



ANCIENT ASIA

Vol. 16, 2025, pp. 121-146
© ARF India

URL: <https://ancient-asia-journal.com>
<https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2025.v16i.8>

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Situating Kaushambi: Exploring Its Role in the Dissemination of Buddhism and Shaping Buddhist Art in Ancient India

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Abstract: *The paper examines primary sources, including both archaeological and textual evidence, as well as studies conducted to date on the nature of Kaushambi and its role in the development and dissemination of early Buddhist art. It also assesses the impact on the spread of Buddhist doctrine, religious practices, and cultural norms throughout the middle Ganga Valley and into north India. Careful consideration is given to trade routes and interconnected networks to enhance understanding of the spatial relationships between Kaushambi and other significant ancient Indian Buddhist sites. The study investigates the diversity of Buddhist art evidence found at the site, the challenges of interpreting it, and the interplay between sociopolitical factors, patronage, and art innovation, emphasizing their influence on the evolution of Buddhist art. Furthermore, it focuses on the reasons for the cultural reliance on local terracotta production for artistic sustainability, which has shaped the broader canon of stone art, particularly in the case of Kaushambi.*

Keywords: Ghositarama Monastery, trade routes, Bhita, early Buddhist art, middle Ganga Valley, sphinx

Published : 22 August 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Rashmi Jha & Atul Tripathi (2025). Situating Kaushambi: Exploring its Role in the Dissemination of Buddhism and Shaping Buddhist Art in Ancient India. *Ancient Asia*, 16: 1, pp. 121-146. <https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2025.v16i01.8>

Introduction

After his enlightenment, Buddha delivered his first sermon (*dharmachakrapravartana*) at Isipatana (Sarnath) and subsequently spent the next twenty years attending various rain retreats (*vassa*) in Rajgir,

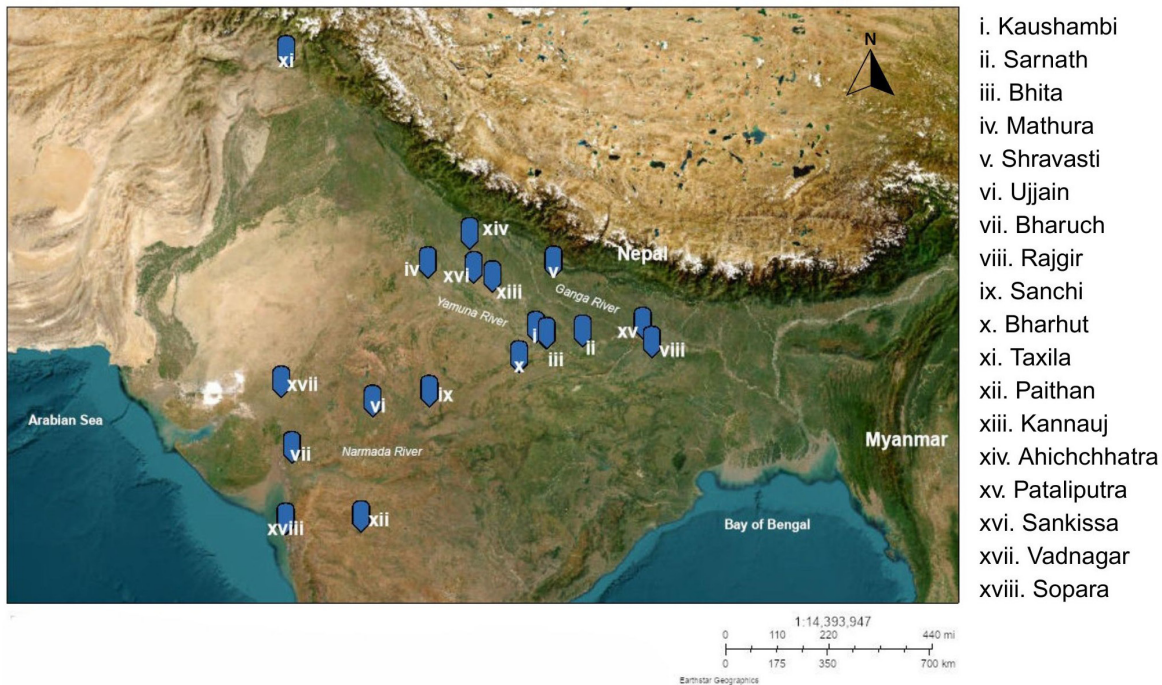
Vaishali, Kaushambi, and Kapilavastu before residing for twenty-five years at the Jetavana monastery in Shravasti. During his lifetime, the transmission of religious teachings in these regions fostered the development of artistic identity and socio-economic progress, revitalizing society. Consequently, the early Buddhist art canon emerged in the subsequent period, facilitating the transmission of a diverse array of established, developed, and evolved regional styles.

‘Aniconic’ Buddhist art, created from imperishable materials during the Mauryan period, evolved into monumental and deified representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the Kushana period. Furthermore, the expansion of the Kushana Empire facilitated the spread of Buddhist art across various regions, including Koshala, Kaushambi, and the Sarnath (Varanasi) areas (Annexure I). Various rulers from successive dynasties significantly promoted Buddhist culture and reinforced economic ties with other prominent centres. The distinctive art and archaeological materials discovered at Kaushambi confirm its status as a notable cultural efflorescence, as its geographical location enabled it to connect with key trade routes and centers of artistic and Buddhist activity, including Sarnath (Varanasi), Mathura, Bhita, Taxila, and Ujjain, via the Yamuna River, its confluence with the Ganga, and the nearby Saraswati River (now extinct) (Map 1 & Map 2). This ultimately led to its development as a significant economic hub and fostered the evolution of the relationship between court patronage and Buddhist artistic practices in the ancient period.



Map 1: Basemap imagery of Kaushambi (Map generated in ArcGIS 10.8.2)

Despite its profound historical and cultural significance, and its role as a major urban center and political hub in ancient northern India, Kaushambi has been overshadowed by the prominence of Sarnath (Varanasi) and Mathura in discussions about the evolution of early Buddhist art. Located along vital trade routes and serving as the capital of the Vatsa Janapada, Kaushambi was a thriving



Map 2: Basemap Imagery of important Buddhist sites in ancient India (Map generated in ArcGIS 10.8.2)

centre for Buddhist monastic activity, scholarship, and artistic innovation. Archaeological discoveries, including monastic complexes and terracotta artefacts, illustrate the vibrant artistic traditions it nurtured. However, its contributions remain understudied and underrepresented in art-historical narratives, particularly when compared to Sarnath, revered as the site of the Buddha's first sermon, and Mathura, celebrated as a prolific producer of iconic red sandstone sculptures that shaped both Buddhist and Brahmanical imagery.

This disparity arises partly from the disproportionate scholarly and devotional focus on Sarnath's sacred associations, along with Mathura's role as a cosmopolitan art hub. Furthermore, the archaeological remnants of Kaushambi, while significant, have not been extensively excavated or publicized, leaving its artistic legacy fragmented in modern discourse. In contrast, the well-preserved monuments and sculptures of Sarnath and Mathura have become emblematic of early Indian Buddhist art, often overshadowing Kaushambi's parallel innovations. Reviving interest in Kaushambi's relics and contextualizing its stylistic interplay with neighbouring regions could illuminate its unique role in bridging artistic traditions across the Gangetic Plain, offering a more holistic understanding of India's cultural and religious heritage.

R.N. Misra, who has argued for Kaushambi to be "substantially vindicated" as an early school of art (1978: 311; 1994: 77) due to its competence in developing an independent school of art influenced by various factors and art evidence, states that Kaushambi, situated in *madhyadesha*¹, with Kannauj and Ahichchhatra to the north and Varanasi and Sarnath to the east, facilitated the movement of art throughout the region. The present study assesses the significance of Kaushambi in comparison to other prominent Buddhist art sites, particularly Mathura and Sarnath. It aims to establish Kaushambi as a key center for early Buddhist art and architecture, which played a crucial role in the evolution of ancient Buddhist visual culture. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore Kaushambi's contribution to the dissemination of art and culture through trade routes and commercial activities, suggesting potential economic and co-development partnerships (Map 2).

This study aims to identify indicators of the 'Indianization' of art that occurred, particularly at Kaushambi, transforming the form and identity of Buddhist art for subsequent centuries. The objectives are partly based on existing research gaps related to the evidence of art at Kaushambi. The movement of art, artists, and guilds in this context is invigorating, as it contributes to achieving the objectives.

The notion that Kaushambi played a multifaceted role in the evolution and propagation of early Buddhist art and religious influence is a key hypothesis of this study. Specifically, it posits that Kaushambi may have served as an independent centre for the production and dissemination of Buddhist canonical art, exhibiting distinct stylistic characteristics in its stone and terracotta artefacts that diverged from the established traditions of Mathura and Sarnath.

To assess the validity of the proposed postulation, it is essential to contextualize ancient Kaushambi and its material culture within a comprehensive historical analysis. With this in mind, an extensive literature review is undertaken using available sources to elucidate its cultural background. During data compilation, it became evident that the predominant literature emphasizes Kaushambi's archaeological identity, with only a limited number discussing its significance as a site of remarkable art production (Kala 1950; Misra 1994; Stone 2007; Tripathi 2003).

Etymology and Literary Allusions to its Buddhist Connection

Kaushambi, a significant site in the Ganga Valley, served as the capital of the Vatsa Janapada, boasting extensive trade connections (c. 6th century BCE) due to its proximity to other prosperous *janapadas* such as Surasena and Panchala to the west, Koshala to the north, Kashi to the east, and Chedi to the south. It is said that Buddha visited the regions between Gaya and Kaushambi, where He taught the four noble truths to his disciples and congregations (Kosambi 1977: 109–11). The *Dhammapadattakatha* claims that King Udayana constructed the Ghositarama with the assistance of Kaushambi's treasurer, Ghoshaka (Ghosh 1963:16). Additional contemporary Buddhist establishments in Kaushambi, built by associates of Ghoshaka, such as Kukkuta and Pavarika, are discussed in Pali literature and referred to as Kukkutarama and Pavarikambavana (Ghosh 1963: 16; Chakrabarti 1997: 195). Some sources refer to the three as King Udayana's ministers in the Vatsa country (Kern 1896:34). Faxian stated that the distance between Sarnath and Kaushambi was approximately 13 *yojanas*, or about 146 km, while Xuanzang described Kaushambi as a prominent market town that thrived during the Buddha's lifetime, a point also supported by the later text *Buddhaghosha*, which refers to the three banker associates—Ghosita, Kukkuta, and Pavarika.

The *Suttas* refer to four monasteries in Kaushambi: Ghositarama, Kukkutarama, Pavarikarama, and Badarikarama (Ireland 1976: 108). The prominence of Ghositarama monastery is implied by the fact that, apart from one, all the *Suttas* (SL VI, 31) were delivered there (Ireland 1976: 108). Ireland has compiled a comprehensive list of *Suttas* from the *Digha Nikaya*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, and *Anguttara Nikaya*, which explicitly mention the Buddha's residence at Ghositarama several times (Ireland 1976: 108-111). The *Vinaya Mahavagga* also recounts a schism that occurred at Kaushambi. R.C. Sharma asserts that after around 10,000 monks attended a separate council in Kaushambi, this schism ultimately led to the division between the Vinaya and traditional *dhamma* followers of Buddhism following the second Buddhist Council at Vaishali (1984: 37). These literary allusions highlight the significance of Kaushambi in preserving and promoting Buddhism after the Buddha's death.

The *Paramatthajotika*, a significant Pali commentary, elucidates the origins of Kaushambi, asserting that the city was named after the sage Kosamba, who resided there (Law 1939: 2). This etymological account suggests that Kaushambi was once a religious settlement centered around the sage's hermitage, with urban growth emerging from this core. The interpretation offers a framework for understanding Kaushambi's early development as a site of both religious and urban significance. The *Papançasudani*

commentary to the *Majjhimanikaya* presents lesser-known onomastics for the city; numerous large and majestic margosa trees (*Azadirachta indica*), known as *Kosammarukkha*, flourished in and around the city, thereby providing its present nomenclature of Kaushambi (*Kosambiyasuttavannana* v.491 as cited in Upasak 1978: 370). Kaushambi is described as a country with its capital "evidently named Kaushambi" by Xuanzang in the *Si-Yu-Ki* (Law 1939: 3). The Buddhist legend of *Bakkula*, which describes Kaushambi as being on the banks of the Yamuna, also implies that the waters of the Yamuna flowed through the Ganga, allowing a fish to carry a child to Benares (Varanasi) who fell into the Yamuna near Kaushambi (Law 1939: 3-4).

Kaushambi: The Host of Buddha and His Disciples

Kaushambi hosted Buddha and his principal disciples on numerous occasions, most notably at the Ghositarama monastery. Faxian records that this country (Kaushambi) had a *vihara* "called Ghoshiravana (the garden of Ghoshira), in which Buddha formerly dwelt" (Beal I: p. lxxviii, as cited in Law 1939: 252). However, Xuanzang states that Ghositarama was situated outside the city (Kaushambi), on the south-eastern side, alongside an Ashoka tope of 200 feet in height, and records, "besides this tope was a place with traces of (...) the Four Past Buddhas, and another hair and nail relic tope." (Watters 1904: 369). Xuanzang also mentions a two-storey building to the south-east of this monastery that featured a brick upper chamber where Vasubandhu resided while composing the *Wei-shih-lun* to refute Hinayanists and non-Buddhists (Watters 1904: 370). The *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN) recounts Ananda's stay at 'Ghosita's Park' in Kaushambi, where the eponymous Ghosita converses with him (SN 35. 129 (6), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1199). The text alludes to Buddha's residence in Kaushambi, stating, "(...) the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambi in a *simsapa* grove"² (SN 56. 31 (1), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1857; Oldenberg 1882: 204). In other verses, the *Samyutta Nikaya* directly mentions Buddha's dwelling at Ghosita Park in Kaushambi, as attested on two separate occasions. In one instance, Pindola Bharadvaja declares final knowledge, while in the other, the Buddha addresses the *bhikkhus* (SN 48. 49 (9), 48. 53 (3), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1692 & 1696). The Pali text references a meeting between Pindola Bharadvaja and King Udena (Udayana) in Ghosita's Park, Kaushambi (SN 35. 127 (4), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1197). Other prominent monks mentioned as residing in Ghosita's Park include Kamabhu, Udayi (the son of a brahmin from Kapilavastu), Upavana, and Sariputta (SN 35. 233 (6), 35. 234 (7), 46. 8 (8), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1231-32). A brahmin (Unnabha) is transformed into a lay follower by Ananda during a discourse at Ghosita Park in Kaushambi (SN 51. 15 (5), Bodhi trans., ed. 2000: 1732).

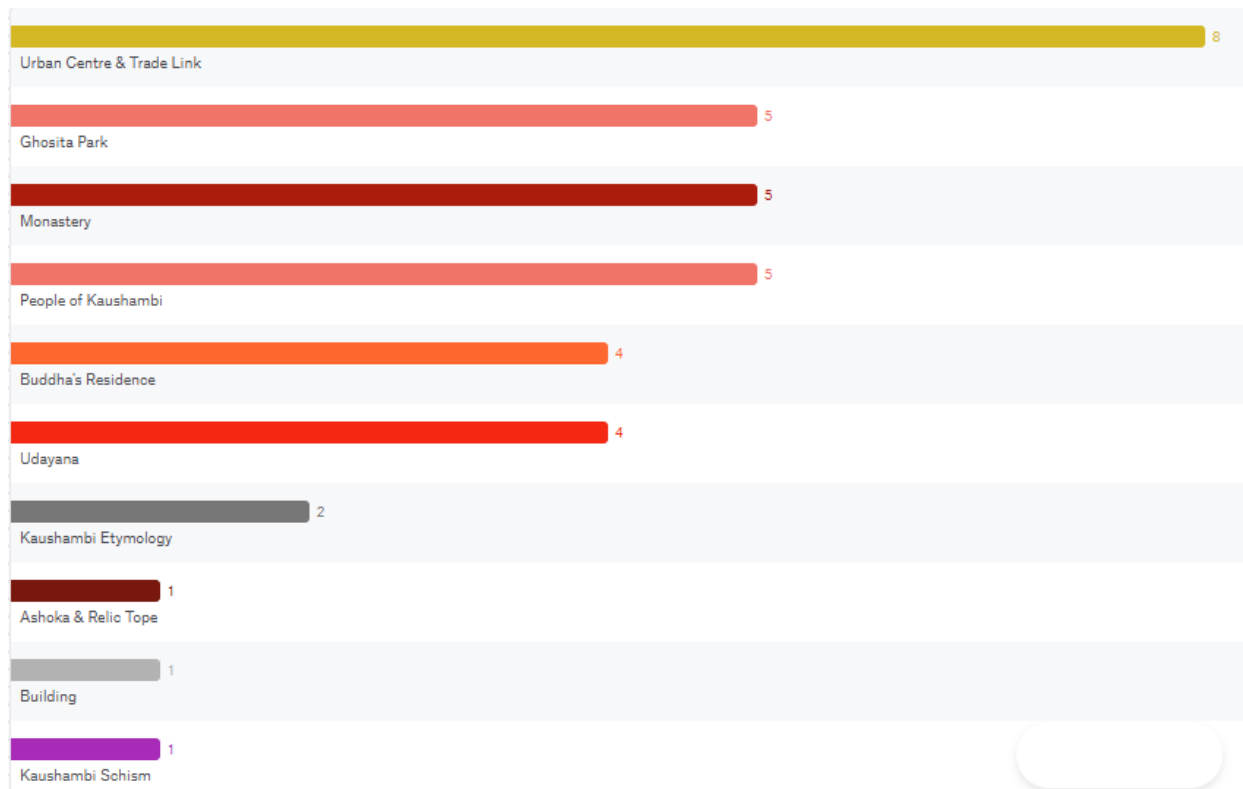
Kaushambi is consistently portrayed as a prominent center of early Buddhist activity in literature derived from various Buddhist texts and commentaries. The city is eternally linked with the Buddha and his notable disciples, particularly at the Ghositarama monastery, which underscores its importance as a site of religious practice and instruction. These literary allusions (as coded in Table 1 and Graph 1) establish a solid foundation for understanding the significance of Kaushambi in the early Buddhist context, facilitating an analysis of its material culture and the archaeological evidence that highlights its historical importance.

Table 1: Analysis of Buddhist Texts regarding Kaushambi

<i>Quotations</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Text</i>
King Udayana built the Ghositarama with the help of Kaushambi's treasurer, Ghoshaka	Udayana; Monastery; People of Kaushambi	<i>Dhammapadatthakatha</i>
constructed by colleagues of Ghoshaka, such as Kukkuta and Pavarika, are discussed in Pali literature and are referred to as Kukkutarama and Pavarikambavana	People of Kaushambi; Monastery	Pali Literature

<i>Quotations</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Text</i>
Some sources refer to the three as King Udayana's ministers in the Vatsa country	People of Kaushambi; Udayana	Pali Literature
Faxian stated that the distance between Sarnath and Kaushambi was approximately 13 <i>yojanas</i> , or about 146 km	Urban Centre & Trade Link	Faxian
Xuanzang described Kaushambi as a prominent market town that thrived during the Buddha's lifetime	Urban Centre & Trade Link	Xuanzang
<i>Buddhaghosha</i> , which refers to the three banker associates—Ghosita, Kukkuta, and Pavarika.	People of Kaushambi	<i>Buddhaghosha</i>
The <i>Suttas</i> refer to four monasteries in Kaushambi: Ghositarama, Kukkutarama, Pavarikarama, and Badarikarama	Monastery	<i>Suttas</i>
The prominence of the Ghositarama monastery is suggested by the notion that, except for one, all the <i>Suttas</i> (SL VI, 31) were delivered there	Monastery	<i>Suttas</i>
Buddha's residence at Ghositarama is explicitly mentioned several times	Buddha's Residence	<i>Digha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, and Anguttara Nikaya</i>
<i>Vinaya Mahavagga</i> also mentions a schism that took place at Kaushambi.	Kaushambi Schism	<i>Vinaya Mahavagga</i>
city was named after the sage Kosamba, who resided there	Kaushambi Etymology	<i>Paramatthajotika</i>
large and majestic margosa trees, named <i>Kosammarukkha</i> , flourished in and around the city	Kaushambi Etymology	<i>Papancasudani</i> commentary to the <i>Majjhimanikaya</i>
country with its capital "evidently named Kaushambi"	Urban Centre & Trade Link	Xuanzang
"Ghoshiravana (the garden of Ghoshira), in which Buddha formerly dwelt"	Buddha's Residence	Faxian
Ghositarama, located outside the city (Kaushambi)	Monastery	Xuanzang
Ashoka tope of 200 feet in height, records, "besides this tope was a place with traces of (...) the Four Past Buddhas, and another hair and nail relic tope."	Ashoka & Relic Tope	Xuanzang
two- storey building to the south-east of this monastery with a brick upper chamber where Vasubandhu resided	Building; People of Kaushambi	Xuanzang
Ananda's stay at 'Ghosita's Park' in Kaushambi	Ghosita Park	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambi in a simsapa grove"	Buddha's Residence	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
Buddha's dwelling at Ghosita Park in Kaushambi, as attested to on two separate occasions	Ghosita Park; Buddha's Residence	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
meeting between Pindola Bharadvaja and King Udena (Udayana) in Ghosita's Park, Kaushambi	Ghosita Park; Udayana	Pali Literature
monks mentioned as residing in Ghosita's Park	Ghosita Park	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
a discourse at Ghosita Park in Kaushambi	Ghosita Park	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
Kaushambi as one of the halting stations on a route that led travellers to Saket and Shravasti	Urban Centre & Trade Link	<i>Sutta Nipatta</i>
a halting station, was located next to Kaushambi when travelling towards Vidisha from Kaushambi	Urban Centre & Trade Link	<i>Sutta Nipatta</i>
Kaushambi as one of the six major cities of northern India during the time of the Buddha	Urban Centre & Trade Link	<i>Mahaparinibbana Sutta</i>
traders who held a strong belief in the <i>Tathagatha</i>	Urban Centre & Trade Link	<i>Mahaparinibbana Sutta</i>
Buddha traversed the town of Bhaddavatika during his journey from Shravasti to Kaushambi.	Urban Centre & Trade Link	<i>Apayimhavagga</i>
Bhaddavatika as a female elephant of King Udena (Udayana) from Kaushambi	Udayana	<i>Vinaya Mahavagga</i>

Table 1 shows the codes and their respective quotations (repetitions omitted) that represent the content analyzed in Buddhist texts discussed in this paper. This data has been presented as Graph 1.



Graph 1: Analysis of content in Buddhist texts regarding Kaushambi (Graph generated using ATLAS.ti)

Archaeological Sources

Excavation report and related secondary sources

The literature review on the archaeological site of Kaushambi, encompassing the excavation report and related secondary sources, illustrates that Kaushambi possesses a distinct archaeological identity that has evolved throughout its ancient history, particularly evident during the second phase of urbanization when compared to other *madhyadesha* sites. Alexander Cunningham was the first to discover the archaeological site of Kaushambi in 1861. N.G. Majumdar (Archaeological Survey of India) conducted excavations there in 1937-38, although the results have not been published. G.R. Sharma (University of Allahabad) conducted excavations at the site from 1949 to 1965, during which he identified its cultural connections with central and other western Indian sites, notably Navdatoli and Kathiawar (Sharma 1960: 6). Between 1500 and 1100 BCE, nearly "30 types of analogous" pottery were uncovered in Kaushambi by G.R. Sharma. His findings suggest that the identification of specific painted pottery in Navdatoli indicates a link to Iran (1500-1100 BCE; Sharma 1960: 6-7). G.R. Sharma noted the fortifications and various pottery styles at Kaushambi, asserting they bore resemblance to 'Harappan models' from western India (1960: 7) and stated that the fortifications at Kaushambi date back to two structural periods prior to the emergence of PGW.

G. R. Sharma, who excavated the southeastern section of the fortification in 1952, uncovered the well-known Buddhist complex, Ghositarama (Sharma 1960; Dikshit and Rai, n.d.) (Figure 1). The findings corresponded with the Pali literary texts that refer to a Ghositarama monastery at the site. Moreover, this complex was excavated between 1954 and 1958, revealing the remains of Buddhist edifices, votive inscriptions, and monastic seals. The results indicate a complex system of fortifications along the left bank of the Yamuna, establishing a foundation for a semicircle surrounded by ancient ramparts and moats (Sharma 1960: 24). The material evidence compellingly demonstrates Kaushambi's

cultural affiliations with other regions during this period. Nevertheless, most conclusions drawn by G.R. Sharma, including the Harappan allegories and the chronology of the Kaushambi fortifications, were later questioned by B.B. Lal, who elaborated on these findings in "Kaushambi Revisited" (2017) with insights from the writings of K.V. Soundara Rajan, A. Ghosh, and K.K. Sinha. Contrary to G.R. Sharma's assertion that the Kaushambi Fort was built during the reign of the legendary King Udayana, B.B. Lal maintained that it was constructed later in antiquity, specifically after the 12th century CE.

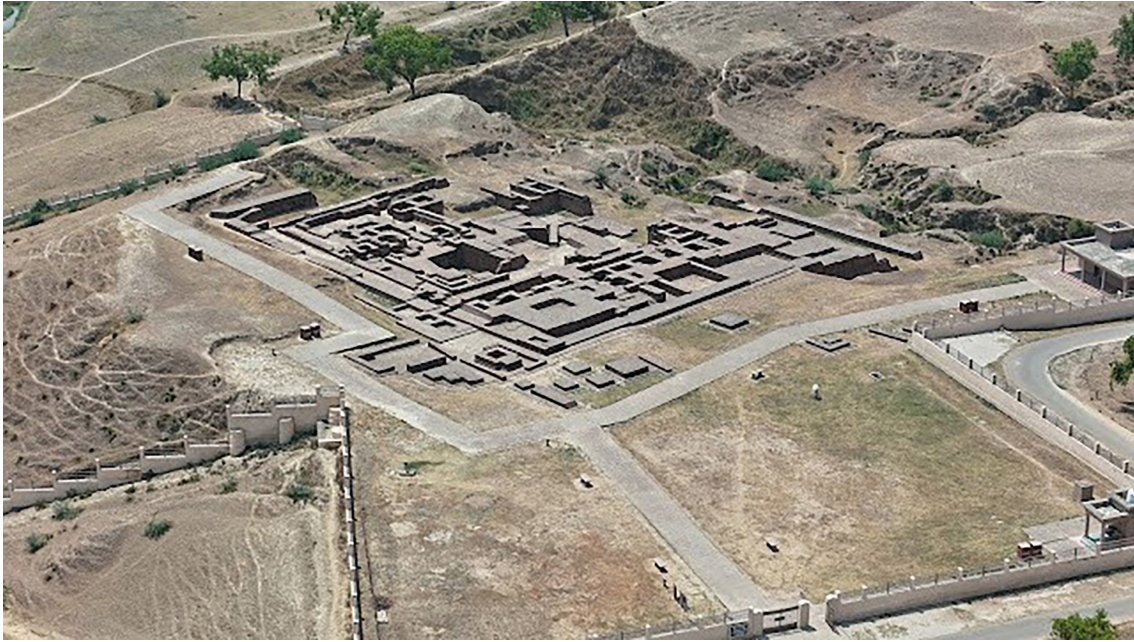
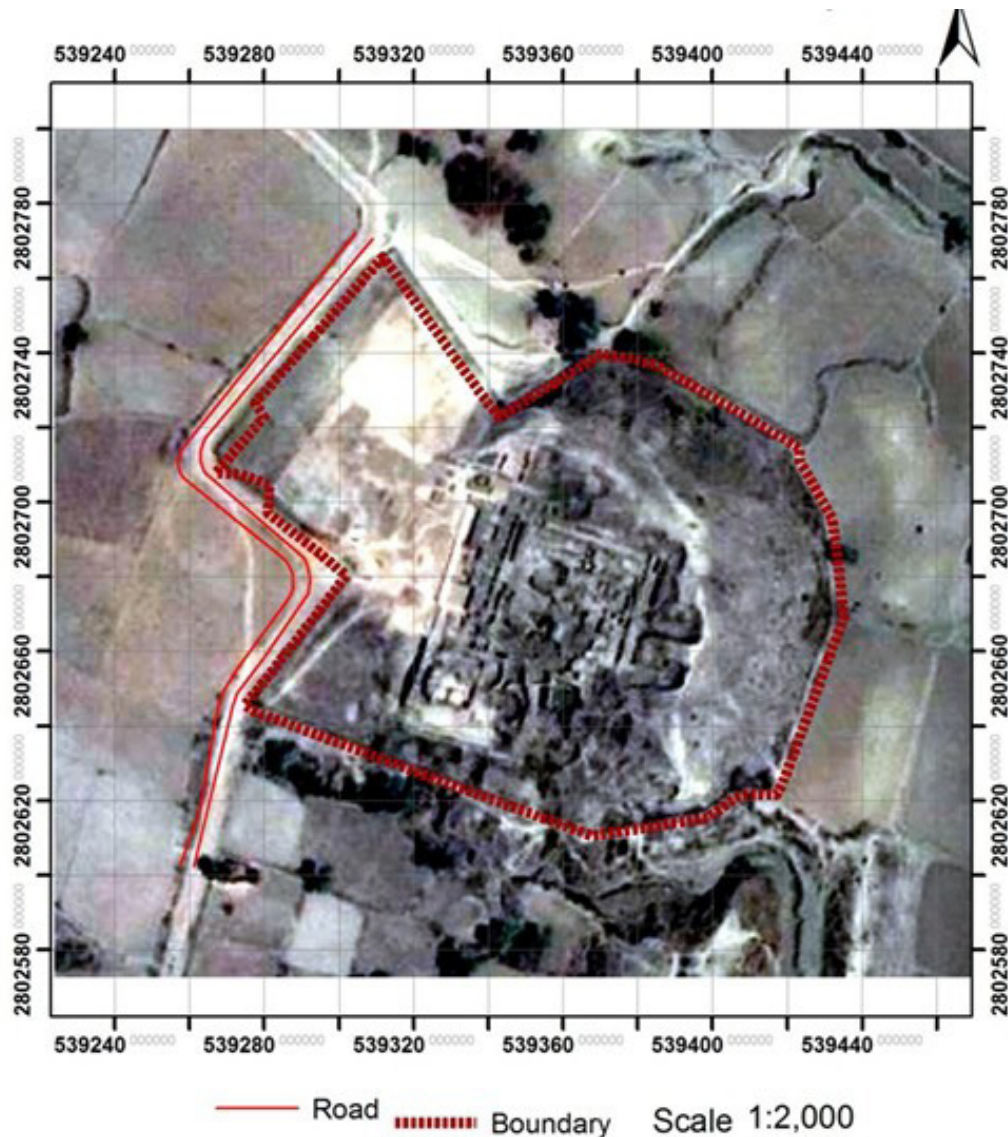


Figure 1: Ghositarama monastery ruins, Courtesy: Nalanda-insatiableinoffering.blogspot.com: 2024

A project entitled "Application of Modern Technologies to the Study of Past" was initiated by a collaborative team from the University of Allahabad and IIT Kanpur in 2008-09. This project aimed to investigate Kaushambi using innovative geoinformatics tools. The report on UNESCO's website includes GIS (Geographical Information System) maps for the Ashokan pillar and the Ghositarama monastery (Map 3), and it states that the Archaeological GIS for Kaushambi is currently in progress. Moreover, other excavations have also been conducted in several notable areas of the site. Adjacent to the Ashokan pillar, a segment of the urban residential zone was uncovered. The Ghositarama monastery revealed significant findings; the Defence area, the Eastern Gateway, and the tower in the north-eastern quadrant were meticulously explored as well. Furthermore, the Stone Fortress Palace served as a primary focus of the archaeological investigations. *Stupas*, *viharas*, apsidal temples, and Hariti temples are all located within the fortified city.

Urban Existence and Trade Links

The reasoning behind the existence of such archaeological structures is supported by the extensive trade routes prevalent in the ancient history of urban Kaushambi. The *Sutta Nipatta* recounts the journey of Bavari's disciples from Paithan (Patitthana) to Rajagriha, mentioning Kaushambi as one of the halting stations on a route that led travellers to Saket and Shravasti (Law 1939: 4). According to the *Sutta*, Vana, a halting station, was situated next to Kaushambi when travelling towards Vidisha from Kaushambi (*Suttanipata* VV. 1011-1013, as cited in Law 1939: 4). B.C. Law designates Kaushambi as one of the six major cities of northern India during the time of the Buddha (1939), in accordance with references



Map 3. GIS map for Ghositarama monastery, Courtesy: Dikshit and Rai: n.d.

in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* (1939). The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* states that this city hosted many noble, wealthy individuals, Brahmins, and traders who held a strong belief in the *Tathagatha*. A *Jataka* commentary mentions that the Buddha traversed the town of Bhaddavatika during his journey from Shravasti to Kaushambi (*Apayimhavagga*, 1 as cited in Fausboll 1877: 360). Conversely, the *Vinaya Mahavagga* depicts Bhaddavatika as a female elephant of King Udena (Udayana) from Kaushambi, through which Jivaka departed from Ujjayini for Kaushambi (Cowell 1907; *Vinaya Mahavagga* 277 as cited in Law 1939: 4).

In terms of Kaushambi's urban existence, the construction of a palace from burnt bricks, akin to that of Ujjain, represents one of the earliest records from the middle Ganga valley (Basant 2000:154). Silver punch-marked coins featuring the Ujjain symbol have been discovered in Kaushambi, dating back to the third century BCE. The circulation of coins promoted trade and related transactions, resulting in improved connectivity in remote regions. The emergence of coins during this period concurrently indicated the complex exchange processes in trade and the rise of trading guilds in northern India. The growth of numerous bankers and moneylenders was clearly influenced by urban economies, particularly through merchant guilds.

During the Mauryan period, trade routes traversing from west to east crossed the Ganga-Yamuna doab, passing through Sankissa, Kaushambi, Varanasi, and Pataliputra (Neelis 2011: 198). These sites experienced distinct cultural development (see Map 2). Kaushambi and Mathura were connected by an additional southern route that followed the course of the Yamuna River (Motichandra 1977: 77; Chakrabarti 2007: 58-88). This route was extensively used from the first to the third centuries CE, enhancing the growing significance of Kaushambi as a commercial centre during the Shaka and Kushana reigns (Neelis 2011: 198). Additionally, it was linked to the central Ganga route.

Jason Neelis argues that the *Parayanavagga* of the *Sutta Nipata* describes the northward journey of Bavari's 16 disciples from their time at the Godavari River, possibly aligning with the *Dakshinapatha*.

(...) they all set out towards the North, firstly to Patitthana of Alaka, then to Mahissati, and to Ujjeni, Gonaddha, Vedisa, (the place) called Vanasa, and to Kosambi too, to Saketa, and Savatthi, best of cities (...) (Norman, trans. 1985: 161 as cited in Neelis 2011: 209).

Numismatic discoveries from the era of the Shunga, Kanvas, and Mitras at Kaushambi illustrate their influence in *madhyadesha*. Consequently, the establishment of Buddhist monastic complexes along these trade routes intensified, as regional rulers, merchants, and other benefactors allocated resources to uphold the sanctity of sites previously recognized in Buddhist literature as significant to the life of the Buddha.

Epigraphical Sources

The Ashokan pillars in Prayagraj and Kaushambi, along with the Kara inscription of Pratihara king Yashapala, feature the name of Kaushambi (Sharma 1960: 25; Ghosh 1935: 95). The pillar at Prayagraj, commonly referred to as '*Prayag Prashasti*,' stands within the premises of Allahabad Fort as a single shaft of polished sandstone, rising to a height of 35 feet. The Kaushambi edict (Schism edict), first noted by Cunningham, is addressed to the *Mahamatras* of Kosambi (Kaushambi in Sanskrit), while the Queen's edict pertains to the deeds of Ashoka's second wife, Karuvaki (Hultsch 1925: xix; Cunningham 1877: 37-41). The pillar bears inscriptions by Gupta ruler Samudragupta (*Prayag Prashasti*), the Birbal Magha Mela inscription, and another by Jahangir.

An inscription accompanying the red sandstone Bodhisattva figure from Kaushambi of the Kushana period refers to the place as the "promenade of the Buddha" (Ghosh 1963: 16), suggesting that Kaushambi was regarded as the city where the Buddha often visited and stayed³:

1 [Ma]h[a]rajasya Kan[i]shkasa sarhva[tsa]r[e] 2 h[e] 2 di 8 Bodhisatvo(tsvarn) prat[a]-

2 [shtha]payati bhikhuni Buddhamitra trepit[i]ika bhagavato Buddhassa cha[m]kame

Translating to: In the year 2 of *Maharaj* Kanishka, on the 8th day of the 2nd month of Hamanta, Buddhist nun Buddhamitra, who is well-versed in the *Tripitaka*, establishes this image of the Bodhisattva at the promenade of the Lord Buddha (Goswami 1942: 212).

Another inscription, located 32 meters east of Kaushambi's Main *Stupa*, was discovered horizontally and compartmentalized on reddish sandstone of a "central Indian variety," not specifically Mathura, and was first studied by A. Ghosh (1963: 14) (Figure 2). Its base and height dimensions are 1x10", which is nearly square. Ghosh asserts that the design space was dominated by floral motifs and dwarf human figures, along with a two-line inscription that followed a pair of footmarks at its centre. He mentions a fragment of a human figure holding a fan-like object under his left arm, which is also preserved in the present inscription. The footprints exhibit diverse symbols, including a spoked wheel on the sole, a *swastika*, and a spouted vase on the toes. The left part of the inscription is legible and written in Prakrit, using Brahmi characters dating back to the first century CE. According to Ghosh, the inscription may

have been composed during the early Kushana period, as he compares the palaeographic identity with other existing specimens from the Ganga-Yamuna doab, such as Kaushambi.

The text of this inscription reads thus:

1. *Bhayamtasa Dharasa amtevasisa bhikusha Phagulasa (...)*
2. *Budh-avase Ghoshit-arame sava-Budhanam pujaye sila ka[rita] (...)*

Translated as

1. Slab has been caused to be made (...) of the monk Phagula, the disciple of the reverend Dhara.
2. At the residence of the Buddha in the Ghoshit-arama for the worship of all Buddhas.

A monk named Phagula, a disciple of the reverend Dhara, is associated with an individual who facilitated the construction and installation of the present slab at Ghositarama, the residence of the Buddha (Ghosh, 1963: 15).

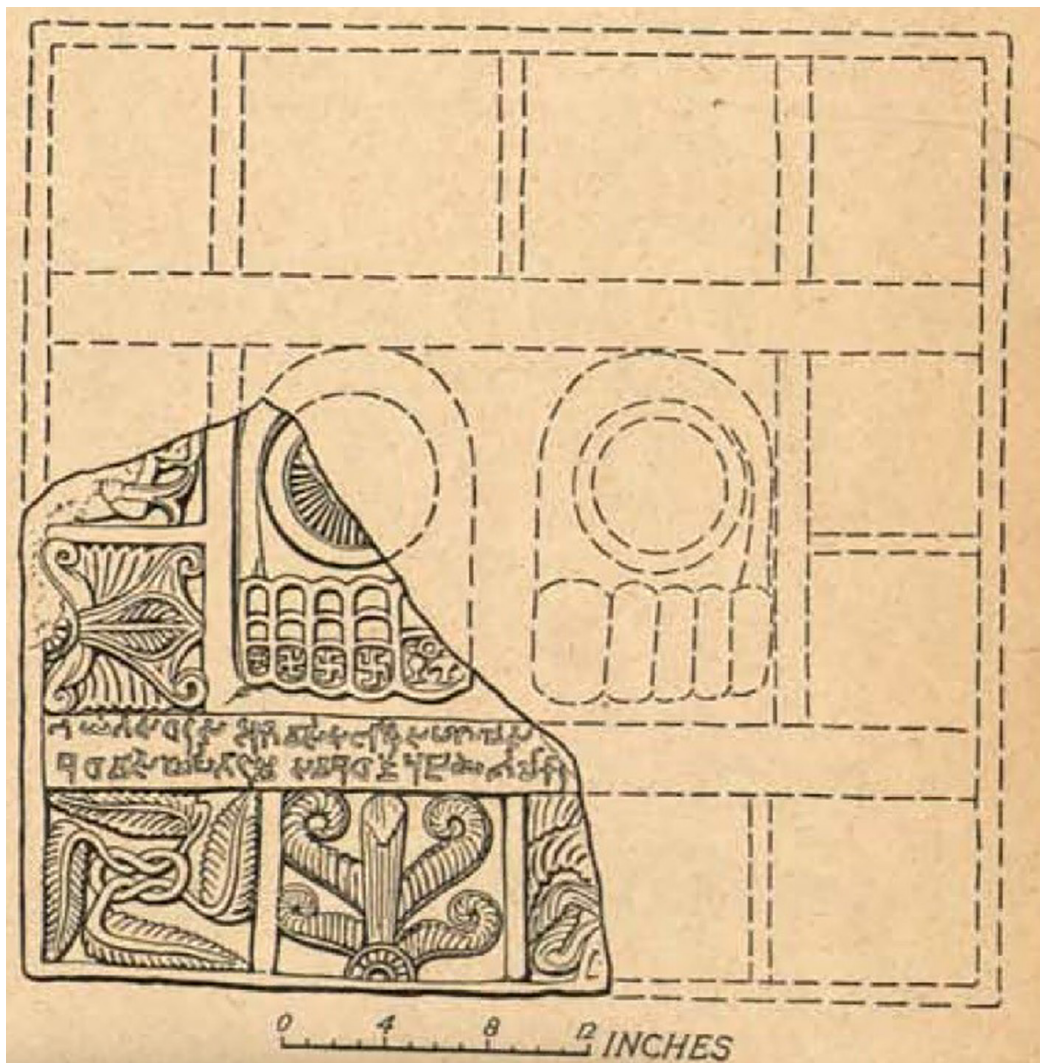


Figure 2: Inscribed slab from Kaushambi, Courtesy: Ghosh 1963: 16.

These accounts attest to Kaushambi's significance as a prominent center in the early Buddhist realm. Although scholars have proposed that the Kaushambi region was likely under the control of the Pratihara kings of Kannauj by the 11th century CE, it also became an administrative sub-division of

Kannauj. However, it lost its significance as a political unit during the reign of Yashapala (Kala 1950: 10). The Kara inscription serves as evidence of Kaushambi's association with the Pratihara rulers of Kannauj during the 11th century (Ghosh 1935: 83-105; see Annexure II for the inscription).

Early Sculptural Art

The origins of Buddhist image-making and worship have long been debated among art historians. Prior to the criticisms from art historians Lewis R. Lancaster, Padmanabh S. Jaini, John Huntington, and others, who questioned the lack of a method for examining textual evidence regarding the making of Buddha images, arguments revolved around Foucher's postulations of 'aniconism'. While Coomaraswamy identified Yaksha conventions of the pre-Christian era as the formal prototype for the Mathura Buddha image, J.E. Van Lohuizen-de-Leeuw preferred the 'king-type' prototype (Leeuw 2007: 38). Leeuw further navigates the "flaw in Foucher's theory" when she presents her analysis of a broken railing pillar, originally published by S.C. Kala in 1946 (Leeuw 2007: 38). This fragment, discovered at Kaushambi and presently in the Allahabad Museum, depicts a narrative scene of the Buddha's birth, with Queen Maya giving birth to the future Buddha in the sala grove at Lumbini (Leeuw 2007: 38). It is now widely accepted that the Buddhist image convention was preceded by an extensive line of development that existed prior to the disputed "earliest" stone images (Huntington 1985: 23). These clay images are significant in suggesting the ritualistic aspect of image-making, as elaborated in the literature. The *Jataka* texts, for instance, studied to understand common life in ancient India, mention the creation and rich demand for these clay images. Banabhatta in *Harshacharita* (7th century CE) refers to clay-modellers as *Lepyakara* and *Pustakrit*, whereas the craft of modelling was known as *Pustakarma* (see Agrawal 1964: 57 & 71; 1965: 308; Srivastava 1996: 3-7). The literary references to the modelling of images in ancient India provide ample evidence that has been attempted to corroborate with the material findings at Kaushambi, a region noted by scholars as one of the key terracotta production centres in the middle Ganga valley.

At Kaushambi, numerous discoveries of moulded plaques have showcased the fertile imagination of its artists, often reflecting typical aspects of contemporary society. Objects ranging from animals and plants to the lives of local rulers⁵, winged lions (*sapaksha simha*), pastimes, and dancing were created (Kala 1950: 14). The female figurine is among the most prolific terracotta pieces, not only in Kaushambi but across the entire Gangetic plain, including Mathura, Chandraketugarh, Bulandibagh, Buxar, etc. (Kala 1950; Ahuja 2000: 90).

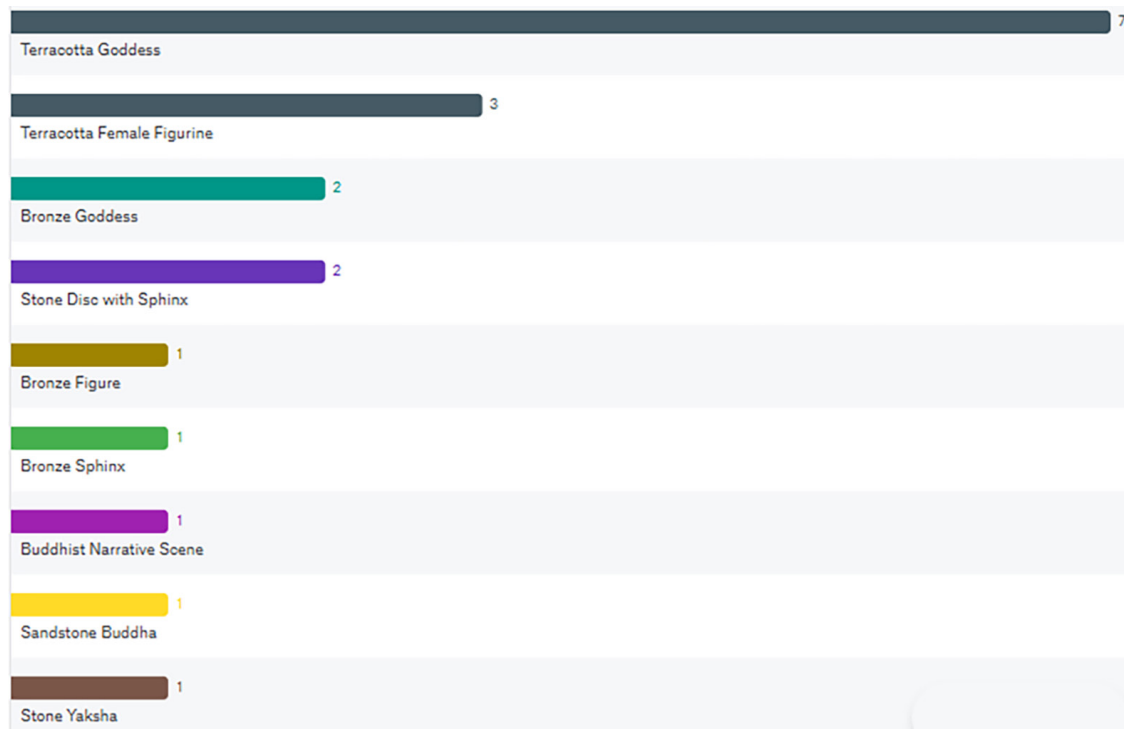
Therefore, the following section analyzes the sculptural art of ancient Kaushambi, highlighting its stylistic features, iconographic representations, and significance within the context of early Indian art. This analysis will provide a valuable material addendum to the literary descriptions, enabling a more comprehensive reconstruction of Kaushambi's role in the history of Buddhist art and culture (refer to Table 2 and Graph 2).

Table 2: Art remains from Kaushambi as discussed in literature

<i>Quotations</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Reference</i>
fragment, discovered at Kaushambi and presently in the Allahabad Museum, shows a narrative scene of the Buddha's birth	Buddhist Narrative Scene	Leeuw 2007: 38; Kala 1946
female figurine is among the most prolific terracotta	Terracotta Female Figurine	Kala 1950; Ahuja 2000: 90
local form of 'Lakshmi's' detailed moulds from Kaushambi	Terracotta Goddess	Ahuja 2000: Figures 3.75, 3.76
a goddess on a lotus surrounded by a railing	Terracotta Goddess	Desai 2013: 83
also in the museum collection, are written about as Sri Lakshmi	Terracotta Goddess	Ahuja 2000: 115

<i>Quotations</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Reference</i>
hollow terracotta image of Hariti	Terracotta Goddess	Stone 2007: 57; Desai 2013: 86
Gajalakshmi, both found from Buddhist temple at Kaushambi	Terracotta Goddess	Desai 2013: 86
medallion from Kaushambi at the Allahabad Museum depicts Gajalakshmi standing on a lotus, flanked by elephants	Terracotta Goddess	Ahuja 2000: Figure 3.82
female terracotta figurine, resembling the post-Mauryan terracotta art	Terracotta Female Figurine	Sharma 1960: 93
Moulds of the female with fish variety are also found from Kaushambi	Terracotta Goddess; Terracotta Female Figurine	Ahuja 2000: 109; Desai 2013: 87
a bronze figure depicting a seated ascetic resembling Maitreya	Bronze Figure	Stone 2007: 57
bronze from Kaushambi that depicts a seated goddess with a lion's head	Bronze Goddess	Stone 2007: 60
extraordinary bronze figurine of a goddess, said to be from Kaushambi, is placed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	Bronze Goddess	Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 58; Ahuja 2000: 114
the bronze sphinx, also from Kaushambi, and placed at Asian Art Museum, Berlin	Bronze Sphinx	Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 56
One of them contains two rows of petals with a horned sphinx	Stone Disc with Sphinx	Chandra 1970: 39-40; Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 64
decorated with lizards on one band and a sphinx in other	Stone Disc with Sphinx	Chandra 1970: 39-40
representation of a seated sandstone Yaksha figure	Stone Yaksha	Virtual Museum of Images and Sounds (AIIS)
Buddha image from Mathura during the second year of Kanishka's reign	Sandstone Buddha	Ray 1975; Indian Archaeology: A Review 1956-57: Plate XXXVII A

Table 2 presents the codification of textual analysis of artefacts and sculptures from data published in literature discussed in this paper regarding Kaushambi. Graph 2 corresponds to this data.



Graph 2: Bar graph presenting the tenets of Kaushambi’s artistic culture focused in publications undertaken in this study. (Graph generated using ATLAS.ti)

Some Specimens of Terracotta Female Figurines

Early moulded plaques appear to feature various types of headgear and hair arrangements that art historians analyze to classify their identity. A local form of ‘Lakshmi’s’ detailed moulds from Kaushambi depicts the frontal standing goddess on a lotus, adorned with a headdress and five weapons (Ahuja 2000: Figures 3.75, 3.76). Such goddesses are referred to as ‘*Panchachuda*’ (one with five *ayudhas* or weapons in the form of hair-pins) by Dr. Devangana Desai to streamline the narrative; she also notes the prevalence of this type throughout the plains from Punjab to Bengal in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE (2013: 83).

A plaque from Kaushambi, in the Allahabad Museum, displays a goddess on a lotus, encircled by a railing, likely intended for worship (Desai 2013: 83) (Figure 3a). Very similar plaques (Figure 3b and c), also part of the museum collection, are referred to as Sri Lakshmi by Naman Ahuja, who suggests that the demarcation of a sacred space, induced by the “*vedika* or fence”, signifies the “remarkable continuity” in the iconography of the goddess, which can be compared to the counterparts in Sanchi and Bharhut stones (2000: 115). The identity of the goddess as Sri Lakshmi remains uncontested due to the methodical display of icons: V.S. Agrawal asserts that the iconography of Sri Lakshmi represents the goddess in a lotus forest (*kamal-van*), as a Padmini, whilst standing atop a lotus—her ‘*kamalasan*’; the water body surrounding her metaphorically contains the holy water that births the living world (Agrawal 1966: 56).

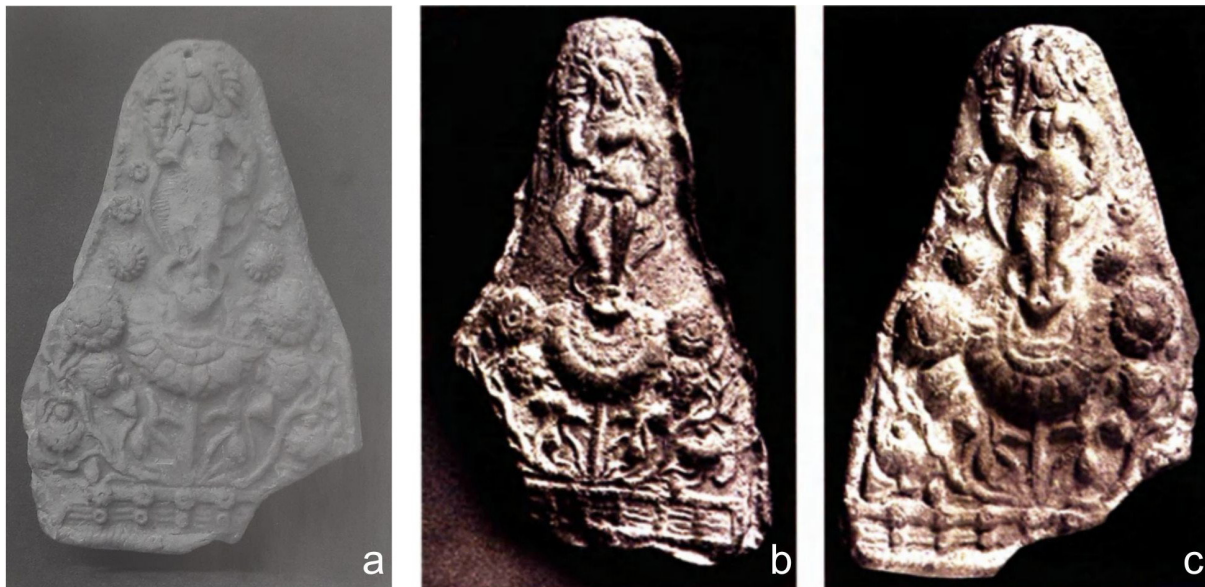


Figure 3: Terracotta plaques with ‘Sri Lakshmi’, Courtesy: Desai 2013: 83 (a); Ahuja 2000 (b and c)

Among other notable terracottas are the Buddhist goddess Hariti and Gajalakshmi, both discovered in a Buddhist temple at Kaushambi, dating back to about the 2nd – 3rd century CE (Desai 2013: 86). The hollow terracotta image of Hariti, seated and crafted from clay, was unearthed in the ‘Hariti’ shrine of the Ghositarama monastery (Figure 5c). Another medallion from Kaushambi, housed in the Allahabad Museum, portrays Gajalakshmi standing on a lotus, flanked by elephants (Ahuja 2000: Figure 3.82).

While some goddesses adorn their hair with weapons, others feature feathery or elaborate projections. A wide variety of identical pieces can be found between Kaushambi and other sites in the Gangetic plains; however, Kaushambi also preserves several distinctive specimens. A female terracotta figurine, resembling the post-Mauryan terracotta art of the Gangetic Valley, was discovered

near the offering stand of an "altar" (Figure 4) (Sharma 1960: 93). In her raised right hand, she holds a flower, and according to Sharma, the six braids visible on her head end with *trishula* and *ankusha* (93). He identified this female figurine as the goddess Sinivali, who was 'called upon to prepare the offering stand'.



Figure 4: Terracotta female figurine, Courtesy: Sharma, 1960: Figure 18

Moulds of the female with fish variety are also found in Kaushambi, displaying similarities to those from Chandraketurah and Mathura (Ahuja 2000: 109). Identified as *Vasudhara* by V.S. Agrawal, S.C. Kala supported the attribution made by Moti Chandra, suggesting they represent a variation of the *Anahita* goddess (Ahuja 2000: 109; also Desai 2013: 87). Naman Ahuja notes that while the identification of the goddess remains, it is worth considering that the sculptors adhered to an iconographic convention that was widespread in Northern and Eastern India (2000: 111).

‘Distinct Idiom’: Bronze Images

In 2007, Elizabeth Rosen Stone advocated for the sculptural art style that emerged in ancient Kaushambi by examining the attributes of a bronze figure depicting a seated ascetic resembling Maitreya (2007: 57). The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York currently holds this Kushana period figure, believed to be from Kaushambi (Fig 5a). Its design closely resembles a bronze from Kaushambi that depicts a seated goddess with a lion's head (Figure 5b) (2007: 60). Both figures are seated frontally and feature

pleated folds, with the right hand in *abhaya mudra*, oriented inward, as is typical of Mathura-Kushana imagery. Similar to the Yaksha figures from Kaushambi, these seated deities exhibit stylistically comparable representations in clay and stone. Such images suggest that the Gangetic Valley may have possessed a distinct idiom (Stone 2007: 73).



Figure 5a: Seated Ascetic (Maitreya?), from Kaushambi; b. Lion-headed seated deity from Kaushambi, placed in Allahabad Museum; c. Seated Hariti, Ghositarama Monastery. Courtesy: Stone 2007: 58-61

An extraordinary bronze figurine of a goddess, believed to be from Kaushambi, is displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 58; Ahuja 2000: 114). This figurine features weapons protruding from her hairdo, three on each side, much like their terracotta counterparts. Wessels-Mevissen compares this figurine to the bronze sphinx, also from Kaushambi, which is housed at the Asian Art Museum, Berlin (2019: 56). The presence of lotus pistils as the central protrusion on their heads and six lateral projections on each, along with their relatively small sizes, makes them comparable specimens worthy of attention. Considering that the sphinx measures roughly half the size of the goddess figurine, it leads to the assumption that the two figures share a similar cultural context (Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 59).

The winged and bearded male sphinx, with its human neck and head, “leonine body”, and small dimensions, has no apparent morphological parallels (Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 57). Although analogues for the composite creature were prevalent in northern India from the early period, no exact parallels can be traced for the bronze figure from Kaushambi. Two isolated sphinxes made of soapstone have been reported from Kaushambi, currently housed at the Allahabad Museum, both dating from the 3rd century BCE (Chandra 1970: 39-40). One of them features two rows of petals with a horned sphinx moving in a counter-clockwise direction, similar to the type found from the Murtaganj hoard (Chandra 1970: 39). The other is adorned with lizards on one band and a sphinx on the other, both in a clockwise direction. The composite creature in the first example is comparable to a fragment of a capital from Bharhut, which also depicts a sphinx (Wessels-Mevissen 2019: 64).

Kaushambi's distinct archaeological history persisted into the early historic period, culminating in the emergence of Buddhist art in the region. The cultural and political continuity of Kaushambi, combined with innovative trade, commerce, and urbanization, along with the rise of religious pluralism (Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism) and local cults, facilitated the establishment of institutionalised art practices in the region (Misra 1994: 77).

Stylistic Chronology

According to R.N. Misra, Kaushambi had a distinct artistic movement in terms of its "content, style, iconography, and chronology" (1994: 72). He attributes the origins of this identity to the post-Mauryan era in Kaushambi. G.R. Sharma categorized the terracotta artefacts unearthed in Kaushambi into three types: early hand-made, mould-made, and late hand-made (1960: 74). The mass production of terracotta elevated it to an "industrial" status during the post-Mauryan era, transforming it into *panya* or market commodities (Desai 1976: 558). Terracottas were in mass demand, which may have necessitated the use of moulding. Despite the persistence of dynastic popularization of subject themes, the terracotta from different regions was distinguished by variations in technical advancement and iconographic forms. Mathura and Kaushambi share many artistic similarities, including terracotta art, Yaksha figures, *stupas*, and relics. Based on these artefacts, Misra notes a stylistic shift at Kaushambi that differs from Mathura. He compares the railings of Kaushambi to those of Bharhut. The preliminary textual analysis suggests that label inscriptions are significantly absent at Kaushambi and are smaller in size with basic features. The treatment of figures implies that the stylistic chronology at Kaushambi is both prior to and distinct from that of Bharhut (Misra 1994: 81).

Interestingly, the artistic idioms of Mathura and Kaushambi are distinctly evident in their representations of Yaksha figures (Figure 6). The examples from Kaushambi illustrate diversity in both

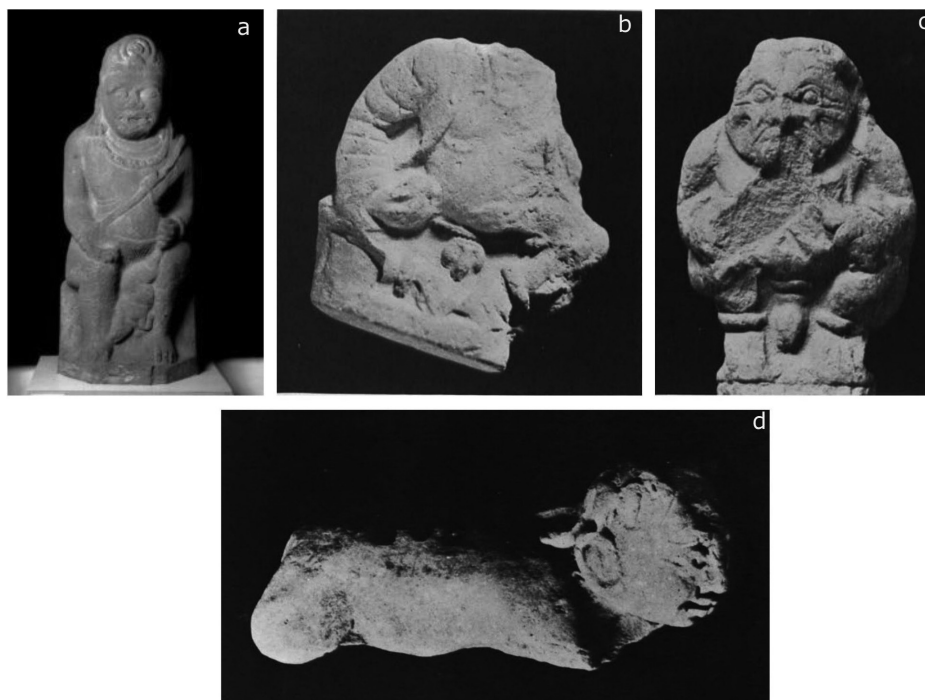


Figure 6a: Yaksha figure from Kaushambi, Sandstone, 137 x 59 cm, Allahabad Museum A. M. Acc. No. 69, Courtesy: American Institute of Indian Studies (Digitized with financial support from the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India) https://vmis.in/ArchiveCategories/collection_gallery_zoom?id=87&search=1&index=6248&searchstring=yaksha; b: Terracotta Yaksha figure from Kaushambi, Courtesy: Misra 1981: Figure 87; c: Terracotta Yaksha figure from Kaushambi, Courtesy: Misra 1981: Figure 88; d: Terracotta Yaksha figure from Kaushambi, Courtesy: Misra 1981: Figure 89

concept and structure, representing the early Manibhadra cult that protects the caravan (Misra 1994: 82). The iconographic representation of a seated sandstone Yaksha figure (Figure 6a) depicts him with a boar positioned between his legs, in contrast to the contemporary standing Yaksha figures from Mathura. This replicates the Yaksha terracotta forms from Kaushambi itself. The stone image retains the round faces and methodical, conservative formalism of its terracotta counterpart (see Figures 6c and 6d). S.K. Srivastava, in *'Terracotta Art in Northern India'*, collates evidence of moulds and concludes that the terracotta moulds from Kaushambi “bear the impression of figures that are identical to the stone figure” (1996: 27). The exceptional terracotta art from Kaushambi seems to surpass that of other sites in the middle Ganga Valley (Kala 1950: 13). S.C. Kala, who conducted extensive research on the terracottas of Kaushambi from 1931 to 1950, posits that the potter artists of Kaushambi utilized the soft, reddish clay, which is ideal for crafting images and is abundant in the Yamuna bed (1950: 13). The pliable clay facilitated the accurate reproduction of form and expression, enabling precise detail (Kala 1950: 13).

In the Magha⁶-Kushana period, Kaushambi maintained political connections with the northwestern territories⁷. It obtained a Buddha image from Mathura during the second year of Kanishka's reign, sculpted from the region's characteristic red sandstone (Ray 1975) (Figure 7). This image, as observed by distinguished scholars, bears an inscription (mentioned in the ‘Epigraphical Sources’ section of this paper). Its form and red stone material closely resemble the Bala Boddhisattva at Sarnath, which was dedicated by monk Bala in the third regnal year of Kanishka (Ghosh, N. 1935: xxii). The conservative



Figure 7: Standing Bodhisattva from Kaushambi, donated by nun Buddhmitra, measurement 113 x 40.5 cm, Allahabad Museum A. M. Acc. No. 68, Courtesy: AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF INDIAN STUDIES (Digitized with financial support from the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India) https://vmis.in/ArchiveCategories/collection_gallery_zoom?id=87&search=1&index=9039&searchstring=buddhamitra

Hinayana disciples “opposed” the facilitation of Buddha images, even though Buddhists later made *sui generis* Buddha images at Kaushambi.

The early images from the Kaushambi ateliers (beginning in the 3rd century CE) exhibit broad foreheads, prominent eyebrows in thin relief, half-open eyes (*ardhnamilita netra*), prominent cheeks, broad chins, elongated ears, thick protruding lips, and symmetrical faces (Pal 1994: 103).

Connection with Bhita Sculptural Workshops

The Kushana period facilitated the proliferation of terracotta for international trade and urban affluence (Desai 1976: 558). Apart from moulded terracotta for *nagaraka*⁸, ancestor portraiture, and household worship, portrait figures and heads of aristocrats and noblemen began to emerge in Kaushambi, Mathura, and Bhita (Desai 1976: 559). The analysis of ancient sculptures and artefacts reveals a significant aspect regarding the connection of sculptural workshops in the middle Ganga plains, emphasized by the presence of similar terracotta and sculptural forms between Kaushambi and Bhita, located about 70 km east of Kaushambi. Cunningham (1843: 46) was the first to write about Bhita. John Marshall subsequently excavated the site of Bhita in 1909–10, uncovering a prolific collection of terracotta and stone sculptures (1915: 71–80). The abundant supply of clay in significant quantities within the Doab region fostered the flourishing development of art at historical sites along the Ganga-Yamuna valley, such as Kaushambi and Bhita.

The study of terracotta art provides valuable insights into the socio-religious beliefs, clothing, jewellery, entertainment, and leisure activities of the time. The existence of specific terracotta figurines exhibiting foreign ethnic characteristics offers a clear insight into how local artists reacted to the arrival of diverse races in the area (Mukhopadhyay 1972: 76). One of the fascinating varieties discovered at Bhita is the princely figure, which appears to be quite popular (Figure 8). The figures, measuring 4 inches in height, are depicted in a squatting posture, adorned with an unbuttoned, long-sleeved coat and embellished with substantial ear ornaments, a necklace, a tiara, and a jewelled turban. They hold indistinct objects in their hands; in one well-preserved example, the figure is shown feeding a bird, most likely a parrot. Remarkably similar stone sculptures of uniform dimensions have been unearthed at Kaushambi and are presently part of the Indian Museum collection. This type appears to be prevalent at Kaushambi (Mukhopadhyay 1972: 76; Kala, S.C.: pp. 31 ff., Pl. XVII).



Figure 8: Terracotta Princely figures from Bhita, Kushana period, Courtesy: Mukhopadhyay 1972: Pl. 7

Bhita was a mercantile township. The gradual expansion of trade and commerce during the Kushana-Shunga and subsequent Gupta periods stimulated prosperity in art and culture in both townships, Kaushambi and Bhita. This relationship between the two exemplifies how ancient Indian townships developed into mutually beneficial areas. In this context, where sculptural workshops flourish, it is reasonable to conclude that the rivers, particularly the Yamuna, aided the spread of art and culture⁹.

During the Gupta period, the Kaushambi locus gained prominence, contributing to the development of a refined North Indian Gupta stylistic idiom in *madhyadesha* (Misra 1994: 85). Kaushambi produced the majority of its artistic output between 415 and 468 CE, succeeding Mathura but likely preceding the Sarnath School of Art (Misra 1994: 86). This early belted type, characterized by a smooth robe and a bare shoulder in Buddha's clothing, is observed in Kaushambi but is absent in large Gupta period examples from Sarnath¹⁰ (Figure 9). Williams opines that the Buddhist "hinterlands" between Mathura and Sarnath in the mid-fifth century were immersed in the concurrent styles of the Mathura school alongside independent local developments, with no true school of sculpture flourishing, with the probable exception of Kaushambi (Williams 1982: 81-82). The one bare shoulder (*ekanshik*) could be a result of a Kushana prototype, as conjectured by Williams, and probably dates to the 5th century CE (1982: 82). Finely carved *chhatras* are also abundant at Kaushambi, presumably dateable to the early Gupta period (Tripathi 2003: 110-111; Williams 1982: 36).

The earliest inscribed and dated artefacts from Sarnath include the Buddha image bearing the inscription of G.E. 154, corresponding to the era of Kumaragupta-



Figure 9: Sandstone Buddha image from Kaushambi, Courtesy: Indian Archaeology: A Review 1956-57: Plate XXXVII A

II (473-74 CE); the pedestal of a Buddha standing on a lotus, inscribed with Buddhagupta (G.E. 157, or 476 CE); and an additional inscription of similar chronology (Hargreaves 1920: 97-132). The prevalence of Kaushambi Buddhist art artefacts during and before these periods may be regarded as a potential precursor to the Sarnath school of art that flourished in the region during the Gupta and post-Gupta eras.

Conclusions

The paper presents literary and archaeological evidence supporting Kaushambi's widespread artistic production and historical significance. As Vatsa's capital, Kaushambi was an important administrative centre in the middle Ganga valley. The analysis of the art evidence, its origins, and evolution reveals the substantial role of Kaushambi as a distinct center of art production. The content of Buddhist literature, archaeological reports, and secondary literature was analyzed and presented to demonstrate the definitive discussions that have shaped the archaeological and art-historical conception of Kaushambi. It focuses on various Buddhist stone, terracotta, and bronze images from Kaushambi that are crucial for understanding the art history of northern India, particularly in its broader connection with Sarnath and Mathura. Kaushambi's efforts to appeal to the masses are exemplified by the production of images in the widely used medium of terracotta, primarily featuring larger pantheons such as Sri Lakshmi, Hariti, Yaksha, and Yakshi. Buddhism gained popularity within the local community due to the rise of prominent ascetic leaders like Maitreya and the ease with which local values and styles were incorporated into Buddhism. The inscriptional data offers initial insights into Kaushambi's potential role as a foundation for disseminating Buddhist art in the Ganga Valley, subsequently enhanced by Sarnath and other centres. It also illustrates the role of Mathura's itinerant craftspeople as exporters of styles in regions leading to Sarnath.

This paper endeavoured to study Kaushambi as a pivotal locus for the evolution and propagation of early Buddhist art, transcending the reductive perspective of a single, consistent tradition. By synthesizing archaeological data, art historical scholarship, and textual evidence, the research demonstrates that Kaushambi was not merely a recipient of Buddhist influence but also an active contributor to its artistic expression. The terracotta art and bronze images discovered in the region serve as evidence of the heterogeneity of styles, challenging the notion of a standardized early Buddhist artistic canon. Kaushambi evolved into a thriving urban locale where diverse regional influences converged and were reinterpreted through the artistic creativity of its inhabitants and itinerant artisans. This nuanced perspective highlights the significance of analyzing the evolution of Buddhist art within specific site contexts.

The paper emphasizes the influence of sociopolitical dynamics and patronage on the artistic milieu of Kaushambi. It examines the intricate relationship between the region's economic prosperity, facilitated by its strategic position along key trade routes, and the support of various rulers and elites. This patronage led to the emergence of distinct artistic styles and the spread of Buddhist religious practices. Analyzing the spatial relationships between Kaushambi and other religious centers, such as Sarnath and Mathura, reveals a network of interconnected sites where ideas, artistic styles, and religious practices can be exchanged. This interconnectedness highlights the importance of understanding Buddhist art within a broader socioeconomic and political context. Having studied various art forms (Table 2) from Kaushambi and the relevance of this place in building the ancient Buddhist narrative (Table 1), it is deduced that Kaushambi must have been an active centre of art production from the Mauryan period to the early centuries of the first millennium CE.

Discussion

While numerous discourses exist regarding the role and influence of Kaushambi as a ‘transitional phase’ in north Indian Buddhist art, attention needs to be given to its distinctive stylistic diction that arose from its regional terracotta and dynastic inspiration. Kaushambi occupies a significant place in Buddhist history, with records indicating that Udayana, king of Vatsa Janapada, may have carved the first sandalwood image of the Buddha during his lifetime (Hamada 2013). Faxian also notes a sandalwood image of about 20 ft in height being erected by Udayana, the replica of which he carried back to his country, China, upon his return from India (Beal 1957). Interestingly, Maugalayayana, Buddha's disciple, is said to have sent an artist to the 33 heavens to memorize Buddha's features (Parimoo 1980: 94).

A seated Buddha image from Cave No. 306 of the Longmen Grottoes in China features a votive inscription in its niche: “a monk created this ‘King Udayana Image’ in the 6th year of the Yonghui period” (655 CE) (Hamada 2013). This Buddha image exhibits certain iconographical similarities to Kaushambi Buddhist images, showcasing a thin robe, a bare right shoulder, and an accentuated slim waistline, which contrasts significantly with its Chinese counterparts. There are 70 other idols of a similar kind at Longmen, and their votive inscriptions bear the title “King Udayana Image.” Due to the considerable Indian influence in their design, the King Udayana Buddhas have been linked to the Buddhist images of the same name that Xuanzang is said to have brought back from India to China. These Buddhist images include, among others, a sandalwood Buddha statue, an imitation of the image carved by Udayana of Kaushambi, standing two feet and nine inches high, including the crystal pedestal; and a sandalwood Buddha image symbolizing the turning of the wheel of the Law at Sarnath, which stands 3 feet and 5 inches high, including the crystal pedestal (Thakur 1984: 36). Such images suggest a probable long-distance connection and the cultural influence of Kaushambi’s art.

Through such examples illustrating Kaushambi’s artistic traditions and connections, this paper seeks to reengage with the ‘Indian perspective’ on the question of the origin of Buddha’s human image. The arguments presented in sections of this paper discussing Kaushambi’s sculptural arts draw influence from Ratan Parimoo’s discourse on the Indian evolution of the worship of the Buddha image in human form, which contradicts both the views of scholars who argue that Buddha did not approve of the worship of his image and the Greek (Gandharan) influence on the origin of Buddha’s anthropomorphic image (1980: 91-122). The connection of Udayana with the Buddha image is elucidated through the latter’s request to King Bimbisara for a painted portrait of *Tathagata* on canvas to be sent to Udayana (Biswas 1998 as cited in Parimoo 1980: 93)¹¹. Buddha remarked on the inability of the artists to capture its personality, criticizing them for lacking *shithila samadhi* (lacking concentration); Buddha later cast his shadow on a canvas and instructed that the outline should be filled with colour, with chief articles of faith written on it (Parimoo 1980: 93). Tracing the compositions from Kaushambi across various mediums, it has been argued that the region was a major contributor to the development of Buddhist artistic idiom in ancient India.

Competing Interests: The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Notes

1. *madhyadesha* is one of the many names used to cogently label the region between the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, extending to Prayagraj, where they intersect. Historically, *madhyadesha* has been classified alongside four other regions to geographically structure the ancient Indian subcontinent.
2. *Simsapa/Sinsapa* is identified as the rosewood tree '*Dalbergia sisu*' by Rhys Davids and Stede (1921-25).
3. This inscription is found on the pedestal of a standing Bodhisattva image discovered in the archaeological ruins of Kaushambi.

4. See *Kumbhakara Jataka* (No. 408) and *Bhaddasala Jataka* (No. 465) for reference (Cowell 1897: 228-232; Cowell 1901: 91-97).
5. The cultural connection between urban sites is also contested through artefacts; ancient Kaushambi and Ujjain are manifested in lore and terracotta finds. Udayana, the ruler of Kaushambi, has multiple folk narratives in both Buddhist and Jain literature. A popular narrative in terracotta depicts what may possibly be the story of Udayana's elopement with Vasavadatta, a princess of Ujjain, atop the elephant Bhadravati (Ahuja 2018: 263; for more see Ahuja 2000: 134).
6. The Maghas flourished between the second and third centuries CE (during the decline of the Kushanas) and are referred to as the lords of Kosala in the Puranas (Lahiri 1965: 102).
7. Three Buddha sculptural fragments in the Allahabad Museum were found from the same site in Kaushambi, all bearing the year 83 (161 CE) and are stylistically carved in the Mathura school of Kushana period, although the epigraphs accompanying them refer to Bhadrāmāgha; Chandra (1970: Pl. XLI, Figure 89) and R.C. Sharma (1984: 195-197) assign them the Kanishka era.
8. *Nagarakas* were an urban class interested in the cultivation of refined artistic taste; they possessed knowledge of *kalas* and *shilpas*, which was requisite for classifying as a *nagaraka* (Desai 1976: 556).
9. For a contemporary analysis of how riverside cultures spread and transformed economies, it will be intriguing to study the impact of the Ganga-Yamuna doab, particularly at Prayagraj *sangam*, from Harshavardhan's *Mahamokshaparishad* to the massive cultural festival of *Mahakumbha*, which attracts millions of devotees to its banks.
10. It is noteworthy that Sarnath lacked a well-developed art tradition prior to the Gupta period. Simultaneously, Kaushambi experienced a transition from terracotta to stone, as illustrated by Figure 6.
11. For details on the conceptual understanding of framing Buddha in human form as a *mahapurusha*, see Kramrisch, Stella's *Marks of the Great Being, Mahapurusha Lakshana* (The Golden Book of Tagore, Calcutta 1931) and *Emblems of the Universal Being* (Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta 1935); Jain literature identifies Udayana as a Jain follower.

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Supplementary File 1: Annexure 1

Table of different cultural and imperial phases mentioned in the paper and their corresponding approximate timeline as referred

Protohistory (India)	Middle of 4th millennium BCE – middle of 1st millennium BCE
Second urbanization	600 BCE – 200 BCE
Ashokan period	Latter half of the 3rd century BCE
Kushana Period	1st – 3rd centuries CE
NBPW	700 BCE – 200 BCE
Gupta Period	370 CE – 495 CE (in the context of images discussed)

Supplementary File 2: Annexure II

Kara inscription of Pratihara king Yashapala (Sahni 1927 as cited in Ghosh 1935, Appendix III):

Text

1. om Samvat 1093
2. Asadha sudi I
3. ady=eham (ha) srimat-Kate
4. maharajdhiraja
5. sri-Yasa (sa) h pala [.*] Kau
6. sa (sa) mba-mandale Payal [a]
7. sa-grame mahantam=a (a)
8. nusamadisa (sa) ti yatha
9. Pabhosekiya-Mathu
10. ra-vik [a] tasya sa (sa) sana-
11. tvam prasadhi (i) krtya matv [a*]
12. bhaga-bhoga-Kara-hira
13. n (n) ya-pratyadya-dhikam
14. matv=opantavyam=iti
15. dasa (sa) bandhena saha.....
16. alabhrata (?)
17. putra-pautranam

Translation

“Om. In the year Samvat 1093, on the first day of the bright fortnight of Asadha, today (while encamping) here at the illustrious Kata, the Maharajdhiraja, the illustrious Yashapala commands the mahant (headman or other official) in the village of Payalasa in the mandala of Kaushambi that, knowing that (the aforesaid village) has been presented (by me) as a gift to Mathura Vikata of Pabhosa, the customary duties, royalties, taxes, gold, and other income (*pratyadaya*), etc., together with one-tenth of the produce should be paid (to him)..... of the sons and grandsons”.