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Face to Face with the Absent Buddha.
The Formation of Buddhist
Aniconic Art



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ABSTRACT

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Early art in Buddhist cultic sites was characterized by the absence of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. The Buddha was instead represented by different signs, like a wheel, a tree, a seat and footprints. This study emphasizes the transformation this art underwent from simple signs to carefully made aniconic compositions representing the Buddha in a narrative context.

Buddhist aniconic art has been explained by a prohibition against images of the Buddha or by a doctrine that made it inappropriate to depict the body of the Buddha. This study rejects such explanations. Likewise, the practice of different meditational exercises cannot explain this transformation. Instead, it is important to understand that early art at Buddhist cultic sites consisted of simple signs belonging to a shared sacred Indian culture. This art reflected a notion of auspiciousness, fertility and abundance. The formation of Buddhist aniconic art was indicated by the connection of these auspicious signs with a narrative tradition about the life and teachings of the Buddha.

The study emphasizes the importance Śākyamuni Buddha played in the formation of Buddhist art. The Buddha was interpreted as an expression of auspiciousness, but he was also connected with a soteriological perspective. Attention is also focused on the fact that the development of Buddhist art and literature was a gradual and mutual process. Furthermore, Buddhist aniconic art presaged the making of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. It was not an innovation of motive for the Buddhists when they started to make anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. He was already there.

Keywords: Buddhist art, Buddhist sculpture, Aniconic art, Indian art, Iconology, Buddhism, Buddhist meditation

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*To my son
Emanuel*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Problem and Aim

1.1.1 The Problem of Aniconism in Buddhist Art

One of the most striking features of early Buddhist art is the so-called aniconic art.¹ It can be found at such sites as Sāñcī, Amarāvati, Bhārhut, Bodhgayā and Sārnāth. This art was made between approximately the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD. Fig. 1 shows one of these images. In the centre there is a bodhi-tree (*bodhivṛkṣa*), a seat (*āsana*)² and the feet or the footprints of the Buddha (*buddhapāda*).³ These three signs together seem to represent the Buddha without depicting him visibly. This and similar reliefs have often been regarded as representing a specific event in the life of the Buddha. Fig. 1 has been regarded as representing the enlightenment and fig. 2 the first sermon of the Buddha. The tree is allegedly pointing to the enlightenment and the thousand-spoked wheel to the first sermon.

If we look at fig. 3, we will observe that this art is not without problems. Just as in fig. 1 we can see a *bodhivṛkṣa*, an *āsana* and a *buddhapāda*. There is, however, one important difference. In fig. 3 we can also see on the *āsana* a round medallion with a Buddha image. What does fig. 3 represent if fig. 1 represents the Buddha? As the medallion is placed on the *āsana*, it looks as if the Buddha has an image of himself on his knee. He may even be sitting in his own knee.

There may be several explanations of this problem. One may be that this image is a missing link between the aniconic art and later anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. It is possible that the artist wanted to strengthen the meaning for the sake of clarity. This may indicate that the meaning of the aniconic art was not clear enough at the time when this relief was made. This explanation is not fully satisfying, as the relief is rather late and there were already images of the Buddha at that time.

¹ The terms *aniconism* and *aniconic art* will be defined in *Terms and Definitions* (1.2.1).

² I use the word *seat* (*āsana*) as an all-embracing term as long as no further specification of its function is needed. See also 1.2.4 and 1.6.5.

³ *Pāda* means “foot” and *padavalañja* “footprint”, “track”. T W Rhys Davids & W Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprinting, 1975 (1921–1925)), pp. 408, 452.



Fig. 1. Indexical sign pointing to the Buddha. *Bodhivṛkṣa*, *āsana* and *buddhapāda*. Amarāvati *stūpa*, 2nd century AD. Indian Museum, Calcutta.

A more simple and natural explanation may be that fig. 3 depicts a Buddhist sacred site in an undetermined time after the death of the Buddha. If this is the case this relief does not represent the Buddha himself. Instead, it represents a real *bodhivṛkṣa* and what is taking place there. It may represent the tree in Bodhgayā, but it may also represent another *bodhivṛkṣa*. Susan Huntington, at the Ohio State University, is of the opinion that most of the reliefs in Bhārhut, Sāñcī and Amarāvati represent worship at sacred Buddhist sites and not aniconic representations pointing to the Buddha.⁴

In a relief in Bhārhut (fig. 4) we can see a ladder standing beside a *bodhivṛkṣa*. There are two footprints on the ladder, one at the top and one at the bottom. This is commonly interpreted as representing the event when the Buddha returns to earth after visiting his mother in the Trāyastriṃśa heaven. Is it also possible to interpret this sign as depicting a place of worship? This is exactly what Susan Huntington has done. She believes that Sankasya had become a major pilgrimage centre as early as the 3rd century BC and that an

⁴ S L Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India. Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. With Contributions by J C Huntington (New York: Weather Hill, 1985). S L Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism", *Art Journal* 49 (1990), pp. 401–408. S L Huntington, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems. Another Look", *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992), pp. 111–156.

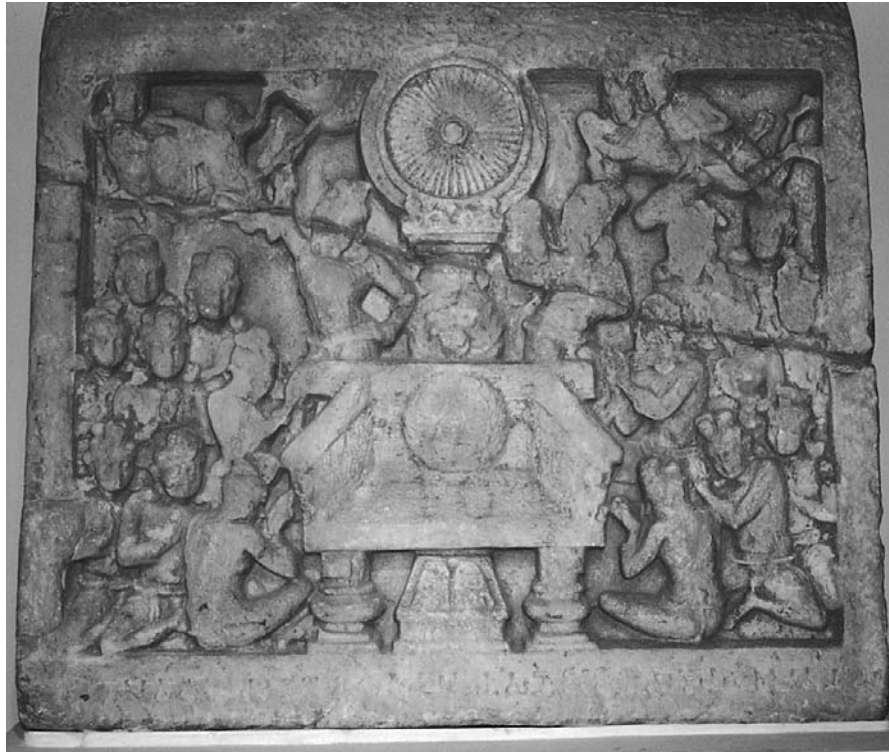


Fig. 2. Indexical sign pointing to the Buddha. *Cakrastambha*, *āsana* and *buddhapāda*. Amarāvati *stūpa*, 1st or 2nd century AD (78x86,5x12). National Museum, Delhi (Acc no 70.1./2).

actual ladder was the focal point of worship there.⁵ The Chinese traveller and pilgrim Xuanzang visited Sankasya in the 7th century AD. He observed an ancient tradition of ladders at the place. The original one had been replaced at later times by ladders made of bricks and chased stones ornamented with jewels.⁶

It seems to be more difficult to interpret fig. 5 as depicting worship at a sacred site. This image, which is believed to depict successive phases of a single episode, has usually been interpreted as the great departure of the Buddha. The four riderless horses with their regal parasols are depicted in such a way that it is difficult to believe that the relief represents anything other than the young Buddha leaving the palace. Is it really possible to interpret it as anything else? According to Susan Huntington it is. Huntington has proposed that the relief depicts a processional celebration of how the Bodhisattva

⁵ Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art ...", p. 404.

⁶ Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World. Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, Vol. 1, Translated by S Beal (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1976 (1884)), p. 203.



Fig. 3. Iconic sign depicting worship. *Bodhivṛkṣa*, *āsana*, *buddhapāda* and medallion with Buddha image. Amarāvati *stūpa*, 2nd century AD. Amarāvati Museum.

leaves the palace⁷ or the celebration and honouring of his horse, Kaṅṭhaka.⁸ In other words, she believes that the followers of the Buddha had set up a kind of passion play or a pageant and the horse plays the leading actor. Her argument, however, is not convincing. Her main point is that the sacred tree in the middle suggests that the horse is being led to a site that was already sacred, implying that the events in the relief are taking place after his departure and do not represent the departure itself.⁹ However, the sacred tree in the middle may not be the *bodhivṛkṣa* at all. Instead, it may be the rose-apple tree (*jambu*-tree) where the young Buddha practised meditation before he left his palace.¹⁰

The difficulties in interpreting Buddhist visual art can also be illustrated by a relief at the east gateway at Sāñcī *stūpa* 1. This relief has been interpreted by

⁷ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient ...*, p. 99.

⁸ Huntington, “Aniconism and the Multivalence ...”, p. 139.

⁹ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient ...*, p. 99.

¹⁰ More about the writings of Susan Huntington in chapter 1.6.1.



Fig. 4. Indexical sign pointing to the Buddha leaving *Trāyastriṃśa* heaven. *Bodhiṣṭkṣa*, *āsana*, ladder and *buddhapāda*. Bhārhut *stūpa*, 1st century BC. Entrance pillar, western gate. Indian Museum, Calcutta.

Alfred Foucher,¹¹ Heinrich Franz,¹² Vidya Dehejia¹³ and others as a depiction of Aśoka and his visit to the *bodhiṣṭkṣa*. However, this relief has subsequently been reinterpreted by Dieter Schlingloff. He believes that it is Māra and not Aśoka in the relief. For him the relief signifies the presence of the Buddha and nothing else.¹⁴

These examples point to the complex relationship between literature and visual art in Buddhism. An obvious example of the danger of only using literature as a way to read visual art can be seen from the stone slabs depicting the soles of the feet of the Buddha (*buddhapāda*). In the *Mahāpadāna sutta* (DN

¹¹ J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī* (Delhi: Swati Publications, 1982 (1940)) Vol. 1, p. 212.

¹² H G Franz, *Buddhistische Kunst Indiens* (Leipzig: VEB E A Seemann, 1965), pp. 39–40.

¹³ V Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art. Visual Narratives of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), p. 39.

¹⁴ D Schlingloff, “Aśoka or Māra? On the Interpretation of some Sāñcī Reliefs”, *Indological and Buddhist Studies. Volume in Honour of Professor J. W. de Jong on his Sixtieth Birthday*. Edited by L A Hercus et. al. 2nd Edition (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1984), pp. 441, 450–451.

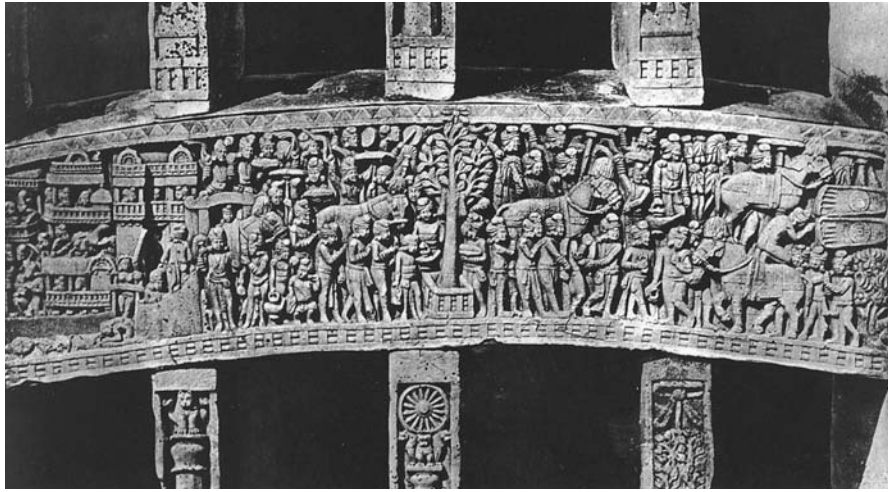


Fig. 5. Indexical sign pointing to the Buddha leaving the palace. Sāñcī stūpa 1, east gateway, late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. From: J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1940. Vol. 2, pl. 40, 2.

II:16)¹⁵ and the *Lakkhaṇa sutta* (DN III:143)¹⁶ there are descriptions of the 32 major physical characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) of the Buddha. On the soles of his feet there appears a thousand-spoked wheel, but nothing is written about the *svastika*, *triśūla* and *śrīvatsa* that also have been depicted on the soles. Thus, literature and visual art do not always correspond with each other.

We learn from the short survey above that it is possible to interpret reliefs from early Buddhist art in several different ways and that it is difficult to know exactly which interpretation is the final one. It seems possible to find evidence for different interpretations in one and the same relief. One picture may be interpreted in different ways by different people. The same picture may also be interpreted in several different ways by one and the same person. The pictures may even have been deliberately created to be interpreted in several ways. Vidya Dehejia has in several publications pointed to the multiplicity of meanings in early Buddhist art.¹⁷

1.1.2 Purpose of this Study

Iconology interprets the meaning of visual art in relation to the cultural and historical context in which it appears. Erwin Panofsky identifies three stages in iconological studies. The first is the *pre-iconographical description* which is

¹⁵ [*Dīgha-Nikāya*]. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part 2, Translated from the Pali of the Dīgha Nikāya by T W and C A F Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1977 (1921)), p. 14.

¹⁶ [*Dīgha-Nikāya*]. *Dialogues ...*, Part 3, pp. 137–138.

¹⁷ V Dehejia, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems”, *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991), pp. 45–66. Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, pp. 36–54. More about the writings of Vidya Dehejia in chapter 1.6.3.

concerned with identifying the pure forms of a piece of art.¹⁸ The second is the *iconographical analysis* which connects artistic motifs with themes or concepts and identifies motifs, stories and allegories.¹⁹ Finally, there is the *iconological interpretation* which deals “... with the work of art as a symptom of something else” with “intrinsic meaning or content”.²⁰ My interests correspond with this third and important stage. I will uncover the underlying religious ideas, social conventions, notions and behaviour that have affected early Buddhist visual art.

However, it is not enough to interpret visual art as a symptom of something else. It is also important to realize that there is a complex connection between visual art in religions and other religious expressions. Visual art may affect other aspects of religious life as well. It is only when we know this that we will fully recognise the origin and development of Buddhist aniconic art.

We have seen in the short survey above that there have been controversies about how to interpret Buddhist aniconic art. This is to a certain extent due to the fact that Buddhist visual art has often been interpreted in relation to texts. We will see later that the relation between visual art and literature in Buddhism is fairly complex. Therefore, it is not my intention to enter into discussions about separate pictures and identification of motifs, stories and allegories on them. This has already been done by others and I am sure that it will continue to be done for a long time to come.

In short, the purpose of this study is to:

- (1) present Buddhist aniconic art in a historical context,
- (2) critically examine scholarly interpretations of Buddhist aniconic art,
- (3) formulate an alternative interpretation of Buddhist aniconic art.

1.1.3 Outline of the Dissertation

In chapter 1 I will introduce the study, make some methodological reflections and present previous research. I will in chapter 2 discuss the assumption that there was a prohibition against making images of the Buddha or that some kind of doctrine prevented the Buddhist from making images of the Buddha. Thereafter, I will use chapter 3 to interpret the assumption that Buddhist meditative practice was the origin of Buddhist aniconic art.

I will in chapter 4 concentrate on a couple of Buddhist sites and districts, Sāñcī, Andhradeśa, Bhārhut, Bodhgayā, Sāmāth and Gandhāra. At all these sites there are aniconic symbols in different styles and at different stages of progress. Archaeological remains at each site will be used in order to establish a preliminary chronology of aniconic signs. This chronology will be necessary to disclose the origin and specific nature of Buddhist aniconic art. In short, I

¹⁸ E Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 (1939)), p. 5.

¹⁹ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology ...*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

will in this chapter show that there is a line of development from simple auspicious signs to careful narrative compositions representing the Buddha without depicting him anthropomorphically.

In order to understand the origin of this development I will in chapter 5 concentrate on the questions of whether the early signs on Buddhist *stūpas* were part of a shared sacred Indian culture. Thereafter, in chapter 6 I will concentrate on a couple of these signs, examine their origin and see how they have been incorporated and transformed into a Buddhist context. It is in the development of Buddhist cultic practice connected with the *stūpa* that we might be able to find the scene of the development of aniconic art. Therefore, in chapter 7 I will concentrate on the *stūpa* and examine a couple of different phenomena that may have been reflected in the development of Buddhist aniconic art. In chapter 8 I will emphasize the auspiciousness of the Buddha as a continuation and intensification of the auspiciousness that characterized Buddhist cultic sites and their art. Finally, I will also discuss briefly the differences between iconic and aniconic Buddhist art.

1.2 Terms and Definitions

1.2.1 Aniconism

The definitions of the term *aniconism* by Burkhard Gladigow in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* assume a cultic context. He defines aniconic cults as cases where no images are known or accepted as objects of worship, especially not in the form of anthropomorphic images.²¹

Tryggve Mettinger enlarges this definition by making a distinction between *material aniconism* with aniconic symbols and *empty-space aniconism*, which refers to a completely empty room.²² The cult is also important in Mettinger's definition and if the cultic context is not clear he does not use the word *aniconism*. Instead, he calls it *aniconic tendencies*.²³

The term *aniconism* has also been used in the field of Indian art. Here the terms *iconic* and *aniconic* are often used "... to indicate the presence or absence of the anthropomorphic image of the deity".²⁴ In Robert L Brown's opinion, *aniconism* in early Buddhist art "... means only the absence of the human-figured Buddha".²⁵ There is however, no agreement about the term *aniconism* and its use. Often the term is avoided, and the art is only described

²¹ B Gladigow, "Anikonische Kulte", *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*. Bd. 1. Hrsg. H Cancik (Stuttgart, 1988), p. 472.

²² T Mettinger, *No Graven Image?. Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995), p. 19.

²³ Loc. cit.

²⁴ R L Brown, "Narrative as Icon. The Jātaka Stories in Ancient Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture", *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*. Edited by J Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 107–108n. 86.

²⁵ Brown, "Narrative as Icon ...", p. 108n. 86.

like this: "... the master is never represented in human forms, but only by symbols, ... these symbols represent the actual presence of the Buddha".²⁶

Eva Balicka-Witakowska also avoids the term *aniconism* when describing early Christian art from Ethiopia.²⁷ The Holy Christ is not depicted in human shape in some old Ethiopic evangeliaria. Even if the soldiers are depicted anthropomorphically at Golgata, Christ is only represented by an empty cross combined with the lamb.

Susan L Huntington uses the term only when she is arguing against the existence of "... the so-called aniconic symbols".²⁸ As she denies that the Buddha is represented by aniconic signs, she does of course not use the term in her analysis of Buddhist art. In an article from 1991 Vidya Dehejia uses the word *aniconic* when describing how the Buddha is represented without his physical presence.²⁹ Later, however, she discards the term. Instead, she prefers to use the term *index*.³⁰ See chapter 1.2.2 for her distinction between index, icon and symbol.

Aniconism in this study corresponds to what Mettinger calls *material aniconism*, with the exception that it also includes *empty thrones*, which in his view belongs to the category of *empty-space aniconism*. I will not follow Mettinger's distinction between *aniconism* and *aniconic tendencies*.

Aniconic art can mean non-figurative art. Here in Buddhist art it means the absence of the human-figured Buddha, otherwise the art is fully figurative. Furthermore, the term does not indicate any universally valid principle of aniconism.

1.2.2 The Concept of Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic Signs

In this study the concept *sign* is used in its broadest sense, consisting of a sign vehicle connected with meaning.³¹ The meaning is only relevant in a specific cultural context. There may be some individual differences, but the limits are set by social conventions.

Vidya Dehejia³² and Tryggve Mettinger³³ both refer to Charles Sanders Peirce and his distinction between *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. This distinction seems useful even if it is not always completely clear. It may help us to describe pieces of art without being bound up with the artists' intention or the beholders' different interpretations. Dehejia uses the distinction because it

²⁶ A Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1985 (1927)), p. 31.

²⁷ E Balicka-Witakowska, *La Crucifixion sans Crucifié dans l'art éthiopien. Recherches sur la survie de l'iconographie chrétienne de l'Antiquité tardive*. Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica 4 (Warszawa: Zaś Pan, 1997 (1993)).

²⁸ Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art ...", p. 402.

²⁹ Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multivalence ...", p. 48.

³⁰ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, p. vii.

³¹ For a discussion of the concept of sign see: W Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 79–91.

³² Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, pp. 36–37.

³³ Mettinger, *No Graven Image? ...*, pp. 21–22.

seems to fit her theory. In this study I will use this distinction mainly as a means to describe the artefacts.

When looking at a painting, the image is a sign of something else. The mental image that the beholder or reader³⁴ of the sign shapes in her or his mind is called by Peirce the *interpretant*. This interpretant points to an object, which may be different for each beholder. The beholder is the main actor and it is only in the act of interpretation that art becomes art. This process, which is called infinite semiosis, is constantly shifting.³⁵

(1) An *icon* relates to its referent by resemblance.³⁶ Pictures are representations of this kind.³⁷ According to Dehejia the "... non-figural iconical sign makes direct reference to the sacred site ...".³⁸

(2) An *index* relates to its referent by its existential connection.³⁹ Peirce gives as an example a bullet-hole in a piece of mould. The bullet-hole can be seen as an indexical sign for the shot. Another examples that he gives is that a rolling gait can be seen as an indexical sign for a sailor.⁴⁰ It has also been described as the physical manifestation of a cause and as a direct pointer to that object.⁴¹ For Dehejia the indexical sign points to the presence of the Buddha.

(3) Finally, a *symbol* is a sign that relates to its referent by convention.⁴² The symbolic sign refers to Buddhist ideals, according to Dehejia. She gives examples of the seat beneath the tree, the wheel or the wheel-crowned column, and the *triratna*. She believes that they may be interpreted as symbolic signs referring to the wisdom of enlightenment, the truth of the doctrine and the threefold emphasis on the Buddha, *dharma* and *saṅgha*.⁴³

In this study an *iconic sign* refers to something that it resembles in appearance. An *indexical sign* points to a special object by a cause or a physical trace. Finally, a *symbolic sign* serves as a vehicle for a conception. An example of an iconic sign can be seen in fig. 3. The tree, the empty throne etc. represent a sacred Buddhist site. An indexical sign can be seen in fig. 1. The tree, the empty throne etc. point to the presence of the Buddha. Fig. 11 is an example of an symbolic sign referring in the Indian cultural surroundings to prosperity and good fortune. It is obvious that the demarcations between the three categories cannot always be clear. It should also be noted that a sign may consist of a combination of two or three of these categories.

³⁴ I will henceforth use the term *beholder* even if it is more usual to use the term *reader* in semiotic studies.

³⁵ M Bal & N Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History", *The Art Bulletin* 73.2 (1991), p. 188.

³⁶ S Bann, "Semiotics", *The Dictionary of Art*, vol 28. Edited by J Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 396–397.

³⁷ C S Peirce, "The Icon, Index, and Symbol", *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 2, Edited by C Hartshorne & P Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), pp. 157–158.

³⁸ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, p. 37.

³⁹ Bann, "Semiotics ...", pp. 396–397.

⁴⁰ Peirce, "The Icon, Index ...", p. 160.

⁴¹ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, pp. 37, 41.

⁴² Bann, "Semiotics ...", pp. 396–397.

⁴³ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early ...*, pp. 51–52.

The three concepts, icon, index and symbol, will make it possible to describe Buddhist aniconic art without being dependent on the artist's or beholder's different intentions and interpretations. To study the transformation of this art it is important, however, to have in mind the contexts in which this art was made. What makes an indexical sign and not an iconic sign a symbol of the Buddha? It is certainly not the appearance of the sign itself. Instead, an indexical sign is pointing to the Buddha if many people understand it to be a Buddha from the context within which it appears. There must be some kind of relationship between the sign and the thing it is pointing to. The cross is the symbol of Christianity by convention and common understanding, not because of the crucifixion. Likewise, a trident is not a symbol of Buddha, *dharmā* and *saṅgha* by its appearance. We can call it a symbol if many Buddhists connect it with the things it is said to symbolize. Therefore, this study will follow George Dickie when he says, "symbols are context dependent".⁴⁴

Important questions regarding symbols in Asian traditions have been raised by Jane Duran⁴⁵ and Gérard Fussman.⁴⁶ As far as possible this study will avoid such analysis that goes beyond the cultural context in which a symbol appears. Symbolic associations will not be used in the same way as Adrian Snodgrass used them. He is unconcerned about whether a particular symbolic association is present in the minds of those who construct or venerate a given *stūpa*. He believes that the meaning of the *stūpa* is inherent in the form itself.⁴⁷ Instead, this study presupposes the importance of the connection between signs and conventions held by artists, sponsors and beholders. The symbolic context in this study is the Buddhist cult practice in India in pre-Gupta time.

1.2.3 Visual Narratives

To describe different ways of depicting visual narratives, I will use a couple of technical terms borrowed from Vidya Deheija.

Monoscentic narratives depict a single event in a story.⁴⁸

Continuous narratives depict successive events of an episode, or successive episodes, of a story within a single enframed unit, repeating the figure of the protagonist in the course of the narrative.⁴⁹

Synoptic narratives depict multiple episodes from a story within a single frame, but there is no consistent or formal order of representation with regard to either causality or temporality.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ G Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics. An Analytic Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 110.

⁴⁵ J Duran, "The Stupa in Indian Art. Symbols and the Symbolic", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.1 (1996), pp. 66–74.

⁴⁶ G Fussman, "Symbolisms of the Buddhist *Stūpa*", *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9.2 (1986), pp. 37–53.

⁴⁷ A Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa. Studies on Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 9.

⁴⁸ Deheija, *Discourse in Early ...*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Conflated narratives depict multiple episodes from a story within a single frame, but the figure of the protagonist is conflated instead of being repeated from one scene to the next.⁵¹

1.2.4 Bodhi-tree (*bodhivṛkṣa*) and Seat (*āsana*)

Śākyamuni Buddha is not the only *buddha* connected with a *bodhivṛkṣa*. Therefore, in this study the term *bodhivṛkṣa* does not distinguish between the *buddha* with which it is connected.

A kind of rectangular stone platform like an altar is a central and important sign in most of the reliefs in this study. It is nearly always placed in front of a *bodhivṛkṣa*, a wheel or a wheel-pillar (*cakrastambha*). In some reliefs, especially in *Amarāvātī* and *Nāgārjunakoṇḍa*, it looks more like a seat and not as an altar. It is not the place here to distinguish between whether it is the throne that arose on the spot where the Buddha was seated or if it is an altar that is depicted. The term *seat* (*āsana*) will therefore be used for a rectangular stone platform as long as no further specification of its function is needed.

1.3 Methodological Reflections

1.3.1 Religion or Philosophy?

Ever since Buddhism began to be discussed in the West opinion has been divided as to whether Buddhism should be regarded as a philosophy or as a religion. Scholarly attention has also been divided between studies principally devoted to philosophical abstract ideas or, on the other hand, everyday religious life. The angle of approach determines already from the beginning much of the result. Nobody can deny that the philosophical systems of Buddhism are an important part in Buddhist religion, and so also is the Buddhist cult. The basis for this study is the cultic everyday religious life of Buddhism, of which Buddhist art is a part. Art, ritual, dogma and philosophy mutually interact and it is in this interaction that we shall search for religious changes and developments.

1.3.2 Monastic-Lay Division

One of the most influential studies in recent times for the understanding of Buddhist history was done in the field of Christian tradition. It is a book written by Peter Brown about the cult of saints in Latin Christianity.⁵² This thin

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁵² P Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Towards a Chronology of Buddhist Aniconic Art

4.1 Introduction

Those who believe that Buddhist aniconic art can be explained as a result of a religious or philosophical doctrine, or that its origin is derived from a prohibition on depicting the Buddha anthropomorphically, or that it arose from a meditational practice, seem to neglect the art itself and its development. They regard visual art only as a symptom of something else and neglect its importance in everyday Buddhist religious life. They neglect the fact that Buddhist visual art may have influenced other aspects of Buddhism as well. Therefore, I will in this chapter concentrate on the development of Buddhist aniconic art.

Some scholars have recognized a development in Buddhist aniconic art. Albert Foucher, for example, believed that Buddhist aniconic art had its origin in pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites.¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy was also of the opinion that old Indian signs came to be used to designate the four great events in the life of the Buddha.² In addition, Ludwig Bachhofer described the development of early Indian sculpture from a historical point of view.³ Even if Dietrich Seckel believes that it was the nature of the Buddha that prevented the Buddhists from making images of him, he is aware that Buddhist aniconic art developed out of early Indian signs.⁴ Dieter Schlingloff is also aware of a development of Buddhist art. Although this does not cause him give up his theory that Buddhist art arose from a meditational practice.

However, no serious attempt to document this development has been made by these scholars. Therefore, in this chapter I will concentrate on this development of Buddhist aniconic art. I will base this study on a couple of important Buddhist sites. For each site, I will try to document and date different ways of depicting aniconic signs. The art at these sites will hopefully disclose a line of development that makes it possible to construct a preliminary chronology of Buddhist aniconic art. There are a host of lesser-known sites that after detailed studies may improve this preliminary chronology.

¹ Foucher, *The Beginning of Buddhist Art ...*, p. 13.

² Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of ...", pp. 290–294.

³ L. Bachhofer, *Early Indian Sculpture* (Paris: Pegasus Press, 1929).

⁴ Seckel, *Jenseits des Bildes ...*, p. 9.

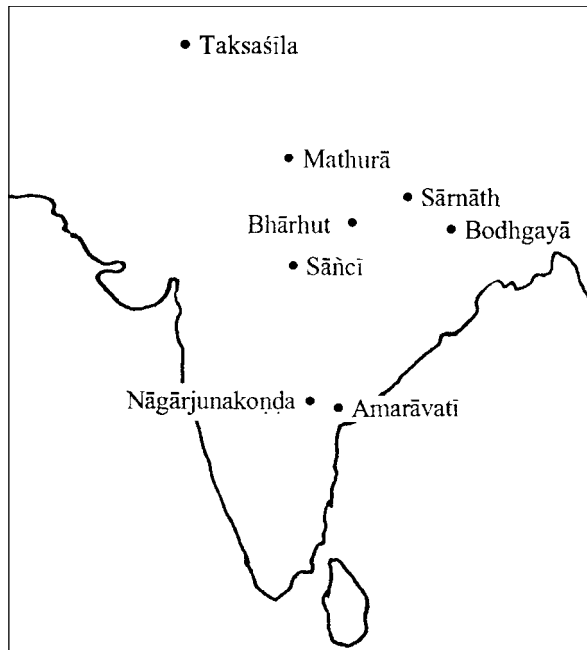


Fig. 6. Some important Buddhist sites.

4.2 Sāñcī

4.2.1 Introduction

Sāñcī is a Buddhist site in Madhya Pradesh, 70 km from Bhopal. It consists of 51 monuments dating from the 3rd century BC to the 13th century AD. It was discovered by the Europeans in 1818 when General Taylor of the Bengal Cavalry encamped near the ruins. Captain E Fell soon thereafter wrote the first account for *Calcutta Journal* of July 1819. The Buddhists left Sāñcī in the 13th century, but the remains were in a relatively good state of preservation at the beginning of the 20th century. Three of the four gateways round the main *stūpa* (*stūpa* 1) were still standing. Sāñcī became famous among westerners, but unfortunately this made it the victim of treasure hunters and amateur archaeologists. The political agent in Bhopal, Herbert Maddock, and his assistant Captain Johnson, opened *stūpa* 1 in 1822 in search for treasures. This resulted in serious damage to the *stūpa* and caused the western gateway to collapse. Alexander Cunningham came to Sāñcī in 1851, and found relics in both *stūpa* 2 and 3. Cunningham planned to send the two fallen gateways from *stūpa* 1 to the British Museum, but this failed because of the expense of the transport. Conservation of the remains was started in 1880. *Stūpa* 1 was cleaned from vegetation and repaired, and both the fallen gateways were re-erected. The first real excavation at Sāñcī was not done until Sir John Marshall arrived there. He led the excavations and conservation at the site between

1912 and 1919, and it is mainly his work that brought the monuments to their present condition.⁵ Together with Alfred Foucher he published in 1940 *The Monuments of Sāñcī*, a work in three volumes.

4.2.2 Vidiśā

Sāñcī was not far from Vidiśā, the western capital of the Śuṅgas. Vidiśā had an important situation on the route linking Northern India, Deccan and Western India. It also seems to have been an important craft centre, particularly noted for ivory, weaving and sharp swords. Its political importance is emphasized by a stone pillar at the site set up by the envoy of the Indo-Greek king of Taxila (Taksaśīla) to the court of the king Kasiputra Bhagabhadra of Vidiśā.⁶

Apart from Sāñcī, there are several groups of Buddhist settlements in quiet and retired spots on sandstone hills within a radius of 20 kilometre from Vidiśā. Particularly impressive among these are the monuments at Sonari, Satdhara, Bhojpur and Andher. These groups are similar to and almost contemporaneous with *stūpa* 1, 2 and 3 in Sāñcī.⁷

4.2.3 Sāñcī at the Time of Aśoka

A brick *stūpa* no. 1 of about 18 metre in diameter (including the *medhi*) was erected at the time of Aśoka. It was crowned by an umbrella (*chattra*) of Chunar sandstone. A polished pillar of Chunar sandstone with a capital similar to the one at Sārnāth was erected at its side.⁸

The earliest written reference to Sāñcī is in chapter 17 in the *Mahāvārṇsa* where it is recorded that Mahinda, the son of Aśoka, visited his mother at Vidiśā and that both went to the monastery she had built at Vediśāgiri or Cetiyaḡiri.⁹ Vediśāgiri is generally identified as the hill of Sāñcī.¹⁰

4.2.4 *Stūpa* 2

4.2.4.1 *The Stūpa*

Stūpa 2 is on a small terrace on the west side, halfway to the hilltop and was built to hold the relics of ten named Buddhist monks. It was Alexander Cun-

⁵ D Mitra, "Discovery and Restoration of the Monuments", *Unseen Presence. The Buddha and Sanchi*, Edited by V Dehejia, (Mumbai: Marg Publication, 1996), p. 3–6.

⁶ D K Chakrabarti, "Post-Mauryan States of Mainland South Asia (c. BC 185-AD 320)", *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia. The Emergence of Cities and States*. By F.R. Allchin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 303–304.

⁷ D Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971), p. 91.

⁸ Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments ...*, pp. 23–24, 97.

⁹ M D Willis, "Sanchi", *The Dictionary of Art*. Vol. 27. Edited by J Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 708.

¹⁰ Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments ...*, p. 97.

ningham who discovered the relics.¹¹ *Stūpa 2* is a small *stūpa*, only circa 14 meters in diameter, excluding the circumambulation path and enclosing balustrade. It is approximately 8 meters to the top of the dome and 11 meters to the top of the umbrella.¹² It is an earthen mound faced with bricks. Its pathway for circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇāpatha*) was paved with stone slabs. Stone was also used for the stairway (*sopāna*) leading to the upper circular drum (*medhī*).

4.3.4.2 The Railing

The *stūpa* is surrounded by a richly decorated stone railing (*vedikā*), 2 m 30 cm in height with four entrances. The design of the railing discloses that a wooden railing must have preceded it.¹³ The railing consists of 88 uprights (*stambha*), connected by three sets of cross-bars (*sūcī*) and topped with a coping (*uṣṇīṣa*). There are no carvings on the copings and crossbars. Each upright is carved on both faces with full medallions in the centre and half medallions at the ends (fig. 7). The main motif on the uprights is lotus flowers. Nearly 300 out of 444 medallions consist of different varieties of lotus flowers. The carvings on the railings make the *stūpa* most interesting for those who wish to understand the development of early Buddhist art. John Marshall believed that the sculptures of *stūpa 2* date from the last quarter of the second century BC and probably from about 110 BC. He also believed that they constitute an especially valuable landmark in the evolution of Indian art, as distinct from the foreign, official art of the Mauryas.¹⁴ The railing is datable to somewhere between 100 and 150 BC. M D Willis believes it as old as circa 150 BC¹⁵ and Coomaraswamy thought it to be from between 184 and 72 BC.¹⁶ Benjamin Rowland and Debala Mitra suggest a date in the last quarter of the second century.¹⁷ We must have in mind that these dating are based on palaeographical studies and on the style of the reliefs only. In order to discuss the carvings we have to divide them into three groups.

4.2.4.3 Group A

Group A consists of all the railing uprights except those at the four entrances. They are all decorated with medallions, a full one at the centre and half medallions above and below (fig. 7). Most of them depict lotus flowers. The rest are decorated with real animals, mythological creatures, plants and human beings.

¹¹ A Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments of Central India. Comprising a Brief Historical Sketch of the Rise, Progress and Decline of Buddhism; with an Account of the Opening and Examination of the Various Groups of Topes around Bhilsa* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997 (1854)), pp. 285–294.

¹² Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchī* ..., p. 79.

¹³ Remains of a wooden railing have been found at Pauni and I think it is likely that there have been wooden railings around all *stūpas* in Mauryan and maby even in early post-Mauryan times.

¹⁴ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchī* ..., p. 95.

¹⁵ Willis, "Sanchi ...", p. 708.

¹⁶ Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian* ..., p. 35.

¹⁷ Rowland, *The Art and Architecture* ..., p. 84. D Mitra, *Sanchī*, 6th Edition (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1992), p. 63.



Fig. 7. *Nāga* and lotus flowers on railing. Sāñcī *stūpa* 2, railing uprights and cross-bars, 2nd century BC.

Among the real animals we find horses, elephants, lions, buffaloes, rhinoceros, squirrels and camels. Among the mythological creatures there are dwarfs, *makaras*, *nāgas*, *nāgīs*, *yakṣas*, a horse with a human head and a woman with a head of a horse. All signs in group A seem to be non-narrative iconic or symbolic signs.

Rowland has proposed that the animals and birds on the railing were intended to evoke the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha.¹⁸ However, a sign does not refer to the life or lives of the Buddha just because it is depicted on a Buddhist building. There is one medallion that has been interpreted as an indexical sign pointing to the Buddha during his great departure simply because it is a horse without a rider (fig. 8). The mere existence of a horse is not sufficient evidence to justify its interpretation as an indexical sign of the Buddha, especially as animals of different kinds are common in early Buddhist art. It is also possible to find depictions of horses with riders on their backs from this early period,¹⁹ but no one has interpreted these as anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha.

4.2.4.4 Group B

Group B consists of the railing uprights at the four L-shaped entrances, except those in group C. These uprights are carved on the whole face, from top to

¹⁸ Rowland, *The Art and Architecture ...*, p. 85.

¹⁹ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments ...*, p. 187–188, Pl. 82: 40b, 86: 63b, 90: 82a, 84b.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 8. Iconic sign of horse. Sāñcī stūpa 2, railing uprights, 2nd century BC. From: J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1940. Vol. 3, pl. 88, 74b.

Fig. 9. Iconic sign of sacred tree. Sāñcī stūpa 2, entrance pillar, 2nd century BC.

bottom. Nevertheless, the carvings look very archaic and if they were created later than those of group A, it cannot have been much later. At the north entrance, there is an iconic sign of a sacred tree. Garlands are hanging in the tree and at the top there is an umbrella (fig. 9). Another upright at the same entrance (fig. 10) has an iconic sign of a Mauryan pillar with elephants and a wheel at the top.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Fig. 10. Iconic sign of wheel pillar. Sāñcī *stūpa* 2, entrance pillar, 2nd century BC.

Fig. 11. Symbolic sign of Śrī Lakṣmī. Sāñcī *stūpa* 2, entrance pillar, 2nd century BC.

There has for a long time been a common belief that these and two other signs in group B are indexical signs depicting monoscenic narratives pointing to the life of the Buddha. It has been suggested that fig. 9 depicts the enlightenment of the Buddha and fig. 10 his first sermon. Similarly, his *parinirvāṇa* is believed to be represented by a *stūpa* and a relief depicting a woman surrounded by two elephants (fig. 11) is thought to be an indexical sign of his birth. Thus, it has been suggested by among others Marshall and Foucher,

Manjushree Rao, Debala Mitra and Benjamin Rowland,²⁰ that the carvings on the uprights in group B are indexical signs of the four major events in the life of the Buddha. Dehejia, however, suggests instead that they are symbolic signs that refer to the Buddhist faith.²¹

I believe that there are no indexical signs pointing to the Buddha on *stūpa* 2. It is my firm conviction that all reliefs in group B, except for two that will be discussed below, consist of iconic signs of sacred trees, pillars, *stūpas* etc. It is important to notice that no *āsanas* or *buddhapādas* are depicted on them. The reason why they have been interpreted as indexical signs must be that the interpreters have been misled by later Buddhist art. Mireille Bénisti even goes so far as to believe that no art at *stūpa* 2 is typically Buddhist. She believes that the art in both group A and B represents a common older Indian tradition, that is not specifically Buddhist.²² I agree with her in so far that the art on *stūpa* 2 is not exclusively Buddhist. As we will see later, sacred trees, wheels, lotus flowers, tridents etc. were not only used by Buddhists. However, when these signs were carved on a Buddhist *stūpa* some Buddhists may have already regarded them as Buddhist signs from an early date.

There are two signs that are difficult to interpret as iconic signs. The first of these is a symbolic sign (fig. 12) consisting of a lotus flower, a trident and a sixteen-spoked wheel on top of each other, all lifted by two dwarfs. These signs are of course Buddhist, but they are also common Indian signs used by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The same three signs are also seen in Jain art. A pedestal belonging to a Jain image has these three symbolic signs depicted on top of each other (fig. 42) just like this Sāñcī upright.²³

The other symbolic sign (fig. 11) is a relief depicting a female figure standing on a lotus flower between two elephants. This relief has been interpreted as representing the birth of the Buddha in the shape of Māyā, the mother of the Buddha. Without doubt, this relief represents Śrī Lakṣmī, the goddess of fortune, and nothing else, as has been clearly pointed out by Coomaraswamy.²⁴

4.2.4.5 Group C

Group C consists of two uprights.²⁵ Both belong to a later period, probably when the gateways at *stūpa* 1 were made. There is nothing of interest for us in this group.

²⁰ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments ...*, pp. 180–191. M Rao, *Sanchi Sculptures. An Aesthetic and Cultural Study* (New Delhi: Akay Book, 1994), pp. 77–78. Mitra, *Sanchi ...*, pp. 63–64. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture ...*, p. 85.

²¹ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art ...*, p. 77.

²² M Bénisti, “Observations concernant le stūpa no 2 de Sāñcī. Résumé de la communication présentée, avec 38 projections, le 19 février 1986”, *Bulletin d’Etudes Indiennes* 4 (1986), pp. 165–170.

²³ P Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators. Jain Art from India* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1994), p. 104, cat. 2.

²⁴ A K Coomaraswamy, “Early Indian Iconography. Śrī-Lakṣmī”, *Eastern Art* 3 (1929), pp. 183–189.

²⁵ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments ...*, Pl. 78: 22a, 22b, 79: 27a, 27b.



Fig. 12. Symbolic sign depicting wheel, trident and lotus-flower. Sāñcī *stūpa* 2, entrance pillar, 2nd century BC.

4.2.4.6 Summary of the Art on *Stūpa* 2

There is relative agreement that the railing on *stūpa* 2 is datable to between 150 and 100 BC. The railing uprights are all decorated with medallions with animals, fabulous creatures, plants and human beings. The lotus flowers are the most frequently used signs. The uprights at the four entrances are carved on the whole face, from top to bottom and may have been added slightly later. Iconic signs of sacred trees, pillars and *stūpas* have been carved on the uprights at the four entrances, but there is nothing to indicate that they represent the life of the Buddha. Likewise, the relief commonly interpreted as representing the birth of the Buddha is a representation of the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī. Events in the life of the Buddha are not present in this early period of Buddhist art. They belong to a later period. There are also symbolic signs such as wheels and tridents depicted on the uprights. However, no *āsanas* or *buddhapādas* can be found on *stūpa* 2. Thus, the art on *stūpa* 2 cannot be said to be typically Buddhist. Instead, it is of a common Indian tradition shared by Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike.



Fig. 13. Sāncī stūpa 1, and eastern gateway.

4.2.5 Stūpa 1

4.2.5.1 The Stūpa

The diameter of *stūpa* 1 (fig. 13), or the Great *Stūpa*, is 36 metres and its height, excluding the umbrella, is 16 metres. The *stūpa* encases an earlier one from the time of Aśoka of about half its present dimensions. The *stūpa* underwent a complete reconstruction in the middle of the 2nd century BC and it is this building that exists today.²⁶ There are two circular pathways meant for circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā patha*), one at the ground-level and one at the circular drum (*medhi*) which is possible to approach by a double stairway (*sopāna*) on the south-side. The pathways are both enclosed by railings (*vedikā*) made at that time. The *stūpa* is crowned by three umbrellas (*chattra*) within a square railing.

4.2.5.2 The Railings

The design of the stone railings (*vedikā*) at this *stūpa* is clearly influenced by wooden craftsmanship, just as those of *stūpa* 2. The railings at ground level were made in the middle of the 2nd century BC. Most of the uprights (*stambha*), crossbars (*sūci*) and coping stones (*uṣṇīsha*) are inscribed with names of donors, both laypeople, monks and nuns, but they do not consist of any carv-

²⁶ Mitra, *Sanchi* ..., pp. 15–16.

ings.²⁷ The upper pathway is also surrounded by a railing consisting of uprights, cross-bars and crowned by copings rounded at the top. It was probably made at the same time as the railing at the ground level or slightly later. The outer faces of the uprights are carved with one full medallion at the centre and two half medallions at the ends. As they are carved on the outer faces the carvings are not intended to be seen when circumambulating on the upper pathway. The reliefs on these uprights seem to be the oldest at *Sāñcī*. This is the opinion of Foucher, as they appear even more “clumsy” and “schematic”²⁸ than the reliefs at *stūpa* 2. These medallions contain a variety of motifs, mostly flowers and animals, but also human figures and mythological beings. The signs at the railing seem, just as the signs in group A at *stūpa* 2, to be nothing other than non-narrative iconic or symbolic signs. It is an art of a common Indian tradition, shared by Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike and cannot be said to be typically Buddhist.

4.2.5.3 The Gateways

Sometime in the late 1st century BC or the early 1st century AD four gateways (*torāṇa*) were added at the entrances. Each gateway is composed of two square pillars and supports a superstructure of three architraves with volute ends (fig. 13). Both sides of the architraves, as well as the various faces of the pillars, are sculpted. The height of the gateways, excluding crowning elements, is about eight and a half metre.

On the south gateway, which was the first to be built, is an inscription which relates that it is a gift of Ānaṃda, son of Vāsiṭhī, the foreman of the artisans of the Rājan Sirī Sātakaṇi.²⁹ Śri Sātakaṇi may be identified as one of the kings of Śātavāhana line, probably Sātakaṇi I. If we follow the short chronology of the Śātavāhana rule, this king must have gained power around 11 AD.³⁰ The long chronology suggested by Vincent Smith is for stylistic reasons impossible to follow, as the Śātavāhana line, according to him, is said to have begun in the 3rd century BC. Chakrabarti, following the chronology of H. C. Raychaudhuri, dates the rule of Sātakaṇi I to between 27–17 BC.³¹ It is of no great importance whether we follow Huntington or Chakrabarti as the gateways according to them would either have been created in the last part of the 1st century BC or the first part of the 1st century AD.

There is at least 70 years between the reliefs on the railings on *stūpa* 2 and on the gateways on *stūpa* 1. But more likely there is 100 years or more or even as much as 150 years. Artistic creativity had during this period undergone a remarkable development. On the gateways there is a rich and clearly distin-

²⁷ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī* ..., p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

³⁰ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* ..., pp. 93, 628–629n. 2–3.

³¹ Chakrabarti, “Post-Mauryan states ...”, pp. 279–280.

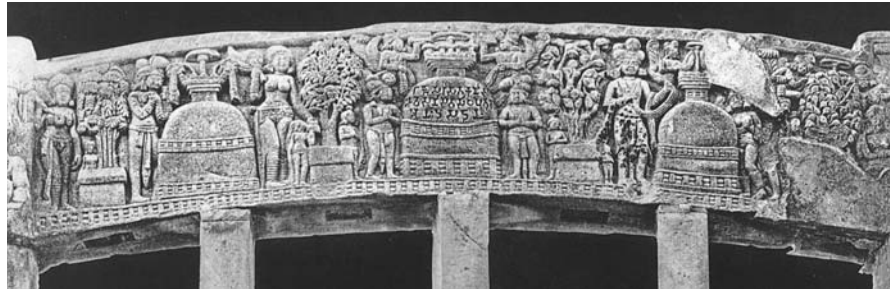


Fig. 14. Iconic sign of *bodhivṛkṣas* and *stūpas*. Sāñcī *stūpa* 1, late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. From: J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1940. Vol. 2, pl. 40,1.

guished Buddhist art. The figures and details on the reliefs are deeply cut compared with the earlier art on *stūpa* 2. Both monoscenic, synoptic and continuous narrations are commonly used by the artists to depict a story.

4.2.5.4 Six Categories of Carvings

I have distinguished six different categories of carvings on the gateways.

- (1) Indexical signs pointing to the Buddha and different events in his life (fig. 5, 16).
- (2) Five *Jātaka* stories are depicted, *Chaddanta*, *Mahākapi*, *Vessantara*, *Alambasā* and *Sāma*.
- (3) Iconic signs representing events in the history or legends of Buddhism, for example the visit to Rāmagrāma *stūpa* by Aśoka.
- (4) Iconic signs of *bodhivṛkṣas* and *stūpas* (fig. 14). There are *bodhivṛkṣas* both of the previous *buddhas* and of the coming Buddha Maitreya.³²
- (5) Symbolic signs of wheels, tridents, *pūrṇaḥaṭas* etc.
- (6) Miscellaneous scenes and decorations, such as animals, plants and mythical creatures (fig. 15).

The first three categories cannot be found on *stūpa* 2. The fourth category, *bodhivṛkṣas* and *stūpas*, existed on *stūpa* 2 but in a simpler form. The different *bodhivṛkṣas* and *stūpas* are on *stūpa* 1 connected with specific Buddhas. All three categories 1, 4 and 5 have been called aniconic, but it is to the first category that the main aniconic signs belong and it must be examined more closely.

4.2.5.5 Indexical Signs of the Buddha

There are several indexical signs at the gateways that seem to depict the presence of the Buddha without his physical appearance. It is the narrative context

³² Mitra, *Sanchi* ..., pp. 40–41.

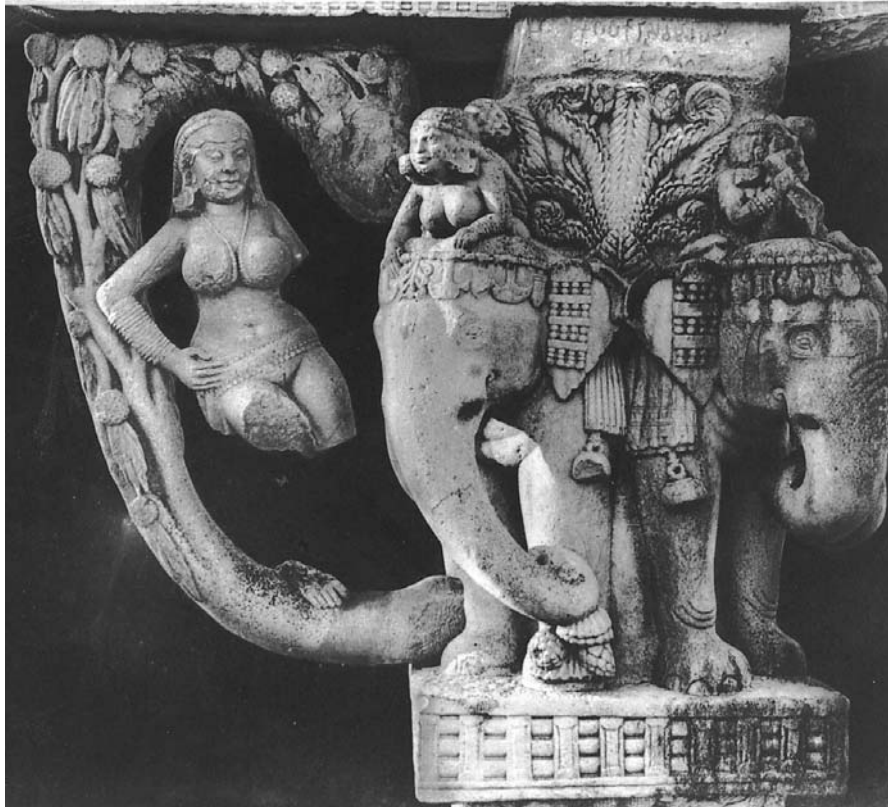


Fig. 15. Iconic signs of *yakṣiṇī* and elephants. Sāñcī *stūpa* 1, late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. From: J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1940. Vol. 2, pl. 25.

that makes the sign easily interpretable as an indexical sign pointing to the Buddha in some event in his life. Indexical signs have been used in several different ways. We will see here a couple of slightly different ways to depict an indexical sign. The most common indexical sign is when a sign points to an event connected to that sign. The *bodhivṛkṣa* is, for example, connected with the enlightenment. However, there are several narrative reliefs on the gateways without a natural connection between the *bodhivṛkṣa* and the event. The *bodhivṛkṣa* has in several reliefs lost its narrative context.

Firstly, there is a relief on the west pillar of the northern gateway, commonly interpreted as the offering to the Buddha made by a monkey just outside Vaiśālī (fig. 16). To the left there is a *bodhivṛkṣa* with garlands. In front of the tree is an *āsana* which looks more like an altar than a throne or a seat. Near the *āsana* are two monkeys, or rather a reduplication of one and the same monkey. The nearest holds a bowl with its hands and the other raises its empty



Fig. 16. Indexical sign pointing to the event when a monkey offered honey to the Buddha. Sāñcī *stūpa* 1, late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD.

hands as in homage. In the front there are two women and a small child venerating the *āsana*. Four laypeople are standing in the back, watching the scene.

This relief can easily be interpreted as an indexical sign depicted in monoscopic or continuous narration representing the event when a monkey presented a bowl of honey to the Buddha. It is, however, also possible to interpret it otherwise. For example it may be interpreted as worship of a *bodhivṛkṣa* in *Vaiśālī*, where the two women and the child in the front represent the donors. The two monkeys would in that case have been placed there with the purpose of identifying the site. Regardless of which interpretation most closely reflects the intention of the artist or donor, the *bodhivṛkṣa* and the *āsana* together with the two monkeys, must have given rise to associations with the Buddha in the mind of the beholders.

Another relief on the same pillar depicts an *āsana* in front of the *bodhivṛkṣa* in the same way as the previous one. Three laypeople, two females and one male, are placed in front of the *āsana*. The male seems to be a king, as a royal umbrella is being held over him. A platform is depicted above the tree. This has been interpreted as the walking path of the Buddha and would then represent how he performed a miracle in front of his father king Śuddhodana, by

walking in the air. There are a few more platforms in other reliefs that have also been interpreted as the walking path of the Buddha. In one example the platform is placed in a river, probably representing a miracle when the Buddha walked on the water.

These two indexical signs consist of an *āsana* in front of a *bodhivṛkṣa*. A couple of important details must be observed. The *bodhivṛkṣas* in these two examples do not point to the enlightenment of the Buddha. Instead, they are connected with other events in his life. This may indicate that the *bodhivṛkṣa* is not closely connected with the enlightenment in the art of Sāñcī. It may already have lost its narrative context and be only pointing to the Buddha without narrative context. The *bodhivṛkṣa*, together with an *āsana*, has become an independent indexical sign for the Buddha, and may be used in different contexts.

The *āsana* looks more like an altar than something to sit upon. In these two examples nothing is on top of the *āsana*. There are, however, a few examples of reliefs at the gateways where something is placed on the *āsana*. In two reliefs some Buddhist symbols (lotus flowers, tridents) are placed on the *āsanas*. Most of the *āsanas* are however, completely empty. Another interesting detail is that of all the circa 30 reliefs at the gateways consisting of a *bodhivṛkṣa* and an *āsana*, not one depicts a pair of footprints in front of the *āsana*.

Another way to depict an indexical sign referring to the Buddha is seen in the relief commonly interpreted as representing the event when the Buddha leaves his palace (fig. 5). Whatever the intention of the artist, it is easy to interpret the riderless horses honoured with royal umbrellas as representing the Buddha when he leaves the palace. To the right there is a pair of foot prints under a royal umbrella. This may be an indexical sign for the enlightenment even if there is no *bodhivṛkṣa*. Notice that the foot print is not depicted in the ordinary Buddhist way. According to *Lakkhaṇa sutta* the Buddha had long fingers and toes.³³ This has usually been interpreted and shown iconographically as him having the fingers and toes all of the same length. This is not the case here. There is, just as it is related in *Lakkhana sutta*, only a wheel in the middle of the foot. No other signs are seen. Both the riderless horses and the footprint have thus been interpreted by western scholars as indexical signs referring to the Buddha, but there was probably a similar interpretation made by Buddhist beholders when Buddhism was still flourishing in India.

A third kind of relief has also been interpreted as an indexical sign pointing to the Buddha.³⁴ The whole east face of the east pillar of the north gateway (fig. 17) is covered with an *indrakhīla*, “Indras post”.³⁵ It consists of a series of formalized lotus plants one above the other, with artificial brackets in the

³³ [*Dīgha Nikāya*]. *Dialogues* ..., Part 3, p. 138.

³⁴ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī* ..., pp. 248–249.

³⁵ Rhys Davids, Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* ..., p. 121. For a discussion about the origin and development of the *Indrakhīla* see: Schalk, *Der Paritta-Dienst* ..., pp. 152–166, Tafel 1, 2, 9 and L de Silva, “Paritta. A Historical and Religious Study of the Buddhist Ceremony for Peace and Prosperity in Sri Lanka”, *Spolia Zeylanica* 36.1 (Colombo: National Museums of Sri Lanka, 1981), pp. 57–79.



*Fig. 17. Indrakhīla. Sāñcī stūpa 1, late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. From: J Marshall, A Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1940. Vol. 2, pl. 37 a.*

borders from which hang jewelled garlands and necklaces of lucky talismans betokening both worldly and spiritual riches.³⁶ At the top there is a trident and at the bottom a pair of footprints. I have some doubts about interpreting this as an indexical sign of the Buddha. Instead, I see the *indrakhīla* as a common

³⁶ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñcī* ..., p. 144.

Indian symbolic sign. At the same time it is a Buddhist symbolic sign as it is made in a Buddhist context with footprints and a trident. Corresponding reliefs on the right pillar of the northern gateway bear no distinctive Buddhist symbolic signs. It is important to notice that the footprints resemble the footprints discussed in the relief depicting the Buddha leaving the palace.

4.2.5.6 Summary of the Art on Stūpa 1

The railing uprights on the stairway and upper pathway on *stūpa* 1 are of the same age or slightly earlier than the railings on *stūpa* 2, between approximately 150 and 100 BC. The carvings are, just like those on *stūpa* 2, from a common Indian tradition. There are no indexical signs pointing to the Buddha yet. Instead, there are iconic and symbolic signs of lotus flowers, animals, plants, humans and mythological creatures.

Sometime in the late 1st century BC or the early 1st century AD four gateways were added at the entrances. On them there are several indexical signs which seem to depict the presence of the Buddha without his physical appearance. Indexical signs have been used in several different ways. The *bodhivṛkṣa* has in several reliefs lost its narrative context. The *bodhivṛkṣa* no longer points only to the enlightenment of the Buddha. It was used to represent the Buddha connected to other events in his life. The *bodhivṛkṣa*, together with an *āsana*, has become an independent indexical sign for the Buddha, and may be used in different contexts. Another way to depict an indexical sign referring to the Buddha is to depict a riderless horse honoured with a royal umbrella. This was done expressly to depict the occasion when the Buddha left the palace.

4.2.6 Stūpa 3

Stūpa 3 is located close to *stūpa* 1, with a diameter of 15 metres and a height of more than eight meters. The *stūpa* was built in the 2nd century BC, not long after the reconstruction of *stūpa* 1. This is known because the same individual is recorded in inscriptions as donating gifts during the construction of the stairway balustrades of both.³⁷ The relics of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, two of the disciples of the Buddha, were found by Cunningham enshrined at the centre of the *stūpa*.³⁸

The *stūpa* was surrounded by a railing (*vedikā*) of which the only remains are a few coping stones and some fragments of a few uprights. Altogether 35 uprights have survived. 5 uprights from the ground railing, 7 from the stairway, 16 from the drum and finally 7 uprights have survived from the *harmikā*.³⁹ The railings are decorated with full lotus flowers in the middle and half lotus flowers at the ends. Even the uprights on the *harmikā* are carved with lotus flowers, in contrast to *stūpa* 1 and 2. Two interesting corner up-

³⁷ Mitra, *Sanchi* ..., p. 42.

³⁸ Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes* ..., pp. 297–300, pl. 22.

³⁹ Marshall, Foucher, *The Monuments of Sāñchi* ..., pl. 92.

rights⁴⁰ resemble those at *stūpa* 2. The decoration of the first is an iconic sign of a pillar crowned by lions and elephants. It resembles fig. 10 from *stūpa* 2, but there is no wheel on the top of the pillar. The second is an iconic sign of a *stūpa* with plants and mythological animals below.

On *stūpa* 3 there is only one gateway (*torāṇa*). It was built at the same time or shortly after the gateways at *stūpa* 1. The reliefs at the architraves and pillars consist of iconic and symbolic signs. No signs can be said to be indexical signs pointing to the Buddha because the signs do not appear in a narrative context.

Thus, the art work on *stūpa* 3 can be divided in two stages. The carvings on the railings resemble the art found on *stūpa* 2. The art on the gateway can approximately be dated to the same period as the gateways on *stūpa* 1. Its style resembles the art on the gateways of *stūpa* 1. No signs can be said to be indexical signs pointing to the Buddha, because the signs do not appear in a narrative context. Instead, there are a lot of iconic and symbolic signs with a clearly Buddhist substance.

4.2.7 Summary

The art that we are concerned with at *Sāñcī* can be divided into two stages. The first stage can be placed approximately between 150 and 100 BC. It consists of the art on the railings on *stūpa* 1, 2 and 3. The best preserved is the art on *stūpa* 2. The art in this stage was of a common Indian tradition, shared by Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. It has no typically Buddhist features. No indexical signs referring to the Buddha can be found in this stage. Instead, the most common motif was the lotus flower, which was depicted hundreds of times on the railing uprights. Other common motifs are animals, plants and mythological creatures. A couple of uprights at the entrances on *stūpa* 2 must be specially observed (fig. 9, 10, 11). They have been interpreted as indexical signs referring to the Buddha and four of the events in his life. In contrast I, myself, am of the opinion that these carvings were only made as iconic or symbolic signs of sacred trees, wheels etc. The four great miracles in the life of the Buddha were not present in this early period of Buddhist art. They belong to a later period. It is, however, very likely that these signs were regarded as Buddhist signs by Buddhists at an early period. The signs on *stūpa* 2 have probably been interpreted as the four great miracles by Buddhists in later times.

The art from the second stage can be placed in the late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD and consists of the carvings at the four gateways at *stūpa* 1 and the gateway at *stūpa* 3. At this stage there was a rich and clearly distinguishable Buddhist art with many indexical signs referring to the Buddha in a narrative context. The indexical signs have been used in several different ways. The most common is to represent the Buddha with an *āsana* in front of a

⁴⁰ Ibid., pl. 93 g, i.

bodhivṛkṣa. The *āsana* in Sāñcī resembles an altar more than a throne or a seat and no footprints were added in front of the *āsana*. The *bodhivṛkṣa* does not any longer only point to the enlightenment of the Buddha. It has also been used to represent the Buddha connected to other events in his life. The *bodhivṛkṣa*, together with an *āsana*, has become an independent indexical sign for the Buddha, and may be used in different contexts. Another way to depict the Buddha was to leave an empty space below a royal umbrella. A third way was to depict a pair of foot prints. They must have been interpreted as indexical signs referring to the Buddha.

4.3 Andhradeśa

4.3.1 Introduction

The Great *stūpa* in Amarāvati was visited by Colonel Mackenzie for the first time as early as in 1797.⁴¹ It consisted at that time of a seven meter high mound. He did not return to the *stūpa* until 1816. It had meanwhile been pillaged of much of its stonework. During this second visit he stayed at the place for six months and started work recording and drawing the remains there.⁴² When Sir Walter Elliot went to Amarāvati in 1845 the *stūpa* mound was almost entirely gone. He started an excavation of the site but his work was never published.⁴³ Thereafter the *stūpa* was neglected until Robert Sewell in 1877 started excavations there again. The pieces Elliot collected were taken to Britain in 1859 and are today exhibited in the British Museum.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, only one quarter of the *stūpa* has been saved. Most of the preserved pieces are either in the Amarāvati Museum, the Madras Museum or the British Museum, London.

The valley of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa had once been covered with Buddhist buildings. A local schoolteacher discovered it 1920. The site attracted the attention of scholars for the first time in 1926 and Longhurst undertook excavations there between 1927 and 1931. Between 1954 and 1960 the entire valley was carefully excavated, because today the whole valley is under the water of the Nāgārjunasāgar irrigation dam. A museum was built on an island in the reservoir to preserve the remains.⁴⁵

⁴¹ R Knox, *Amaravati. Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), p. 17.

⁴² Knox, *Amarāvati* ..., pp. 17–18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁵ E R Stone, *The Buddhist Art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa*, Buddhist Tradition Series 25 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), pp. 1–2.