CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS:
MULTICULTURAL SYSTEMS IN ANCIENT INDIA

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The northwestern region of the subcontinent, historically a corridor connecting the Indian peninsula to Central Asia and the West, was not the only multicultural milieu in ancient India. The Deccan plateau, under the control of the Sātavāhana kings from the first century B.C. to the third century A.D. also was exposed to diverse models as a result of its involvement in maritime trade with the Mediterranean.

The present paper aims at defining the particular forces that characterized these two multicultural societies, in an attempt to shed light on their response to different waves of foreign contact. The dynamics of selective appropriation and recontextualization of imported models that took place in Gandhāra and in the Deccan will be examined through a series of case studies, with particular emphasis on the less known region controlled by the Sātavāhana rulers.

The Greater Gandhāran region and the Deccan Plateau showed different degrees of cultural permeability. The Northwest, due to its geographic location, was always a land where diverse people converged. Best known are its Hellenistic antecedents; Alexander the Great expanded the easternmost boundaries of the western world in the fourth century B.C. to include Greater Gandhāra. He left behind a trail of Hellenized kingdoms, as confirmed by the archaeological finds.¹ A vast array of Greek names belonging to Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek sovereigns who controlled this region in the last centuries before the current era, is preserved in the numismatic

evidence. While participating in the Hellenistic koine or common language, the Northwest was essentially an Indian land where people from Central Asia continuously settled. Various groups throughout the centuries moved into Greater Gandhāra and blended into the local landscape: foremost are the Śakas in the first century B.C. and the Kuṣāṇas in the first century A.D. In addition to the historic layering of different ethnicities, a continuous stream of foreign people, artifacts and ideas percolated through this area adjoining the main trade routes between China and the West. Thus the extreme receptivity of Gandhāra is well represented by its artistic repertoire, where Hellenistic, West Asian, Central Asian and Indian elements co-mingled, creating a unique northwestern idiom.

The Deccan did not have such an old history of cross-cultural interaction. Unlike Gandhāra, no major waves of foreign immigration occurred in this region, which was just a terminal branch of East-West trade. The inland areas of Mahārāṣṭra, Āndhra Pradesh and Karnataka were famous for their semiprecious stones and ivory, shell and bone crafts that reached the Northwest and further destinations. Evidence of artifacts moving from the Deccan to Gandhāra, in the pre-Kuṣāṇa period, is preserved in the archaeological record of Taxila. A bone handle (Fig. 14.1) found in the early strata of Sirkap3 can be closely compared to a similar object from Ter (Fig. 14.2),4 which was a thriving ivory and bone manufacturing center in the heart of the Deccan. The presence of such imports in the datable context of Taxila, besides indicating trade connections between the two areas, provides a more secure chronological horizon for the Ter handle, a surface find generally attributed to the second century A.D.5 The international fame of the bone and ivory carvers of the Deccan is well represented by other finds. Some of the Indian ivories found at Begram, in Afghanistan, have been identified as second century products of Āndhra Pradesh;6 an ivory figurine possibly

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4 J. Marshall, Taxila, 3 vols. repr. (Delhi, 1975), II, 658, nos. 43, 44, 45, 46. These four handles appear as an homogenous group.
5 Dawn of Civilization in Mahārāṣṭra (Bombay 1975), 75, no. 60a.