Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean

edited by

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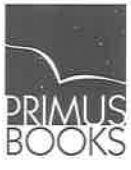

PRIMUS BOOKS
An imprint of Ratna Sagar P. Ltd.
Virat Bhavan
Mukherjee Nagar Commercial Complex
Delhi 110 009

Offices at CHENNAI LUCKNOW
AGRA AHMEDABAD BENGALURU COIMBATORE DEHRADUN GUWAHATI
HYDERABAD JAIPUR JALANDHAR KANPUR KOCHI KOLKATA MADURAI
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First published 2016

ISBN 978-93-84082-07-9

Published by Primus Books

Lasertypeset by Sai Graphic Design
Arakashan Road, Paharganj, New Delhi 110 055

Printed at Replika Press Pvt. Ltd., India

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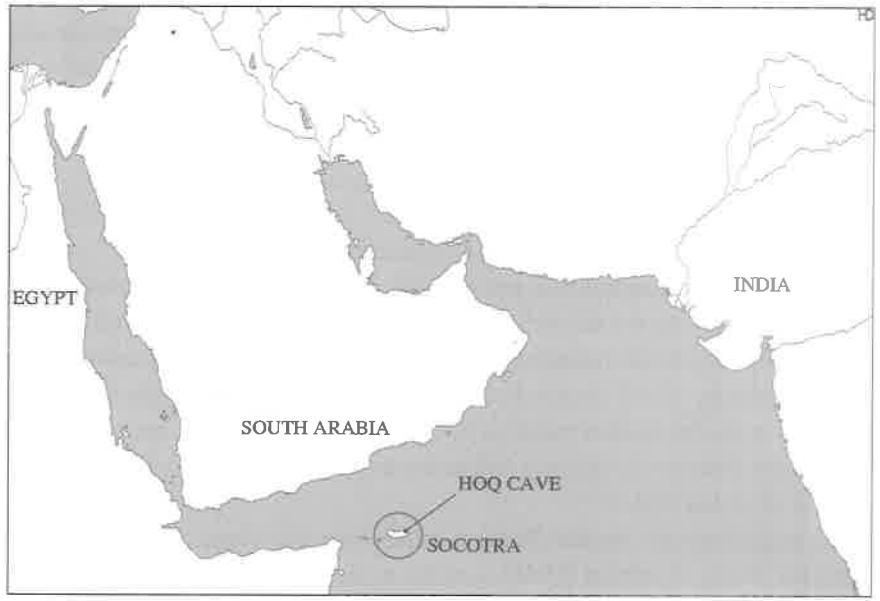
CHAPTER 5

Indian Inscriptions from Cave Hoq at Socotra

Ingo Strauch

This essay deals with a corpus of texts, which were discovered about ten years ago in a cave on the island of Socotra, situated in the Indian Ocean between the coast of South Arabia and the Horn of Africa (Map 5.1). The island with ca. 45,000 inhabitants is today politically part of the Republic of Yemen. A majority of its population lives in the north where a large plain provides enough space for settlements and modest agriculture and easy access to the sea and its products. The granite core of the island is



Map 5.1: Western Indian Ocean with Socotra and Hoq Cave
Courtesy: Hédi Dridi.

covered by thick layers of marine deposits like limestone, which is strongly karstified and caused the emergence of large cave systems all over the island (Cheung and DeVantier 2006: 23). In one of the numerous caves, which are part of this huge karst system, a group of Belgian speleologists discovered in 2000 numerous graffiti and drawings inscribed on the walls, stalactites, stalagmites and floors of the cave. The Belgian expedition was part of a larger enterprise called Socotra Karst Project, founded and run by Peter De Geest, at that time Ph.D. student at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Thanks to him, Christian Robin and Hédi Dridi—then members of the French Archaeological Mission in Yemen—could visit the cave and prepare a documentation of these artefacts. They identified the textual remains and handed over the Indian materials—at that time only about 20 epigraphs—to my Russian colleague Mikhail Bukharin who invited me to work on them together with him. The results of this first study of the Indian texts were published in an article which came out in 2006 (Strauch and Bukharin 2004). The readings of the non-Indian epigraphs and presentation of the archaeological artefacts were published by the French colleagues in two fundamental articles in 2002 (Dridi 2002; Robin & Gorea 2002).

Some years later, the leader of the Belgian Socotra Karst Project, Peter De Geest, invited me to join his expedition in December 2005 and January 2006. During this visit, I had the opportunity to visit the cave myself and to prepare a new documentation,[1] which included much additional material and is the basis of the comprehensive catalogue of inscriptions and drawings published in the volume *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq* (= Strauch 2012). The present essay will shortly present the main results of the study of the Indian material (Strauch 2012: 254–365).

The Historical Background

As far as the palaeographical analysis allows, all Indian epigraphs can be bracketed between the second and early fifth centuries AD. It is well known that during this time Indians actively participated in the intercontinental trade contacts, which connected the Indian subcontinent with the West, not only with the Mediterranean, but also with the Arabian peninsula. An impressive number of literary and archaeological data bear witness of this period of global history.[2]

A major source on the Roman trade with the East, the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*PME*) written in the middle of the first century AD, gives a detailed account on the sea-route from the Red Sea up to the Indian subcontinent. This text also contains one of the earliest historical

accounts on the island Socotra which is known to the author under the name *Dioskourides*. According to this account, the population of the island consisted of a mixture of Arabs, Indians and Greeks who settled there for the purposes of commerce. The island's products listed in the *PME* are tortoise and dragon-blood (*Dracaena cinnabari*), the resin of a tree which even today grows abundantly in the mountain areas of the island. According to the *Periplus*, Socotra was connected mainly by two routes with the Indo-Roman world: via Muza, i.e. the South Arabian harbour at the mouth of the Red Sea, and to the ports of western India, namely, Barygaza, the ancient Bharukaccha, and Limyrike which can be identified with the Malabar coast of south India (*PME* 30 + 31, Casson 1989: 67–9).

The data of the *Periplus* can be compared with both earlier and later Western sources which confirm the participation of Socotra in the Indo-Roman trade contacts and the role which Indian traders played in them. Among the earliest texts, which mention the presence of Indians in this part of the Indian Ocean, are the *Periplus* written in the middle of the second perhaps early first century BC by the Ptolemean officer Agatharchides of Cnidus (Burstein 1989: 169) and Diodorus' description of the mythical island Panchaea in his *Bibliotheca Historica* (5.41.4–5.42.4., Oldfather 1935).[3]

Despite this literary evidence, there are almost no clearly identifiable material traces of the presence of Indian traders on Socotra.[4] But the same can also be stated for other parts of the Indian Ocean networks. The sources for the presence of Indians mainly consist of ceramics and a few inscribed potsherds from the Red Sea ports Myos Hormos and Berenike (cf. Salomon 1991). As important as archaeological evidence might be—especially in the absence of literary reports—its testimony is a limited one. We hardly know anything about the people who took part from the Indian side in these trading activities. Where did they come from, what was their social and religious identity? Against this background, the newly discovered inscriptions from the Hoq Cave at Socotra gain an eminent importance. For the first time we dispose of a source which reflects the voice of one of the major agents in the Indo-Roman trade network—the Indian traders and sailors.

The Hoq Cave

The Hoq Cave opens at a height of about 350 m. above sea level facing the open sea to north-east (Plate 5.1). The cave is shaped as a rather narrow long corridor, about 2 km. long and up to 37 m. high. Without hesitation, it can be called a treasure house of speleology. All sorts of stalagmites

Plate 5.1: View from the cave's entrance towards the sea.

and stalactites from miniature size up to monumental compositions can be found along the way into the cave. It was confirmed by the Belgian specialists that Hoq is an outstanding example of cave architecture. Beside this natural beauty, it is also the relatively easy accessibility of the cave, which makes it an attractive place to visit. After a not too strenuous climb of about 2-3 hours, one reaches the entrance. The floor of the cave is flat and there are no subterranean lakes or rivers, which have to be crossed.

The first traces of the cave's ancient visitors are found only after about 1 km. walk. This spot onwards, the inscriptions are usually arranged in clusters along the path. Altogether, I could identify 18 different sites, where texts have been written on the surfaces of the walls, on the stalagmites and stalactites or on the floor (Plate 5.2). The texts were inscribed with the help of material, which was found in the vicinity of these places. Thus we have texts written with different types of mud from the floor and texts incised with the sharp ends of a broken stalagmite. One text is written with charcoal, which is taken from a torch. Remains of torches have been found at different places. Due to the complete darkness inside the cave, such torches were the only source of light for the premodern visitors. The difficult conditions under which these texts were written are also

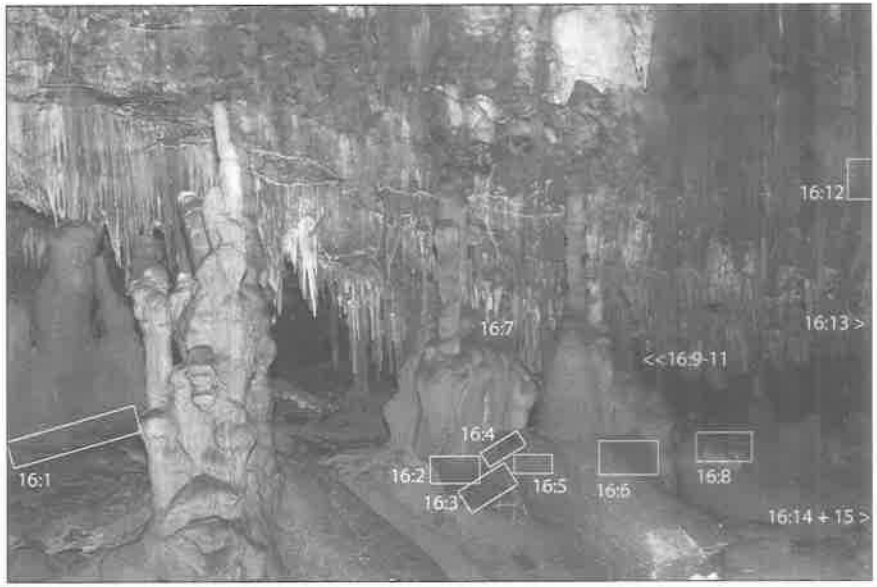
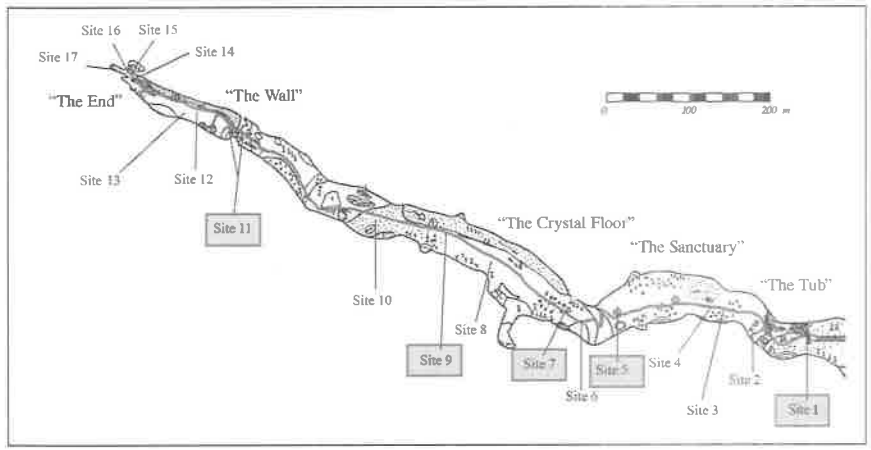


Plate 5.2: Site 16 with inscriptions indicated.

responsible for their sometimes rather enigmatic character. Not all the signs are carefully inscribed, sometimes texts are written above each other.

Altogether, I could clearly identify 193 Indian epigraphs written by 117 different persons. Accordingly, some of the visitors left their texts more than one time. The most active of them was a certain Ravāhaka who inscribed his name in total 10 times at five different spots. Following his graffiti, it is thus even possible to reconstruct his route through the cave during his visit more than 1,500 years ago (Map 5.2).



Map 5.2: Distribution of Ravāhaka's graffiti within the cave.

At some sites, the Indian texts are accompanied by South Arabian, Aksūmite, Greek and Bactrian texts. Of special interest is a wooden tablet bearing a Palmyrene inscription dated to AD 232 (Robin & Gorea 2002: 432–45; Gorea 2012).

The Corpus of Indian Inscriptions at Hoq Cave: Formal Features

With the exception of a single Kharoṣṭhī inscription, all Indian graffiti are written in the Brāhmī script, namely in a variety which can be attributed to the so-called Western Brāhmī of the Western Kṣatrapas which was in use in Gujarat and the adjacent regions from around the second century AD up to the fifth century AD.

Due to the occasionally enigmatic character of very short inscriptions and the homonymy of Sanskrit and Middle Indic in some cases, it is not always possible to provide a clear linguistic attribution of the texts. In the majority of cases, however, the language can be described as Sanskrit, sometimes intermingled with Middle Indian phonological features as it is typical for this kind of epigraphic texts. Only 21 inscriptions of the whole corpus (= ca. 11 per cent) are clearly written in Middle Indian.

According to their genre (see Table 5.1), the majority of inscriptions belongs to the type of personal inscriptions, i.e. graffiti containing the personal name of the scribe and occasionally some additional information (= Type A). This group corresponds to the category of 'Pilgrims' and travellers' records included in Salomon's 'Typological survey' on Indian epigraphy (Salomon 1998: 121f.). In most cases, these short texts contain only the name of a person, either in the genitive case or in the nominative. However, intermittently further elements are added, such as a verbal form like *prāpta* 'has arrived' or the name of the person's father, his title, profession or place of origin. These occasional additions make clear that the majority of people who left their names in the cave were participants of maritime expeditions from western India. Thus, these texts also bear witness of a considerable degree of literacy among the seafaring people of India.

Other types of inscriptions are only weakly attested. Thus, the corpus contains only seven texts, which can be ascribed a religious character (=Type B). Two of them are left by a person, who calls himself Rahavasu. His two short texts contain formulae for the worship of the Buddha. One of them (14:28) mentions the historical Buddha by his birth name—Gotama/Skt. Gautama: *bhagavato gotamasa na[bha]katasa* 'For the Lord Gotama (Skt. Gautama), the *nabhakata*'. The term *nabhakata* is problematic. Since

the text is written in Middle Indic language, the word should represent a Middle Indic lexeme. A possible Sanskrit equivalent is *nabhaḥkrānta*, a rather late term which according to some Sanskrit lexicographers—the oldest of them the twelfth century Jaina scholar Hemacandra from Gujarat—has to be regarded as synonym of *siṃha* 'lion'. There is no proof that Hemacandra's explanation goes back to a much older and possibly regionally distinct source. But if we consider this possibility, the term *nabhakata* < *nabhaḥkrānta* would refer to a well-known epithet of the Buddha, who is frequently called in literary sources *Śākyasiṃha* 'the lion of the Śākya (family)'. On a golden medallion from Tillya Tepe in Bactria we even find the legend: *siho vigadabhayo dharmacakraṃ pravatati* 'The fearless Lion turns the Wheel of the Teaching' (for excellent pictures see Sarianidi 1985: 188f.).

The second Buddhist inscription (11:43) uses another well known epithet and designates Buddha as *mahāmuni* 'Great Sage'. It runs in Middle Indian phonology: *bhagavato mahamuni[sa]* 'For the Lord "Great Sage"'.

The inscriptions subsumed under the last category—that is miscellaneous—probably belong to different types of texts. All of them are, however, rather enigmatic and their contents is not beyond doubt. The most interesting among them is a very short inscription (10:2) which consists of only three numerals: *100 50 4*. Due to the lack of any additional information and the unclear context, it is not possible to definitely fix the purpose of these numerals. But it is possible that they were meant to designate a date. According to the palaeographical evaluation, the script of this epigraph belongs to western India and can be dated to the second-

Table 5.1: Survey of the inscriptional genres represented at Hoq Cave

The Indian inscriptions of the cave Hoq	*Texts*		*Scribes*	
	Σ	%	Σ	%
TOTAL	193	100	117	100
A. Personal inscriptions	172	89	104	89
(1) Name only	90	52	55	53
(2) Name + patronym	34	20	21	20
(3) (Name) + (patronym) + provenance/profession/title	19	11	15	14
(4) Name (+ patronym) + (provenance/profession/title) + verbal form	33	19	21	20
B. Religious inscriptions	7	3.5	3	2.5
C. Miscellaneous inscriptions	3	1.5	3	2.5

Source: Strauch 2012: 279.

fourth century AD. The only candidate of the eras current in this region, which suits this dating, is the Śaka era commencing in AD 78. The number 154 would thus result in the year AD 232, a date which quite impressively matches the palaeographical evidence and the date of the Palmyrene tablet which was fixed by Maria Gorea to AD 257/58. If our interpretation of the Brāhmī numerals is correct, they would provide an important chronological argument for the entire Hoq corpus.

The Indian Inscriptions of Hoq: The Historical Information

Religious Affiliation

Our major source of information is, of course, the names themselves. In many cases, the religious and social status of a person or his family is expressed in his name. Thus, an onomastic analysis of the names of the Indian visitors of Hoq allows some cautious conclusions about the religious stratification of Indian sea traders in the first centuries AD (see Table 5.2). Due to the general sympathy early Buddhism showed towards

Table 5.2: Religious affiliation of personal names attested in Hoq (names of visitors are given in normal print, names of their fathers in italics)

Religious term	*Indian names from Hoq*
Buddhist	6 names (3 visitors)
Buddha	Buddhanandin, *Buddhamitra*
Dharma	*Dharma*
Saṃgha	Saṃghadāsa, Saṃghanandin, *Saṃgharaṅgin*
General	1 name (1 visitor)
Deva	Devila
Vaiṣṇava	7 names (5 visitors)
Viṣṇu	Viṣṇu, Viṣṇudatta, Viṣṇudhara, Viṣṇupati, *Viṣṇubhaṭṭi*, *Viṣṇula*, Viṣṇuṣena
Śaiva	8 names (6 visitors)
Śiva	*Śivaghoṣa*, Śivaba+pava, *Śivamitra*
Rudra	Rudradatta, Rudranandin, Rudrendra
	Iśaradasa (Skt. Īśvaradāsa), Īśvaraskanda
Other Hindu deities	9 names (8 visitors)
Skanda-Kumāra	Īśvaraskanda, Skanda, Skandabhūti, Skandamitra, Kumāraṣena, Bhaṭṭikumāra
Sūrya	Sūryasiṃha
Vedic deities	*Aryamabhūti*, Prajāpati

Source: Strauch 2012: 356–7.

trade and commerce it is not surprising to find Buddhist names, such as Buddhanandin, Buddhamitra or Saṃghanandin. Together with the devotional texts introduced earlier and some drawings of *stūpa*s inside the cave, there emerges a clear indication of the strong presence of Buddhists among the sea-trading population of India. Surprisingly, two of the visitors of Hoq call themselves *śramaṇa* 'Buddhist mendicant, monk' (11:32, 14:16). Whether this title referred to their actual religious status or to their former engagement in the Buddhist order, is not clear. Is it possible that Buddhist monks accompanied seafaring expeditions? It cannot be excluded, however, that *śramaṇa* is used here as a personal name. In this case, any speculations about Buddhist monastics on Socotra have to be abandoned.

Other religious groups, which can clearly be identified, are Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas bearing typical names. In the case of Vaiṣṇava names, we find for example Viṣṇupati, Viṣṇudatta, or Viṣṇuṣena. The Śaivas are represented by names as Śivaghoṣa or Śivamitra. Many names refer to other Hindu deities like Sūrya and Skanda-Kumāra and even Vedic deities like Prajāpati and Aryaman. Śaiva visitors are probably also responsible for the drawings of tridents (*triśūla*) which are found at different sites in the cave (Plate 5.3).

Plate 5.3: Incised figure of a trident (*triśūla*), indicated by hand-drawing (16:18).

Social and Professional Background

Only few epigraphs mention the profession of the writers. It is no surprise that among them are terms referring to seafaring. Three scribes call themselves *nāvika* or *navika*:

Skandabhūti (scribe 31): *navik[o]* (6:1)
Viṣṇuṇena (scribe 55): *nāvika* (10:4), *n[ā]vika* (11:1)
Son of Humiyaka (scribe 93): *nāvika* (14:15)

In Sanskrit literature this term is often used in a rather generic way with the meaning 'mariner, sailor'. When found as a technical term or professional title, *nāvika* often bears a more limited connotation and designates one of the leading members of a ship crew, either the captain or the helmsman (Schlingloff 1976: 28; 1982: 54). Another term with a similar semantic range is *niryāmaka*, which is also found in an epigraph from Hoq. Viṣṇudhara, an inhabitant of the Indian harbour city Bharukaccha, uses the title *niryyāmaka* (11:12).

The nautical background of the scribes is also indicated by some drawings of ships which clearly represent the Indian type of seagoing vessels with multiple masts, highly curved sterns and two rudders (Plate 5.4). This ship type is found on the coins of the Sātavāhana ruler Gautamīputra Yajña Śrī

Plate 5.4: Mud drawing of a ship (6:13).

Sātakarṇi who ruled in the second century AD (see Schlingloff 1976: 21, figs. 4-7; 1982: 57, Abb. 4).

Another professional background is indicated by the use of the abbreviated title *vani* which probably goes back to Skt. *vaṇij* 'merchant'. The use of a similar abbreviation (*vaṇi*) was common in the later period, as attested in the thirteenth century Sanskrit text *Lekhapaddhati* and in inscriptions of the same period (cf. Strauch 2002: 478). That it was known in a much earlier period can be shown on the basis of inscriptions along the Karakorum Highway (e.g. Oshibat 82:2, Bemmann & König 1994: 130).

Less clear is the exact meaning of the term *ārāmika* 'gardener' which is attested in two texts (7:4, 11:30).

An important historical and chronological argument is provided by two inscriptions, which refer to the title *kṣatrapa* (12:2, 15:5). As shown by Richard Salomon (1973), the use of this originally Iranian title is restricted to territories where the originally Iranian Śakas gained political power. It is attested in inscriptions from Gandhāra in the extreme north-west, in the Mathurā region and in Western India where a branch of the Śaka family established the Western Kṣatrapa dynasty. The period of its use can be determined as the time from the first century BC up to the early fifth century AD, when the rule of the Western Kṣatrapas came to an end. Based on the overall appearance of the script and the suggested geographical background of most of the Indian visitors of Hoq, it seems permissible to connect the *kṣatrapas* from Hoq with Western India, i.e. the domain of the Western Kṣatrapa dynasty. So far, the use of this title in this region was known either for the independent ruler or his heir-apparent. In light of the evidence from Hoq, it is now possible to introduce a functionally different type of *kṣatrapas* in Western India. It seems that the title was also used for subordinates to a sovereign ruler or even members of a noble family, i.e. noblemen. Such a type had already been observed in inscriptions from North-West India (Falk 2006: 400f.). It might be significant to note that the *kṣatrapas* from Hoq bear ordinary Indian names. One of them calls himself Bhaṭṭiṣena, son of Śivamitra (12:2). The name of the second *kṣatrapa* is not completely preserved, but begins with the element Śiva- (15:5). Accordingly, both persons obviously had a Śaiva background. This can be compared to the evidence from Western India, where the Śaiva names of some of the ruling *kṣatrapas* (e.g. Rudrasena, Rudradāman) indicate a rather advanced assimilation of this previously foreign group.

Table 5.3: Religious and official titles, professional designations

Religious titles	*Official titles*	*Professional designations*
śramaṇa	*kṣatrapa*	*nāvika* 'mariner, captain'
*'Buddhist mendicant'		*niryāmaka* 'mariner, captain'
		vaṇi 'merchant'
		ārāmika 'gardener'

Geographical Background

The palaeographical analysis of the corpus pointed to western India as the home of most of the Indian visitors. This evaluation is confirmed by the few instances where geographical designations are added to the writers' names. Five of the visitors point to Bharukaccha as their hometown:

Viṣṇudhara (scribe 67): *bhārukacchaka* (11:12)
Śūragaṃja (scribe 72): *bhārukacchaka-* (11:17), *bhāruka[cchaka]* (14:2), *bhārukacchaka* (16:19)
Siha, son of Viṣṇula (scribe 68): *[bhā]rukacchaka, bhārukaccha[k]a* (11:25)
Viṣṇuṣena (scribe 55): *bhārukacchaka* (11:11)
*Aruyaṇiputra (scribe 115): *bh[ā]rukacchaka* (17:1)

The harbour city Bharukaccha is well known in the *Periplus* and other Greek sources as one of the major harbours in western India (cf. Casson 1989: 199f.). It was one of the main trading centres during Sātavāhanas and Western Kṣatrapa rule and preserved this status up to the Muslim period (Jain 1990: 129f.). It is not surprising that sailors from Bharukaccha were part of the expeditions to Socotra. This evidence corresponds to all what we know about Bharukaccha's role in west Indian maritime trade.

Of particular interest is the second western Indian harbour mentioned at Hoq: Hastakavapra. A certain Saṃghadāsa, son of Jayasena, calls himself *hastakavapra[stav](y)[a]* (= Skt. *-vāstavya*) 'inhabitant of Hastakavapra' (2:23). Until recently, the Sanskrit name of this site was known only from rather late inscriptions of the Maitrakas of Valabhī, datable to the late fifth till eighth centuries AD (Gupta 1973: 73; 1977: 48). The Greek name of this place, however, is already attested as Ἀστακάπρα/ Ἀστακάμπρα in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (ch. 41, 43, tr. Casson 1989: 77, 200) and in Ptolemaios' *Geographia* (VII.1.60). Recent excavations showed that the site of Hastakavapra was occupied between the fourth century BC and the sixth century AD (Pramanik 2004: 136f.). Of special importance for the study of the Hoq corpus are the numerous inscribed sealings with personal names datable to the third-fourth century AD (Pramanik 2005: 108). The names

on these seals published so far by Shubhra Pramanik show a number of structural parallels with those from Hoq and reflect the same Sanskritized language which is typical for the period of the Western Kṣatrapas. One of these seals mentions *hastakavappr[ā]dhikār(i)* 'the superintendent of Hastakavapra'. The seal thus confirms the authenticity of this geographical designation and corroborates the evidence of the Greek authors and the Hoq inscription about Hastakavapra's role in the maritime contacts of western India during the first centuries of our era (cf. Strauch 2012: 344-345).

There are few graffiti, which indicate a foreign origin of their writers. Two scribes add an ethnic designation to their name. One of them is Candrabhūtimukha who calls himself *yavana* (14:17). Although this term can designate persons of Greek origin, other ethnic affiliations—pointing more generally to a 'Western' origin—cannot be excluded. The presence of *yavanas* in western Indian during the Sātavāhana and Western Kṣatrapa periods is shown by numerous epigraphical sources (Ray 1988, 1995).

An Iranian background is indicated by the ethnonym *śaka* used by a visitor bearing the Indian (Sanskrit) name Ajitivarman (6:7). Like in the case of the title *kṣatrapa*, this ethnonym refers to the group of assimilated Iranians who lived in northern, north-western and western India in the centuries before and after the beginning of our era. Another Iranian group is represented by the short bilingual graffito of a person who calls himself Humiyaka (in Brāhmī script) and OMOIAGO (in Greek script) (16:8). According to N. Sims-Williams, both spellings represent the Bactrian name (H)umyag or (H)uməyag (Strauch 2012 Catalogue ad 16:8). It is not clear, from where this Bactrian originally hailed. Although most of the evidence from India points to the north-west (Gandhāra) as the area of Bactrian presence, it cannot be excluded that Bactrians were also present in western India, where the important sea ports certainly attracted a multitude of ethnicities from all over India. That (H)umyag/(H)uməyag used Brāhmī as his second script—and not Kharoṣṭhī, the script of the north-west—might also indicate his western Indian homeland.

At least one person, however, did clearly not belong to western India. He left his name Upali in the Kharoṣṭhī script, which was exclusively used in north-west India and in regions north from there. His text is found on one of the stalactites at the very end of the cave, at site 16 (16:13, Plates 5.5 and 5.6). Thus, this little text represents the westernmost evidence for the use of Kharoṣṭhī. It would be dangerous to conclude on the basis of this single epigraph that some of the expeditions to Socotra started from north-west India or one of the Indus harbours, which provided access to the sea. It is equally possible, that Upali originated from the Kharoṣṭhī writing area

Plate 5.5: Kharoṣṭhī inscription (16:13).

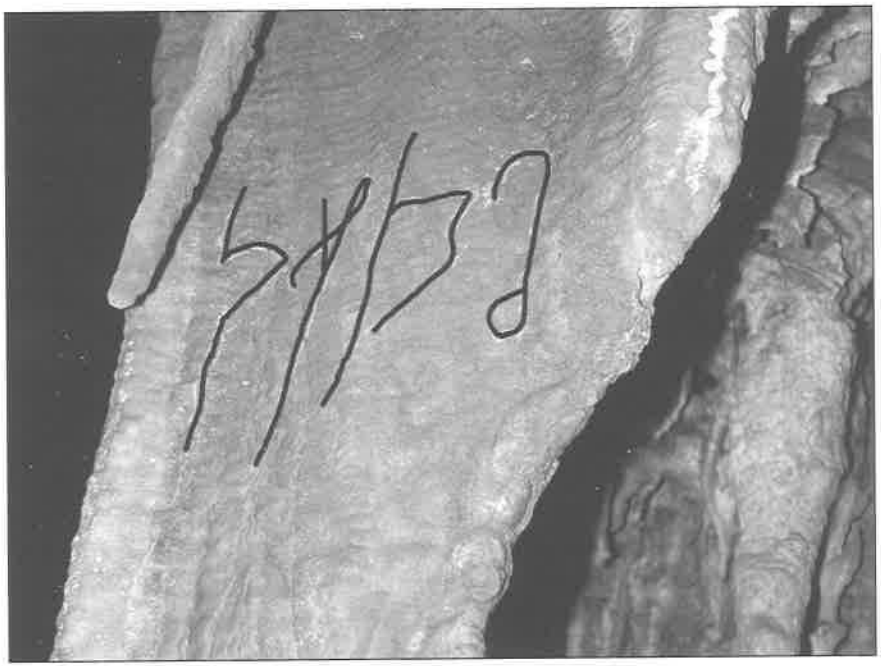


Plate 5.6: Kharoṣṭhī inscription, indicated by hand-drawing (16:13).

but used to live in western India from where he started for this journey. His graffito can also give a chronological indication. The Kharoṣṭhī script fell out of use in the end of the third, beginning of the fourth century AD (see Salomon 2008; Strauch 2011), which matches quite well with our suggestions about the date of the Brāhmī material from Hoq.

SUMMARY

The inscriptions preserved in the cave Hoq on the island Socotra bear witness of the activities of Indian sailors in the period following the description of the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* of the middle of the first century AD. According to the palaeographical evidence, the majority of Indian texts at Hoq can be dated to the period between the second and early fifth centuries AD. Both an earlier and a later dating are highly improbable, although cannot be definitely excluded. Thus one text (15:2) shows features, which point to the first century AD.

The Indians visited the cave together with persons from other regions bordering the Indian Ocean. Thus we find South Arabians, Ethiopians, Palmyrenes, Greeks and a Bactrian among those who left their graffiti inside the cave. The dating of these non-Indian records roughly corresponds to the Indian material, although there seems to be evidence for a slightly more expanded duration of South Arabian and Ethiopian presence inside the cave. According to Christian Robin, the earliest South Arabian texts can be dated to the third or second centuries BC, while three of the Ethiopian (Aksūmite) texts must be written between 500 and 575 AD (Robin 2012: 439–41).

It is difficult to accurately fix the frequency and the exact dimensions of the visits at the cave. But the manner in which the inscriptions are written at the various sites, and the recurrent overlapping of texts show that the cave was frequented over a certain period of time by different groups of visitors. The purpose of these visits is not completely clear. However, references to gods in the Palmyrene text and in one of the Greek graffiti (11:26) and the discovery of a considerable number of incense-burners (Dridi 2002, 2012) inside the cave might indicate that Hoq cave was considered the home of a deity and visited for religious purposes. Whether this was true for all visitors, must remain open for discussion. The Indian inscriptions show no references to any assumed local 'cave deity'. Instead, few of them refer to the Buddha or are accompanied by drawings of Indian auspicious or religious symbols (Strauch 2012: 361-65). While symbols like the 'filled vessel' (*pūrṇaghaṭa*) or the *nandyāvarta* hardly allow any conclusion

about their specific religious meaning, drawings of *stūpa*s or the 'Wheel of the Law' (*dharmacakra*) clearly point to the Buddhist character of these symbols. However, the ritual or religious status of such inscriptions and drawings is far from being certain. If, for example, the *stūpa* drawings would have fulfilled any ritual function, we would expect to find traces of the circumambulation ritual (*pradakṣiṇa*) in the sand surrounding these drawings. Instead, the only visible footprint here originates from the artist who left these *stūpa* drawings. There are no signs of any subsequent ritual use.

The inscriptional and archaeological remains at Hoq show that India remained one of the main actors in the intercontinental trade networks of the Indian Ocean during the first centuries of our era up to the early fifth century AD. The evidence also narrates that the main line of trade with India during this period ran via its western harbours in present-day Gujarat.

Socotra was certainly not a hub in these trade networks, but rather at their edge. It can be suggested that this marginal position largely promoted the preservation of the artefacts at Hoq, which remained obviously untouched and unseen for nearly 1,500 years until the Belgian speleologists entered this part of the cave. The multitude of Indian texts in such a remote place can perhaps give us an idea about the immense sea-trading activities in the centuries after the beginning of our era. What we see, is definitely only the tip of an iceberg. According to its visible parts, it must have been a huge one.

Notes

1. My participation in the expedition and the printing of the book were possible thanks to the generous financial support granted by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung. The book combines the research of several scholars on different aspects on the material from Hoq. It includes the comprehensive catalogue of inscriptions and drawings and special studies of the archaeological evidence and of the Indian, South Arabian and Ethiopian, Greek and Palmyrene texts. The numbers of the inscriptions cited in the present essay refer to the system used in the catalogue.
2. For a comprehensive survey on the relevant literary and archaeological sources see the excellent monograph *Indo-Roman Trade: From pots to pepper* by Roberta Tomber (2008).
3. Although there is no unanimous proof that these two works refer to the Socotra Island, they clearly point to Indians in the South Arabian sea and can thus be used as evidence for Indian activities in the western Indian Ocean in the pre-Christian period. The literary evidence on Socotra's ancient past is impeccably subsumed by W.W. Müller (2001) and Zoltan Biedermann (2006). Another summary which focuses on the South Asian relations of Socotra is part of Strauch 2012 (366-406).
4. This picture is currently changing. During excavations at Kosh in the west of Socotra, Russian archaeologists discovered ceramic which they attributed to South Asian wares of the second-fifth century AD (Vinogradov 2012).

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