

# SOME EXAMPLES OF CENTRAL ASIAN DECORATIVE ELEMENTS IN AJANTA AND BAGH INDIAN PAINTINGS

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The pictorial decoration of the 29 Buddhist caves of Ajanta (Maharashtra) is amongst the most ancient Indian painting extant.<sup>1</sup> According to Walter Spink (1976/77, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 2004, 2005, 2010), the caves should be dated to the second part of fifth century CE, most likely between 460 and 480. The paintings were commissioned by members of the aristocracy of the Vakataka (c. 255–480), one of the most powerful dynasties of Southern India, at the time ruled by King Harishena (Weiner 1977: 7–35; Spink 1990, 1991a, 1992). The paintings in the Buddhist caves at Bagh (south-western Madhya Pradesh) have in common with the ones at Ajanta both chronology and patronage (Spink 1976/77; Zin 2001).

Several studies have been dedicated to the representations of foreigners in Indian art and, specifically, in the paintings at Ajanta (Dhavalikar 1970, p. 24; Van Lohuizen-De Leeuw 1989). However, there are many objections to the proposed identifications for these paintings (Schlingloff 1988, pp. 59–60; Zin, 2003, pp. 286–91). Given how numerous are the figures of foreigners at Ajanta and Bagh, a brief article would not be enough. For this reason, only few details in Ajanta Caves I, II, XVI and XVII and Bagh Caves IV–V will be considered in the present paper.

The representations of foreigners are easily recognizable, especially when they can be identified as Iranians, because of the characteristic garments so unusual for the Indian climatic conditions and more suitable for members of the Kushan aristocracy or other external invaders. These people were first considered Persians by students of Indian art, and in one specific case, it was thought that one famous scene from Cave I had been positively identified as a presentation of the embassy sent by Khusro II Parvez (590–628) to Pulakeshin II Calukya (c. 608–642) which took place around 625 [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup> That identification openly conflicts with the chronology of the paintings proposed by Walter Spink and currently accepted by most scholars. Moreover, the identification fails to consider that Pulakeshin was a Hindu sovereign, and so his presence in a Buddhist context is furthermore suspect (Spink 1992, p. 251).

According to Dieter Schlingloff, the scene should be identified as a story that the Buddha told to Ananda when the latter raised objections to his master's choice of Kushinagara as the place to enter *nirvana*. The Buddha related the story of a pious Kushinagara king called Mahasudarshana. His people loved him and wanted to give him precious gifts. Mahasudarshana was reluctant in the beginning but in the end he financed a religious building with the money received from the gifts. According to Schlingloff, the Iranian features of some people depicted giving gifts to the king underlines the exotic character of the inhabitants of Kushinagara, who very often are represented in foreign dress (Schlingloff 1988, pp. 59–60; 1996, Cave I, No. 44, p. 1; 2000, n. 44/Cave I, pp.1, 2).

Foreigners dressed like Kushana or Śaka (that is to say wearing caftans, trousers, boots and the



Fig. 1. Depiction of the story of a pious Kushinagara king called Mahasudarshana, Ajanta Cave I. After: Schlingloff 1988, Ch. 4, Fig. 1.



Fig. 2. Ceiling panel with banquet scenes, Ajanta Cave I. After: Griffiths 1896/1983, Pl. 94.

so-called “Phrygian” cap) can be seen very often in Indian art. However, they seem to be used simply as a decorative theme without any specific allusion to Iranians.<sup>3</sup> Most likely, the models for such representations were just merchants, soldiers, or invaders come to India from the northwest. In fact, Frantz Grenet (1996, p. 72) identified two donors in front of King Mahasudarshana as Persians because of their beards and bright skin.

The other important pictorial cycle of cave I is reproduced on the central ceiling [Fig. 2]. Here four panels are decorated with banquet scenes, which were greatly appreciated in pre-Islamic Persia and Central Asia (Silvi Antonini 1996). Unfortunately, one of the panels has been completely lost. The sitting central figures of the three that remain are larger in size than the attendants around them. They hold weapons and in one hand a dish or a cup. Their garments are typical of the people from Central Asia, and they wear also exotic headgear. In two panels, it is possible to observe floating ribbons attached to the shoulders of the larger figures. This is another characteristic of Iranian art

that sometimes appears also in Gupta Vakataka arts (Pal 1978, p. 64). The servants are all women or men, and so the person sitting next to the central one can be a man or a woman, with a finger lifted in a manner commonly depicted in Sasanian and Sogdian art, expressing reverence (Frye 1972; Bromberg 1991). The three scenes have been identified as generic representations of the Persian court<sup>4</sup> or as representations of Kubera/Vaishravana in his Western Paradise (Grenet 1996, pp. 79–80, n. 34; Bautze-Picron 2002, pp. 250–51). However, since the three main figures of every scene are not identical, it is not excluded that they are representations of the *Lokapala*, especially considering the fact that, counting the missing panel, there would have been four altogether (Bautze-Picron 2002, pp. 250–51; Zin, 2003, pp. 287–91).

At least two dancers wearing garments similar to the ones of the foreigners at Ajanta, appear in a painting on the wall between Caves IV and V at Bagh [Fig. 3]. The scene is probably the representation of a dance which takes place in the sky close to Indra’s palace as part of the story of King Mandhatar (Zin 2001).<sup>5</sup>

Several people in the paintings at Ajanta and the two dancers at Bagh wear a particular kind of dress called *chamail*. This is a poncho-like, multi-pointed jacket similar to the one worn by the joker in the modern playing cards. According to James Harle (1987, pp. 571–72), the *chamail* is a Central Asian invention and its



Fig. 3. Painting on wall between Bagh Caves IV and V. After: Marg 1972: 11.



Fig. 4. Buddha adorned with the *chamail*. Ghorband Valley, Fondukistan Monastery, Niche D. 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Collection of the Musée Guimet, Inv. no. MG 18960. Photograph Copyright © Daniel C. Waugh.

introduction in India would have been dated to the period of the Śaka and Kushan invasions. The *chamail* can be observed in Gandharan reliefs and on the dress donors around the Buddha over a very long period as far away as in Xinjiang (Harle 1987, pp. 571–72; Bus-sagli 1984, p. 25; Kurita 1990, p. 291, Fig. 4; pp. 335, 465, 523). At several 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhist sites of

Fig. 5. Depiction of the girl following the Ruler of the Demons, mural in Room 50, Sector XXIII, Panjikent. After: Marshak 2002: Fig. 60.



modern Afghanistan like Bamiyan and Fondukistan, the *chamail* can be seen even on Buddha paintings and statues [Fig. 4; Color Plate III].<sup>6</sup> Also some 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>-century bronze statuettes of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Surya from Kashmir (Pal 1975, Pls. 30a-b, 32, 36; Paul 1986, Pl. 87; Bhan 2010, Fig. 372; Siudmak 2013, Pls. 145–146, 149) and at least two 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup>-century stone statues (Paul, 1986, Pl. 88; Bhan, 2010, Figs. 14–15; Siudmak 2013, Pls. 152, 189) have the same dress.<sup>7</sup> The *chamail* was certainly known also in 8<sup>th</sup>-century Sogdiana, as can be noted in painted programs at Panjikent identified as epic local stories [Fig. 5]. Here the *chamail* seems to be a garment for men and women. In a painting found in the Temple I at Panjikent a deity accompanied by a horse wears the *chamail* as well [Fig. 6]. But the statues from Afghanistan and Kashmir, and the Sogdian paintings are all dated to a later period than the Ajanta and Bagh paintings, while the only earlier specimens come from Gandharan reliefs representing foreign donors. So, it is highly improbable that the people dressed like Central Asians at Ajanta and Bagh are Sogdians. Most likely, they are Bactrians who, in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century had been conquered by the Hephtalites (Grenet 2002, pp. 209–10).<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 6. Deity accompanied by a horse, mural in Temple I, Panjikent. Fig. 6. After: Marshak and Raspopova 1991, Fig. 11.

A 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup>-century silver bowl considered to be Bactrian (now in the British Museum) is embellished with roundels containing human heads whose features offer a clear parallel with the Ajanta and Bagh paintings [Fig. 7, next page].<sup>9</sup> The visible portion of their dress and, above all, their headgear call to mind some figures at Ajanta. Also the beard is a characteristic typical of many foreigners represented in Indian paintings.

The ceilings of Caves I and II are divided into several squares, in some of which other foreigners can be recognized. In this case their attitudes are not serious



Fig. 7. Silver gilt bowl. Northwest Frontier Province, Pakistan, 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Collection of the British Museum, OA 1963.12-10.2. Photographs Copyright © Daniel C. Waugh.

and their pronounced noses and beards call to mind typical Chinese funerary statuettes (the *mingqi*) which are, however, mostly dated to the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is not improbable that at both Indian and Chinese courts during the fifth century, the most requested dancers and musicians were of Iranian origin, possibly just Bactrian. While such a hypothesis is reasonable, it does not explain the representation of foreigners in more serious contexts both at Ajanta and Bagh [Figs. 2, 3]. Possibly in Indian art the “paradisical” scenes had to evoke exotic lands like Central Asia or Persia, and in such a context the people had to be dressed like strangers.<sup>11</sup>

Another peculiarity of the foreigners at Ajanta is that they hold metal objects. Very interesting metalwork resembling typical Iranian vessels can be observed on the external ceiling of Cave II and in a painting on the external wall of Cave XVII where two lovers seem to be disturbed by a servant wearing a green caftan and a cap who holds a metal jar [Fig. 8] (Ghosh 1996, Pl. LVIII, Fig. 15; Okada and Nou 1996, p. 169). Also, in this case there is a clear parallel with some Chinese funerary paintings of the Tang period, representing local or Central Asian attendants with imported metal objects in their hands.<sup>12</sup>



A last decoration worth mentioning concerns the pictorial ornament of four inner octagonal pillars of Cave XVII.<sup>14</sup> At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Griffiths reproduced the decorative elements of these pillars, but his work was almost completely destroyed during a fire (Griffiths 1896/1983, Pls. 143, 147). One pillar in particular presents very interesting decorative elements composed by white pearl roundels on every side of the octagonal support containing single vegetal and animal subjects, such as the bull and the wild

Fig. 8. Lovers and a servant, mural on external wall of Cave VIII, Ajanta. After: Ghosh 1996, Fig. 20.



< Fig. 9. *The Devavatara jataka, mural in Ajanta Cave XVII. After: Schlingloff 1996, Cave XVII, No. 86, p. 53.*

Fig. 10 (below left). *Inner octagonal pillars, Ajanta Cave XVII. After: Griffiths 1896/1983, Pls. 143, 147.*

boar [Fig. 10]. The pearl roundel containing the wild boar could be compared to similar Sasanian decorations from Damghan (northwestern Iran) where some 6<sup>th</sup>-century stucco panels present boar heads within pearl roundels (Kröger 1982: 262; Bromberg 1983). Sasanian art possibly had some influence on 5<sup>th</sup>-century Indian decorations (Jairazbhoy 1963, pp. 148–62; Meister 1970, pp. 265–66; Kröger 1981, p 447; Klimburg-Salter 1996, pp. 480–81, 485), but it is clear that round frames embellished by pearls along their rims and containing various subjects spread in India at least since the first century BCE.<sup>15</sup> The entire figure of a white wild boar is depicted on the column of Cave

XVII, whereas in Persian (at least in Bamiyan) and Sogdian art (in the motherland and in the colonies in the Tarim Basin), there is only the head of the animal [Fig. 11; Color Plate IV] (Compareti 2004a). It is not clear if this was just a decorative element or a symbolic representation of a deity, nor is it clear whether the wild boar had a specific meaning. It is worth noticing that the coinage circulating in the Vakataka kingdom included also representations of a bull, a conch, a vase and other objects that call to mind the elements included within the roundels painted on the column in Cave XVII (Raven 2004).

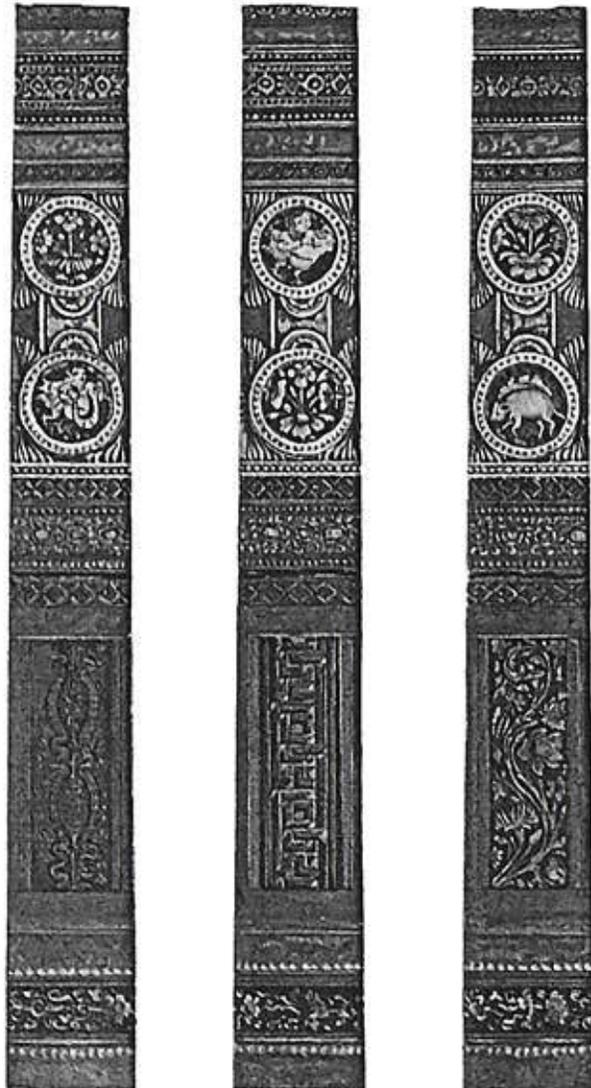


Fig. 11. *Fragment of mural from Bamiyan, depicting a boar's head in a "pearl roundel." Collection of the Musée Guimet, Inv. no.: MG 17972 or 17973. Photograph Copyright © Daniel C. Waugh.*



Pearl roundel decorations have been among the favorite textile embellishments in Central Asia since the sixth century and were spread in the ancient world most likely by the Sogdian merchants active along the so-called “Silk Road” from China to the Byzantine Empire (Compareti 2000; 2004a, 2006a). However, the pearl roundels observed in India, especially as architectonic decorations, seem to be a local creation: they appear isolated, inside there is usually a flower or vegetal motif, and it is only at Ajanta that different subjects are represented.<sup>16</sup> The textile decorations of the foreigners at Ajanta and Bagh display only simple geometric designs and no pearl roundels at all. This observation is further evidence in support of the chronology advanced by Walter Spink. If the later chronology advocated by other scholars, especially the Indian ones (e. g., Khandalavala 1990; Jamkhedkar 1991; Deshpande 1991; Khandalavala 1991) were to be correct, then we would expect pearl roundel decorations to have been reproduced on the garments worn by the numerous foreigners of Iranian origin portrayed in those Indian paintings.

The relationship between the Subcontinent and the Iranian world must have been very intense during the pre-Islamic period, judging from its reflection in Indian arts. However, the perception that Sasanian Persia was the main source of influence should be re-examined in the light of new discoveries in the field of Iranian studies. The evidence seems to point at 5<sup>th</sup>-century Bactria-Tokharistan as the place of origin of most of the decorations that appear in the paintings at Ajanta and Bagh, while only the foreigners depicted next to the preaching Buddha in cave XVII could be possibly identified as Sogdians because of their hats.

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## Notes

1. The monks at Ajanta were followers of the Mulasarvastivadin sect which is a form of Hinayana (Weiner 1977: 32–35).
2. The hypothesis of identification was advanced few decades after the discovery of the Ajanta caves (Fergusson, 1879). See also the summary of this story with commentaries in Spink, 2005: 181–83.
3. At Ajanta some decorations of the façade of cave XIX are arch-like-niches containing the head of a foreigner, in some

cases wearing a Phrygian cap and with long moustaches (Bautze-Picron 2002, p. 248; Zin, 2003, p. 287). I owe the latter reference to Falk Reitz, whom I wish to thank. Other ornamental architectonic elements of probable Iranian origins are the crenellations represented very often at Ajanta (Melikian-Chirvani 1975, pp. 9–10). Crenellations can be observed at Bharhut, Sanchi and Bhaja (see for example, Franz 1965, Figs. 31, 53, 64, 91; Huntington and Huntington 1999, Fig. 5.22); so it is possible that their introduction from Persia or Central Asia in India happened during the Parthian period or even before (Goetz 1974, pp. 4–5).

4. It is worth noting that in contemporary Sasanian art the gods have never weapons (Vanden Berghe 1988, p. 1514). Only at Taq-e Bostan does the equestrian statue in the big grotto have a shield and a spear, but it is probable that this is a representation of the king as a warrior and not a deity as previously thought by this writer (Compareti 2006b, p. 167). In any case, Taq-e Bostan is a very late Sasanian monument which could hardly be considered representative for the whole of Sasanian art.

5. On the paintings at Bagh, see Marshall 1927 and Marg 1972. For more recently published studies see Zin 2001 and Pande 2002. According to Walter Spink (1976/77; 2004, p. 97), the period of inactivity at Ajanta caused by a war that lasted between 472–474 corresponds to the flourishing period at Bagh because of the migration of the artists to this latter site.

6. Tarzi 1977; Klimburg-Salter 1989. On the problem of the so-called “Buddha paré” see Rowland 1961.

7. Some garments worn by Indian deities seem to be typical of Kashmir only. A typical dress for the so-called “mother-goddesses” also has a pointed ending in the lower part and a pearl border (Bhan 2010, Figs. 207–208, 213, 221; Siudmak 2013, Pls. 85–88, 196).

8. It is now clear that the Hepthalites were not part of those Huns who conquered the land south of the Hindu-Kush and Sind as well in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, this latter Hunnic group was the one commonly known as Alkhon because of the inscriptions on their coins (Vondrovec, 2008). The Hepthalites in Central Asia and the Alkhon in north-western India had probably some connections (Errington and Curtis 2007, pp. 85–88).

9. The bowl is part of the so-called “Oxus Treasure,” at present in the British Museum (Dalton 1964, Pl. 205). There are at least other three metal vessels like this. Two were recovered at Datong, China, while the third one was found in the Molotov Region (Russia) and is now part of the Hermitage collection (Fajans 1957, p. 56, Figs. 3–4; Qi 1999, part 2, p. 257, Figs. 124, 125; p. 319, Fig. 3–8; Marshak 2004). The same

knotted cloak and headgear can be observed in a painting from Cave XVII at Ajanta identified as the Mahakapi *jataka* (Schlingloff 1988, Cave XVII, No. 31, p. 47; 1996, Cave XVII, No. 24.1, p. 30; 2000, p. 144. Decorations of bearded human heads wearing a cap inside pearl roundels appear on the garments of a participant at the banquet at Balalyk Tepe, a site of 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century Bactriana (Al’baum 1960, Figs. 115–116, 148; Silvi Antonini 1972).

10. Most of the material on this kind of *mingqi* was collected by Mahler 1959. It is worth remembering that in 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century China, the Iranians represented in arts are mostly Sogdians (Compareti, 2004b; 2006c). There is no specific study on these foreigners in Indian paintings. For a recent mention of foreigners in Ajanta, see Albanese 2004, p. 203.

11. Evocative distant lands represent a literary *topos* in many cultures and civilizations. For the Muslim Persians, for example, China and Khotan played this role. This appears very clearly in the famous *Shahname* by Firdousi. A similar phenomenon happened also in Chinese literature where some characters of entertaining tales were Iranians or Arabs come from very distant lands (Schafer 1951). Curiously enough, it is very likely that, for the Sogdians, India represented the magic land of their tales (Marshak 2002, pp. 27–28). In the Greco-Roman world too, India was more exotic than any other land (Compareti 2012).

12. Again, the metalwork in Chinese paintings reflects most likely a Sogdian production. See, e.g., the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Tang funerary paintings found in the Shaanxi Province with attendants bringing in their hands metal objects (Qi 1999, pp. 420–27). Some of these exotic objects include also the *rhyton*. This is a horn usually in the shape of animals used to drink. It appears sometimes in Indian reliefs representing foreigners such as on a relief on a pillar from Nagarjunakonda, Site 37 at present kept in the National Museum, New Delhi (Stone 1994, Fig. 281).

13. For a general discussion on this element see Lucidi 1969.

14. One of the main studies on Indian columns is still Stern 1972. The pearl roundels on the pillar under examination in Cave XVII at Ajanta can be seen in Nakamura 1968, p. 35, Tab. 21, and Taddei 1976, Fig. 57.

15. Pearl roundels can be observed on the reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut (2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) (Bénisti 1952). On pearl roundels in Indian painting see also Eastman 1943.

16. There were probably some direct influences of Sogdian art into Northern India and especially in Kashmir, but there is no evidence about such an exchange before the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Compareti 2000, pp. 338–39).

PLATE III

[Compareti, "Some Examples," p. 41]



*Buddha adorned with the chamail. Ghorband Valley, Fondukistan Monastery, Niche D. 7th c. CE. Collection of the Musée Guimet, Inv. no. MG 18960. Photograph Copyright © Daniel C. Waugh.*

PLATE IV

[Compareti, "Some Examples," p. 43]



*Fragments of murals from Bamiyan, depicting a boar's head. Collection of the Musée Guimet, Inv. nos.: MG 17972 and 17973. Photographs Copyright © Daniel C. Waugh.*

