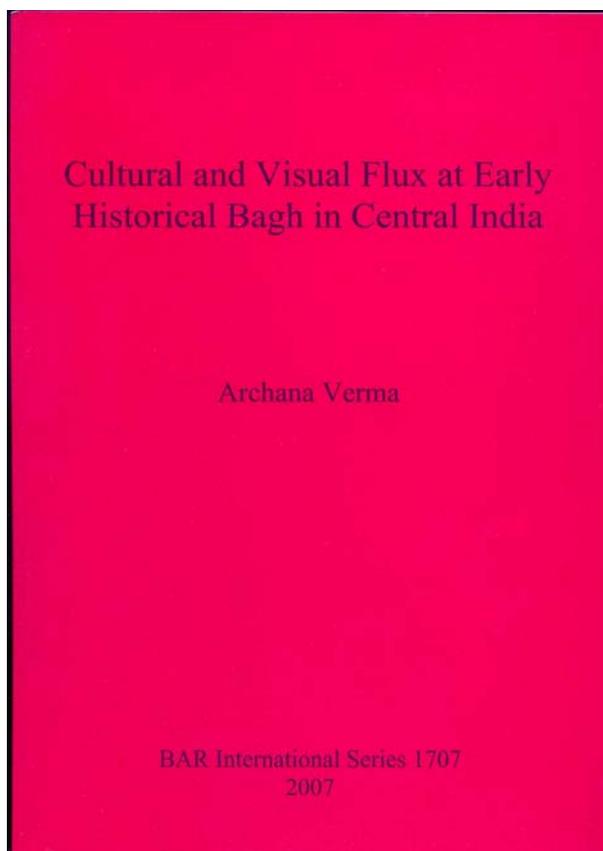


**Archana Verma, *Cultural and Visual Flux at Early Historical Bagh in Central India***



**N. J. Francis<sup>1</sup>**



A background of historical training makes a research in art history much more insightful for the reader, as the researcher can relate the art objects to their historical context. While art-historical studies of the well-known early Indian Buddhist as well as Brahmanical sites abound, research on the not-so-famous or “lesser” sites of early Indian art continues to remain either unpublished or constitutes more or less appendices to studies on major sites. Very few independent studies have come up on Bagh since the works of Dr. E. Impey, Maj. C. E. Luard, John Marshall, and Vogel.

Divided into four chapters, the book shows that the visual art of Valkha—the ancient name of the region in central India to which the Buddhist caves of Bagh with sculptures and paintings belong—represented the

religio-cultural assimilation within the fold of Buddhism of the region during the period between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Common Era. The central argument of the study is that the visual art of the Bagh caves reflected the religious and cultural flux of the transformation going on at various layers: the popular, the Brahmanical and the Buddhist. The study is based mainly on two varied sources:

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epigraphs—copper plate grants issued by the chiefs of Valkha, who were subordinates of the Guptas—and Buddhist monastic art, including sculptures and paintings.

The introductory discussion of the archaeological data pertaining first to the worship of the *stupa / caitya* and subsequently to the image of the Buddha, against the background of the changing religious and philosophical moorings of *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*, helps in contextualising the historical facets of the Buddhist visual art of Central India and of the Northern Deccan viz., of Bagh, Ajanta and Aurangabad. This takes the reader to a historical study of the region around the early historical Buddhist monastery in Bagh, in the state of Madhya Pradesh in Central India. The author has been able to map out the process of acculturation in Valkha in the broader context of the political developments, the commercial and trans-peninsular movement of men and material, and the general trends of changes in religious philosophy and cultic practices. She rightly points out the significance of the location of the Buddhist monastic network of Bagh, close to the trade route from Mahismati to Bharukaccha.

The author has identified three phases in the transformation of Valkha during the period between 358 AD and 487 AD and the changes in its economy, society and religion are interrelated and complementary. In the first phase (358-379 AD), the society of Valkha was predominantly based on the popular belief-systems and a mixed economy. Local cults were more forceful though Brahmanism was in an emergent stage. The second phase (383-454 AD) saw a strong revenue-system based on intensive paddy cultivation. The socio-religious picture shows a complete dominance of the Brahmanical order with a greater differentiation of the society. The visible-space given to women and popular cults got overshadowed in the period. The third phase, covering the period up to 487 AD, witnessed an advanced state of administrative machinery and a stronger polity. The most noteworthy feature of the phase was the impact of Buddhism with its acceptance into networks of patronage.

The discussion as to how the architecture, sculptures and paintings of the Bagh caves show the subtle features of the changing monastic organization and also as to how artistic symbolism was used to sustain a transforming Buddhism from *Hinayana* to *Mahayana* during the fifth century AD is very deep and yet interesting on many accounts. She has been able to delineate the differences in the architectural composition of the caves of Bagh on the one hand and that of the contemporary caves of Ajanta on the other, and interestingly, this is attempted by also taking into account the specific needs of the Buddhist congregation and its religious praxis. She has shown that the Buddhist iconography of Bagh represented that stage of Buddhism where the influence of the *Mahayana* affected the monastery enough for introducing the Buddhist icons in the monastery, but not enough for replacing the *stupa* or even for superimposing or combining with it.

Although very few paintings have survived in Bagh, the author has shown that the artistic symbolism used in these is much the same as those in the sculptures. While

the preparation of the surface for painting was the *tempera* technique as at Ajanta, the author has been able to point out the essential differences between the styles of Ajanta and those of Bagh. While the artists at Bagh applied a lighter shade of ochre to show the eyebrows, nose and lips, thus requiring the viewer to observe more closely, the artists of Ajanta reinforced body-outline and facial features by means of a black line. Identification of the paintings at Cave 4 as a depiction of *Mahajanaka Jataka* carries conviction in the light of the scholarship that has gone into its formulation.

Notwithstanding the merits of the book and its contribution to early Indian art historical studies, one can not gloss over the typographical errors. Errors that are not typographical can also be noticed as for example: Madam J E van Lohuizen-de Leeuw has been repeatedly referred to by the pronoun 'he'. The use of the term *Hinayana*, 'the inferior way,' is not fashionable these days, nor is it tenable due to the pejorative connotations that it carries. Though maps are referred to, none is appended with the book.

Archana Verma has written a well-argued and presented monograph on the art and history of the early historical Bagh which can prove to be a model for historicizing the art and history of similar sites in early India, and therefore, the book will definitely be read seriously by students and researchers of early Indian history and art. Archana Verma's study is a welcome addition to the thin art-historical and cultural studies on the so-called "allied" / "related" / provincialised sites of early Indian art like Bagh.