Strong 1983; Teiser 1988; Wang-Toutain 1998: 132–135.

¹¹⁹ On the duties of a *buddha*, see Tournier 2017: 239ff.; Tournier and Strong 2019: 28–30. In the **Ekottarikāgama*, the two sūtras (nos. 24.5 and 35.2), focusing on the conversion of both parents, are introduced by a prologue containing this list of duties. See T 125, II, 662c11–15, 699a4–8. On the Buddha's visit to the Thirty-Three, see for instance Skilling 2008; Anālayo 2012. On the manifestation of the Buddha's filial duty towards his foster-mother Mahāprajāpatī on the occasion of her funeral, see Lamotte 1944–1980, vol. I: 587–588; Heirman 2015: 44–49; Dhammadinnā 2016c.

¹²⁰ The Arhant's name is indeed transcribed, thrice, in Xuanzang's travelogue, as 阿折羅 **ʔa-teiat-la*, which, according to Max Deeg (personal communication, 25/11/2013), could theoretically transcribe *ācāla*, *ācāra*, *ājāla*, or *ājāra*. Twice, this transcription is followed by a translation into Chinese as 所行, which corresponds to **Ācāra*. See T 2087, LI, 930b7, 935b8, 936c1–2. See also T 2088, LI, 966b27–c4; T 2131, LIV, 1065a4. It thus seems likely that the interchange between *ra* and *la*, and the fluctuation in vocalic lengthening in an oral environment could have led the Chinese pilgrim to misunderstand the meaning of the Arhant's name. Note that a *buddha* bearing the name Acala is known to the *Avadānaśataka* (I.53.18), while **Ācāra* would represent a distinctly odd and otherwise unattested name.

¹²¹ On the section of the *Xiyuji* dealing with Āndhra, see: Deeg forthcoming.

Valabhī, and in Eastern Mahārāṣṭra, in a deep valley surrounded by cliffs, whose detailed description very much recalls—and may indeed correspond to—Ajanta.¹²² The description of the Mahārāṣṭra monastery is the only of the three passages to provide any detail about Acala’s legend.¹²³ First, he is described as a native of Western India, which, according to Xuanzang’s subdivision of the subcontinent, encompassed regions to the North of Valabhī, up to Sindh. Realizing that his mother, after passing away, had been reborn in Mahārāṣṭra as a girl, he decided to pay her a visit and to introduce her into the Dharma, following as it were the Buddha’s prescription in the above-mentioned sūtra on filial piety. After describing that their encounter led her to obtain the “fruit of holiness” (Ch. 聖果)—which in this case might point to the fruit achieved by the “Stream Enterer” (*srota-āpatti-phala*)—the account concludes:¹²⁴

羅漢感生育之恩，懷業緣之致，將酬厚德，建此伽藍。

Grateful [towards his mother] for the benefit of having given birth and raised him, and willing to bring about karmic fruition [for her], the Arhant built this monastery to repay [her] favour.

The insistence of both this passage and of the Ajanta’s inscription on the *arhant*’s gratitude (*kṛtajña*) is probably not coincidental and may point to Buddhahadra’s knowledge of a similar story.¹²⁵ The story reported by Xuanzang encourages us to read, between the lines of AjI 93, Acala’s mother as the object of his gratitude, and this filial dimension is fully coherent with that pervasively expressed at Ajanta. Thus, it becomes possible to suggest overlapping motivations between the legendary figure of Acala and that of Buddhahadra.

¹²² See, for instance Fergusson and Burgess 1880: 282–283; Beal 1884: 257–258; Waters 1905: 239–240.

¹²³ T 2087, LI, 935b6–15.

¹²⁴ T 2087, LI, 935b14; Ji 1985: 895. Cf. Li 1996: 297.

¹²⁵ Gratitude is also one of the two motivations mentioned by Vasubandhu in relation to the gift made by a liberated person to a *caitya*. See AKBh 269.3–5 (ad 4:114ab):

yad āryo vītarāgaś caitye dadāti sthāpayitvā dṛṣṭadharmavedanīyaṃ tad dānam ubhayeṣāṃ nārthāya | tad dhi kevalaṃ gauravakṛtajñābhyāṃ [*gauravaṃ* ed.] dīyate |
What a noble one devoid of passion gives to a *caitya*—unless [its result] is experienced in the present existence—this gift is for the sake of neither of them, but this is only given out of reverence and gratitude.

On another level, the categories of *arhant* and *bodhisattva* are clearly contrasted and hierarchized in stanzas 6–7, as made clear by the use of *prāg eva*. Buddhabhadra likely considered a *bodhisattva*'s gift, although made by a non-liberated being, to be superior to that of the Arhant Acala, given its higher and wider ambitions.¹²⁶ The two stanzas not only operate a vertical hierarchization of the models of perfection, but they also express the ethos of a wealthy *bodhisattva*, a self-perception which—considering especially the cave XVII *praśasti*—could be shared with some of the prominent lay donors (*dānapati*) active at the site.¹²⁷ In the specific case of Buddhabhadra, who,

¹²⁶ Compare AKBh 270.14–18 (*ad* 4:117cd), where both types of gifts are equally valued:

sarveṣāṃ tu dānānām

agram muktasya muktāya [117c]

yad vītarāgo vītarāgāya dattvātīdānam idaṃ śreṣṭham āmiṣadāneṣu dānam ity uktam
bhagavatā |

bodhisattvasya ca [117d]

yad vā dānam bodhisattve dadāti sarvasattvahitahetos tad muktasyāpy amukte
'bhyādānam agram |

Out of all the gifts,

the best is the one of the liberated to the liberated...

The Bhagavānt said: “What a person devoid of passion has given to one who is devoid of passion is a superior gift, the best of all material gifts.”

... and that of the bodhisattva [as well].

Or else, in the case of a *bodhisattva*, that gift he gives to cause the welfare of all beings, even if a non-liberated [gives] to a liberated, this is the best gift.

On the sources of the canonical dictum alluded to by Vasubandhu in this passage, see Dhammadinnā 2016b.

¹²⁷ See especially CII V 127 (AjI 77), st. 28:

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

(jaga)ddhitāyoddyatasarvvakarmmaṇa[h]

munīndrabhāvapraṇidhānasiddhaye

bhavantv abhīṣṭāḥ bhuvi sarvvasampadaḥ

May all the possessions dear on earth to him (i.e., the donor) whose actions are all intent on the well-being of the world be for the fulfilment of his wish for the state of lord among Munis!

Cf. Wood 2004. The donor's *praṇidhāna* is mentioned one more time in st. 19. Interestingly, the *locus classicus* of a *praṇidhāna* scene, namely the encounter between the future Śākyamuni and Dīpaṅkara, features twice in cave XVII's paintings. A beautiful version of the episode has also been engraved by the entrance of cave XIX, which was likely excavated together with cave XVII, and a smaller one is also found in cave XXVI. See Vasant 1992.

like Acala, was a “renunciant”, one could further speculate that a “horizontal transfer” may have been suggested, between his eminent social status and what he aimed to achieve as a religious specialist.¹²⁸ Buddhahadbra’s aim at Buddhahood—and not merely *nirvāṇa*—for himself, his parents, members of his entourage, and the whole world is clear from the Anuṣṭubh by which he formally transfers the merits produced by his foundation:

(12) yad atra puṇyaṃ tat teṣā[ṃ] ◊ (13) jagatām ca bhavatv idaṃ
sarvvāmalaguṇavyātamahābodhiphalāptāye || [15]

c. -vyāta- Emend -vyāpta-.¹²⁹

Whatever merit there is in this [act], let it be for the attainment of the fruit of the superior Awakening that is pervaded with all pure qualities, by them (i.e., Bhavirāja, Buddhahadbra and his parents, Bhadrabandhu and Dharmadatta)¹³⁰ and by the [whole] world.

The rationale transpiring from Buddhahadbra’s description of his meritorious deeds across his composition is best summarized in diagrammatic form (Diagram 1). The schematic outline drawn here includes the social network of the main donor, and shows the distinction between the soteriological goal openly stated in stanza 15 and the expected outcome of temple dedication—namely rebirth in heaven—revealed in stanza 8.

Concluding remarks

Analysis of selected fifth- to sixth-century inscriptions from Ajanta has led us—through a slightly meandering path—to consider issues such as the stratification of prescriptive works about the cult of images and *stūpas* and their influence on donative practices, the ritual commemoration of dead relatives, and *bodhisattvas*’ assertions of superiority over the old ideal of *arh-*

¹²⁸ In making this observation, I draw inspiration from the Weberian reading of Pelagianism by J.-M. Salamito (2005: 30ff.).

¹²⁹ This emendation was already suggested in Burgess 1883: 134. Indraji had earlier read *-dhyāta-* (Burgess 1881: 78), but the reading is clearly *-vyā-*. Chhabra (1955: 116, n. 5) suggested emending *-vrāta-*, an emendation also accepted by Cohen (2006a: 334, n. 26) and McCombs (2014: 338, n. 76).

¹³⁰ These are the individuals mentioned in stt. 13–14, also in Anuṣṭubh, with which st. 15 forms a block. It is less clear whether Bhavirāja’s son Devarāja, mentioned st. 12, was also to benefit from the benefits aimed at by Buddhahadbra.

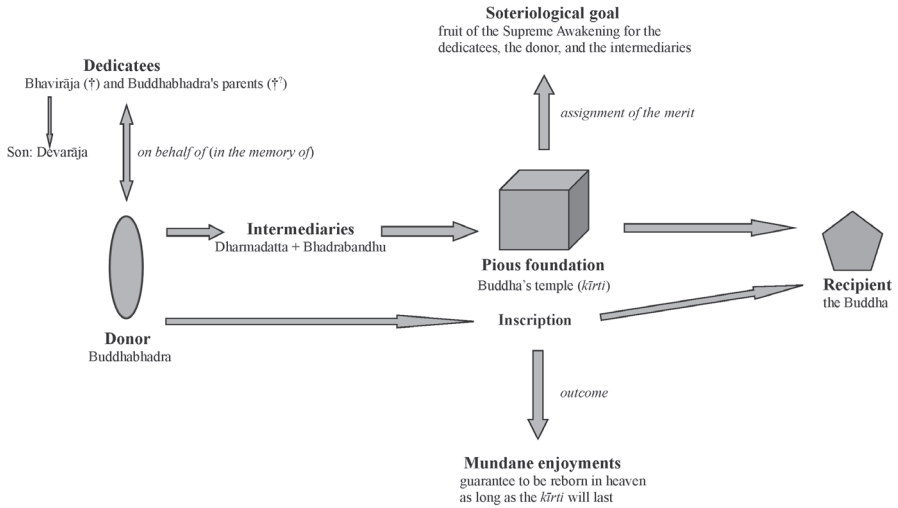


Diagram 1: The rationale underlying Buddhahadra's gift, according to AjI 93.

ants. I hope to have shown how these issues, as distant as they might seem at first sight, are worth considering together to reconstruct the culture and *imaginaire* of those who shaped this remarkable site.

Let me return here, in particular, to what this discussion may contribute specifically to our understanding of living *bodhisattvas*' aspirations and conceptions of their spiritual progress. What unites the modest donative records discussed in Part 1 of this study and the ambitious *ad hoc* composition of the prominent donor of cave XXVI that was the object of Part 2 is the co-presence of both the soteriological goal that constitutes the end point of the spiritual path—and to which auspicious deeds are explicitly directed—and a lesser outcome (i.e., auspicious rebirth) spontaneously ensuing from merit-making. I have argued that rebirth in heaven and among prominent human beings forms an integral part of the trajectory that leads *bodhisattvas* to the *summum bonum*. In other words, committed *bodhisattvas* at Ajanta were far from being mere hedonists,¹³¹ and may not have seen any contradiction between expecting positive rebirths in their extremely long path to Buddhahood and their supramundane aspirations: in fact, high births could themselves be the marker of spiritual progress. The convergence of purposes

¹³¹ Compare Spink 2010: 960.

observed at Ajanta was not exceptional, and may in fact represent a broader trend, both within and outside the Buddhist tradition. A sixth-century inscription from Jaggayyapeta in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, engraved on the pedestal of a stela on which a standing *buddha* is carved in low relief (figs. 13 and 14) deserves to be quoted here:¹³²

(1) svasti bhadantanāgārjunācāryyasya (2) śiṣya ◊ jayaprabhācāryya tacchiṣyeṇa ca(ndra)(3)prabheṇa kārāpitā ◊ satusugatataprasāda-viśeṣaviśiṣṭasamsāre devamanu(ś)[ya](4)vibhūtipūrvvakam buddhattvaprapṛtīnimittam buddhapratimā pratisthāpitā ◊

2. śiṣya jayaprabhācāryya Understand *śiṣyo jayaprabhācāryyas*. 3. kārāpitā kārāpitām B. **satu-** Burgess suggests emending *satya-*, which I tentatively accept. **devamanu(ś)[ya]-** *devamanu(ja)-* B. 4. **buddhattva-** Understand *buddhatva-*. **buddhapratimā** *buddhapratimām* B. **pratisthāpitā** *pratisthāpitām* B. Emend *pratiṣṭhāpitā*.

Prosperity! Jayaprabhācārya (was) the pupil of the Venerable Master Nāgārjuna. His pupil, Candraprabha, caused to be made (this) image of the Buddha, which is established for the attainment of Buddhahood, preceded by the fortune among gods and humans, in *samsāra* that is distinguished by [Candraprabha's] superior faith in him by whom the [noble] truths have been well understood (**satyasugata?*).

This donative record, harmoniously combining concerns for mundane enjoyments and for liberation, shows with even greater clarity than the Ajanta material that both goals have to be considered in succession, within the framework of a *bodhisattva* career developing over many lives. The blending of heaven (*svarga*), followed by prominent human rebirths, with final emancipation (*apavarga*), or—to use a related pair of concepts—mundane enjoyment (*bhukti*) with liberation (*mukti*), was also current in contemporary discourses on merit of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva milieux.¹³³ For instance, discussing the section on the establishment of a *liṅga* in the Śivadharmas to shed light on donative inscriptions from the Licchavi period in the Kathmandu

¹³² EIAD 136 was first edited by Fleet in Burgess 1882: 57; an improved edition appeared in Burgess 1887: 112. The latter's variant readings are marked here as B. For more detailed reference and discussion of the problematic last sentence omitted here, see the entry dedicated to this record on the EIAD website.

¹³³ On the pair *bhukti/mukti* in the Vaiṣṇava *Purāṇas*, see for instance Agrawala (1960), who characteristically mis-represents the Buddhist attitude on the matter. See also Gonda 1977: 133–134, n. 126.

valley, Nina Mirnig has recently observed that this important prescriptive work outlines “[a] spiritual trajectory that first leads to heaven and then, optionally, to liberation or mundane goals such as rebirth as king.”¹³⁴ Thus the pattern highlighted in the materials discussed here, much like conceptions relating to Buddhist icons, is best understood against the backdrop of broader developments characterizing multiple devotional traditions in the period under consideration.

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¹³⁴ Mirnig 2016: 352.

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- NWS Jürgen Hanneder and Walter Slaje, *Nachtrags-Wörterbuch des Sanskrit. Ein kumulatives Nachtragswörterbuch zu den Petersburger Wörterbüchern von Otto Böhtlingk und den Nachträgen von Richard Schmidt*. Online publication, 2017: <http://nws.uzi.uni-halle.de/>
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Fig. 1

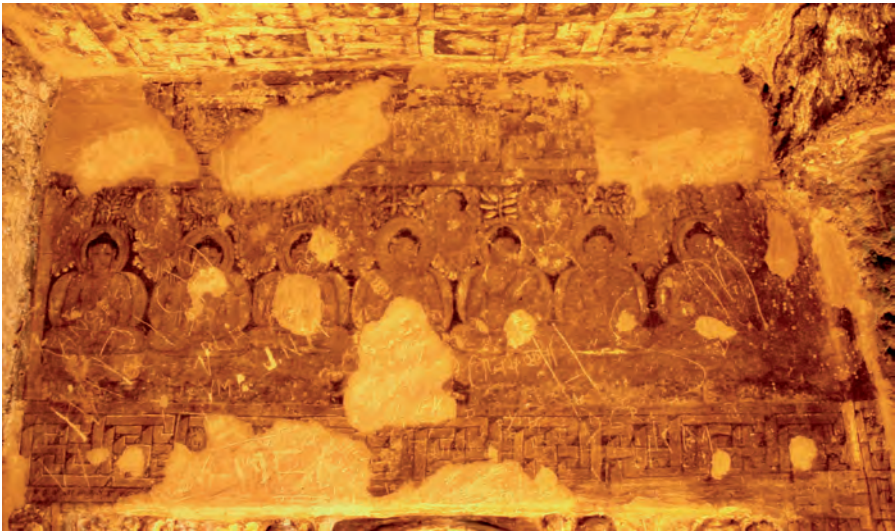


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

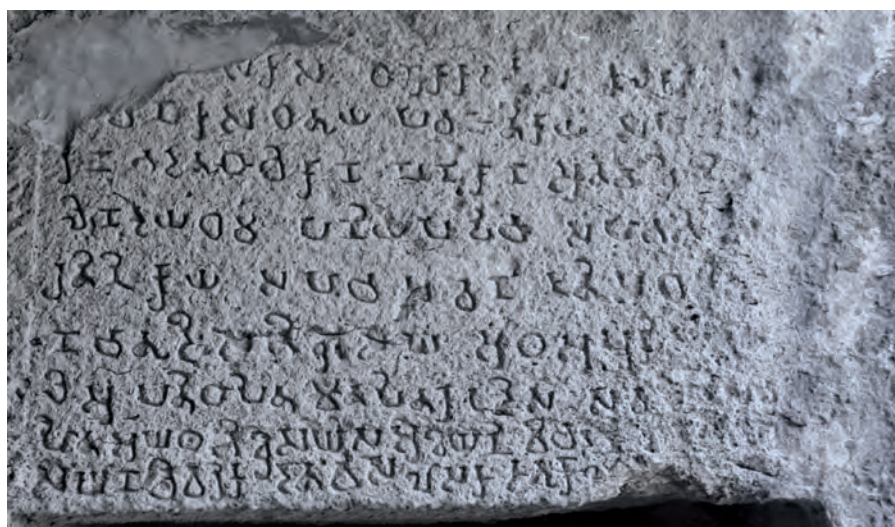


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

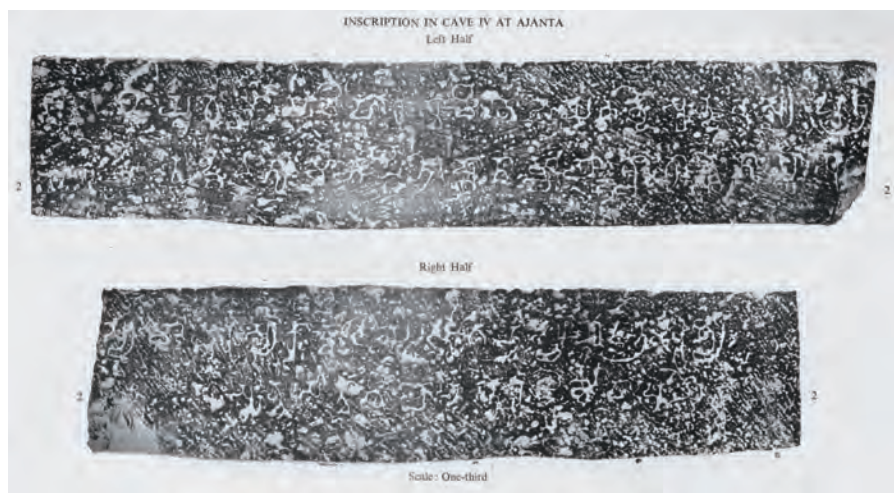


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14