

Buddhist Heritage of Gujarat: An Account from 300BC-400AD

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Abstract

Buddhist studies have come through a long way by the contributions of various disciplines and also through their multidisciplinary approaches. However the region of Gujarat, the north western state India, remained as an area which calls for more attention from scholars and indicates great scope for research in Buddhist heritage. The testimony of early existence of Buddhism in Gujarat is assigned to Girnar Rock Edict by Emperor Asoka, while chronologically, Boriya stupa in Junnagadh is assigned to post Mauryan times, followed by an yield of innumerable architectural evidences of consists of stupas and rock cut caves established by Kshatrapas (100AD-400AD). Thus the time period 300BC-400AD stands as a noteworthy period of Buddhist heritage. The present paper is an attempt to elucidate the Buddhist heritage of Gujarat from 300BC-400AD and is a preliminary effort in generating data for multidisciplinary research in the field of Buddhist studies of this region.

Keywords: Buddhist heritage, rock cut caves, stupas, viharas, sculptures, relic caskets, terracotta sealing.

Introduction

Study of Buddhist cultural heritage structures and remains by academic disciplines like archaeology, art history, history and religious studies have evolved through time. Study of Buddhist Stupas by Alexander Cunningham

during the mid 19th century elevated the Buddhist art and architecture to the forefront of academic study for the first time. During the second half of 19th and early 20th century, the remains of Buddhist Stupas assumed a prominent position in art and architecture studies. The study of carved architectural and

sculptural remains was mainly focused on chronology of stylistic development. Some scholars viewed architectural and sculptural remains of stupas in the light of the “psychology” and “meaning” of art as expressed in the philosophical and aesthetic traditions (Hawkes & Shimada 2009).

Gujarat, the north western state of India, holds the testimony of existence of Buddhism since Mauryan times with the popular Girnar Rock Edict of Emperor Asoka, located in Junagadh, Saurashtra. Evidence of a brick built stupa at Boriya, Junagadh region is dated to post Mauryan times. This region yielded evidences of both stupas and rock cut caves (in large number) established during the early historic period (100AD-400AD). On the basis of archaeological and art historical perspectives, data generated on early Buddhism (Mauryan and post Mauryan cultural periods) of this region is limited, leaving immense scope for research and exploration. Except few excavation and exploration reports of rock-cut caves, stupas, and reports of other material remains and few museum catalogues, publication is scanty in the field of Buddhist studies in Gujarat. Thus the study and research of

Buddhist heritage is of great importance. The present paper is an attempt to elucidate the Buddhist heritage materials of Gujarat from 300BC-400AD so as to generate information on the basis of a multidisciplinary research in the field of Buddhist studies in Gujarat.

Early Historic Gujarat from 300BC-400AD

The verifiable political history of Gujarat begins with Mauryan dynasty and urbanism in the early historic period of Gujarat emerged after the conquest by Mauryans around 3rd century BC (Allchin 1995). Sankalia (1941), opines that, the status of this region during Mauryan period seems to be that of an ‘outlying’ province ruled by a raja under the direct control of ‘viceroy’ of Malwa and the province might have been autonomous and independent for its internal matters. Traditional records of Pandits, Yatis, Bhatas, folk-literature and travelogues are the literary sources which draw information on early historic Gujarat (Majumdar 1960).

According to Allchin (1995) “it appears that the period between the Harappan and Early Historic was less of a dark age, but more of a period of gradual

stable growth and innovation which culminated in the emergence of the Early Historic world". The material evidences prior to 4th century BC from the archaeological excavations at Dwaraka (Ansari 1966; IAR 1979), Nagara (Mehta and Shah 1968) and Prabhas Patan (Nanavati *et.al.*1971) hold up the view. Allchin (1995) further proposed that urbanism in the Early Historic Period in Gujarat emerged after the conquest by Mauryans around 3rd century BC.

The Girnar rock inscription, one of the significant rock edict of Asoka, stand as the earliest evidence to hold up the occurrence of Buddhism in this region. It appears that the erstwhile population of Saurashtra was quite a sizable population and for whose benefit this inscription was engraved and this implies how important this region was as an annexure to the Mauryan empire to merit such an endeavor. Based on Buddhist literature *Dipavamsa*, *Mahavamsa* and Asokan edicts, Sankalia (1941) suggests *Dharmaraksita* were acted as the convoys who introduced Buddhism to Kathiawar/Saurashtra. On stylistic grounds, scholars assigned some of the rock cut caves of Junagadh to the

2nd century BC contemporary to Mauryans, though this needs cross verification and authentication. The absence of dating material and other relative archaeological evidences from the site makes it difficult to assign a definite date for these caves.

The strategic location of this region might have played a major role in its continuous cultural growth. There is no clear evidence available to indicate the direct control of Sungas, Satvahanas and Andhras over Gujarat. During early centuries of Christian era, this area might have served as an area of amalgamation between the indigenous rulers and Kushan and Greek invaders. It appears that Buddhism was adopted by the Greeks during Menander's time and they acted as donors to many Buddhist establishments. Along with Pali textual references which mention the role of Indo-Greeks in missionary activities, the numismatic evidences from northwestern frontier designate the jurisdictional influence of Greeks. Thus it has turned out to be the Greeks who were responsible for evolving a new style of Buddhist art, usually known as Indo-Greek art, flourished in North-Western sub-continent. Indo-Greek rule

over Gujarat is mainly attested by numismatic evidence. *Milindapanha*, the famous Buddhist text immortalized Indo-Greek king Menander as a Buddhist devotee. It appears that some caves in Gujarat can be assigned to Indo-Greek rule dating 1st-2nd century AD. Gandhara school of Art under the Kushanas also influenced the north western states of modern India including Gujarat. The influences of the foreign elements are well illustrated in the artistic representation of this period.

Though Sakas said to have conquered sea provinces of Kutch and *Surastrene*, details of ruling of this north-western region is uncertain. According to the traditional records, Sakas were driven out from Ujjain in 58BC and is uncertain what happened to their territories in Gujarat (Sankalia 1941).

The earliest undeniable evidence of the succeeding rulers, the Western Kshatrapas comes from Andhau inscription dated to 89AD (Gokhale 1972) from Kutch. Another six inscriptions from the same area, four of them on the same stone slab (Banerji 1921) attest the joint rule of Rudradaman and Chastana for at least a decade. The most popular Devnimori

Buddhist settlement was constructed by Kshatrapas and their rule appears to have ended by c.305AD. During Kshatrapa time, many viharas were excavated in the rocky areas at Junagadh, Sana, Talaja, Dhank, Zinurizar and Khambalida (Sankalia 1960).

The main traits of early historic period, such as the existence of agro pastoral economy, development of script, rise of urban settlements; brick built structural remains and monumental buildings, international trade and occurrence of Jainism, Vaishnavism and Buddhism. The excavated sites like Devnimori (Mehta *etal* 1966), Vadnagar (Subbarao 1955, Rawat 2011), Amreli (Rao 1966) and Siyot (IAR 1988-89) revealed art and architectural remains of Buddhist settlements (Map 1). The material cultural assemblages consists of variety of ceramics, coins, glass objects, shell artifacts, metal artifacts enable us to appreciate the Buddhism and the early historic period of Gujarat from 300BC-400AD in deeper dimensions.

Monumental Heritage:

Architectural Edifices (Stupas, Viharas and Rock cut Caves)

For the first several centuries of Buddhist history, disciples and monks led an ascetic life, often wandering and depended on donations of food and begging. Once institutionalized, this lifestyle allowed the pursuit of enlightenment among the monkish community (sangha) which formed around the Buddhist doctrine. It became customary for the itinerant monks to meet for periodic retreats at monasteries, often for two or three months during the rainy season, to confirm the teachings of the community. Later, settled monasteries were established and maintained through donations by lay persons of both high and low status (Barnes 1995). The built heritage and its environment are full of meaning and functional perspectives in relation to time and space as well as to the communities who have built it by their participation in its planning, construction and maintenance and it remains same for Buddhist built heritage as well.

Buddhist worship thus was focused on stupas, especially large ones containing relics of the great master. The smaller ones either held relics of close disciples of him or were built as

commemorative/votive constructions within the stupa and monastic establishments. Buddhist religious centers received the patronage of kings, guilds, merchants, bankers and even by the clergy themselves.

The free standing monuments, stupas, viharas/monasteries in the plains consisting of large open air complexes (built with a focus on pilgrimage by the Buddhist laity) were located in the plains of North Gujarat. Buddhist monasteries carved into the rocky cliffs at various pockets of Gujarat as rock cut caves were distributed in Saurashtra, Kutch and south Gujarat. They functioned either as *chaitya halls* (for meditation/prayer) or as *chaitya grihas* (for living) or for combined purposes by the Buddhists. Innumerable number of both these types of structures was built during Kshatrapa time (100-300AD).

Rock-Cut Caves

The rock cut caves are majorly located in the rocky cliff areas of Junagadh, Kutch and South Gujarat, and were of mainly two types, Chaitya halls and Viharas (*Chaityagruhas*). The isolated rocky cliffs might have served peaceful environment for Buddhist monks to

meditate and stay. Approximately 200 Buddhist caves at various stages of preservation have been reported from Gujarat (IAR 1953-2000). Junagadh itself reported more than 50 caves spread in three locations; Uparkot, Khaprakodia and Bavapyara (IAR 1958-59, Gosh 1989). Though some of the rock cut caves are assigned to Mauryan and post Mauryan period by some scholars, the absence of archaeological evidence makes it difficult to accept it. However, Sankalia (1941) assigned some of the rock cut monuments at Junnagadh, Talaja and Sana to the early Hinayana type based on stylistic grounds. Majority of the caves are simple and consist of plain cells without much ornamentation except Uparkot with ornate pillars and rows of chaitya arches (Figure1), above the cells and chequer design band in between. Bavapyara caves showcase chaitya arches, Khaprakodia caves indicate fragmentary remains of capital/bracket figures and Talaja caves with weathered vedika designs on the façade of Ebhal mandapa).

Kshatrapa period being the blooming time of Buddhism in Gujarat, majority of the rock cut caves were assigned to

this time viz., Uparkot, Sana, Talaja, Khaprakodia, Dhank (in Saurashtra), Siddhsar, Siyot, Lakhpatt (in Kutch), Kadiyadungar (in South Gujarat) and are probably occupied from 1st- 4th Century AD.

Based on the vedika ornamentation, Sankalia (1941) dates Zinzurizar caves to 1st-2nd century AD. The ornamentation of Chaitya arches and chequer design on the facade of the lower halls at Uparkot caves show similarity with Devnimori stylistic elements, perhaps indicate their contemporaneous existence. The excavated material remains from Uparkot (IAR 1958-59) namely, coins of Kshatrapa king Rudrasena II, and terracotta figurines show similarity with those from Devnimori to hold up the aforesaid view. The caves at Khambalida dated to Kshatrapa - Maitraka period have shown elaborate ornamentation at the facade of the chaitya hall. Vajrapani and Padmapani are illustrated with attendant figures on either side of the façade in life size highlighting pervasiveness of Mahayanism (Figure 2). Perhaps some of these caves continued to be occupied by the monks during the succeeding Maitraka period.

Stupas

Elaborate structural monuments namely stupa and vihara were excavated from Devnimori, Vadnagar, Boriya etc. Devnimori, located 2kms in the south of Shamalaji, Bhiloda Taluka of North Gujarat is a popular Buddhist settlement excavated by the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1959-63 (Mehta and Chowdhary 1966). This Buddhist complex revealed one Mahastupa, two Viharas and four votive stupas and an apsidal chaitya hall (Figure: 3) along with large number of antiquities and an inscribed stone casket with bodily relics of Buddha (casket contained a copper vessel having gold bottle in it with relics). The stupa was built of brick and mortar and has two platforms topped by an elongated hemispherical dome (*anda*) and perhaps originally had a harmika and umbrellas (*chatrayashti*) which is missing. The height of the ruined stupa structure (Figure.4) was 11m from the ground with a shallow and broad base. The first tier was a square platform and might have been the circumambulatory path (*pradakshinapatha*). The platform on its elevation had four mouldings, with

tiny moulded cornice with rounded bricks seen as string course, superimposed with wall mouldings and in between pilasters with plain base and Indo-Corinthan capitals with acanthus leaves. In between each pilaster, on the second platform arches under which Buddha images in *dhyanamudra* were placed. The arches were decorated with *ghatapallava* motifs, lotus petals, chequer designs etc. This stupa shows close similarities with those from Mirpurkhas, Taktibahi in Pakistan and others located in the north western frontier.

Two votive stupas were excavated at Vadnagar, one with a square plan and other is a circular one near the north eastern corner of the monastery, dated to 5th century AD (Rawat 2011). The stupa, square in plan is erected in terraced fashion with three diminishing terraces and with an elevation of 1.25m extant, the *anda* is missing. The second circular votive stupa had at least three courses extant. The stupa at Boriya, Junagadh excavated by Cousens (1891) revealed a solid brick core and structural remains decorated with herring-bone pattern of brick alignment. The relics were embedded in the brick structure at

considerable depth above ground level and the relic casket is now part of Junagadh museum collection. Numerous small mounds seen in the vicinity appears to be votive stupas (Majumdar 1960) and to confirm the same it needs more research.

Viharas

The Chatusala vihara at Devnimori measured (36x36m) with an open courtyard (Figure 3) paved with diagonally placed bricks, having rooms/cells all around was single storied structure with flat rectangular roof tiles. The southern side central cell was in different plan with raised platform with moulded bands, floor with rectangular schist slabs perhaps functioned as a chamber for prayer and the platform on the western side might have been used as a preaching dais. Absence of Buddha images in the vihara perhaps highlights inhabitation of Samitya school of monks (Mehta Chowdhary 1966).

Vadnagar reported a Buddhist monastery made of burnt bricks located within a fortified area during the recent excavations from 2008-09. The plan of the monastery is quadrangle with an open square courtyard in the middle

surrounded by cells on all sides. The construction and arrangement of cells around the courtyard followed a swastika pattern which was possibly meant to provide easy access to the cells located at the corners (Rawat 2011) which is comparable to monasteries from Taxila. The Vadnagar monastery was provided with narrow veranda on the front side and the postholes on the front wall indicate the erstwhile existence of a wooden roof structure.

Vihara at Intwa, a brick built monastery, excavated by Acharya (1949) is known as Rudrasena monastery on the basis of the inscribed round seal. The eastern outer structure with six rooms and a veranda, brick floors, platform and remnants of brick walls etc. were uncovered during excavation. Covered gutters as part of drainage system, water closets etc. along with roof tiles, terracotta beads, red polished ware and other material remains provide evidence of flourishing ancient vihara at Intwa (Majumdar 1960).

Art Heritage

Buddhists practicing autonomous and distinctive aesthetic art tradition perhaps act as the first mature expression of

Indian Art following the collapse of the proto-historic (Harappan /Chalcolithic) art. Buddhist art tradition was increasingly favored by special characters of its doctrine especially meditation (which remained as the central discipline leading to the attainment of spiritual grace representing images of the seer seated in deep contemplation or dispensing the fruit of his meditations, the *Dhamma*. Though, the doctrines were later divided into separate sectarian lines, they nonetheless exerted a pervasive unifying power over the realm of artistic expression (Rosenfield 1965). Buddhist Art in Gujarat represents diverse forms of sculptures, decorative motives of architectural edifices, rock paintings and sealings. Among the sculptures, Buddha images remain as the dominant category.

Buddha Sculptures

As per the Buddhist scriptures, after the death of Great Master, Buddhism got divided into two schools; Hinayana relied in the doctrines preached by Buddha in original form while and Mahayana emphasized on human representation of Buddha as Sakyamuni, an eternally supreme deity. Early Buddhist art being an-iconic never

depicted Buddha in anthropomorphic form, instead, his presence was generally indicated by a footprint, an empty throne, royal umbrella/parasol. Texts such as *Suddharma Pundarika* (lotus sutra) and *Mahavastu* emphasize worship as supreme means of salvation, brought an end to aniconic stage of Buddhism and provided a suitable climate for the creation of the anthropomorphic image of Buddha.

The genesis of the Buddha image is one of the inexplicable issues in Indian art (Foucher 1917; Rowland 1936; Krishnan 1996). The first images of Buddha are generally said to have produced either in the ancient province of Gandhara, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent or at Mathura (125km away from Delhi) was a flourishing commercial and religious center once formed the focus of southern part of erstwhile Kushana Empire. The earliest Buddha images are those that bear dates in the reign of Kanishka, viz., the Saranath Bodhisattva dated to the 3rd regnal year of Kanishka (Agrawala 1965). The growing practice of Buddha-puja (the cult of devotion of the Buddha as lord), creation of images as manifestation of bhakti, growing popularity and prevalence of Mahayana

cult perhaps flourished hand in hand. Image making was known by the end of 3rd century BC as a figural style and based on the concept of *Mahapurusha* (great man) with distinctive *lakshanas* (identification features), the images of the great master was created in different regional styles based on certain art traditions and techniques (Sharma 2004).

By the first century AD., followers of the Buddha elevated him to the status of god and symbolically stupa became synonymous to Buddha himself representing his presence in structural form. Buddha images became popular by middle of second century AD, and in the case of Gujarat, their early appearance is assigned to 1st/2nd century AD and dominantly seen in Kshatrapa period (2nd-4th century AD). The human figure of the Buddha wearing a monastic robe began to dominate the art of India.

Asokavandana referred to the use of wood and clay for making Buddha images at many parts of India (c.f. Strong 1983). The material evidences from the early historic sites in Gujarat showcase iconic representation of Buddha in stone, metal and terracotta.

Early evidences during Kshatrapa period, terracotta dominated as a major media of image making. The finely made Buddha images in terracotta (Figure 5) from Gujarat are master pieces of Kshatrapa-Gupta Art highlighting the balanced blending of artistic expression and technical skill of the maker.

Stone Image of Bodhisattava (sits on lotus in *padmasana* posture on *simhasana*) from Vadnagar is akin to Katara Buddha in its depiction. The hair style of this image as well as the depiction of animals on the base is similar to typical early Katara images. This seated red sand stone image is dated to 1st/2nd century AD from the inscription on its base. The inscription reads as "*Sammatiyo Bhikhuno yo Devo Bodhisattvas tayo chataye kuteye Acharyen Mahasayaken pariyoh*" means that Acharya Mahasayak brought the image of Bodhisattva, who is the God of Sammatiya Bhikshus for installing in the chaitya. This image is very significant as it directs towards the existence of Samitya School in Gujarat during early centuries of Christian era.

Stone Relic Casket

The inscribed relic casket (Figure.6) is made of greenish schist stone and measures 7-inch diameter and 5-inch height, found *insitu* position, placed in an earthen pot at a depth of 13 feet from the top of the *stupa* at the core part, from the *Mahastupa* of the Buddhist establishment at Devnimori, Sabarkantha District, North Gujarat, dated between 3rd-5th century AD (Mehta and Chaudhary 1966). It is one of the exclusive artistic object created in stone with a lid having separable knob. This greenish-grey casket is a squat cylindrical box of chlorite schist and its shape corresponds to a woven bamboo (Pitaka) basket with a lid. The stopper appears as handmade while the lid and the box are finished on a fast turning lathe as indicated the lathe marks.

This relic Casket is inscribed all around its body, base as well as inside and outside of the lid. The appearance of the inscription namely thick bold lines on the body and thin long incisions on inside as well as outside of the lid gives an impression that, these represent skills of different scribes. The rounded rim appears elegant ornamentation on the rims of the lid and base of the casket. The flank of the lid is decorated with a

pair of grooved lines. The lid is inscribed both inside out side with doctrine of *Pratityasamutpada*, the Buddhist ideology. This exclusive art object act as an excellent source of information with regard to the built heritage.

Terracotta Sealings

The circular inscribed seal from Intwa vihara with chaitya symbol at the center with brahmi legend around it on the borders is a noteworthy object for terracotta art. It also stands as a source to assess the role of then monks and monasteries. The inscription on the seal read as *Maharaja rudrasena vihare bhikshusamghasya*, indicate that it belong to the bikshu samgha of Maharaja Rudrasena monastery. The terracotta seals and sealing obtained from excavations at Nagara are very interesting as one among them read as *Buddhapasya* along with few other seals read as *(Shiri?)vijayamitra, Mahasena etc.*(Mehta & Chowdhary 1968). Some of the black ware sherds with high polish from Vadnagar is inscribed with brahmi legends, like *Devshririshi, Shakasya and Dhamma* (personal communication with excavator, Shri.Y.S.Rawat).

Conclusion

The Buddhist architectural heritage in this region acted as a strong vehicle for the propagation of the religion from Maurayn times onwards and served as an annexure to the great empire. Though Buddhism occur in Gujarat during Mauryan times and grown during post – Maurayn time, the built and the art heritage remain as potential evidences to highlight the booming of the religion during Khastrapa period (100AD-400AD). The location of the major Buddhist settlement sites like Devnimori, Vadnagar, Siyot etc. on the ancient trade routes indicate the influence of merchant support. The Girnar rock edict and the inscription on Devnimori relic casket corroborate the royal patronage for the establishment of their construction. The built heritage specially, stupas are stylistically different from those in various regions of India. They show close similarity with those in Pakistan and Afghanistan more specifically to that of stupas of Mirpurkhas, Taktibahi etc. Hence the architectural heritage stands as the media to highlight the stylistic parallels within the region as well as with the neighboring countries.

The data accumulated through the present paper on the structural heritage can be used to study further on the lines of use of architectural monuments as ritual spaces. This information can act as the basic records to start with in comparing the use of ritual space in an open air stupa complex and in the rock cut caves.

The artistic representations and architectural edifices augment Hinayana to Mahayana transformation. The Buddha images in terracotta were splendors representing artistic skill. The stone image from Vadnagar highlights the Katara style in depiction and therefore establishes connection between the two regions. Thus the Buddhist heritage from 300BC-400AD highlight the emergence of Buddhism in the region, the centers of its growth, followed by booming of the religion during Kshatrapa times. The variety of built heritage and the art heritage contribute each other in showcasing the growth of Buddhism in this region from Mauryan to Kshatrapa times.

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Figures



Figure 1. Buddhist sites/settlements in Early Historic Gujarat

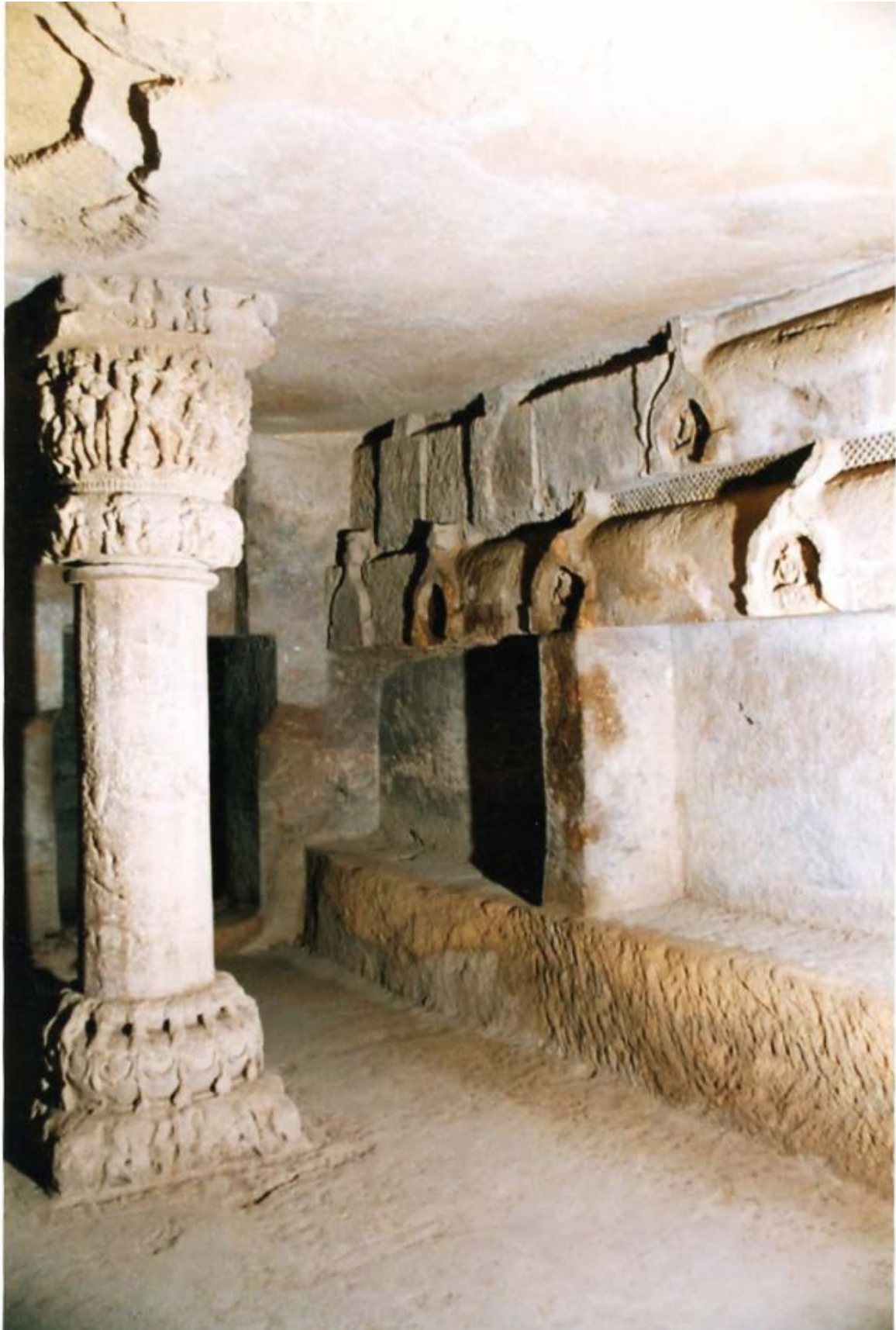


Figure 1: Ornamentation in the cave Façade, Khambalida Caves

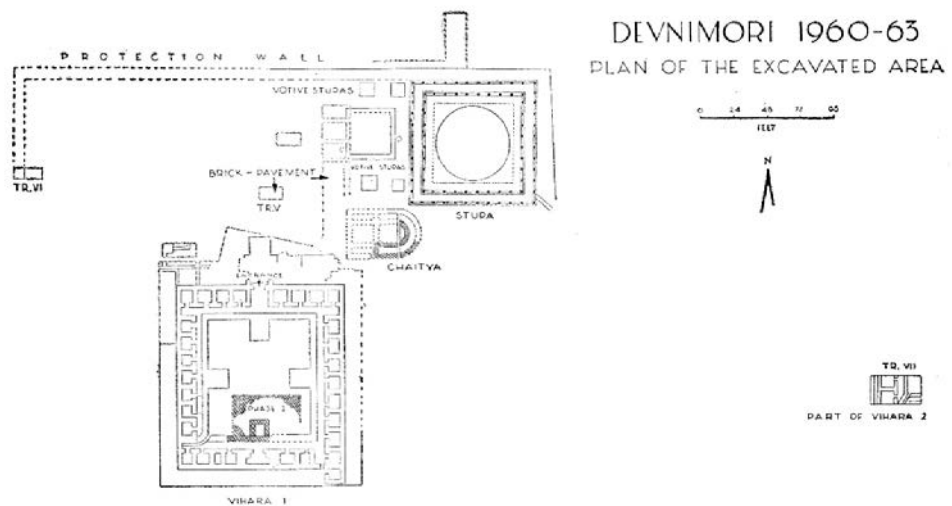


Figure 2:

Figure 3: Plan and Layout of Devnimori Stupa Compound



Figure 4 : Excavated Stupa, Devnimori



Figure 5 : Terracotta Buddha images, Devnimori



Figure 6 : Relic Casket