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Indian Inscriptions from the Cave Ḥoq on Suquṭrā (Yemen)*

The Indians and Suquṭrā: an Introduction

In the last few years one of the most exciting discoveries in Indian epigraphy is the corpus of Brāhmī inscriptions from the Ḥoq cave on the island of Suquṭrā (Republic of Yemen).[1] The island is situated 320 km away from the African coast and 400 km from the South Arabian. Its isolated geographical position and the extraordinary climate made Suquṭrā in the past mainly a place of botanical, zoological and geological interest.[2] The number of archaeological remains, however, which could shed some light on the island's past, was very limited.[3] Only in the last decades this situation has somewhat improved, particularly due to the activities of Russian archaeologists in South Yemen (Naumkin 1988: 72-94; 1993: 84-134; Dridi 2002: 569-72).

In sharp contrast to this meagre archaeological data was the amount of information which could be gained from literary sources. As early as the first century AD the importance of Suquṭrā as an intermediary station in the sea-trading activities between the Indian subcontinent and the Mediterranean world is clearly

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[1] The new discoveries in the Ḥoq Cave have already become the object of some short notes: Lévêque (2002); Villeneuve (2002; 2003*a*; 2003*b*); Dridi and Gorea (2003). A first detailed archaeological analysis is given by Dridi (2002). The Semitic inscriptions of cave Ḥoq and some aspects of Suquṭrā's history are discussed in Robin and Gorea (2002).

[2] Cf. *e.g.* Wranik (1999) with further references. See also Wranik's very informative website www.uni-rostock.de/fakult/manafak/biologie/wranik/socotra.

[3] For a good summary of the archaeological remains of Suquṭrā which were known till the beginning of the nineties, see Doe (1992: 41-118).

attested by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Casson 1989: § 31). From that time onwards we possess continuous evidence of the presence of Indians on the island who went there as traders and obviously even settled down for a certain period of time.[4] According to the 6th century report of Cosmas Indicopleustes in later centuries only Greek settlers lived on Suquṭrā (Müller 1999: 185). Cosmas connects the arrival of the Greeks to the establishment of colonies by the Ptolemaen rulers. This is supported by later Arabic sources from about the 10th to 13th century which link Greek 'colonization' even to Alexander the Great (Oman 1998: 843a). Moreover, they state that the Greeks took over the island from the Indians who «were there and took hold of that island» (al-Mas'ūdī, quoted in Ubaydli 1989: 150, n. 33). Although the Arabs are certainly wrong in that point, they show that the 'Indian connection' of Suquṭrā was well known as late as the Middle ages. As it is evident from the *Periplus* and the succeeding classical sources, the 'Greek period' on Socotra was preceded by a phase of coexistence of Greeks and Indians. We do not know exactly when this coexistence began, but it is highly probable that Cosmas' reference to the Ptolemies is near to the truth. As early as in the end of the 2nd century BC the Ptolemaen officer Agatharchides of Cnidus wrote a *Periplus* describing the sea passage from Egypt to the mouth of the Red Sea. In the easternmost point of this voyage he describes the so-called 'Fortunate islands' which are sometimes identified with Suquṭrā. These 'Fortunate islands' were visited by sailors «from everywhere, but especially from Potana, which Alexander founded beside the Indus river, because he wished to have a port on the shore of the ocean» (Fragm. 105b < Diodorus; Burstein 1989: 169). Although the identification of Agatharchides' 'Fortunate islands' with Suquṭrā might be wrong,[5] the text proves beyond any doubt the presence of Western (Ptolemaen) as well as of Indian sailors in this part of the Indian Ocean. This coexistence remained a persistent phenomenon in the succeeding centuries, when Indian sailors actively took part in the intercontinental trade contacts (Karttunen 1997: 328-36). Agatharchides explicitly mentions Northwestern India as the homeland of the Indian sailors. This situation seems to have changed in the time of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* when the Indians came from Barygaza (modern Broach) in Gujarat and from South India. This change could be linked to the introduction of direct trade routes across the Indian Ocean by using the monsoon winds. Before that period trade between the Mediterranean world and India was carried on mainly along the coasts and via South Arabian middlemen (*ibid.*).

Thus the role of Suquṭrā island in long-distance trade between India and the West and the association of Indian traders with it can be deduced from a number of texts from about the 2nd century BC till the 13th century AD (*e.g.* Yāqūt al-

[4] After the *Periplus* Indian settlers are also mentioned by Diodorus and perhaps Pausanias (Beyhl 1998: 69-70).

[5] According to Müller (1999: 186) here the peninsulas Little Aden and Rās Nimrān are referred to.

Ḥamawī).[6] The references to Indians in Suquṭrā reports are so striking that as early as 1830 even an Indian origin of the island's name was suggested and since then numerous times repeated (Beyhl 1998: 47-51; Müller 1999: 187-88). According to this theory, both the ancient Greek designation *Dioscourida* and the modern one, Suquṭrā, should be derived from Skt *dvīpa sukhādhāra/sukhatara.* Beside this not very convincing etymology several other possibilities have been taken into consideration, of which the more convincing one connects the island's name with the Arabic root *qṭr* «to dribble» (Beyhl 1998: 57-63; differently Müller 1999: 187-88; 2001: 152). This root can be used to denote different incense products like aloe and frankincense. It is also the base of the noun *qāṭir* «dragon-blood tree», which denotes one of the most important products of Suquṭrā since ancient times. Despite the recurring association of Suquṭrā and India in literary sources, until now only few material traces of the presence of Indians on this island have been discovered (Dridi 2002: 591). The same is generally true for material traces of Indian traders outside their homeland.[7] This obvious gap can now be filled.

At the beginning of the year 2001 the Belgian Speleological Mission (Socotra Karst Project), directed by Peter de Geest, explored the Ḥoq Cave on the northern side of the island,[8] during which some archaeological and epigraphical remains were discovered. In 2002 the Belgian society AXELL Communication, that specializes in subterranean shootings, invited Prof. Christian Robin (Institut des Etudes Sémitiques, Collège de France, Paris) as a consultant for shooting a documentary on the island of Suquṭrā. From the 14th to 18th January, 2002, the exploration of the Ḥoq Cave was carried out.

The cave opens at a distance of 2 km from the northern seashore. The entrance is situated at 350 m above sea-level. It is about 2 km deep (1918,75 m), its average height is 37 m, its width 19 m. The average temperature in the cave is about 27° C, the average humidity 90 %. According to the speleologists, the dimensions of the cave and its speleological richness are exceptional.

Prof. Robin's team identified a number of separate inscriptions, among them Indic, South-Arabian, Ethiopic and Aramaic (Palmyrene[9]) texts. The exact number of inscriptions, whether of the Indian ones, or of the others, is not established. However, 43 Indian inscriptions were registered, about half of them were photographed. The inscriptions are written by clay, chalk and coal on the walls and on small knolls within the cave.

Unfortunately, the Indian epigraphs do not indicate what kind of religious

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[6] A good summary of the sources is given by Müller (1999; 2001). Cf. also Beyhl (1998) and Dridi (2002: 567-69, 591-93). For the Arabic sources see Ubaydli (1989); Oman (1998).

[7] For the few available data from Berenike, cf. the references given by Dridi (2002: 591-93). See also Salomon (1991) for further inscriptional evidence from Berenike and Sedov (1996) for archaeological data from South Arabia.

[8] See the position of Ḥoq on the map in Wranik (1999: 236).

[9] For the publication of the Palmyrene tablet see Robin and Gorea (2002: 420-21, figs. 6-8, 432-33).

purpose was fulfilled by the cave. However, the presence of incense-burners among the findings suggests that this cave had been used as a sanctuary or as an object of pilgrimage (Dridi and Gorea 2003: 50). This is confirmed by the content of the Palmyrene tablet found in the cave. This tablet mentions «god, that stays here» (for the translation, see *ibid.*: 54).

But whether we are in presence of «un sanctuaire à vocation maritime» as explicitly proposed by Dridi (2002: 587-90) remains an open question until new evidence. Nevertheless the position of the cave, high above the sea shore and thus visible from vessels passing the island far away, makes such an explanation quite reasonable.

The absence of any trace of Christian or Islamic cult (though Christians were quite numerous on the island) denotes the fact that the cave has been visited only in the time of the composition of the inscriptions (2nd-4th century AD).

The assumed holiness of the place may be partially explained by its setting which can be compared to Indian religious sites contemporary to it which are often located in natural or artificial caves high above a valley ground. As an example the famous Kashmir Smast in Northern Pakistan may be cited (Falk 2003; 2004). It can also serve as a paradigmatical 'holy place' where the sacred character of the spot draws worshippers of different religious affiliations just like in Kashmir Smast where, beside Buddhist, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava remains, we also find traces of Iranian worshippers. A similar multi-religious clientele is attested in Suquṭrā. Among the Indians were certainly Buddhists and Vaiṣṇavas and perhaps Śaivas.

The Brāhmī Inscriptions

The members of the expedition took photographs of a number of rock surfaces covered with Brāhmī inscriptions. Almost all of them are rather short and contain the names of persons who eternalise in this way their presence at the place. On the basis of these formal characteristics the inscriptions can be compared to the numerous epigraphs of northern Pakistan, published in the series 'Antiquities of Northern Pakistan' and 'Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans' from 1989 onwards. At the same time they also share the problems concerning the decipherment of this class of texts.

Since the majority of the inscriptions is very short, the inventory of letters used is rather small. This fact combined with the scarcity of contents makes a reliable reading – even if it could be done on the spot – not always possible (von Hinüber 1994).

Due to the inscriptions' bad state of preservation and to the sometimes rather poor quality of the photographs our following remarks should be regarded as a preliminary edition, more appropriate for introducing the material into scholarly discussion than to establish firm readings. Furthermore, as we had at our disposal only a part of the whole corpus of Brāhmī inscriptions

found in this cave, a final edition can be expected only after a personal inspection of the cave itself. This is the reason by which in this article we will present only texts whose reading allows us to make reliable suggestions about their contents in the hope to present a complete inventory of all the Indian epigraphs in a succeeding publication.[10]

A first survey of the archaeological and epigraphical material was given by Hédi Dridi (2002). However, the data given by him for the Indian texts are not entirely comprehensible. According to him 48 texts have been identified so far. Out of them 43 are classified as Brāhmī inscriptions. Further on, Dridi (*ibid.*: 583) mentions six South-Arabian epigraphs and another not clearly identifiable text. The Indian texts examined by us cover Dridi's T 22-T 33, T 36-T 37, T 44-T 48. Sometimes more than one inscription is subsumed under one signature. In these cases we add an additional letter (*e.g.* T 24-a). According to Dridi the (groups of) inscriptions T 1-T 12 and T 15-T 21 are written in Brāhmī as well.[11] Unfortunately, we had no access to them.

The plan of the cave published by Dridi (*ibid.*: 574, fig. 4; cf. also Dridi and Gorea 2003: 49) accompanied by a preliminary list of archaeological remains gives an idea of the localisation of the epigraphs within the subterranean complex.[12] For a better understanding of the situation of the epigraphs and their spatial relationship to each other it is recommendable to provide in future large-scale photographs or drawings of the respective rock surfaces.

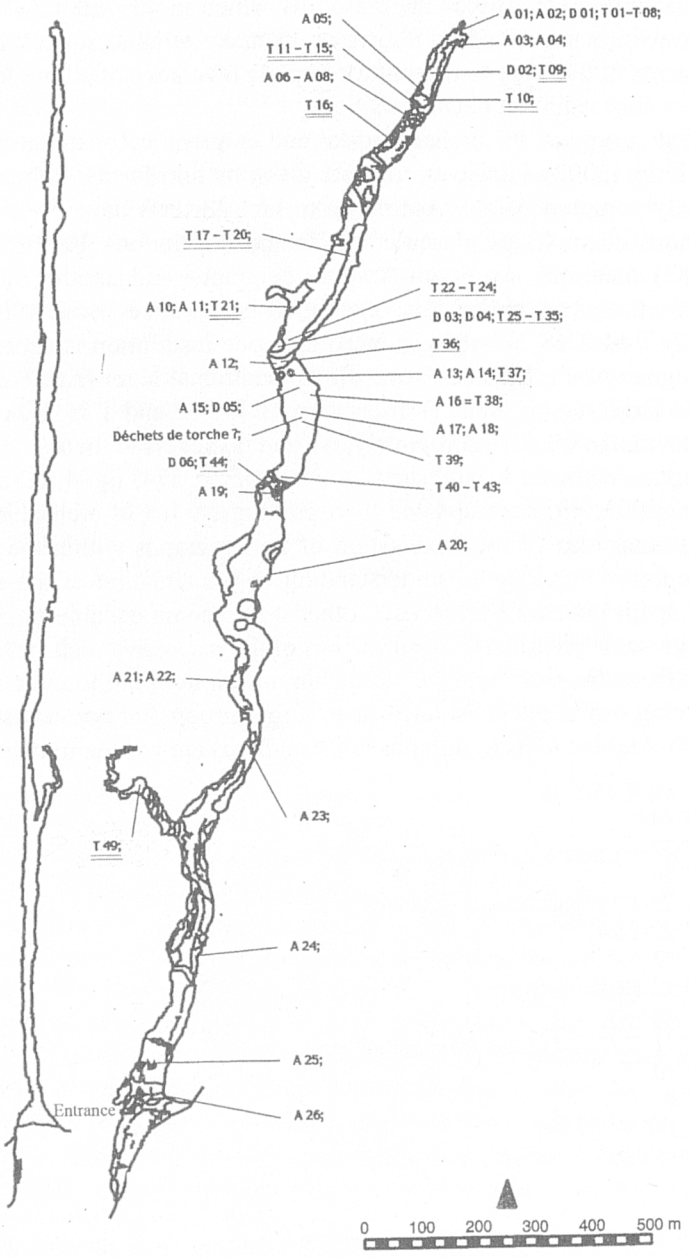
Seen from the cave entrance, the Indian inscriptions are found arranged in the following order, either isolated or in larger groups, in two cases together with South-Arabian texts (epigraphs not seen by us are written in italics):

1. *T 49*, T 45-T 48
2. T 44
3. T 37
4. T 36
5. T 25-T 33 (plus 2 South-Arabian)
6. T 22-T 24
8. *T 21*
9. *T 17-20*
10. *T 16*
11. *T 11, T 12, T 15* (plus 2 South-Arabian)
12. *T 10*
13. *T 9*
14. *T 1-T 8*

[10] In January 2006 Ingo Strauch could investigate the inscriptions on the spot. A comprehensive edition is in progress.

[11] Dridi does not mention T 41-T 43 among the South-Arabian material; in his list they are mentioned as «non décrit». The photographs at our disposal show that they belong to the South-Arabian group.

[12] Note that T 45-T 48 are given neither in the map nor in the list. Instead of them we find a hitherto not mentioned T 49 described as «texte(s) non vu(s) (décrits par R.L.)».



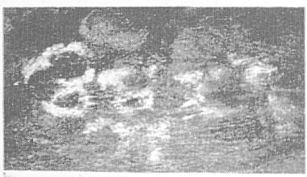
Map of the cave with Brāhmī epigraphs indicated
(single line: published, double line: unpublished).
(After Dridi 2002: 574).

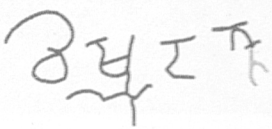
According to their contents the inscriptions may be divided into three groups. Type I gives only the name of a person, either in the Gen.Sg. or in the Nom.Sg. A special group among them are names ending in *-putra*, which have to be separated from Type II, which contains names of persons together with the indication of their father's name. Sometimes a strict division between these two types is impossible because of the fragmentary character of the inscriptions. Type III comprises a few epigraphs which give complete sentences of the kind: 'X (son of Y) has come'. This type may be compared to the Karakorum type II using expressions like *gata, (saṃ)prāpta, vicarati, pracarati* etc. (= TYPE 2 of von Hinüber 1989: 44 f.).

Type I: Single Names

– in Nom.Sg.

T 31: *viṣṇuda[tto]* «Viṣṇudatta»

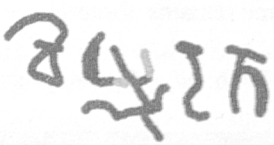




The name is well attested in Sanskrit literature and epigraphy (cf. also on seals: Sarasvatī [1974]: no. 178). Also one of the three persons which are mentioned on the Brāhmī ostrakon from Berenice in Egypt bears this name in Prakrit spelling: *viṇhudatasa* (Salomon 1991: 732). It also seems to be attested in the following epigraph.

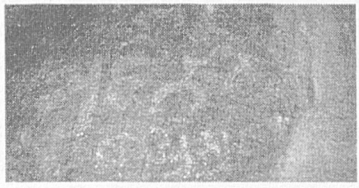
T 24: *vi[ṣ]ṇudato* «Viṣṇudatta»





The akṣaras after *vi* are difficult to read. The shape of the *ṇ* in the ligature *ṣṇu* is of the early Eastern Gupta type as represented in the Allahabad Pillar inscription and Sander's Gupta alphabet g (Sander 1968: esp. Table 10). The spelling of °*datta* as °*data* is not unusual in epigraphic Sanskrit (Damsteegt 1978: 14).

T 45: *ajita[v]a[r]m[ā]*



The akṣaras above and below this line cannot be deciphered. They seem to belong to other independent epigraphs.

Inscription **T 26** is heavily abraded. But it seems to contain another name with a N.Sg. ending: *śail[ā]ryo*, with the ligature *ryo* as found in Gupta epigraphs.[13]



– in Gen. Sg.

T 23–a : *racāhakasya* «Of Racāhaka»



A reading *ravāhakasya* cannot be excluded. In both cases the meaning of this name remains obscure.

T 29–b: *sihas[y]a* «Of Siha» (Skt Siṃha)

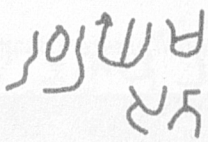


[13] This reading was suggested by Lore Sander.

The preceeding akṣaras *[?]obhasya* (= T 29-a) seem to be part of another epigraph. Their meaning is not clear.

T 46: *[?]varagh[o]ṣa[?]*
sa tā [?] (?)

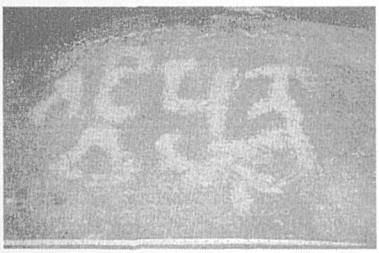


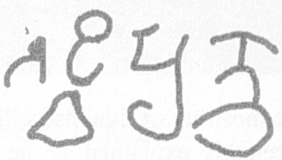


The interpretation of this record is highly hypothetical. The upper line could be restored as *pravaraghoṣa-* thus giving a typical North Indian Skt name ending in °*ghoṣa*. The akṣara following *ṣa* is undiscernible. Possibly, it stands for the genitive case ending *-sya*.

Type Ia: Single Names Ending in *-putra*

T 37: *bhaṭ[ṭh]iputtro* «Bhaṭṭhiputra»



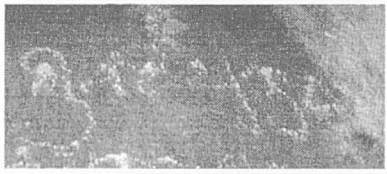


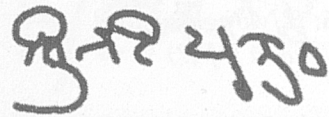
The name Bhaṭṭhiputra can be compared to the following *Bhaṭiputra* of T 44-a and *Bhaṭ(ṭhi)putro* of T 47.

The first member of the name should best be connected with Skt *bhaṭṭa* «lord» (< *bhartṛ*). The final *i* is well attested in literary Prakrits (cf. PSM *s.v. bhaṭṭi* = *bhartṛ*). As part of a name *bhaṭṭi* is met with in the names Bhaṭṭi (Monier-Williams 1990: *s.v.*) and Bhaṭṭimita (= Skt °mitra) (cf. seal from Kauśāmbī in Sarasvatī [1974]: no. 363; seal purchased from Lucknow, *ibid.*: no. 462).

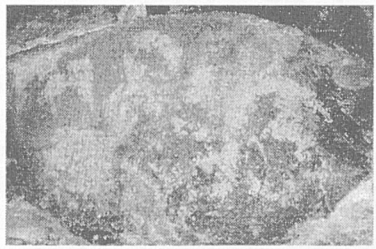
The shape of the medial *i* can be compared to that of the Junāgaḍh inscription of Skandagupta, Gupta year 136-138 (= 368-370 AD; Dani 1963: table XIV) but it finds even stronger parallels in the South Indian Brāhmī from around 250 AD onwards.

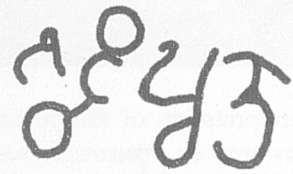
T 44–a: *śrī bhaṭiputro [e/va]* «Śrī Bhaṭiputra»





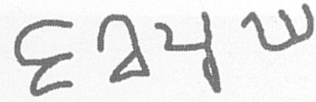
T 47: *bhaṭ[ṭh]iputro* «Bhaṭṭhiputra»





T44–c: *jakhapu gha* [further illegible akṣaras]
«Jakhapu(tra) ...» (Skt Yakṣaputra) or «Gha..., son of Jakha»

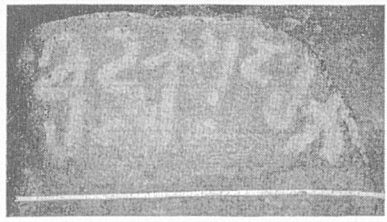


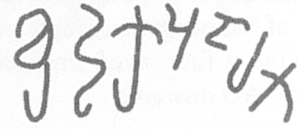


The meaning of this inscription is obscure. Only the first element (*jakha*) can be reliably explained as the Prākrit spelling of Skt *yakṣa*. Highly hypothetical is an association of the following *pu* (?) with the abbreviated forms *pu°* (Sircar 1966: 264) or *u°* (< Pkt *utta*; Lüders 1905-6: 204) attested in early medieval Jaina inscriptions. Especially the following epigraph T 36, which already belongs to type II, could speak in favour of such an assumption.

Type II: 'X, son of Y'

T 36: *khuddakapu dāra[ka]* «Dāraka, son of Khuddaka (Skt Kṣudraka)»

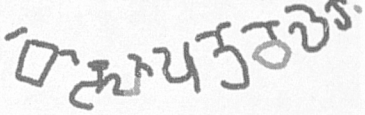




Both names (Kṣudraka, Dāraka) are attested in Skt literature (Monier-Williams 1990: *s.vv.*).

T 23–b: *boḍalāputro* (or: *bodalā°*) *[co]lika[ḥ]* «Colika, son of Boḍalā/Bodalā»



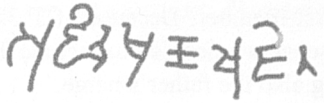


boḍalā is uncertain. As it is hardly possible without comparative material to distinguish between the letters *ḍa* and *da*, a reading *bodalā* cannot be excluded. The shape of the akṣara *lā* reminds the Dravidian letter *ḷa,* attested in South Indian Brāhmī epigraphs of the first century AD. Since the shape of *lā* as found in slightly later North and West Indian inscriptions does not essentially differ and the inscription shows no further South Indian characteristics we decided in favour of this reading. In both cases (*boḍalā/boḍaḷa*) the word could be connected with Pkt *boḍa* 1.) *dhārmika*, *dharmiṣṭa*, 2.) *taruṇa*, *yuvā*, 3.) *muṇḍita-mastaka* (PSM *s.v.*). In view of the attested *dharmaputra* below one might prefer the connotation *dhārmika*, *dharmiṣṭa*.

[co]lika: The reading *co* is uncertain, but it seems to be the only convincing one. The name is obviously the same as that in the epigraph T 44-b below. The Colika there, however, is another person, since his father's name is given as Coḍaka.

T 25–b: *aji[ta]suṇo ajita* «(Of) Ajita, the son of Ajita»





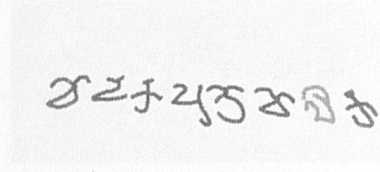
Because of the uncertain shape of the letter *ta* a reading *ajina* cannot be excluded. In this case the name would correspond to the rare Skt name Ajina (< *ajina* n. «hairy skin of a (black) antelope»). As *ajita* is a quite popular part of Skt names (Ajitavarman, Ajitasena, etc.), we decided in favour of this reading. Moreover, in one of the Karakorum inscriptions we find *ajita* without any extensions as a personal name: *śrī ajitaḥ* (Bemman and König 1994: 84, Oshibat 21:9).

°*suṇo* corresponds to Skt Gen. °*sunoḥ*. The cerebralization of middle *n*

and the omission of final *visarga* without further application of external sandhi can be found in other epigraphs of the so-called Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit as well (Damsteegt 1978: 39, 45, 110). The lacking grammatical correspondence between the two words might be due to a scribal error.

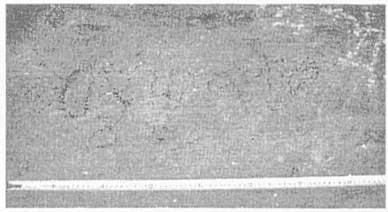
T 44–b: *co[ḍa]kaputro colika* «Colika, son of Coḍaka»

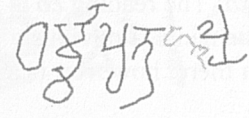




As in the preceding inscription father and son bear similar names. Possibly, both variants *coḍaka* and *colika* can be associated to the Sanskrit ethnonymon *cola(ka)*, v.l. *coḍaka*, signifying the South Indian Colas. Whether the term alternatively could be connected with the family name *culika*, *caulukya* etc. of later times (Majumdar 1956: 14-15), has to remain open.

T 33: *dharmmaputro [?]llya*[2-3 further akṣaras] «[?]lya[?], son of Dharma» or «Dharmaputra ...»

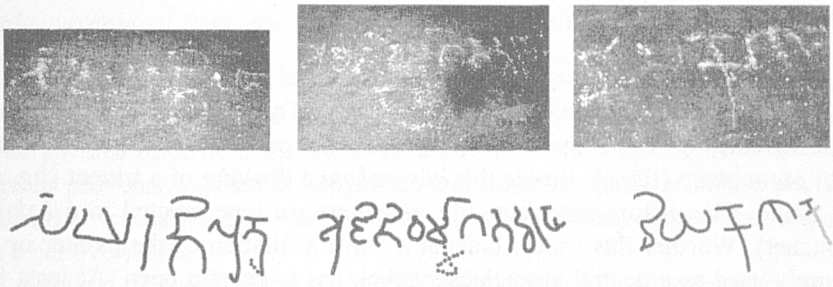




Although Dharmaputra appears like a regular Skt name, Dharma alone could be accepted as an abbreviated form of a composite name with Dharma as its first member. Because of T 32 below where Dharma seems to be used in this sense we decided to include T 33 into the second group of epigraphs indicating also the father's name.

Type III: 'X has come'

T 25-a: *saṃgharaṅgiputro ajitivarm[m]āgata ddharaḷā[v]iyako(?) śa[ko]* «Ajitivarman, son of Saṃgharaṅgin, has come, the *ddharaḷā[v]iyako*(?), the Śaka»



Saṃgharaṅgi: < Saṃgharaṅgin, Buddhist name with *saṃgha* as first member, cf. Saṃgharakṣita, Saṃghapāla etc.

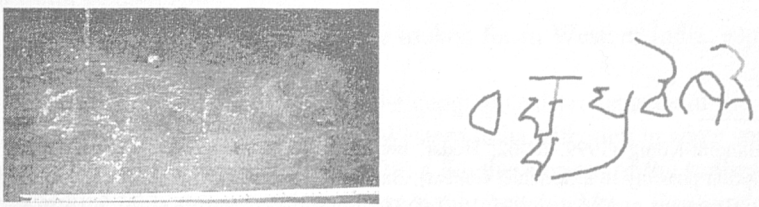
Ajitivarman: The first member should be corrected to *ajita* «unconquered». The name may be associated to the names Ajitavarman from T 45 above and Ajita, met in the epigraph located directly below this inscription (T 25-b).

ddharaḷā[v]iyako(?): A reading *dvara*°, possibly wrong for *dvāra*, cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, the meaning of this word is doubtful.

śako: If this reading may be accepted, it would be an interesting evidence for the presence of a Scythian in Yemen. From an inscription from the agora of Palmyra (no. 23) we learn that the Palmyrene merchants travelled by sea to Indo-Scythia in the 2nd century AD (Seyrig 1941: 259-61). Furthermore, Diodorus and perhaps Pausanias list Scythians beside Indians and others among the inhabitants of Suquṭrā (Beyhl 1998: 69 f.). One may suppose that Indo-Scythian and Palmyrene merchants travelled and traded together between Suquṭrā, the Persian Gulf and North-West India.

It is not astonishing that Ajitivarman as well as his father Saṃgharaṅgin bear ordinary Indian names. Maybe, the foreign affiliation of both may be responsible for the unusual fact, that the father has a Buddhist name whereas his son comes along with a typical Hindu name ending with the Kṣatriya suffix *-varman*.

T 32: The epigraph T 32 seems to give a similar statement: *dharmmo praviśa[ti]* «Dharma enters (the cave)»



This interpretation presupposes that *dharma* has to be perceived as a personal name as it has been suggested with regard to the expression *dharmmaputro* in T 33.

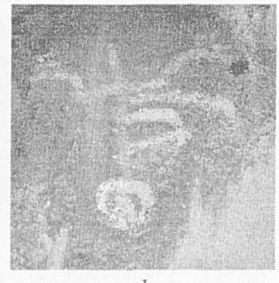
Drawings of Indian Auspicious Symbols

Along with the epigraphs of T 44 some pictural representations are found, which are partly mentioned by Dridi (2002: 585). The figure named by him as «la fontaine» (D-03) is quite obviously the upper part of the auspicious symbol *pūrṇaghaṭa* (fig. *a*). Beside this *pūrṇaghaṭa* a drawing of a trident (fig. *b*) is found. The picture represents the *triśūla-paraśu* type erected in a *kalaśa* (pitcher). Whether this trident hints at a Śaiva affiliation of the painter or is simply used as a neutral auspicious symbol, has to remain open. At least its shape is reminiscent of the trident-axe symbol of Kuṣāṇa coins which first appears as an attribute of Oēšo. From Kaniṣka I onwards it also becomes a royal symbol and is depicted on the obverse beside the king's bust or in his hand. A second parallel can be seen in the related rock-paintings of North Pakistan, where however a certain religious background could not be established. Some of the North Pakistan paintings show the same characteristics as our trident: an axe-like symbol on the right or left side of the middle of the shaft and a round (sometimes also flat) base.[14]

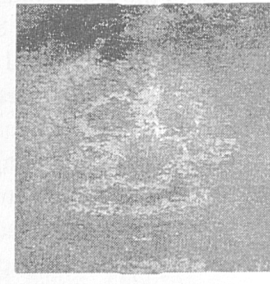
The drawing at the left side of the *pūrṇaghaṭa* (see fig. *c*) can be associated with another Indian auspicious symbol: the *nandyāvarta* or *nandipada*.[15]



a



b



c

[14] Cf. Bandini-König (1999: 61-62; Hodar, because of an accompanying *devadharmo yaṃ*-inscription possibly in a Buddhist context); Bandini-König and von Hinüber (2001: 91; Gichi Nala); Bemmann and König (1994: 10, Taf. 22; Oshibat, for the «axe» cf. 15:5, 18:153, for the base cf. 17:20; 18:129; 18:289); Fussman and König (1997: 33-34; Shatial, cf. especially Taf. 19, 150:1 for the circular base of the trident). Cf. also Bandini-König (2003: Taf. 11). For this symbol cf. also Chutia (2004: 69-70).

[15] For this symbol and the somewhat confused terminology, cf. Bhattacharya (2000) with further literature.

Palaeographical Remarks, the Date of the Inscriptions and the Provenance of their Authors

All the epigraphs are rather short and contain only a limited number of letters which often do not allow us to make any detailed statements about their age or provenance. Due to the private and informal character of the inscriptions the writing has been carried out quite carelessly and many letters appear in a cursive shape.

A final palaeographical analysis should be done only after the preparation of an improved edition of all the Brāhmī epigraphs. As far as we can judge from the available material, the scripts used in Suquṭrā can be roughly dated into the late Kuṣāṇa/early Gupta periods, *i.e.* from the end of the 2nd well into the 4th century. A dating both earlier and later can safely be excluded. Especially the shape of the letters *ma* (in its looped variety), *ya* (in its tripartite variety), *sa* (hooked), *ha* (equal-armed with right curving down) speaks for a Kuṣāṇa date. On the other side, a number of clear Gupta letters like the *ṣ-* in the ligature *ṣṇu* and the typical open-mouthed Gupta *ma* should be taken as indicators of an early Gupta date of at least a part of the epigraphs. Thus a dating of the whole corpus within the above mentioned chronological frame should be justified at the present stage of research.

Some signs show a quite archaic shape (*e.g. ṇo* of T 25-b and *śa* of T 25-a) which not necessarily indicates a very early date, but reminds us of the variety of Brāhmī developed in Western India under late Western Kṣatrapa rule (Dani 1963: pl. IX).

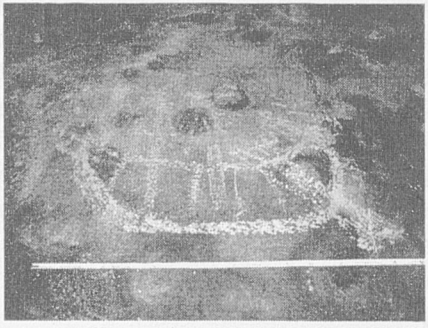
In any case the proposed dating of the Indian inscriptions on palaeographical grounds corresponds with the date of the Palmyrene tablet (between 1.10.257 and 30.9.258 AD; Dridi and Gorea 2003: 54). Furthermore, it is in general agreement with archaeological data from the neighbouring South Yemen. As was shown by Sedov (1996: 26 f.) most of the Indian ceramics, especially those of the so-called Red Polished Ware (RPW), came from strata which date from the 2nd up to 4th century AD. From the 5th century onwards the RPW disappears from South Arabia as other indicators for trade contacts with India as well (*ibid.*: 28).

The origin of the RPW has to be looked for in Western India, especially in Gujarat (*ibid.*: 22).[16]

According to the palaeography, the geographical provenance of the scribes should be looked for in Northern and Western India, although in some cases (cf. the medial *i* in T 37, T 44-a, T 47, T 29) a Southern origin of the scribes seems also possible. This agrees with the data of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (§ 31), which mentions Barygaza = Bharukaccha (modern Broach) and Limyrike (Malabar coast in South India) as homelands of the Indian traders. In terms of

[16] For the distribution in India cf. MacDowall (1996: 80).

political geography this area mainly corresponds to the empires of the Western Kṣatrapas and the Sātavāhanas, which were the leading powers in Western India and the Deccan and played a major role in the maritime trade activities of India at the period in question. In favour of a close relationship of the Indian visitors of the Ḥoq cave with those regions one may recall some depictions of boats in the immediate neighbourhood of the inscriptions. One of them (fig. *d*) was published by Dridi (2002: 584, fig. 12 = D 03) and associated with pictures of ships from Ajanta (Schlingloff 1982: 64, Abb. 10; 2000: I, 451; II, 150). Another one (fig. *e*) is found just beside the epigraphs of T 44.



d



e

Much more compelling, however, than the Ajanta paintings of the 6th century are the numerous ship-motifs on the coins of the Sātavāhana ruler Gautamīputra Yajña Sātakarṇi who ruled in the last half of the 2nd century (170-198 AD) over a vast area from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka to Maharashtra and Gujarat (Shastri 1998: 77). Like the Ḥoq pictures the ships on these coins have two masts, a highly curved bow and stern and two paddles at the back.[17] As was convincingly shown by Schlingloff (1982), this type of ship was typical for India and more Eastern regions. It is therefore highly probable that these drawings owe their origin to the Indian visitors of the Ḥoq cave.

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[17] See Schlingloff (1982: 57, Abb. 4) with bibliographical notes. Cf. also Deloche (1996: 202, fig. 2).

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