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Paithan as a Nodal Centre in the Deccan: Trade, Routes and Continuity

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Abstract

Paithan, known in antiquity as Pratishthana, emerged as a pivotal inland trade hub during the Satavahana period. Strategically located on the Godavari river system, it was integrated into western coastal and northern trade networks, functioning simultaneously as a political capital and a nodal market. Its position enabled the movement of agrarian surplus from the Deccan to maritime ports such as Bharuch and Sopara, facilitated by overland routes through the Western Ghats. The chain of rock-cut cave sites at Karle, Bhaje, Bedsa, Kanheri, and Kondivite, situated along these passes, illustrates the infrastructural and religious dimensions of these trade corridors. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence further highlights Paithan's participation in Indo-Roman exchange, with active circulation of coins, textiles, beads, metals, and luxury goods. This study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology, combining archaeological data, epigraphic records, and numismatic analysis with a comparative reading of literary sources. By situating Paithan within broader Deccan and Indian Ocean trade networks, the research reconstructs its economic significance across shifting political landscapes. The approach emphasizes material culture and infrastructural continuities, while tracing transformations in trade orientation from long-distance Roman-linked commerce to temple-centred and intra-Indian economies under the Vakatakas, Chalukyas, and Rashtrakutas. The findings demonstrate that despite political fragmentation in the post-Satavahana phase, Paithan retained commercial relevance due to its entrenched mercantile infrastructure and riverine connectivity. Its continuity as a regional exchange centre underscores the resilience of Deccan trade routes and their capacity to adapt to changing economic and political contexts. By examining Paithan's long-term trajectory, the study contributes to broader debates on the sustainability of inland trade hubs and their role in shaping regional economic networks from the early historic to early medieval periods.

***Keywords**: Deccan, Paithan, Roman, Satavahana, Trade*

Introduction

Paithan (19.48° N, 75.38°) E is the oldest known town in the Deccan region stretching back its antiquity to around the Mauryan period and continued till the medieval period. It gained prominence under the Satavahana dynasty. The region acted as an important political, administrative capital as well as it emerged as a central cultural hub connecting with other major production zones through various inland as well as marine trade routes.

Paithan is located 50 kms south of Aurangabad district of Maharashtra near the left bank of Godavari river. It cuts through the western deccan plateaus and it is among some valleys which run eastwards. The river's navigability in certain stretches allowed for the transport of bulky commodities such as grain and textiles, which were then redistributed through Paithan's markets to coastal ports and northern trade centres.. The Godavari basin is rich in mineral content like silica and its compounds. As silica is an important element in precious stones and such articles it boosted export of precious stones and other forms of jewellery.

Paithan's access to the Western Ghats passes, which linked the Deccan plateau to the Konkan coast, was equally important. These passages made it easier to travel overland to ports like Bharuch and Sopara, which were important hubs

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for Indo-Roman trade. The chain of Buddhist rock-cut cave sites along these pathways, such as Karle, Bhaje, Bedsa, Kanheri, and Kondivite, shows that the transit of products through these corridors was both cultural and economic.

Thus, Paithan's strategic location integrated three components: overland connectivity, riverine transportation, and religious infrastructure support. When combined, these produced a robust trade network that made it possible for Paithan to flourish as a center for redistribution. While the Ghats passes continued to support intra-Indian trade, the Godavari remained a vital link for the regional economy. These routes' continued existence demonstrates the flexibility of inland cities like Paithan, which could shift their focus from long-distance Roman-linked trade to temple-centered and regional economies without losing significance.

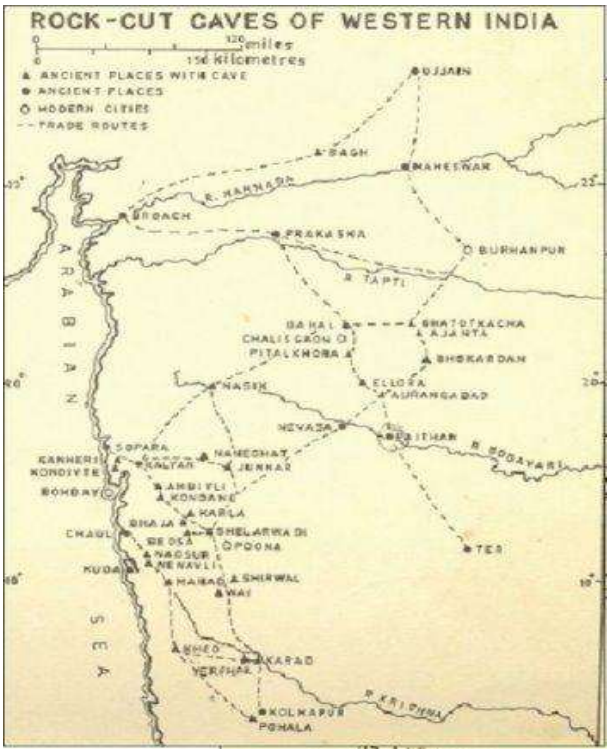
The name also has Prakrit variants such as 'Patiṭhāna','Patiṭṭhāṇa', 'Paëṭhāṇa', etc.(Bhandare 2020: 11) Paithan can be studied through various literary as well as material evidence. Paithan has its mention in various Jaina, Buddhist and Brahmanical texts and also in various western texts. Later summaries and commentaries identify 'Paethan' as Pratishthana which functioned as an important inland commercial market linked to ports of Bharuch and other ports in Deccan through caravan routes.

The early Buddhist canonical literature like the Jataka gathas does not explicitly mention Pratishthana, the Jataka Atthakatha mentions Pratishthana by name as a flourishing trading center at the center of Dakshinpatha. It refers to Pratishthana as a central hub of long distance trade routes which connect Ujjayini; modern Ujjain with various southern and western regions in India.

The nidana of Jataka atthakatha, the commentary narrates- *"Ujjeniyā nikkhamitvā pratiṭṭhānaṃ gantvā vāṇijjāya jīvikaṃ kappesi."*(Cowell et al. 1897, Vol. 2: 213–15) This is an important commentary as it has a mention about a man; mostly a merchant or a trader who left ujjayini nagari which was an important commercial center of central india and travelled to Pratishtthana of the Dakshinapatha. He makes his livelihood through trade.

The same source identifies a great trading community in Pratishthana-"Pratiṭṭhānanagare mahantaṃ vāṇijjagāmaṃ ahosi."(Cowell et al. 1897, Vol. 3: 33–35). Assaka was among the 16 janapadas whose capital was a city named Potali, Potana or Podana.The janapada was located along the godavari river as referred to in Anguttara Nikaya. According to some scholars like Bhandarkar associates the name with Paithan. The later Buddhist texts like the Mahamayuri mentions Paithan as the abode of Khandaka yaksha.

Jaina texts like *Brhatkalpabhasya* and *Kalpasutra* mentions Paithan as an important city and the city of learning. According to *GacchacarVritti*, Varahamihira and Bhadrabahu stayed in Paithan. The Jaina texts explicitly mention the association of Paithan with Satavahanas. The Brihatkalpabhassya Pitaka mentions the connection of King Shalivahana of Paithan with Bharukaccha. *Āvaśyakaniryukti* (v. 1304) narrates the war between Satavahana and the king of Bharukaccha, Nahavana.



Map showing the central location of Paithan
Courtesy: 'Rock Cut Temples' by Karl Khandalawala; Central Excise Aurangabad Site

Paithan emerged as an eminent center of Brahmanic tradition in the medieval period.

Puranas like Matsya, Brahma and Lingapurana. The Brahmapurana has a distinct Sthala purana referred to Pratishthana Mahatmya which mentions Paithan as a tirtha on the banks of godavari.

Various western texts written by scholars like Arrian, Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy mentions Paithan. Greek texts like Geographike Uphegesis of Ptolemy and Periplus Maris Erythraei give an account of trade routes in the Indian subcontinent connecting with the Red Sea.

Chapter 51 of the Periplus describes Paithan as follows: Of the trading centres in the region of Dachinabades, two are the most outstanding: Paithana, twenty days' travels to the south from Barygaza; and from Paithana, about ten days to the east, another very large city Tagara. From these there is brought to Barygaza, by conveyance in wagons over very great road-less stretches, from Paithana large quantities of onyx, and from Tagara large quantities of cloth of ordinary quality, all kinds of cotton garments, garments of Molochinon and certain other merchandise from the coastal parts that finds a market locally there (Casson 1989: 82–83). Ptolemy's geography mentions "Baethana" as a seat of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi. Here Dachinabades means Dakshinapatha.

The repeated mention of Dakshinapatha in Buddhist, Puranic, Jaina and Greco roman sources is important. It signifies a shared geographical imagination and deccan as a coherent and connected region.

The epigraphical evidence mentioned as Paithan are limited. Ashokan inscriptions mention 'Peteikas" which according to scholars is the prakrit version of Pratishthana. Along with 'Petenikas' other two names associated are "Rathikas" and "Bhojakas". The caves in Deccan mention the name Patitana. Kanheri cave 3 inscription has a mention about a monastery built in Paithan. The donor inscriptions at Kanheri reveal the connections between various monastic developments like Kanheri, Sopara, Kalyan and paithan. The presence of Satavahana royal inscriptions at Kanheri suggests that political authority supported and facilitated these routes, enabling the circulation of goods, pilgrims, and patrons across regions. The Pitalkhora inscriptions are important in generalising Paithan as an important hub for not only trade but also patronising rock cut caves. The inscriptions note of a donation made by the unnamed Son of Saghaka who was a resident of Paithan and second mentions Mitadeva from a perfumer family who donated a pillar.

Paithan is mentioned as *Supratishṭha-āhāra* in two Vakataka copper plates of Pravarsena II. Ahara means an administrative division. We find two copper plates from the Rashtrakuta dynasty associated with Paithan. One of Govind III which records the donation of a village to Brahmins and that village was known as Pratishthana bhukti. The second copper plate is known as Jambgaon copper plate which is from Indra III's reign. It mentions a gift of a village named Khaerondhi on the occasion of the king's anniversary of coronation.

Paithan is connected to Aurangabad, Devagiri, and Bhokardan through open terrain. Nevasa is a crucial stop on the Pravara Valley route from Nasik, which offers a direct route to Aurangabad. From there, Paithan is conveniently accessible via the Godavari corridor.

The Bijapur–Badami sector also connects back to Paithan. From Paithan, one could move toward Pune and Kolhapur, then onward to Athni to reach Bijapur. For Badami, the Bor pass route to Belgaum and then eastward provides another alignment. These southern routes highlight Paithan's role in linking the Deccan with northwestern Karnataka.

Finally, Paithan's connection to the Konkan coast is facilitated through the Thal–Bor passes. The most important site on the coast here seems to be Kanheri.In addition to facilitating travel toward the coastal belt, Kanheri connected to significant Buddhist centers, which turned out to be the most important location in this coastal corridor. Thus, Paithan stands as a nodal centre, with alignments radiating outward like spokes of a wheel north to Aurangabad, west to the Konkan, southwest to Ahmednagar, south to Gulbarga, and further south to Bijapur and Badami.

In Pre Satavahana period, Paithan was capital of Janapadas like Mulaka, Asmaka and Petenika. It

served as a centre of trade and commerce. Though the nature of commerce was mainly based on a barter system, it can be concluded that the region was a centre of surplus production and it gave a boost to trade and commerce. The political patronage added to its commercial values. (Morwanchikar 1985:97)

In the Satavahana era (1st century BCE–3rd century CE), the city of Paithan was at the peak of its political and economic glory. This dual role gave Paithan a distinctive character: while it housed the machinery of governance, it also facilitated the circulation of commodities across the Deccan and beyond. The city of Paithan was strategically placed on the Godavari River, which facilitated the exchange of goods from the sea as well as the exchange of surplus from the Deccan plateau. A defining feature of Deccan manufacturing, cotton textiles were shipped from Paithan to ports like Bharuch, where they were incorporated into Indo-Roman trade networks. Further Paithan was also linked with the Trans Asiatic Route through Bharuch, Baroda, Taxilla and ultimately Gandhar. (Morwanchikar 1985: 103). Although this was a less popular route it can be noted this extensive linkage underscored Paithan's role as a crucial intermediary between inland trade centers and wider transcontinental networks.

Coinage provides critical material evidence for Paithan's centrality within this network. The presence of Roman coins in the region reflects Paithan's indirect yet significant participation in Indo-Roman trade, where imported bullion and coinage were absorbed into local economic systems. The discovery of various early and later Sātavāhana coins in urban centres like Paithan, Adam, Ter, Nevāsā, and Pauni indicates the presence of minting houses and a regional economy heavily influenced by trade (Ashu 2023:1090). The routes helped in facilitating transactions across trade routes and supporting both market exchange and state administration.

A Roman silver coin of Tiberius (14-37 A.D.) has been discovered at Paithan. A number of baked clay imitations of Roman coins, perhaps made from moulds, have hooks at the top for hanging round the neck as amulets have been discovered in large numbers. They are the rough copies of the coins of Tiberius. There are some of the glass-beads containing gold foil and certain features of western influence in the local collection at Paithan. As mentioned already, Paithan was an important bead manufacturing centre. And then it would have direct contacts with the western markets of the Mediterranean, Greece, Rome and the coasts of Egypt and Arabia. Among pottery types there are pieces of Roman amphorae consisting of base portions, some sherds of red polished ware, certain terracotta figurines including the head of a boy with foreign features and stone seals of a lady having western influence, all are indicative of Paithan's intimate association with western countries.

Among the Kaolin-finds there is a lion of Egyptian style.

Besides this, it has been conclusively proved that there was a colony of Roman settlement at Ter. Ter was directly connected with Paithan and it would be no wonder if we presume that the Roman traders were equally familiar with Paithan. So the above references confirm the contacts between the western world and Paithan.

Closely linked with these trade and monetary systems was the importance of Paithan as a major craft production centre, especially in beads and terracottas. Archaeological evidence shows that Paithan was one of the main centres for bead production in the Western Deccan, along with Bhokardhan and Ter.

The finished products, particularly onyx beads, were transported in large quantities through these routes via ports such as Bharukaccha, which is a clear indication of the integration of craft production with trade routes. Some of these specific qualities of stones also originated outside Paithan, such as carnelian originating from Gujarat, marine shells from the west coast, and lapis lazuli from Afghanistan. The exchange of craft products was also helped by the monetary system of Paithan, where coinage was used for standardized exchange in various regional markets. The craft of beads produced in Paithan was not only for commercial purposes but also carried specific symbolic and religious content, including triratna and pipal motifs. The

availability of these craft products over a wide area is an indication of commercial as well as cultural exchange through established routes.

Though no Roman amphoras have been found in Paithan itself, the presence of these amphoras in the western part of India suggests that commodities from the Mediterranean region were exchanged through the inland routes. Such commodities must have been routed through Paithan as part of the wider distribution mechanism. The convergence of these routes with the presence of coins and the emergence of specializations in craft production in Paithan confirm it as the central organizing agency for the economic and urbanization processes in the Western Deccan region during the Satavahana period.

During the reign of the Chalukya dynasty of Badami, the Rashtrakuta dynasty, and the Yadava dynasty of Devagiri, Paithan again gained prominence as a center of economic activity and industry, particularly for the textile industry. Paithan never achieved the same level of economic power as the Satavahana dynasty. However, it remained an important town. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang recognized the town's political importance during the Chalukya rule. The artistic evidence from the Ajanta Caves also speaks of the excellence of the textile industry in Paithan. Paithan continued to produce the famous Paithani silk sarees even after the fall of the Yadavas.

The decline of the Satavahana dynasty in the third century CE marked a major change in the economic direction of Paithan. During the height of Indo-Roman trade, Paithan had flourished as a political center and a major commercial center, but with the disintegration of Satavahana power and the decrease in Roman demand, a change in economic direction was necessary. The disintegration of Satavahana power resulted in the rise of smaller regional kingdoms in the Deccan region, resulting in a lack of centralized control over major trade routes. Yet, with its existing infrastructure as a commercial center, Paithan was able to continue as a major center of economic exchange. The decrease in coins and amphorae from the Mediterranean region signifies a decrease in Roman trade, leading to an increased focus on regional trade within India. Merchants began to focus on regional markets and on commodities that met regional demands, such as textiles, agricultural products, and craft items.

With the advent of the fourth century CE, the role of religious institutions in the region became more prominent in the economic scenario. The patronage of the Vakataka dynasty witnessed the emergence of temple-based economic systems in Paithan. The emergence of these temple-based economic systems ensured the generation of new avenues for the circulation of wealth. The temples served as platforms for the distribution of surplus resources during festivals and religious ceremonies. This practice continued with the subsequent empires that ruled the region, such as the Chalukya dynasty and the Rashtrakuta dynasty. The rulers further patronized the integration of mercantile activity with the temple-based economic systems. However, the geographical position of Paithan on the banks of the Godavari River ensured the continuation of economic activity. The city's merchants adapted to shifting economic conditions by engaging with new systems of patronage while maintaining traditional trade routes, demonstrating the resilience of inland trade centres in the Deccan and highlighting the adaptability of regional economic networks in the early historic and early medieval periods.

Conclusion

Because of its advantageous location on crucial inland trade routes that connected the western ports with the interior areas, Paithan served as a significant nodal center of trade in the Deccan. Its prominence is demonstrated not only by the flow of commodities and traders but also by the persistence of cultural and economic interactions across several centuries. Literary allusions, epigraphical documents, and archaeological discoveries all attest to Paithan's importance as a thriving trade and urban hub during the Satavahana and subsequent eras. Together, these many sources show that Paithan's prosperity was maintained via its incorporation into larger regional and long-distance trade networks.

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