ON THE SAILING SHIP: ACROSS THE BAY OF BENGAL

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1. Introduction

The seas across the India – ASEAN region presented a unique environment to the sailor in antiquity. The monsoon winds not only determined the basic rhythm for seafaring activity in much of tropical and equatorial Asia, but also influenced agricultural activity in the region. This paper suggests that one way of understanding this complex web of interactions of the past is through a deeper engagement with the markers of maritime regions and the communities that inhabited these spaces. One of the markers being discussed in this paper relates to depiction of boats and ships on religious architecture in the region. While these representations may not be realistic, they raise the issue of context. Why were boats and ships sculpted on Buddhist monastic sites and Hindu temples? How are these representations to be understood? It is being suggested here that these depictions are indicative of the diverse engagement with the sea in the region.

The paper is divided into several sections starting with the location of narratives of ship-wreck at three important sites in India, viz. Mathura, situated about 150 kilometres south of Delhi; Kanheri, a group of rock-cut caves located on the western outskirts of Mumbai on the west coast; and Ratnagiri in the Brahmani and Birupa river valleys in Jajpur district on the Orissa Coast in the east. Chronologically, while the first two are near contemporaries, the last of

the three monastic sites dates from fifth to thirteenth century CE, i.e. the second phase of sculpting at Kanheri. The three sites are also diverse in their location: thus, while Kanheri and Ratnagiri are in coastal regions, Mathura is located in the northern heartland of the subcontinent away from the sea. What links up the three sites are representations of the saviour from ship-wreck and other dangers encountered at sea at each of them. Thus, one objective of the paper is to highlight the uniqueness of Buddhism, which adopted an approach unlike its contemporary religions in evolving the notion of a saviour from worldly disasters, including threats and risks involved in seafaring.

A more important agenda is to underscore commonalities between the national monuments and World Heritage sites of the ASEAN – India region and the engagement with the sea that these represent. How are representations on religious architecture to be understood? Scholars have often identified the sculptural depictions through the textual traditions, but often there is little consonance between the visual and the written. A well-known art historian has suggested that the large number of Avalokitesvara representations showing the Bodhisattva saving his devotees from trouble as shown in the paintings from Ajanta indicate physical dangers rather than spiritual salvation. Dieter Schlingloff argues against this position and states that "Buddhist artworks financed by laymen and executed by lay artists were primarily

intended to help and guide the monks in their path to salvation." We also need to factor into this debate not only the vision of the community who conceptualized and built religious structures, but also those who maintained and nurtured it over the centuries.

Most religious architecture survived through history because it continued to be relevant and meaningful to communities living nearby. In the second section, I move to another Buddhist site, which is also a World Heritage site, viz. Ajanta rock-cut caves in Maharashtra, which are exquisitely painted and sculpted. It is indeed significant that many of the paintings drawn from the Jatakas or stories of the earlier lives of the Buddha show the Buddha as a seafaring merchant. This is followed by a section focussed on ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia and their interconnectedness to sites in India as evident from religious travel and visits by Chinese pilgrims to India along the sea route, which show a somewhat different engagement with the waters. The final section deals with ship-wreck sites in South Asia to highlight the need to develop underwater archaeology for a deeper understanding of the water craft used to cross the seas. I start with one of the earliest Buddhist monuments in the country, viz the site of Bharhut in central India.

2. Early Buddhist Sites in Central India

Perhaps the earliest representation of a seafarer in distress is to be seen on a medallion on a railing bar from the Buddhist site of Bharhut, located in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh. Foucher identified the story as described in the *Mahāvastu* and the *Divyāvadāna* while Chavannes showed that it also occurred in a Chinese version. In the Chinese and *Divyāvadāna* version the merchants shout '*namo buddhāya*' or '*namo buddhasya*' in the *Mahāvastu* version. In the medallion, the ship is depicted twice: once, being swallowed by a giant fish and the second time safely sailing away from the monster. Thus in its representation, the narrative adheres to the fifth century texts quoted above, but the inscription deviates from the texts by referring to the saviour as Mahādeva, a name unknown for the Buddha in textual sources.

This raises the issue of examining the sculptural representation of the narrative along with the inscription, which as in the case here, presents a somewhat different insight into the depiction. It also interrogates the extent to which sculptural representations followed textual accounts. The paper then proposes that the evidence from art and architecture be viewed as a parallel tradition, rather than one supplementing the narratives as prescribed in the written form.

More recently, an archaeological survey has revealed that a small monastic site may have existed as early as the end of third century BCE. During the later centuries BCE, the monastic community at Bharhut appears to have consolidated and expanded, as is evident from the construction of the stone railing and the network of four smaller sites that emerged around Bharhut. Before I discuss the three sites of Mathura, Kanheri and Ratnagiri, two points need to be stressed: one, the coastal location of a large number of Buddhist monastic sites; and secondly, the conceptualization of maritime space, as evident from inscriptions at early Buddhist sites.

The peninsular part of Gujarat is referred to as Saurashtra and forms a rocky tableland with an altitude of 300 to 600 meters, fringed by coastal plains. It is known for its black cotton soil making it a fertile tract for agriculture. Gujarat has a total coastline of 1600 kilometres with the Gulf of Kutch and the Gulf of Cambay providing major inlets. The Saurashtra coast is marked by sandy beaches, which extend from Dwarka to Diu and the distinction between the coast and the interior is not as marked as elsewhere in peninsular India. The Girnar hills, which contain the site of Junagadh are important for pilgrimage to the Buddhists, Hindus and the Jainas.

In the coastal regions of Gujarat, Buddhist caves were excavated from second century BCE to the sixth century CE. Rock-cut caves are known from Kateshwar and five from Siyot in Lakhpat taluka in the extreme north-west of Kutch, as also bronze images of the Buddha have been found datable from fourth to seventh century CE. Other coastal sites in south Gujarat include Talaja in Bhavnagar district with thirty rock-cut caves and Kadia Dungar near

Bharuch. Thus, the maritime orientation of a large number of Buddhist sites is striking and this leads to the second issue of travel across the seas.

3. Saviour of Mariners and Travellers in Distress

The emergence of the cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara as a saviour of mariners and travellers in distress is generally associated with the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* (chapter 24), though an enumeration of dangers of travel is to be found in earlier texts as well such as the *Anguttara Nikāya* (Kessivagga 119-20; vol. II: 121) and the *Divyāvadāna* (p.92: 25-8).

How does one explain the clustering of representations of Avalokitesvara in the western Deccan caves? The icon of Avalokitesvara as protector of the faithful is a type that occurs widely in the caves of western India. Several renditions were made in the western Deccan and over twelve painted and/ or sculpted versions are known from Ajanta (caves 2, 4, 6, 10A, 11, 17, 20, 26), three from Kanheri (caves 2, 41 and 90), one from Aurangabad (cave 7) and two from Ellora, though nowhere is the composition so elaborate and the treatment so elegant as in cave 90 at Kanheri. The image in cave 90 is unique in that it depicts Avalokitesvara as protector against ten perils (rather than the usual eight) and includes numerous subsidiary figures. In this litany, Avalokitesvara offers the devotee promise of salvation from the various perils depicted at the sides of the composition including attack by elephants, lions, robbers and similar disasters.

Around the same time, in the rock cut sanctuaries at Ellora, the function of the Avalokitesvara as the saviour from the eight perils is delegated to Tara. This theme occurs prominently in the monastic establishment at Ratnagiri in Orissa. It was in Orissa that the major expansion of Buddhism took place in the fifth to thirteenth century period and stupendous monastic complexes were constructed in the three hill ranges of Jajpur district, the Alti or Nalti, Assia and Mahavinayaka. Local tradition refers to the region being close to the sea in the past.

Ratnagiri is a 25 metre high isolated hill of khondalite formation of the Assia range bounded on three sides by the rivers Brahmani, the Kimiria and the Birupa. In the vicinity of Ratnagiri, the extensive Buddhist site of Udayagiri is located in the easternmost part of the Assia hills in a horse-shoe formation, while Naltigiri or Lalitagiri is not very far on the south bank of the Birupa. The three monastic complexes form a triangle, with the distance between Ratnagiri and Udayagiri is 5.5 kilometres as the crow flies and 3.5 kilometres between Udayagiri and Lalitagiri. The latter two hills are much broader and higher than Ratnagiri.

As late as the 1950s, Ratnagiri was marked by two compact mounds: one circular and conical, which yielded the stupa; and the other quadrangular, with several Buddhist sculptures scattered on the surface of the mounds. The site was located in close proximity to the major centre of Jajpur and was surrounded by navigable rivers, productive plains and khondalite bearing hills. The excavations yielded a large impressive stupa surrounded by a number of smaller stupas and two quadrangular monasteries. Several slabs found during excavations were inscribed with texts such as the *Pratītyasamutpāda sūtra* or the *dhāraṇīs*.

Of all the three major sites in Assia hills, the stupa at Ratnagiri is indeed striking (Fig. 6). The precincts of Stupa I were crowded with smaller stupas of varying dimensions and forms and comprised of both structural stupas of brick and stone, as well as portable stone stupas. It is interesting that there were several levels of stupas and sometimes stupas were built on top of earlier ones, the largest number of dedications being built between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE. Many of the stone portable stupas had niches for enshrining deities such as Buddha, Tara, Lokesvara, Manjusri and sometimes deities from the Vajrayana pantheon. Some of the smaller stupas yielded *śārīrika* relics in the form of charred bones, though hardly any attention was paid to reliquaries, which were generally plain earthen vases or stone blocks with sockets.

Two standing images of *aṣṭamahābhaya* Tara were found from the surface at Ratnagiri. In

1927-8, R. P. Chanda, an official of the Indian Museum, Calcutta visited Ratnagiri and other sites in Orissa to collect Buddhist sculptures for the Museum. He found a number of sculptures near the Mahakala temple on the hill at Ratnagiri, including *aṣṭamahābhaya* Tara image, which is now in the Patna Museum. The standing image is dated to the 11th century on the basis of a fragmentary inscription and graphically portrays the *jalārṇava-bhaya* or fear of drowning in a sinking boat. A second image now in the site museum at Ratnagiri, dated to the end of the 8th century CE, shows Tara flanked by scenes of the eight perils depicted in two vertical rows of four panels each.

A striking feature of Buddhism in Orissa is the lack of narrative sculptures, one of the few exceptions being the *aṣṭamahāprātihārya* sculpture, now in the Raghunatha temple at Solampur. Tara was a popular deity in Orissa, especially at Ratnagiri, where she is found sculpted on 99 niches of monolithic stupas. She is represented both in her seated *lalitāsana* form as also in various other types described in the *Sādhanamālā*. The eleventh century manuscript of *Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in the Cambridge University Library (MSS no. Add 1643) illustrates Buddhist images and shrines from different parts of India and four of the illustrations relate to Orissa. It is not surprising that three of these refer to images of Tara, perhaps from Banpur, while the fourth refers to the monastic complex at Kuruma, near Konarak in Puri district. From seventh to twelfth centuries she is shown as the saviour from a variety of dangers including ship-wreck in sculpture as also in epigraphs. She is invoked in several inscriptions, such as the Nalanda record of Vipula Srimitra dated to the first half of the twelfth century, as also the Kalasan inscription from Java. It would then seem that though there were several similarities between contemporary sites, yet every site placed emphasis on certain images suggesting local preferences for cults and specific texts. It is this local and regional context of the practice of Buddhism that imparts the archaeology of monastic complexes a crucial place in the study of Buddhist narratives. In the next section we discuss the site of Mathura, which depicts another aspect of the Saviour of merchants at sea.

4. Mathura: Valahassa Jataka

Mathura is located on the river Yamuna, about 55 kilometres north-west of the city of Agra. Preliminary explorations at Mathura began as early as 1830s with the discovery of a Bacchanalian group of stone sculpture by Col. Stacy. This was followed by a survey by Alexander Cunningham from 1853 to 1883 based on the account of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang. His primary objective was to collect sculptures from the several mounds around the present city of Mathura, especially from Katra, Jail, Kankali Tila and Chaubara mounds. In 1872, during his explorations, Cunningham found a pillar in a small dharamsala near the Balabhadra tank close to Bhuteshwar mound. The second-third century railing pillar shows a standing female figure on the back of a dwarf and on the backside is sculpted the Valahassa jataka in three compartments. The first panel shows the chief merchant perched on a tree addressing others imprisoned in a circular tower. The central panel depicts merchants escaping by clinging to a flying horse, while the demons are portrayed gorging on their hapless victims in the lower panel. Thus, the context of the Mathura panel is no longer available. Five other railing pillars are known from Bhuteswar mound, though at present a Siva temple built in the late eighteenth century is an important marker at the site. Two inscriptions are known from Bhuteswar: one inscribed on a Naga image; and the other on a railing pillar, though the reading is doubtful.

The Pali version of the Valahassa Jataka relates an episode from a previous incarnation when the Bodhisattva was born as a white horse. He rescued five hundred merchants who had been cast ashore after they were ship-wrecked on the island of Ceylon where there was a town peopled by she-demons who seduced unwary travellers wrecked on the coast as far as the river Kalyani on one side and Nagadipa on the other. The head-merchant became aware of the flesh-eating demons, who charmed them by appearing as beautiful women and cautioned the others. Two hundred and fifty of them agreed and were saved by the Bodhisattva who flew in the form of a white horse from the Himalayas. This Jataka found wide popularity in the Buddhist world and it

was painted in the caves in Kizil, as also on scrolls in Japan. Representations also occur in the Anand temple at Pagan and in Tibet. The discussion so far has largely revolved around the Bodhisattva as a saviour of travellers and sailors in trouble. Did the kings and ruling groups in early India claim control of the seas? This is an issue that we take up in the next section.

5. Conceptualization of Maritime Space

Two names are used for the Indian subcontinent in early sources: the fourth century BCE Minor Rock Edict I of Aśoka at Brahmagiri and elsewhere refer to Jambudvīpa or 'island of the rose-apple tree' and the same term occurs in the *Mahābhārata*; and *Bhāratam varṣam* or *Bhāradhavasa*, which occurs in the Hathigumpha inscription. The minor rock edicts of Aśoka describe the king's noble deeds through which the people of Jambudvīpa were united with the world of the *devatās* or gods. The conceptualisation of the Indian subcontinent as an island continues to occur in later centuries. A first century CE inscription on a limestone slab found in a vihara at the Buddhist site of Phanigiri in Nalgonda district reads '*Jambudvīpa mile vagu*'.

By the second-first century BCE, royal inscriptions initiate the practice of defining territory under control of the king and the Buddhist caves in the hills at Nasik, on the river Godavari, are especially significant in this regard. The caves are locally known as Pandulena and are situated 8 kilometres west of Nasik town about 60 to 70 metres up the hill on a rock scarp. The monastic establishment had one *cetiyaghara* (cave 18), eighteen *lenas*, including three unfinished ones, one *matapa* and three cisterns, though more water cisterns are also known from the vicinity of the hill. The twenty-six inscriptions from the caves are significant not only for an understanding of the chronology of the Satavahana and Kshatrapa rulers of the region, but for the relationship between royalty and Buddhist monastic centres. The earliest record of the ruler Kanha of the Satavahana-*kula* is inscribed on the upper part of the right window of vihara 19 at Nasik. The vihara appears to be the

earliest excavation at the site that came into existence because of the generosity of the king.

Thus, the inscription is valuable as the earliest evidence for royal control of the oceans, but what is intriguing is its location in a Buddhist *vihāra* and the inclusion of Epic heroes as role models for the king. No doubt cave 3 was an unusual setting for the Queen's inscription. It consists of a large hall with eighteen cells around it, five to the left, six at the back and seven to the right. There are two additional cells in the veranda in front. A beautiful relief of a stupa was cut in the back wall of the hall between doorways to the third and fourth cell. There are three additional royal inscriptions engraved in the veranda and these require brief discussion.

The earliest record in cave 3 is on the left wall of the veranda and dates to the 18th year of Satavahana ruler Gotamīputa Siri Sātakani. Thus, the caves at Nasik indicate complex relationship between royalty, the inhabitants of monastic sites, such as Nasik and the administration of monastic property, in this case by the Bhadāyanīyas, probably located in Andhra. This wealth of inscriptional data undoubtedly accords a special place to the Buddhist monastic centre at Nasik and to the claim for control of the three oceans. Another site that needs to be brought into discussion at this stage is that of the rock-cut caves at Ajanta.

6. The Paintings at Ajanta and Insights into Control over the Seas

Walter Spink has suggested that the bulk of the work at Ajanta dates from 462 to 480, though there was an early phase, as evident from caves 9, 10, 12, which were excavated in the first phase dated from first century BCE to the first-second centuries CE. Work at cave 2 at Ajanta was started in the mid- 460s, though the elaborate work was done on it after 475. Cave 4 the largest vihara at the site was started in the early 460; cave 11 is another inaugural Vakataka vihara; and in cave 26, work continued until 478. How is this royal power of control over the oceans represented? We discussed the inscriptional data from Nasik in the previous section, but no sculptural depictions are to be found at Nasik, instead the

Simhala vijaya narrative and its somewhat later fifth century representation at Ajanta cave 17, a cave "fit for the king" elaborate this concept.

In one of his previous births, Sakyamuni Gautama was born as Simhala, a merchant who led fine hundred others on a seagoing venture to Tamradvīpa or Sri Lanka. They were ship-wrecked, but eventually saved from the man-eating ogresses by the horse Balaha, who rose majestically into the sky with Simhala on his back. The ogresses, however, followed him back to his kingdom. Simhala once again rose to the occasion and saved the kingdom from being devoured by them. Simhala was crowned king and Tamradvipa was renamed Simhaladvipa.

The story of Simhala can be read at different levels: at one level, it is about the defeat of evil worldly forces by dharma and "articulates the Mahayana notion that in order to reach the further shore of nirvana, one must rely upon the *sambhogakāya* power of a saving bodhisattva", while at another it refers to physical dangers such as those encountered by the fifth century Chinese pilgrim Faxian off the coast of Sri Lanka, who saved himself by calling upon Avalokiteśvara. Holt continues the argument further and states that from the eighth to tenth centuries Avalokiteśvara was not only venerated by the coastal communities of Sri Lanka, but also in some of the monasteries of Anuradhapura.

The impressive litany of Avalokitesvara in cave 4 was, according to Spink, carved early in 479 CE and the scene of the Bodhisattva as Saviour continued to be popular at Ajanta. This popularity is indeed striking, as the other iconic images are either of the Buddha or the stupa. Based on his study of pictorial representations of the litany of Avalokitesvara at Ajanta, Schlingloff does not prioritise any particular text that was followed by the artists. "On the contrary, they developed their own relatively flexible iconographic tradition in which neither the number nor the subject of the perils, to say nothing of a prescribed sequence, were generally considered compulsory." In contrast, Schopen attempts to identify Mahayana Sutras that may have formed the basis for the painting tradition at Ajanta and suggests

after examination of a painting of the Avalokitesvara in cave 10 that as the *Gandavyuha sutra* contains a similar enumeration of perils, it would have been taken recourse to at Ajanta. On an esoteric level, the dangers may be interpreted as obstacles to salvation.

In addition scenes of sea travel and ship-wreck are depicted, such as the voyage or prince Kalyanakarin in cave 1; the painting of the Purnavadana in cave 2; and Simhala legend showing ships carrying an army of elephants and cavalry to Sri Lanka in cave 17. Clearly sea-travel is prominently depicted and the popularity of the Avalokitesvara as saviour from ship-wreck at sites such as Ajanta indicates a far more complex picture than that suggested by the inscriptions at Nasik. How does this compare with representations at sites across the seas? Three of the sites that are significant include Nakhon Pathom in Thailand; Borobudur in Indonesia; and Neak Pean in Cambodia.

7. Chedi Chulapathon in Central Thailand

In this section, I shift the focus to the development of archaeology in Thailand over the last six decades and the shifting priorities in the research agendas. Dvaravati appears in the official name of both Ayutthaya (founded in 1350) and Bangkok (founded in 1782) and it would seem that the memory of the polity maintained itself from the tenth until the fourteenth century. Jean Boisselier has argued that the Ayutthaya royalty looked to Dvaravati culture as important to their rule, rebuilding Dvaravati period monuments abandoned at U Thong and bringing Dvaravati sculpture from Nakhon Pathom to Ayutthaya. No doubt the revival of interest in historical Buddhism had far-reaching implications for the study of the past – a case in point being the restoration of Phrapathom Chedi.

As a monk, king Mongkut (1804-1868) visited the Phrapathom Chedi that was in a state of disrepair in the jungle, though it was still considered a centre of pilgrimage by the local communities. On his accession to the throne, the monarch not only restored the Chedi, but also developed the surrounding areas. Two new canals were dug – the

Mahasawas and Chedibooja (1853-1862) and these provided a link between Nakhon Pathom and the waterways of Bangkok.

The following two stucco reliefs from Chulapathon chedi need to be brought into the discussion here. These reliefs were brought to light during excavations by the Fine Arts Department in 1968. As the present chedi had covered the earlier one, Pierre Dupont's 1939-40 excavations had failed to unearth them. It would seem that the chedi was renovated and expanded three times in the past. How are these depictions to be explained in the context of the monument at Nakhon Pathom, especially as there is no evidence for them from other stupa sites? Are these representations linked to the association of the site with the landing of Buddhist monks sent by Ashoka and the setting up of the earliest stupa in Thailand?

The panel shows the Buddha as a giant tortoise in a previous birth saving ship-wrecked merchants by carrying them ashore and then by sacrificing himself to keep them from starvation. This story also occurs in the first gallery at Borobudur in central Java.

The representation shown above draws from Suparaga Jataka, which narrates the adventures of merchants who travel to Suvarṇadvīpa under the able guidance of Supparaga, the *niryāmaka* or steersman who was none other than the Buddha in a previous birth. As compared to Nakhon Pathom, the eighth century monument at Borobudur displays an exuberance of sculpture devoted to sea travel and pilgrimage.

8. Chinese Pilgrims on the Sea Route

Another network that needs to be taken into account is that with China. As recorded in the written history of the Han (*Qian Hanshu*) under the reign of Emperor Wudi (140-87 BCE), the emperor sent a mission to the kingdom of Huangzhi, which contemporary writers generally agree was located on the shores of the Indian Ocean very likely in India. More often quoted are records left by Chinese pilgrims who travelled to India and visited Buddhist sites. The pilgrim Faxian arrived overland in India in 399 CE

and returned by sea to China in 413-414 CE from Sri Lanka heading towards the northwest tip of Sumatra. The ship was wrecked on the way and perhaps landed in the Andamans. The next phase took Faxian to the northwest of Borneo where he arrived in 414 after 90 days at sea. The pilgrim remained in Borneo for five months and then left for China in mid-414 heading towards Canton.

The most interesting information about circum-peninsular navigation of the Malay Peninsula is contained in Yijing's accounts of the voyage of the Chinese pilgrims who travelled to India and returned during the second half of the 7th century CE. Yijing provides an account of his journey from Canton in October-November with the northeast monsoon and his arrival in Palembang on Sumatra a month later. He stayed there for six months, and then went to Jambi near Palembang sometime around May. He stayed there for another two months and then re-embarked in order to profit from the winds of the southwest monsoon to reach Kedah (Jiecha) on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. He did not leave this region for India until the beginning of the following year when the north-east monsoon was well established. He reached the Nicobar islands in ten days and fifteen days later arrived at Tamralipti in Bengal. This was clearly the most direct route to the holy places of historic Buddhism.

Twelve years later, Yijing returned by the same route travelling on the winds of the north-east monsoon to reach Kedah, but this trip required two months, when the outward journey had taken only twenty-five days. Sailing against the winds was a well-tried technique but it took much longer than sailing with the winds. One of the voyages recounted by Yijing lasted only the time of one monsoon – the pilgrim Wujing left China "in the period of the east winds," i.e. in October-November and arrived in Srivijaya at the end of a month. After stopping at Jambi he took another month reaching Jiecha and from there he left for Negapatam on the Tamil coast with the same winds before they began to wane towards the end of March. Clearly then the notion of the Saviour and its depiction on monastic structures reflected an active engagement of the patrons and

sponsors of Buddhist monastic architecture with the sea. This is further corroborated by ship-wreck sites found in the region, though their numbers are still small.

9. Ship-wreck Sites

The oldest ship-wreck in South Asia dates to first century BCE – first century CE and lies off the fishing village of Godavaya on the south coast of Sri Lanka. The ship was transporting a cargo of raw materials, including what appear to be ingots of iron and others of glass, as well as finished stone querns (hand-operated mills) and ceramic bowls, when it sank some time before the first century CE. Further across the Indian Ocean a somewhat later ninth century ship-wreck of a vessel of possible Indian or Arab origin was found in Indonesian waters in 1998. The wreck was located just north of the main town and port of Belitung Island, Tanjung Pandan. A large number of seventh century Chinese coins and ceramics were recovered from the site indicating that the ship was travelling on the route from the Persian Gulf to China. The wood for the ship originated in India, though the ship itself may have been constructed in the Arab region based on an analysis of bitumen pieces found near the ship-wreck.

In this paper the focus has been on representations of the several conceptions of the saviour of seafarers as represented on Buddhist monuments across South and Southeast Asia. This is an issue that needs further discussion and research as it is linked to larger issues of maritime connections, cultural plurality and memory of the community. Monuments enshrine many kinds of memories: memory of the vision of the builder; memory acquired over time; and finally, the created memory through transformation of the monument, either through its destruction or by altering its context or form. Monuments also become sites for enactment of rituals such as pilgrimage for the replenishment of memory and knowledge of the past. Social carriers of memory are agents for the reproduction and circulation of historical memory and traditionally these have included story-tellers, singers or actors who narrate mythical and past events to a local audience. As this overview of narratives of sea-stories shows, the sculptural depictions has multiple meanings and were significant markers of the diverse ways in which the communities of the ASEAN – India region travelled across the seas and related to each other.

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