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ARTICLE

Dhār, Bhoja, and Sarasvatī: an old problem revisited

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Abstract

This article focuses on an inscription on the base of a sculpture in the British Museum dated Vikrama year 1091 (1034–1035 CE) in the reign of king Bhoja, the most celebrated ruler of the Paramāra dynasty of central India. Although published in the past on a number of occasions, the discovery of a small donor figure incised on the plinth prompts a re-evaluation. The inscription can now be understood as referring to the establishment of an image of the goddess Ambikā by a donor named Sosā, a lay follower of the Vidhyādharī branch of the Jain faith.

Keywords: Bhoja; Dhār; Jainism; Paramāra; Sarasvatī

In memory of Paul Dundas (1952–2023)

Earlier in the pages of this journal, I addressed some of the problems connected with the city of Dhār, king Bhoja, and the legendary image of the goddess of learning connected with him and the Paramāra kings of central India more generally.[1] An important piece of evidence for the cult of Sarasvatī in the eleventh century comes from an inscription of Bhoja's time that is engraved on the plinth of a sculpture that has been in the collection of the British Museum since the nineteenth century.[2] Although some early authors associated the sculpture with the campus of the Kamāl Maula masjid, it was actually found on the site of the city palace in 1875, as reported by C. B. Lele in the 1940s.[3] A recent study of the historical geography of Dhār has resulted in a new map of the old city, shown here in Figure 1. This shows that the city palace and the Kamāl Maula campus are almost one kilometre apart, the latter standing on the edge of the settled urban area.

The earlier reading of the inscription published in 2012 was adequate as far as it goes but was frustrated by the abraded surface and the diagonal fractures across the inscribed

[1] See M. Willis, 'Dhār, Bhoja and Sarasvatī: from Indology to political mythology and back', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 1 (2012), pp. 129–153. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1154197

[2] The image itself is reproduced in the article just cited and can be seen also on the website of the British Museum (number 1909,1224.1) to which the interested reader is referred. The image and inscription are catalogued in the SIDDHAM network as IN060027. See https://siddham.network/inscription/in060027/.

[3] [C. B. Lele], *Parmar Inscriptions in Dhar State, 875–1310 AD*, Dhar State, Historical record series, v. 1 (Dhar, [1944]), p. iii. The earlier historiography is in Willis, 'Dhār, Bhoja and Sarasvatī', and does not need to be repeated here.

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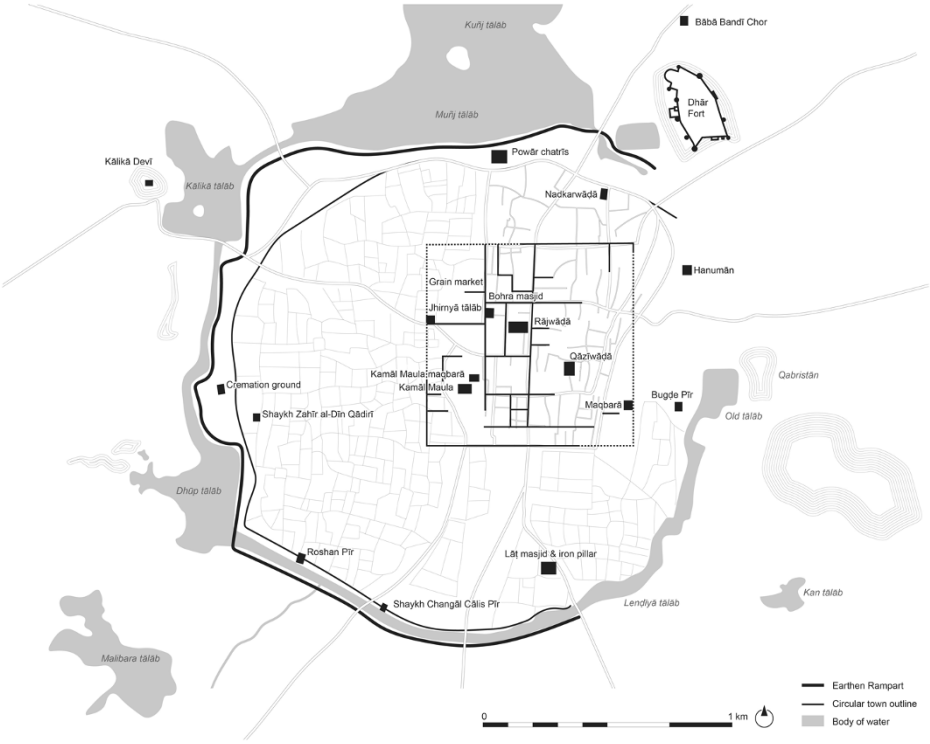


Figure 1. Dhār (Madhya Pradesh). Topographical study of the old city prepared in 2025. *Source*: Courtesy of Saarthak Singh and the author.

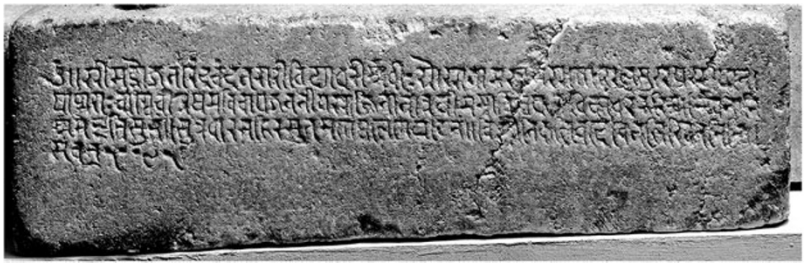


Figure 2. Dhār (Madhya Pradesh). Ambikā sculpture found on the site of the city palace in 1875, detail of the inscription on the plinth. (British Museum, no. 1909,1224.1). *Source*: Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

part of the stone. In recent years, however, new tools have emerged, in particular Harry Falk's *Indoskript*, an online tool that has transformed the study of Indian palaeography.[4] Coupled with a specially prepared photograph, we are in a position to re-evaluate this record (Figure 2).

In the first place, my re-evaluation was prompted by a small votive figure of a kneeling woman on one of the receding faces of the plinth (Figure 3). In accord with conventions prevailing in medieval India, this can be understood as the donor. The image is labelled, the reading being *sāna*. With this as a starting point, I went back to the inscription. Here I

[4] Harry Falk and Oliver Hellwig, *Indoskript 2.0* (Berlin, 2017). http://www.indoskript.org

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Figure 3. Dhār (Madhya Pradesh). Ambikā sculpture found on the site of the city palace in 1875, detail showing kneeling votive figure on a receding face of the plinth (British Museum, no. 1909,1224.1). *Source*: Courtesy of the author.

present the results of my work in two parts: firstly, a diplomatic reading, giving the text as it appears to be written, line-by-line without corrections and, secondly, a critical reading, with the text corrected and displayed as a verse with a prose colophon.

DIPLOMATIC EDITION:

1. auṃ | srīmadbhojanareṃdracaṃdranagarīvidyādharīrmmadhīḥ sosānāma s(o?)sa(?)saṇā khalu sukhaprasthāpanā
2. yāpsarāḥ vāgdevī prathamavidhāya jananī pasā jinānātrayīm ambā nityaphalādikāṃ vararuciḥ maratti sabhā ni
3. rmmame iti subhaṃ || sūtradhāra sahirasutamaṇathaleṇa ghaṭitaṃ || vi(jñ)ānika sivadevena likhitam iti |
4. saṃvat 100 91

CRITICAL EDITION (the metre is Śārdūlavikrīḍita):

śrīmadbhojanareṃdracaṃdranagarīvidyādharī[*dha]rmmadhīḥ[*|]
sosā nāma s[*uśā?]sanā khalu sukhaprasthāpanāyāpsarāḥ[*||]
vāgdevī[*ṃ] prathama[*ṃ] vidhāya jananī[*ṃ]pas[*c*]āj jinānā[*ṃ] trayīm[*|]
ambā[*ṃ] nityaphalādikāṃ vararuci[*ṃ?] m[*ū]rti[*ṃ] ś[*u]bhā[*ṃ] nirmame[*||]

Colophon (Prose):

iti śubhaṃ || sūtradhārasahirasutamaṇathaleṇa ghaṭitaṃ ||
vi[*jñ]ānika śivadevena likhitam iti |[*|] saṃvat 100 91 [*||]

The key change from earlier published editions is the addition of the donor's name: *sosā*. That the letters here are *sosā* seems reasonably certain when comparisons are made to inscriptions of the period; for example, the Paramāra inscription from Udaypur (Figure 4). The name Sosa appears in the Jaina Prosopography Database, so we are on firm ground

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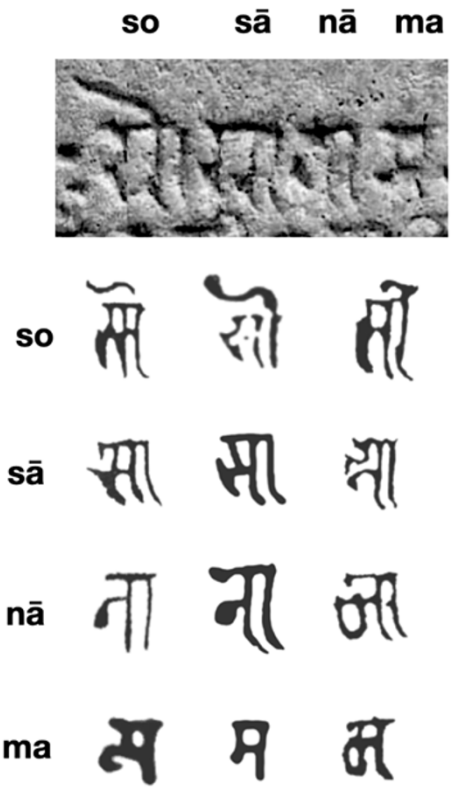


Figure 4. Palaeographic chart showing the letters *sosā nāma*, drawing on the examples provided by Harry Falk and Oliver Hellwig, *Indoskript 2.0* (Berlin, 2017). Key to letters shown: *so* (left to right): Udaypur stone inscription, ID: 476; Bilhāri stone inscription, ID: 704; Udaypur stone inscription, ID: 476; *sā* (left to right): Udaypur stone inscription, ID: 476; Māndhātā plates, ID: 582; Bilhāri stone inscription, ID: 704; *nā* (left to right): Khairha plates, ID 55; Māndhātā plates, ID: 582; Udaypur stone inscription, ID: 476; *ma* (left to right): Nadol plate, ID 53; Arthūṇā stone inscription, ID 726; Udaypur stone inscription, ID: 476. *Source*: Courtesy of the author and Indoskript.

historically even if the donor named in our inscription is not documented otherwise.[5] However, on the face of it, the label (*sāna*) and the inscription (*sosā*) do not agree. My understanding of the label is that it is a mason's abbreviation of the main text, *sosā nāma* being abbreviated as *sanā*. Sosā itself is a vernacular name, perhaps coming from Soṣā (*su*+*uṣā*).

However we choose to understand the name, this is the proper subject of the first half of the verse. The word following is much damaged, as can be seen in Figure 2, but the Śārdūlavikrīḍita metre and the thematic context restrict the possibilities. The word following *sosā nāma* is anyway an adjective describing the donor. Based on the parts of the letters visible, I suggest here *suśāsanā* (i.e. 'she of good discipline' or 'she whose commands are good'). Another possibility is *subhāṣaṇā* (i.e. 'well-spoken'). After this, the compound *sukhaprasthāpanāyāpsarāḥ* can be construed two ways, either as *sukhaprasthāpanā yāpsarāḥ* (i.e. 'who is an *apsara* sending forth/distributing happiness') or as *sukhaprasthāpanāya*+*apsarāḥ* (i.e. 'an *apsara* for sending forth/distributing happiness').[6] The second is the most likely.

[5] See Jaina Prosopography Database, s.v. sosa. https://jaina-prosopography.org/

[6] I am grateful to Whitney Cox for his suggestion about the possible reconstruction and how to construe the compound.

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Figure 5. Sehore (Madhya Pradesh). Standing figure of Ambikā, eleventh century. As documented in the Collector's Office, Sehore. *Source*: Courtesy of the author.

Describing our donor Sosā as an *apsara* might seem out of place and unusually sensuous for a Jain patron. In Jainism, however, these are semi-divine beings who have the celebration of the Jinas as their primary function. Such figures appear often in the image surrounds of Jain sculptures. By way of example, I illustrate here an Ambikā from Sehore, Madhya Pradesh, a town in the district neighbouring Dhār. In iconographic terms, this image is close to that under study in this article.[7] Although damaged, a small standing female figure can be seen in the upper part, as well as a broken celestial couple carrying garlands (Figure 5).

Our donor Sosā is qualified as *dharmmadhīḥ*. The *dha* at the beginning has been omitted by the scribe but is required by the metre. This can, of course, be both masculine and feminine. In my earlier publication, I took it as masculine and construed it with *vararuciḥ* in the

[7] For the iconography, the interested reader can consult: M. N. P. Tiwari, *Ambikā in Jaina Art and Literature* (New Delhi, 1989).

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second half of the verse. We will come back to that shortly, but my guess that *vararuci* was a masculine name forced me to understand *dharmmadhīḥ* as masculine and thus as a technical term, some sort of religious supervisor who had his mind fixed on the *dharma*. This is possible but contrived. It is more plausible and natural to take the obvious meaning in the feminine—'she whose mind is fixed on the *dharma*'.

With these observations providing a route into understanding the first half of the verse, we come to the long compound at the start: *śrīmad-bhoja-nareṃdra-caṃdra-nagarī-vidyādharī*. Thanks to an observation made by Paul Dundas in a seminar at an early stage of my research on this inscription, *vidyādharī* can be taken as referring to a Jain lineage, the Vidyādharī *śākhā*. In his characteristic way, Paul presented this as a modest aside, but it was transformative and, in a stroke, allowed me to understand the gist of the inscription. The Vidyādharī is an old school with documented roots in central India and with further inscriptions from the Akota bronze hoard showing it was active in medieval times.[8] The name is given as *vidyādharī* and *vidyādhara* in the sources, the latter appearing to be somewhat later in time. For example, an inscription of the reign of Kumāragupta in the fifth century records the donation of an image at Mathurā by a woman and lay follower named Śāmāḍhyā at the instance of Dattilācāryya, a preceptor belonging to the Vidyādharī *śākhā*.[9]

For the rest, there are various ways of construing *śrīmad-bhoja-nareṃdra-caṃdra-nagarī*. While there are lineages with the name Candra, Candranagarī is not found. So *nagarī* has to be taken independently, its ending in *ī* explained by the fact that the word is referring to Dhārā, the capital of Bhoja and, as we know, the find spot of the sculpture itself. We are left, then, with *śrīmad-bhoja-nareṃdra-caṃdra*, which can be glossed as 'the illustrious Bhoja, that moon among kings', a fairly standard turn of phrase in inscriptions.

The second part of the verse is not problematic with regard to its core meaning: the donor Sosā made the image of Ambā (i.e. the sculpture on which the inscription is incised (*sosā … ambāṃ nirmame*)). The only problem is the word *vararuciḥ*. As mentioned above, I took this earlier as a masculine name in the nominative singular. With the subject appearing in the first part of the verse as Sosā, this now needs to be understood adjectivally, describing the donor as 'she of excellent taste'. The word order is unusual, however, and the description of the donor in this way is not compelling. In terms of metre, the syllable needs to be heavy, and both *vararuciḥ* and *vararuciṃ* meet the requirements. Considering that the first half of the verse is given over to the donor and the second half is given over to the image, and given also the number of scribal errors and the need to restore all the *anusvara* marks, the best critical decision seems to be an emendation to *vararucīṃ*.[10] The image is thus 'of excellent beauty'. This is more natural and logical.

Colophon does not present difficulties. The *sūtradhāra* is the mason, while a *vijñānin* is a craftsman, usually a term describing those responsible for engraving inscriptions.[11] The date is Vikrama *saṃvat* 1091 current, as with most Paramāra records. The equivalent is 1034–1035 CE. This places the inscription in the middle of king Bhoja's reign.

This is now the place to pull together the observations in the foregoing paragraphs and offer a new translation.

[8] See Jaina Prosopography Database, s.v. suhastin. The bronzes are described in Umakant P. Shah, *Akota Bronzes* (Bombay, 1959). S. B. Deo, *History of Jaina Monachism from Inscriptions and Literature* (Poona, 1956), pp. 103, 364, 463, 542. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18326496

[9] Deo, *Jaina Monachism*, p. 103, citing G. Bühler, 'Further Jain inscriptions from Mathurâ', *Epigraphia Indica* 2 (1894), pp. 195–212 (211). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2598117

[10] Here I follow the helpful suggestion of Dániel Balogh.

[11] For the terms, see D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphical Glossary* (Delhi, 1966), pp. 373, 379. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3838189

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The lady Sosā by name, whose religious intention is fixed upon the Vidyādharī Jain lineage in the city of the illustrious Bhoja—a moon among kings—who is of good discipline and is indeed an *apsara* distributing happiness,

She—having first installed Vāgdevī the Mother and subsequently a triad of Jinas—created this auspicious image of Ambā who is radiant in beauty and grants fruit eternal.

Colophon:

Blessings! It was fashioned by Maṇathala, son of the craftsman (*sūtradhāra*) Sahira. It was written by the artisan (*vijñānin*) Śivadeva. Year 1034–1035 CE.

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Conflicts of interest. None.

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