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# LAY RITUAL IN THE EARLY BUDDHIST ART OF INDIA

MORE EVIDENCE AGAINST THE ANICONIC THEORY

SUSAN L. HUNTINGTON



J. GONDA LECTURE





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Illustration cover: Scene showing devotion to Buddhist relics in a *stupa*.  
Stupa 1 at Sanchi, India. Photo by Eric Huntington.

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## INTRODUCTION

For over a hundred years, scholarship on the early Buddhist narrative art of India has held to a paradigm that I suggest is incorrect. This essay augments the body of presentations and publications in which I have taken issue with what has come to be known as the “aniconic theory.”<sup>1</sup> The aniconic theory proposes that the central objects seen in many of the earliest Buddhist narrative sculptures from India are intended as substitutes for an iconic, that is, figurative, representation of Shakyamuni Buddha. Such compositions are further said to depict events in the Buddha’s biography. However, I contend that the subject of these carvings is not the life of Shakyamuni Buddha and that an anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha is therefore not notable for its absence. Rather, I propose that the central objects in this type of scene, such as the trees, *stupas*, wheels, and pillars discussed below are meaningful in their own right and do not serve as surrogates for a human figure. My previous work has focused on these central objects of devotion, but here I concentrate on the human actors depicted in the carvings. An examination of these figures demonstrates further that the scenes are not representations of Buddha life events that might require a figure of a Buddha. But what is even more striking about these figures is that they are exclusively members of the laity. Not a single monk or nun is depicted in the known early artistic corpus. Further, these figures perform rituals that are still a cornerstone of Buddhist devotion today. This essay, then, makes new arguments against the aniconic reading of the early art while drawing attention to the importance of the laity and lay rituals in Buddhism from ancient times.

## THE BUDDHIST LAITY AND THE EARLY ART

It is a truism that without lay practitioners those religions that have been called “world” religions would never have achieved their exalted status. For, no matter how appealing and compelling their philosophies and teachings, these religions would have remained limited to relatively small numbers of professional practitioners without their legions of lay devotees. In Buddhism, the well being of the monastic community can be directly correlated with the generosity, and perhaps even the size, of the lay population since the members of the monastic communities would have been unable to pursue their religious activities to

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1 Please see the list of these publications included in the Bibliography below.

the extent that that did without the sustenance provided to them by the laity. As the primary—although not sole—donors of food, robes, and religious buildings and their paraphernalia, the Buddhist laity has been largely responsible for supporting the monastic institutions that are a hallmark of the Buddhist religion.<sup>2</sup> It follows, then, that to understand Buddhism and its range of beliefs, practices, and teachings, it is crucial to study the ways it has been observed by the vast majority of its followers—the laity.

A fresh look at the corpus of sculptural remains that date from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. found at Indian sites such as Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodhi Gaya, Amaravati, and others, reveals that the laity are a principal subject in Buddhist art from what may be its very beginnings.<sup>3</sup> That the figures depicted in the early corpus of Buddhist narrative art are members of the laity is evident from their clothing and adornments, which differ strikingly from the simple robes, tonsured heads, and absence of jewelry that are characteristic of monks and nuns. In these carvings, many of which are illustrated with this essay, both the men and women are garbed in secular dress, characterized by bare torsos, elaborate jewelry, and turbans for the men and headgear for the women. Although there are scenes that include foreigners wearing foreign dress, these individuals are also attired in secular, not monastic, clothing.

Almost all of the known early relief carvings depicting lay activities occur as part of the iconographic programs of the type of Buddhist reliquary monument known as a *stupa*. At Stupa 1 at Sanchi (Figure 1), the carvings occur on the four gateways to the monument, each of which is decorated with relief sculptures on both sides (Figure 2). The carvings associated with Stupa 2, also at Sanchi, are located on both the inner and outer faces of the stone railing (*vedika*) that encloses the monument. At Bharhut, the carvings occur on both the inner and outer faces of the single, surviving gateway and on both sides of the surviving portion of the elaborately carved railing that once surrounded the *stupa*. At Amaravati and related sites in southern India, the surface of the *stupa* itself was decorated with carved stone slabs that carried the iconographic program.

In all known cases, then, these sculptures were not the main focus of devotion

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2 Gregory Schopen has shown that the members of the monastic community were also donors. See, for example, Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), p. 3.

3 For this paper, I have used imagery primarily from Stupas 1 and 3 at Sanchi and Bharhut, but the observations I make apply broadly to similar contemporaneous narrative carvings at other Indian sites.



at the monuments—that is, they were not central “icons”—but were auxiliary and supplementary. Instead, the main focus of veneration in these monuments was the relics that they were built to enshrine. Because the corpus of relief carvings depicting lay practices are known almost exclusively from these and other *stupa* monuments housing Buddhist relics, I propose that the subject matter that I identify must have some relationship with the core meaning of the monuments. Indeed, I suggest that a large number of the scenes reify the very lay practices associated with the reliquary monuments they adorn.

## RITUALS AND RITUAL ELEMENTS DEPICTED IN THE CARVINGS

### *Introduction*

The early art allows us not only to identify the earliest known representations of the laity in Buddhist art but to observe the rituals they are performing. These rituals are apparently so fundamental to the objectives of Buddhist practice that they are later encountered in virtually every regional and sectarian manifestation of Buddhism not only in India but everywhere Buddhism has traveled. Further, these practices are still ubiquitous throughout the Buddhist world today—more than two thousand years after the carvings were made.

Shakyamuni’s teachings, including the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, were predicated on the principle of *samsara*—that is, the continuing round of rebirths and accompanying suffering to which all sentient beings are subject. The key to liberation from the bondage of *samsara* is one’s actions (*karma*). Like Buddhist monastics, Buddhist lay practitioners aim their religious activities toward the broad objective of improving their *karma*. Support of the monastic community through acts of generosity is certainly part of this effort, but there are many other means by which members of the laity work toward achieving their religious goals. Some of these ways are similar, even identical, to the practices of monastics. But in this essay the focus is on the ritual activities of the laity because this is what is shown in the art under consideration.

In previous scholarship the activities of the people in the art have often been called worshiping. However, I describe these Buddhist practitioners with terms such as honoring, venerating, revering, and showing respect for the objects of their devotion, but not worshiping. The figures may thus be called devotees, practitioners, or disciples, but not worshipers. This distinction is important for understanding the activities of the lay people shown in the art and how these activities relate to core beliefs in Buddhism. The term worship necessarily carries with it connotations of deification of the object of veneration even

when none is intended, and, at the most fundamental level, reverence towards the historical Buddhas, including Shakyamuni, should not be called worship because these beings were human exemplars, not deities. The term worship is problematic also because the goal of worship can be simply a request for an answer to a prayer, but does not necessarily involve spiritual development and *karmic* improvement on the part of the devotee. Although in Buddhist practice something may be requested in return for devotion—such as long life or good health—the higher goal is transformative, with the practitioner’s intention to increase merit (*punya*) and therefore accrue good *karma* for future rebirths.

By their very nature as human actions, rituals are performed in time and space. Because rituals are actions, they involve movement, whether by changing the positions of the hands, head, and body, or through the use of implements or structures. Rituals may be simple, almost momentary actions, or highly elaborate sequences that take place over hours or even days. They may be performed in a single space, or may involve movement from one location to another.

In contrast to the real-life performance of rituals, the early Buddhist sculptures from India capture rituals as snapshots in time and space even in cases where multiple moments in an event are depicted. Like still photographs, these renderings cannot offer a full record of every element and progressive stage of the rituals performed by the early Buddhist laity that would be possible if one could witness the rituals themselves or see them through real-time sequenced documentation, such as video or film. Other sensual aspects of the rituals, such as the full range of colors, the sounds of music, chants, and recitations, and the fragrances of incense, flowers, and food offerings, are further not captured in the reliefs. Nonetheless, through an analysis of the elements of the compositions, including the characteristic poses and hand gestures of the figures, the relationship between the figures and the religious artifacts shown in the compositions as well as other activities and paraphernalia depicted in the reliefs, some of the ritual activities of the laity as depicted in early Buddhist art may be identified. By extrapolation from Buddhist rituals still practiced today, the full flavor of these early practices, with all of their sensory richness, may be imagined.

My comments on the rituals depicted in the relief sculptures of the early Buddhist corpus are not intended to comprise an exhaustive catalogue of all types of ritual that may be depicted in them nor is this study an explanation for all of the subject matter that occurs in the art. As I discuss below, previous scholars have concentrated their attention on the objects of veneration in the reliefs rather than the activities of the human participants, and this discussion

is intended to bring to light a new approach and new insights about these carvings. In my opinion, it is quite surprising that only the objects of devotion, not the activities of the people in these scenes, have been noted with regard to the aniconic theory. I suggest that this lacuna has led to a pervasive misunderstanding of the very meaning of this corpus of carvings in the art historical and buddhological discourses.

### *Salutation (Pranama)*

In the Indic context the term *pranama* refers to the respectful salutation performed by religious devotees, usually in conjunction with the hand posture commonly known as *anjalinudra* and sometimes as *vandanamudra* and *namaskaramudra*. This gesture of reverence may be directed towards a person, such as a *guru* or a Buddha, a divinity, or an object, monument, or sacred place. The early Buddhist reliefs from India include numerous depictions of men, women, and children performing the *pranama*, sometimes standing and sometimes kneeling, sometimes with their heads bowed, and invariably with their hands palms together in front of them in the characteristic gesture of devotion (Figure 3 and Figures 7-9, 13, 15, and others).

*Pranama*, like many of the other activities described below, is a ritual action in its own right, but it may also serve as an element in a longer ritual sequence. Even today, this simple but deliberate and easily recognized action, with its distinguishing elements of body, head, and hand positions, is ubiquitous throughout the Buddhist world. Although members of the laity and monastics alike perform this gesture, the people in the art under discussion are invariably members of the laity on the basis of the details of their costume and jewelry.

### *Offering Garlands*

A common subject portrayed in the art is lay men and women making offerings of flowers garlands (Figure 4). This activity is sometimes shown independently or may be part of a larger set of lay actions. The placement of garlands as a devotional activity, whether by the laity or members of the monastic community or both, is implicit in the fact that the sacred trees depicted in the art universally have been adorned with garlands.

### *Viewing (Darshan)*

*Darshan*, or viewing, is a well-known concept within the Indic religious traditions.<sup>4</sup> Like *pranama*, *darshan* remains a fundamental element of Buddhist lay

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4 Diana Eck's influential book has pioneered our understanding of *darshan* in the Indic religions. See Eck, Diana L. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. (Chambers-

practice even to the present day. *Darshan* can be part of a larger ritual or ceremony or a practice in its own right. In many artistic renderings from Bharhut, Sanchi, and contemporaneous sites, lay devotees are shown looking at enshrined trees, *stupas*, and other sacred objects. A carving on the Bharhut railing depicts a group of men, most with their backs to us, standing in reverence looking at a place marked by a sacred tree, in front of which is an altar or platform (Figure 5). Numerous other carvings from the sites under discussion show figures with their gazes directed towards an object of veneration.

Although it might seem that virtually any human activity involving sight could be called *darshan*, in fact, *darshan* is a special type of viewing that produces religious benefits by the very act. Since *darshan* is experiential in nature, there is no full substitute for the activity. A commonly cited component of *darshan* involving anthropomorphic images is a visual exchange between the devotee and the personage that is the object of devotion: While the devotee looks into the eyes of the figural image, the eyes of the image returns the gaze. The exchange, then, involves both the taking of *darshan* (*darshan lena*) by the devotee and the giving of *darshan* (*darshan dena*) by the revered. The powerfulness and impact of *darshan* may be compared with an experience that many of us has had when our gaze accidentally meets that of another person and the two pairs of eyes lock for a few powerful, unforgettable seconds. Such is the intended impact and effect of the *darshan* experience.

Given the special role that *darshan* plays in Buddhism and other Indic religions, it follows that devotional practices have developed that are specifically intended to foster opportunities for *darshan* to take place. The desire for *darshan* has stimulated devotees to visit places where *darshan* can occur, in turn leading to extensive travel and pilgrimage to sacred places in Buddhism. Practices have also evolved that bring the sacred object to the devotees, rather than the other way round, and festivals and other ceremonies occur in Buddhism wherein images or other objects are not only brought out for display but are carried in processions that may be witnessed by throngs of devotees.<sup>5</sup> In the early art under discussion, the central object of devotion can be a *stupa*, a tree, a wheel, or other object.

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burg, Pa.: Anima Books, 1981).

5 One major example occurs at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka, where each year during the Perahara festival the tooth relic casket is removed from its place of installation and carried on an elephant through the streets of Kandy.

*Ritual of Offering (Puja)*

Also identifiable in the early art is the ceremony of *puja*, or at least, some of the components of *puja* rituals. This form of bestowing honor to something or someone that is revered remains another of the most pervasive forms of religious practice throughout the Indic and Buddhist worlds today. *Pranama*, described above as the salutatory gestures of devotion toward a revered object or being; the offering of flowers; and *darshan* may be included in a *puja*. But *puja* is commonly a more formal ceremony, often quite elaborate and lengthy, and can incorporate many other elements. A typical *puja* involves prayers and invocations, music, incense burning, lustration of the object of veneration, the presentation of offerings, such as flowers and flower garlands, and food. A full *puja* incorporates the senses of touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste.

Although stone carvings cannot convey the full sensory experience of a *puja*, numerous compositions among the early corpus of Buddhist art depict some of the typical activities that are part of what we know as *puja* rituals from textual sources and modern religious activities in Buddhism. One sculpture on the south gateway of Stupa 1 at Sanchi illustrates characteristic activities in *puja* ceremonies very clearly (Figure 6). The focus of veneration is a mango tree with an altar-like platform before it. Coming towards this sacred place, which is marked by the tree and the platform, are two pairs of humans, each consisting of a male and a female. Both women hold trays, probably bearing food offerings, and one carries a spouted vessel, containing water or another liquid. The activities of making offerings, including food, and lustrating with water or other liquids are still key elements in *puja* ceremonies. In the upper portion of the sculpture, a pair of celestial beings combining human and bird features (*kimnaras*) flies toward the sacred spot. Also carrying trays of food offerings as well as garlands, the *kimnaras* mirror the actions of the humans below.

*Puja* remains an important component of practice throughout the Buddhist world today, indicating that some of the most pervasive activities of Buddhism were fundamental to the religious praxis of the laity from the time of the earliest identifiable narrative art (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.). Usually explained as a type of hospitality ritual in which the venerated being is offered food, water, and other comforts, *puja* is a ceremony of honor and respectfulness offered by the devotee. As a ritual of offering and generosity, *puja* fits conceptually within the framework of merit-increasing activities appropriate to Buddhist practitioners, whether members of the lay or monastic community. Special *pujas* may be conducted for select occasions and purposes, but *pujas* also may be performed at simple home shrines, and they are regularly incorporated into the daily religious practices of the laity. As a central feature of Buddhist lay devotion, a *puja* may be performed at virtually every Buddhist site and venerated place.

Above, I suggested that the objective of taking *darshan* is likely to have influenced the design and decoration of Buddhist monuments. Similarly, I propose that the practice of *puja* may have had an important influence on the design of Buddhist monuments to facilitate this ritual activity. The altars (sometimes interpreted as seats) in front of the trees and other objects of veneration in the early Buddhist carvings suggest not only places that mark a sacred spot, but also serve as platforms for staging *puja* and other offering ceremonies.

#### *Clockwise Circumambulation (Pradakshina)*

One of the most characteristic rituals in Buddhism even to the present day is circumambulation, that is, moving around, a revered monument, image, object, or even person. The general term for circumambulation is *parikrama*. Both clockwise (*pradakshina*)<sup>6</sup> and counterclockwise (*prasavya*) circumambulation occur in the Indic religious context, although the clockwise movement (*pradakshina*) is the auspicious direction and overwhelmingly the most pervasive. To my knowledge, Buddhist practice exclusively employs clockwise circumambulation, although there are circumstances under which counterclockwise movement is employed in Hinduism.<sup>7</sup>

Numerous depictions of *pradakshina* appear in the corpus of early art under discussion. For example, a relief carving from Bharhut shows an unmistakable instance of clockwise circumambulation around a building that contains a wheel as the main object of veneration (Figure 7). The clockwise movement of the entourage of figures around the shrine is indicated by the direction of the horse chariot at the bottom left, the back views of the figures along the left side of the shrine, the front-facing figures at the right, and the people exiting the gateway to the sacred compound at the right and bottom right.

An inscription on the roof of the main shrine housing the wheel reads “*Bhagavato dhama Chakam*.”<sup>8</sup> I take this inscription to mean “the *dharmacakra* [or wheel of law] of the revered one [Shakyamuni]. The aniconic interpretation is that the inscription identifies the scene as Shakyamuni Buddha’s first sermon, in which he is said to have turned the wheel-of-law (*dharmacakra*) into motion. The site shown in the carving would thus be Sarnath, where the first sermon was

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6 The term *pradakshina* is often misused in scholarly literature to refer to circumambulation in general. See Susan L. Huntington, with contributions by John C. Huntington, *Art of Ancient India* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1985), p. 62.

7 See Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, p. 208.

8 Alexander Cunningham, *The Stūpa of Bharhut: A Buddhist Monument Ornamented with Numerous Sculptures Illustrated of Buddhist Legend and History in the Third Century B.C.* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879), p. 90.

performed. According to the “aniconic” reading of this carving, the wheel, then, serves as a substitute for what should be a figurative representation of Shakyamuni Buddha in a depiction of an event in his life.

A second inscription offers perhaps a better option for interpreting the site, the event, and the figures depicted. The inscription reads “*Râja Pasenaji Kosalo*,”<sup>9</sup> referring to King Prasenajit of Kosala, a contemporary of Shakyamuni Buddha who became the Buddha’s devotee. Because the inscription is placed on the roof of the entrance to the compound, Cunningham suggested that it refers to the structure itself, which would then represent the Punyashala that Prasenajit built at Shravasti.<sup>10</sup> The composition, therefore, may depict King Prasenajit and his entourage, and, as such, would document not only lay devotion but possibly a specific historical incident of royal lay ritual. The two elephants in the panel might be Seta (or Eka) Pundarika and Bhadderaka, and the two men next to the king in the chariot might be either Ishidatta and Purana, his chief ministers. Alternatively, the two figures might be the commander-in-chief Digha Karayana and a charioteer.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that the Shravasti shrine constructed by King Prasenajit once housed a wheel as its main object of devotion, referring to the Buddha’s *dharma* and the teaching miracle he performed at Shravasti, but not the first preaching at Sarnath.

Regardless, the ritual shown in the relief is clearly circumambulation. Circumambulation is also indicated in another relief from Bharhut (Figure 8). Here, the object of veneration is a *stupa*, a Buddhist reliquary monument. Figures placed both to the left and right of the *stupa* perform the *pranama*, with their hands in *anjali mudra*. The standing female and a kneeling male to the left of the *stupa* are compositionally paired with a standing male and a kneeling female to the right. The ritual of circumambulation is conveyed by two other figures, both male, one of whom is shown to the left of the *stupa* and the other to the right. The suggestion of circumambulation is conveyed by the fact that the figure at the left has his back to us, as if he is moving away from us into the pictorial space, while the other at the right faces us, as if he is moving from the rear of the pictorial space towards us. That the figure going away from the viewer is at the left and the one coming towards us is on the right indicates the clockwise pattern of movement around the *stupa*.

In a carving from Bodh Gaya, the ritual of *pradakshina* is conveyed by a male and female couple paying homage to a pillar topped by a wheel that is

9 Cunningham, *Stûpa of Bharhut*, p. 90.

10 Cunningham, *Stûpa of Bharhut*, p. 90.

11 I am grateful to Marcus Bingenheimer for offering these suggestions regarding the attendant figures in a personal communication.

enshrined in a small building (Figure 9). The front-facing male at the right appears to be walking forward towards the viewer, while the female at the left with her back to us seems to be moving inward, thus suggesting that the two are circumambulating the pillar in the clockwise manner typical in Buddhism.

In these three examples, three different objects serve as the focus of veneration. In the first example (Figure 7), an entire building is being circumambulated, but it may be inferred that the wheel (*cakra*) enshrined within is the principal object of devotion. In the second composition (Figure 8), a *stupa*, which is a receptacle for bodily relics, is encircled, and in the third (Figure 9) the devotees move around a central pillar that is installed within an architectural structure. Additional compositions within this early artistic corpus suggest that circumambulation was a widely practiced ritual of the laity, performed at many sacred sites and in relation to a variety of monuments and objects.

That circumambulation is popularly shown in the earliest surviving narrative art of Buddhism and is a practice that is widespread even today demonstrates the fundamental nature of this ritual to Buddhism, possibly from the very earliest days of the tradition. Indeed, it may be inferred that many monuments created for Buddhist practice were specifically designed to facilitate circumambulation. Stupa 1 at Sanchi (Figure 1), for example, has a paved pathway on the ground level surrounding the *stupa* mound and a second-level pathway that also surrounds the monument. The design of Buddhism's most elaborate *stupa*, Borobudur in Java, Indonesia, epitomizes the integration of a monument design with the practice of circumambulation. There, the relief carvings and other elements on each of the levels are organized in relation to the viewer's path around and ascending the monument, thereby fostering a transformative experience stimulated by the physical progression. Simply, circumambulation is a basic element in the ritual practices of Buddhism, and, as such, has influenced the design of the monuments used in religious practice. In turn, ritual circumambulation has been reinforced by the creation and design of monuments that foster this type of interaction between the devotee and the focus of devotion.

### *Participation in Assemblies*

Some activities shown in the art are performed by individuals or occur in pairs or small groups. Others seem to be associated with large, more formal assemblies (Figure 10). As depicted in the carvings, these assemblies may take place in the presence of a tree, a *stupa*, or other revered object. In previous art historical writings, scholars supporting the aniconic theory have argued that these objects are substitutes for a Buddha figure. However, in my own readings of



these carvings I have suggested that these objects relate to Buddhist relic devotion. Such assemblies at the site of a Buddhist relic still take place today. I further discuss these central objects of veneration and relic practices below.

Since there are no monks or nuns in the “assembly” reliefs, the scenes likely depict some type of lay discourse. In Sri Lankan Buddhism, one of the ten meritorious deeds that can be performed by members of the laity is preaching; another is listening to preaching. Such lay activities may be precisely what are being shown in the art. Although the figures in these assembly-type compositions are often arranged in an organized grouping, there are no discernible leaders in the surviving compositions. However, some lay people can achieve a high status in the Buddhist community, serving as exemplars, or “foremosts,” who sometimes attracted large numbers of followers.<sup>12</sup> Some of these scenes might imply the presence of such individuals.

#### *Generosity and Gift-Giving (Dana)*

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that scholars have mainly considered the Buddhist laity in their role as supporters of Buddhist monastic establishments. Indeed, donations to the monastic community (*samgha*), which includes almsgiving to individual monks, is one of the most well known activities of the laity. While not a ritual *per se*, generosity (*dana*) to the Buddhist monastic community (*samghika dana*) and to all others is one of the Buddhist perfections to which the laity aspire. I include this virtue to add further dimension to the lay activities depicted in the art. Donations to the religious community and the generosity and sacrifice that parting with material goods requires is similar to the casting off of possessions that takes its more extreme form for monks and nuns. Such acts have been celebrated, institutionalized, and ritualized in Buddhism. The Vishvantara/Vessantara Jataka, for example, is the paradigmatic narrative of generosity, recounting the story of Shakyamuni Buddha in his next-to-last life, when he achieved perfect generosity and gave away everything that was precious to him, including his wife and children.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Emperor Ashoka’s gifts and symbolic renunciation of his possessions narrated in the

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12 Lewis Lancaster explains that there are lay Buddhists who attain the status of “foremosts” or “exemplars,” and that some exemplars developed large followings of devotees. Lewis R. Lancaster, “Narratives of Exemplars: Perspectives On Doctrine and Practice in Early Buddhism,” in *Aryacandraya: Essays in Honor of Akira Yuyama*, edited by Gregory Schopen and Paul Harrison. Indica et Tibetica 35, Swistal-Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1998, pp. 107-124.

13 See, among other publications of this story, Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

*Ashokavadana* serves as the ultimate archetype not only for lay devotees but for Buddhist kingship.<sup>14</sup>

One well-known Buddhist narrative that emphasizes the perfection of giving (*dana paramita*) concerns Anathapindada, a rich merchant whose donation to the Buddha's community is depicted in a carving on the Bharhut railing (Figure 11). Easily identifiable at the right is an episode from the story of Anathapindada, who wished to purchase a grove owned by Prince Jeta in order to donate it to Shakyamuni Buddha and his followers. The composition shows workers laying down enough pieces of gold to cover the ground to match Prince Jeta's outrageous price. This act of lay generosity occurred during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha by one of his principal lay followers, and thus implies the virtue of lay generosity at the time of Shakyamuni. Further, because the price of the grove (the so-called Jetavanarama) was so outlandish, the parable demonstrates Anathapindada's generosity without reservation or limit.

Other compositions and many of the inscriptions associated with the early Buddhist monuments also document the virtue of giving. Many of the sculptures show buildings and trees adorned with garlands, all of which would have been left by Buddhist practitioners (although not necessarily solely members of the laity). The donative inscriptions associated with Stupa 1 at Sanchi and those relating to other early Buddhist sites reiterate again and again the theme of lay gifts to the monastic community. The earliest Buddhist monuments, then, indicate that the generosity of the laity was an important component of Buddhism, probably right from the start. Implicit in the very structures seen in the artistic compositions at Sanchi, Bharhut, and other sites, are the offerings of the laity that fostered the creation of the *stupas* and other buildings seen in the reliefs.

Generosity (*dana*) as a virtue to be perfected by members of the laity is the symbiotic corollary of much monastic existence. For the most part, monks and nuns do not engage in earning a living, and, therefore, their survival and their ability to devote their lives to their religious aims are dependent upon the generosity of the laity to provide for their physical needs. The virtue of generosity among lay people thus underpins much of the monastic system. At the same time, the laity were not the exclusive donors to the monastery, since, as will be discussed below, monks and nuns did apparently make significant donations to the *samgha* as well.<sup>15</sup>

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14 John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 96-97.

15 As mentioned above, Schopen has demonstrated that members of the monastic community were also donors to the *samgha*.

*Reverence to Relics*

## Introduction

In Buddhism, several types of relics are commonly cited in relation to Shakyamuni Buddha. The most important are *shariraka*, that is, the relics of the Buddha's physical body, including his bodies in his previous lives. Such bodily relics might include a hair, a tooth, or his cremated ashes. Next in importance are *paribhogika*, or secondary relics, consisting of anything that came in contact with the Buddha's physical body or anything he used in his last and previous lifetimes. Relics of contact include Shakyamuni's robe, begging bowl, and the tree under which he sat when he became enlightened. Relics of contact, or use, also include the air he breathed and the places where his feet touched the ground as he walked.

The sheer numbers of scenes at Bharhut, Sanchi, and other early Buddhist sites that show lay veneration toward Buddhist relics indicates the overwhelming importance of relic veneration even in the earliest traceable art. Scenes showing devotion to *shariraka* relics housed within the *stupas* and to *paribhogika* relics, primarily in the form of sacred trees, abound in the early art. Indeed, reverence to *stupas* (and the relics housed within) and to trees comprise the most common subject in this corpus of art.

Despite Shakyamuni's uncontested pre-eminence in Buddhism, his are not the only relics that are revered in Buddhism. Aniconic interpretations of the art have often hinged on the assumption that the art by necessity referred to Shakyamuni, but this does not seem to be the case. Inscriptions on the Bharhut remains clearly identify several representations of sacred trees as the enlightenment trees (and therefore *paribhogika* relics) of some of the other human (*manushi*) Buddhas, who preceded Shakyamuni (see below and Figures 20 and 21). Although not identified by inscription at other sites, depictions pertaining to the *manushi* Buddhas occur elsewhere. For example, scenes on the gateways of Stupa 1 at Sanchi show sequences of distinctive trees, each likely associated with one of the human Buddhas, and similar arrangements of individualized *stupas* are also likely those housing remains of the *manushi* Buddhas.<sup>16</sup>

I also propose that some of the trees and *stupas* shown in the reliefs might be those of still other Buddhist luminaries. Inscriptions on some of the reliquaries

16 See, for example, the front face of the north gateway at Stupa 1, Sanchi, middle lintel for depiction of trees and top lintel for representations of the *stupas*. See John Marshall and Alfred Foucher, with inscriptions edited, translated, and annotated by N. G. Majumdar, *The Monuments of Sāñchī*. 3 vols. (Calcutta: Manager of Publications, 1940, vol. 2, pls. 22 and 21, respectively.

found at Sanchi and nearby sites indicate that the relics housed within these monuments included those of Buddhist monks and teachers.<sup>17</sup> Thus, at the very time that the carvings were made, there was a practice of erecting *stupas* to house relics of individuals other than Shakyamuni (and the other *manushi* Buddhas). As is well known from the two millennia of Buddhist practice since the time these carvings were made, the erection of *stupas* to house the relics of accomplished Buddhist practitioners has become a widespread practice. Honored individuals likely included followers of Shakyamuni Buddha or the other mortal Buddhas, monks, teachers, and spiritual leaders, such as the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas of Tibet. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of surviving *stupas*, *chortens*, and pagodas, including recently constructed ones, in the Buddhist world contain the remains of other luminaries as well. What is striking is that this widespread practice is identifiable by inscription at the same time as the creation of the earliest known corpus of Buddhist narrative art.

With the exception of those few carvings that can be conclusively associated with Shakyamuni, the relic monuments (*stupas*) and sacred trees depicted in the art at Sanchi, Bharhut, and related sites should thus not automatically be considered to be those of Shakyamuni. This fact is important for interpreting the early Buddhist art and the discussion of the Buddha image since the so-called aniconic theory is predicated on the idea that a *stupa* or a tree in the carvings of Bharhut, Sanchi, and other contemporaneous sites is intended as a substitute for a figurative carving of Shakyamuni Buddha alone. But if these trees and *stupas* are not associated with Sakyamui but another personage—including his followers—the argument about aniconism does not hold.

Also important is the fact that a single *stupa* monument might house the relics of more than one individual. As is known from the inscriptions relating to the relics of Stupa 2 at Sanchi and from *stupas* at nearby sites, individual *stupas* apparently commonly included portions of relics of more than one individual.<sup>18</sup> In other words, although we can clearly identify the practice of relic veneration in the sculptural compositions, for the most part we cannot ascertain the identities of the individuals whose relics are the focus of ritual practice nor whether the relics contained within these venerated monuments are those of a single person or more than one individual. I propose that there are many different relics and relic monuments depicted in the art and that these may relate to many individuals including but not limited to Shakyamuni.

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17 Michael Willis discusses this thoroughly. See Michael Willis, with contributions by Joe Cribb and Julia Shaw, *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*. (London: British Museum Press, 2000), especially pp. 21-23.

18 See Willis, *Buddhist Reliquaries*, pp. 21-23.

Depending on the textual source, beside the bodily and contact relics, other categories of relics are also named. These include Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings (*dharma*) and the monastic community (*samgha*),<sup>19</sup> which is the institution by which the teachings of the Buddha have been transmitted over the millennia. Also cited in Buddhist sources are the *uddeshika*, or reminder, relics that have no physical associations with the Buddha but that refer to him. This relic category includes the figurative images representing him.<sup>20</sup> The absence of images of Shakyamuni in the early narrative art has been a topic of great interest to scholars for more than a century, as will be discussed below.

#### Reverence to *shariraka* relics

The eastern entrance of the Bharhut railing (*vedika*) flanking the single surviving gateway (*torana*) shows an interesting example of lay ritual activity associated with a *sharira*, or bodily, relic. On the right-hand upright of the railing, a male figure wearing lay dress rides an elephant and carries a relic casket of the type known throughout the Buddhist world to house bodily relics (Figure 12). The individual is most likely a member of the royalty since in ancient India ownership of elephants was a prerogative of the nobility. Flanked by two smaller male riders on elephants (perhaps his sons), the group is part of a procession that spans the opening of the *vedika* to include a female standard bearer on horseback on the opposite upright.<sup>21</sup> Another figure on horseback, this one carrying a standard aloft, attaches at a right angle to the elephant-riding group.<sup>22</sup> As the principal sculptures flanking the eastern (and perhaps main) entrance to the *stupa*, the carvings suggest that the relics are those intended for enshrinement at this very place. Indeed, the sculptured scene may have been intended to memorialize the very ceremony by which the relics were brought to Bharhut. Assuming that it was Ashoka who founded the Bharhut *stupa* when he redistributed Shakyamuni Buddha's cremated ashes, the large figure on the elephant may even be Ashoka himself.

Numerous depictions show reverence to *sharira* relics by devotional activities associated with *stupas*, the characteristic Buddhist monument created to

19 See John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. xvi.

20 According to John Strong, *uddeshaka* does not appear universally in early Buddhist literary discussions of relics and may have been a later addition. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, p. 19.

21 For an illustration, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *La Sculpture de Bharhut*. *Annales Du Musée Guimet*. (Paris: Vanoest, 1956), pl. V, fig. 16.

22 For an illustration, see Coomaraswamy, *La Sculpture de Bharhut*, pl. V, fig. 15.

enshrine bodily relics (Figures 8, 13-16). The example from Bharhut discussed above in relation to circumambulation (Figure 8) is one of the most interesting because it shows the characteristic practice of walking around a *stupa* in clockwise direction used for venerating the *stupa* and the relics within. Another example, this one from Stupa 1 at Sanchi, shows music-making and what appears to be joyful celebration at a *stupa* that looks very much like Stupa 1 itself (Figure 13). The costumes worn by figures in this relief suggest that they are foreigners, but clearly foreigners who are laypersons, not monastics.

By necessity, this essay illustrates only a fraction of the dozens of depictions of *stupas* and devotion to them by members of the laity that are contained within the artistic corpus of sites such as Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, and others. I include three more as examples (Figures 14, 15, 16). The differences among such carvings suggest that they do not represent generic sites but individual monuments at specific locations even though we cannot identify them today. The site and *stupa* rendered in Figure 14 are distinctive because of the lion-topped pillar at the left, suggesting that this composition is a kind of “portrait” of an actual location. However, pillars with capitals decorated with adorsed lions were erected at Sarnath, Sanchi, and perhaps other ancient places, and therefore we cannot further narrow down the identification.

In earlier scholarship, such *stupa* scenes have been identified as depictions of the final event in Shakyamuni Buddha’s last life, that is, the *parinirvana*. The *stupa* in such sculptures has been interpreted as an aniconic, that is, non-figurative, representation of the Buddha. However, the varieties of figures, activities, and *stupas* in these scenes suggest that it is not a single subject that is being shown. No two compositions are identical, varying in terms of the details of the *stupas* depicted as well as the composition, number, and ritual activities of the participants. The fact that different activities are shown, including *pranama* (Figure 15), circumambulation (Figure 8), and music-making (Figure 13) makes it difficult to agree with earlier scholars that the carvings are all depictions of a single subject, that is, Shakyamuni’s *parinirvana*. The importance of relic veneration in Buddhism discussed above indicates that this practice, rather than reverence to a symbol substituting for a figurative Buddha, is the subject of these relief carvings. The sheer number of such compositions showing lay devotional activities in relationship to a *stupa* among the Sanchi, Bharhut, and related materials indicates the importance of lay veneration towards *shariraka* relics.

### Reverence to *paribhogika* relics

Reverence towards *paribhogika* relics is another pervasive subject in the early Buddhist narrative art. Every object used by a Buddha or other revered Buddhist luminary, including the air they breathed, the ground they walked upon, the places they sat and where their feet rested while they sat, the utensils and objects they used, and the garments they wore is a *pariboghika* relic, or relic of use. In the early art, although other relics of use are depicted, the most common are sacred trees (Figures 3-6, 10, 17-25).

The *paribhogika* relics shown in the art include those that are likely linked specifically with Shakyamuni Buddha but as in the case of the *stupas* some are associated with other personages. Inscriptions accompanying some compositions identify the trees as the enlightenment (*bodhi*) trees of past mortal Buddhas. Two examples are illustrated here (Figures 20 and 21). The first (Figure 20) bears the inscription “*bhagavato Vesabhūṇā bodhi salo*”, that is, (the *bodhi* [tree] of the holy Veshabhu (Viśvabhū)).<sup>23</sup> The second (Figure 21) bears an inscription that reads “*bhagavato Vipasino bodhi*,” or (the *bodhi* [tree] of the holy Vipashi (Vipaśyin)).<sup>24</sup> That the trees are being venerated as *paribhogika* relics is clear from the activities of the figures in the composition, who adorn the trees with garlands and perform the *pranama* at the platform that, presumably, marks the spot where the enlightenments of these Buddhas occurred.

It is therefore clear that not all of the compositions refer to Shakyamuni Buddha, nor do they refer to the same *paribhogika* relic, whether that of Shakyamuni or another figure. The varieties of trees depicted in the art include the *figus religiosa*, or *bodhi* tree of Shakyamuni (Figures 22 and 23), the mango (Figure 6), and many others (Figure 24), including the distinctive trees of several other *manushi* Buddhas (Figures 20 and 21). Variety is seen not only in the types of trees illustrated but by the way the tree is shown. In some cases, the sacred tree is enclosed within a railing (Figure 17); in others, an altar or platform is set in front of it (Figures 18 and 19). In still other compositions, the tree is associated

23 Heinrich Lüders, ed., *Bharhut Inscriptions*, revised and supplemented by Ernst Waldschmidt and Madhukar Anant Mehendale. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt. 2. (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963), p. 84. Cunningham correctly reads the inscription to refer to the *bodhi* tree of the Buddha. See Cunningham, *Stūpa of Bharhut*, p. 114. Coomaraswamy, however, inferred that the inscription should be read as “the awakening [l’aveil]” of the Buddha, and not a reference to his tree. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *La Sculpture du Bharhut*, *Annales du Musée Guimet. Bibliothèque d’Art*, n.s. 6. (Paris: Vanoest, 1956), p. 65. This simply does not make sense as a translation, but was an inference drawn based on Coomaraswamy’s assumption that these were aniconic Buddha life scenes.

24 Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, p. 82.

with a building (Figure 22), and sometimes the tree is enshrined within a building that has been constructed around it (Figure 23). The lay people in the carvings are shown in a variety of poses and activities, and sometimes include only males (Figures 4 and 17), sometimes only females, and sometime both (Figures 3, 6, and 18). The figures sometimes occur in small groups (Figures 17 and 18), and sometimes larger assemblies (Figures 10 and 25). Therefore, as in the case of the *shariraka* devotional scenes discussed above, it is unlikely that all of the trees illustrated in the art are meant to represent the same one and that only a single event is being shown in the art as some authors have suggested. Just as the variety seen in the compositions that include *stupas* makes it difficult to conclude that all of these carvings represent a single event, namely Shakyamuni's *parinirvana*, I suggest that the variations in trees shown in the art make it illogical that a single event is the subject of the art. Yet, previous scholars have generalized about the "tree" compositions, frequently interpreting them as representations of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree regardless of the many varieties of trees and other distinctions and activities in the sculptures.

Another focus of veneration seen in the early art is a pillar of the type often called an Ashokan pillar because Emperor Ashoka is known to have erected such monumental stone pillars throughout his empire, sometimes to mark important relic sites (Figures 26-28). The pillars at both Sarnath and Sanchi bore elaborately carved capitals, each with four, addorsed lions similar to those depicted in Figure 26 and also shown in Figure 14. The pillar erected at Sarnath likely commemorated the site of Shakyamuni Buddha's first sermon; the similar example placed at the southern entrance to Stupa 1 at Sanchi was probably erected at the time Ashoka re-enshrined a portion of the Buddha's cremation ashes in the *stupa*.

A common crowning motif on the pillars shown in the early narrative art is the wheel, generally believed to represent the Buddha's *dharma*, or teachings. In the case of one of the two sculptures that have the four addorsed lions, the wheel is the crowning element (Figure 26). However, some compositions in the early artistic corpus show the wheel directly mounted on the pillar without an intervening animal capital (Figures 27 and 28). Other relief sculptures show wheels that have been erected directly on platforms (Figures 29 and 30).

Previous scholars interpreting the early Buddhist art of India have argued that both the pillars and wheels shown in the carvings are substitutes for a figurative representation of a teaching Buddha. In contrast, I suggest that the wheel is a symbol in its own right referring to the Buddha's *dharma* but not a depiction of an actual sermon (that is, an event in the life of the Buddha with



an absent Buddha figure), and that the pillars are depictions of the monumental stone pillars Ashoka and perhaps other early kings erected throughout ancient India. Like the pillar erected at Sarnath, such pillars may have been erected at places associated with an event in the life of Shakyamuni, such as a teaching, and the spot where they stood would fall into the category of a *paribhogika* relic. But they are not substitutes for figurative representations of Shakyamuni Buddha.

#### Lay reverence to relics and the aniconic theory

Lay reverence to *sharira* relics, most notably through devotion to *stupas*, and veneration of *paribhogika* relics, particularly the reverence to sacred trees, are seen in such abundance in the early artistic corpus that these practices must have been widespread among the Buddhist laity at the time these carvings were made. By a simple count alone, devotion to these two categories of relics comprises the principal artistic theme of these carvings. Most, if not all, of the illustrations that show ritual practices such as *pranama*, *darshan*, *pradakshina*, and *puja*, relate to this practice of reverence to relics, either primary (*shariraka*) or secondary (*paribhogika*).

Interestingly, the early art that survives, or, more accurately, the art that has so far been discovered, does not show reverence to the figurative image of Shakyamuni or any other Buddha. In the discussion of circumambulation above it was noted that the objects of veneration included a shrine with a wheel enclosed, a *stupa*, and a pillar. None of the known compositions in this early body of artistic materials shows a Buddha, or, indeed, any other figure, as the focus of devotion. This lack of a known Buddha image puzzled late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars, who then postulated and developed the aniconic theory. The presumed later introduction of a Buddha image into the artistic corpus was seen as an improvement—indeed, a correction to a wrong-headed artistic trajectory.

Previous writers have asserted that the *stupas* and trees shown in the sculptures are substitutes for figurative images of Shakyamuni Buddha and that the scenes are intended to represent events in his life, such as the enlightenment, or, more correctly, the *maravijaya* (where a tree is intended to substitute for the human figure) and the *parinirvana* (where a *stupa* is supposedly depicted instead of an anthropomorphic form).

However, I take the representations to be literal, not semiotic, depictions not only of the *stupas*, trees, and other objects of veneration but of the practices associated with lay ritual. Evidence used to argue for the so-called aniconic theory has been largely external to the art, including the hypothesis of a restriction if not an outright ban on the creation of Buddha images or even a

creative inability on the part of the Indian artists to conceive the Buddha in human form. Barring the emergence of any actual, not such inferred, evidence to the contrary, I attempt to look at the art for what is actually represented. Implicit in the scholarly hypothesis that the *stupas* and trees depicted in the art are substitutes for representations of Shakyamuni Buddha is the assumption that all of the carvings relate specifically to this particular personage. This assertion, first put forth by Alfred Foucher, who claimed that the art necessarily pertains to Shakyamuni and the events of his life,<sup>25</sup> is false, as discussed above, where imagery relating to other *manushi* Buddhas is unquestionably indicated and where the practice of enshrining the relics of other individuals was known at the time of the carvings.

The aniconic theory can be further undermined because it is predicated on the assumption that figurative images were added to the artistic repertoire after a lengthy period of aniconism. However, archaeological work in the past half century proves that Buddha images were made at the very same time as the so-called aniconic art—at least as early as the first century B.C.E.<sup>26</sup> Therefore the idea of a sequential relationship between non-image and image has been disproved and the relationship between works of art that show devotion to trees, *stupas*, and other non-figurative subjects and representations of Buddhas in figurative form must be re-assessed.

Based on the art itself and the ritual activities the compositions portray, I suggest that early Buddhism was overwhelmingly focused on veneration to *shariraka* and *paribhogika* relics. In particular, the bodily relics were a focal point of Buddhist practice. As John Strong explains, each bodily relic, whether a tooth or a hair or a portion of the Buddha's cremated remains, is considered to embody the full essence of the Buddha, not a reduced or proportionate share.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, Strong contrasts the Buddhist term for bodily relics, *dhatu*, with the English term relic, the latter implying a remainder, a fragment, or something left over. In contrast, *dhatu* means essence. The bodily relic, then, *is* the Buddha, having been a physical part of him and embodying his essence. To think that by venerating a Buddha relic one is doing anything other than honoring the Buddha and that a figurative image is both required and preferred is illogical.

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25 Foucher in Marshall's *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 1, p. 193 and elsewhere.

26 For an example from Mathura, see Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, Figure 7:14. A number of reliably dated examples from the Bactro-Gandhara sphere were recovered during the archaeological excavations conducted by ISMEO in Swat, Pakistan. For an example from the approximate date of the gateways to Stupa 1 at Sanchi, see Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, Figure 7:11.

27 Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, p. xvi.

By their very nature, *stupas* house relics, and it makes a spurious argument that an image should necessarily be the central object of veneration in a *stupa*. In Buddhism's relic hierarchy, the bodily relic ranks at the top, and I suggest that the presence of a relic in the *stupas*, which the carvings under consideration adorn, makes it unnecessary to have a figurative image as the object of veneration. Indeed, when we do find monuments with Buddha images as the main object of veneration, and not as adornment to a *stupa*, the images are commonly housed in a different structure. Such a contrast is vividly seen at Tibetan monasteries, such as Gyantse, where both a monumental *stupa* and an image hall stand side by side. The bilateral pairing of a relic monument with an image hall is also a characteristic of East Asian Buddhism, where, for example, at the Horyu-ji in Japan, a pagoda housing relics stands next to the *kondo*, or image hall. An Indian precedent for this distinction between a reliquary monument and an image hall is found at Nagarjunakonda, where structures housing *stupas* were paired with buildings housing Buddha images. Even at Sanchi, a separate apsidal structure across from Stupa 1 may have enshrined a figurative representation of a Buddha.

Although I argue that there is no need for a figurative Buddha as the main focus of veneration in the scenes under discussion, I do feel that it is fair to ask why we have no early carvings that show reverence to Shakyamuni Buddha (or any other Buddha) in anthropomorphic form nor are Buddha life events a principal subject of the art. Clearly, there is an abundance of Buddha imagery and representations of Buddha life events from later periods, most notably from the second and third centuries C. E. in the Bactro-Gandhara region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The topic needs extensive discussion, and is one I plan to explore in future publications. In the meantime, we must simply observe that the centrality of relic veneration to early Buddhist practice made it an important subject for the art. Simply, the predominance of compositions showing reverence to Buddhist relics in the early carvings demonstrates that relic veneration is a core element in Buddhist practice from the earliest archaeological evidence and that this is the reason it is shown in the art.

Belief in the power of relics is even today virtually ubiquitous throughout the Buddhist world, and may be observed in nearly every phase and regional manifestation of Buddhism, from the ancient times to the present day. Visiting the relic places of greatest power, often as part of a pilgrimage route, has been a central feature of Buddhist practice most likely since the death of Shakyamuni Buddha in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and has never abated in Buddhism. The value of relics is so great in Buddhism that, soon after the death of Shakyamuni, a war took place among competing kingdoms for possession of his cremated

remains. The result was a compromise—a division of the ashes into eight portions. These eight portions, along with the container that held them (which was a secondary, or *paribhogika*, relic by virtue of having touched the cremated ashes), were then housed in nine *stupas* created for them. The *Ashokavadana* records that several hundred years later, as one of his most important acts, King Ashoka retrieved the eight portions of cremated ashes, redivided them into 84,000 units, and built *stupas* to contain them throughout his kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Monuments, such as the *stupa* at Bharhut, Stupa 1 at Sanchi, and the great *stupa* at Amaravati, are believed to have contained portions of Ashoka's redistributed relics. That these monuments and the others that were adorned by the carvings under discussion were themselves reliquary monuments or were associated with sacred relics is no mere coincidence.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, I suggest that the popularity of the theme of reverence to relics in the carvings on these monuments reiterates the essential meaning and purpose of the structures they adorn.

### *Pilgrimage*

The third century B.C.E. Emperor Ashoka is credited with giving impetus to the practice of religious pilgrimage after he embarked on a series of visits to sacred sites following his conversion to Buddhism. Recorded in the *Ashokavadana*, Ashoka's pilgrimage serves as an archetypical paradigm for Buddhist lay devotees.<sup>30</sup> Several reliefs on the *toranas* at Sanchi have been identified as depictions of Ashoka's celebrated pilgrimage visits to the sacred sites of Buddhism.<sup>31</sup> In one, a group assumed to be Ashoka's entourage visits the site of Sarnath, where Shakyamuni performed his first sermon (Figure 31). The deer are a common element in descriptions of this site, for the specific location at Sarnath where this momentous event occurred was the Deer Park. The wheel that is the focus of devotion may have been erected at Sarnath to commemorate the Buddha's teachings there and to symbolize the *dharma*. In another carving at Sanchi, the figures presumed to be Ashoka's entourage gather at what is likely Bodh Gaya, the place of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment, where Ashoka is believed to have built the first temple at the site, perhaps the very building shown in the composition (Figure 32). At Sanchi in particular, inscriptions on the railing of Stupa 1 indicate that pilgrims had come from near and

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28 Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, pp. 109 ff.

29 The Bodh Gaya railing was apparently associated with Shakyamuni's Buddha's *bodhi* tree rather than a *stupa*.

30 See Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, pp. 119 ff.

31 I believe that the identification of the so-called Ashoka scenes on the Sanchi *toranas* is likely to be accurate.

far to visit the site. The practice is thus documented on the very monument on which many of the carvings occur, and it would not be surprising that scenes of pilgrimage might be shown in the art.

Over the millennia and throughout the Buddhist landscape, lay practitioners have undertaken pilgrimages as a major, merit-increasing religious activity.<sup>32</sup> The motivation is often to pursue opportunities for *darshan* and relic veneration. Like the other practices outlined in this essay, pilgrimage to sacred sites remains a prevalent and characteristic Buddhist religious activity today. Pilgrimage as a formal undertaking differs from visits to sites that might occur as part of daily activity. Merit is gained because in the case of pilgrimage the devotee leaves his or her home for a period of time and goes to one or more sacred places. The pilgrimage produces merit because it brings the devotee into contact with sacred relics and creates opportunities for *darshan* and relic veneration. Undertaking a pilgrimage requires that the individual leave behind the cares of the daily world and devote attention to this religious purpose. Pilgrimage may involve lost income while away; absence from the safety, security, and comfort of home; time away from those to whom one is attached; and other sacrifices, and thus pilgrimage can represent a type of austerity and severance from the every day world that mimics the path of the monastics, who generally relinquish much, if not all, participation in the world of attachments after taking their vows. As such, undertaking a pilgrimage is an activity that can have—indeed, is intended to have—life-altering, transformative benefits.

According to a well-known passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna sūtra*, on his deathbed Shakyamuni Buddha exhorted his followers to visit the places associated with the main events in his life.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps too much credit has been given to this passage as a full rationale for the impetus behind pilgrimage and devotion to relics in Buddhism, but, regardless, the evidence is abundant that pilgrimage is a vital component of Buddhist practice.<sup>34</sup> The art we are examining offers compelling evidence that early Buddhists not only went on pilgrimage to the sites associated with Shakyamuni Buddha's life (and his past lives), but also sacred places associated with other *manushi* Buddhas and Buddhist luminaries.

32 See Susan L. Huntington, "Relics, Pilgrimage, and the Personal Experience." In *Pilgrimage and Faith: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam*, edited by Virginia Raguin and Dina Bangdel. (Chicago: Serindia, 2010), pp. 41-53.

33 Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987 and 1995), *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, pp. 263-264, no. 5.8.

34 See the series of articles on pilgrimage by John C. Huntington listed in the Bibliography below.

The vigor and gusto with which this practice was adopted by Buddhists may have exceeded what even the Buddha in all of his omniscience might have imagined. That replicas of sacred sites were recreated throughout Asia—for example, the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya was replicated in Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Sri Lanka—is further evidence of the powers associated with sacred places and visits to them or their surrogates.<sup>35</sup>

#### ISSUES CONCERNING DEPICTIONS OF THE LAITY IN THE ART

Buddhist texts record that Shakyamuni Buddha grouped his disciples into four categories according to gender and whether the individual had taken monastic vows. Often called the Four Assemblies (*catush parishad*), the four categories are male monks (*bhikshu*), female nuns (*bhikshuni*), male lay disciples (*upasaka*), and female lay disciples (*upasika*). The rules by which the members of the monastic community were expected to live are known as the Vinaya, and Vinaya texts comprise a major category of Buddhist literature. As befitting the importance and centrality of the monastery to understanding Buddhism, this body of materials been the subject of a great deal of scholarly inquiry. Although a few texts concerning the *upasaka/upasika* disciples are known, the topic is, in fact, scantily addressed in the known Buddhist literature.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, discussions of the laity are, correspondingly, also nearly absent from scholarly writings on Buddhism. My cursory search through the indices and tables of contents of a dozen standard introductory texts on Buddhism in English did not yield even a single entry for the term lay person or laity.

Despite the attention accorded the monastic community in Buddhist practice, text, and scholarship, not a single representation of a monk or nun occurs in the surviving artistic materials of this early period: it is only members of the laity who are shown. While it is, of course, possible that future excavations and discoveries might yield imagery that bears depictions of members of the monastic community, such discoveries would be insufficient to explain the exclusive portrayal of lay men, women, and children, not monastics, in the vast

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35 For discussion of this phenomenon of replication, see Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Leaves From the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Centuries) and Its International Legacy* (Dayton and Seattle: Dayton Art Institute and the University of Washington Press, 1989), pp. 203, 206, and elsewhere.

36 One example is the *Upāsakaśīlasūtra*. See *The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts*. Translated from the Chinese of Dharmarakṣa (Taisho, vol. 24, no. 1488) by Bhiksuni SHIH Heng-Chung. (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994).

body of already-known early art. Simply, we must investigate the role of the laity further if we are to understand the art, and, since the art is a document of Buddhist practice, the Buddhist tradition itself.

*The Buddhist Categories of Upasaka and Upasika and the Laity Shown in the Art*

The pictorial emphasis in the art on the laity to the exclusion of monks and nuns raises a number of issues. An instinctual explanation for the prevalence of members of the laity in the art is that the laity are shown because they are the patrons of the monuments. But this is only partially the case, for while approximately half of the donative inscriptions on the railing of Stupa 1 at Sanchi record the gifts of members of the laity, the other half records gifts made by monks and nuns.<sup>37</sup> One cannot then say that the subject matter was determined by the patronage. This suggests that the subject matter of the reliefs is not directly associated with the lay or monastic status of the donors of the monuments within the Buddhist community, but, rather, that for some reason the relief carvings offer a detailed model of lay practice.

Also interesting is the fact that among the donative inscriptions made by members of the laity at Sanchi, only a few distinguish the donors specifically by the terms often used to describe Buddhist lay followers, that is, *upasaka* and *upasika*. The vast majority of non-monastic donors listed in the inscriptions are identified simply by their profession, such as a banker, and/or the location from which they hail, such as Ujjain, and/or sometimes by their relationship with another individual (such as the mother of). The large body of inscriptions associated with Stupa 1 at Sanchi, then, seems to categorize donors in three ways: members of the monastic community (monks and nuns), lay persons who are identified as *upasaka/upasika*, and lay persons more generally. Within these groups, individuals are further distinguished by gender, although this may be a product of the gender distinctions necessitated by case endings within the language more than a conscious effort to make gender distinctions.

Nattier notes that the designation *upasaka/upasika*, which literally means "attendant," or "one who serves" is "increasingly recognized to be not a generic term for supporters of the Buddhist community who happen not to be monks or nuns, but a very precise category designating those lay adherents who have taken on specific vows... [T]hese dedicated lay Buddhists did not constitute a free-standing community, but were rather adjunct members of particular monastic organizations."<sup>38</sup> Gregory Schopen also believes that "*upasaka/upasika*

37 See N. G. Majumdar in Marshall, *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 1, pp. 297-396.

38 Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariprcchā)*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), p. 25.

is a formal status and in some traditions it required something like a formal declaration, almost a kind of 'ordination'... [it] also appears to have been limited: in both texts and inscriptions very few of the 'lay' people one encounters are said to be or declare themselves to be *upasakas/upasikas*.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Richard Gombrich proposes that the *upasakas/upasika* designation is fluid, and that the same individuals can be an *upasaka/upasika* at one moment but not another.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, although the details vary, Buddhist traditions usually require that an *upasaka/upasika* take a specific set of vows, often the *pancashila* vow (that is, the fivefold, vows, although sometimes eight are cited), including the vow not to take the life of a sentient being, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to become intoxicated. The *upasaka/upasika* further takes refuge in the Buddhist *triratna*, or Triple Gem, that is, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Sanchi inscriptions, then, seem to imply a distinction between members of the laity more broadly and those lay individuals who had taken the initiatory vows to qualify them as *upasaka* (for males) and *upasika* (for females). This distinction, I argue, was deliberate and not due to simple omission about this status on the part of the donor or error on the part of the scribes who recorded the donative information. We can, I think, argue that those who had attained the status of *upasaka/upasika* would have wanted this information included in the records of their donations since such a title would have been an important recognition of the donor's commitment to the Buddhist path. Simply,

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39 Personal communication. In the same communication, Schopen also said that "what you see in the art of Sanchi and Bharhut may reflect very well what the inscriptions from the sites indicate: most donors at both sites were not *upasakas/upasikas*." He also noted that there are good textual reasons for thinking that *upasakas/upasikas* if represented would *not* be wearing the garb of the individuals seen in this body of art, including the elaborate jewelry. I am grateful to Gregory Schopen for his input on *upasaka/upasika* issue. See also Schopen, "The Ritual Obligations and Donor Roles of Monks in the Pāli Vinaya," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, pp. 80 and 84, n. 24. For other early Indian inscriptions using the terms *upasaka/upasika*, see Gregory Schopen, "The Ritual Obligations and Donor Roles of Monks in the Pāli Vinaya," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, p. 84, n. 24.

40 See Richard F. Gombrich, "Organized Bodhisattvas: A Blind Alley in Buddhist Historiography," in *Aryacandraya: Essays in Honor of Akira Yuyama*, edited by Gregory Schopen and Paul Harrison. Indica et Tibetica 35, Swistal-Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1998, pp. 49-50. In a personal communication to me, Gombrich further suggests that an *upasaka/upasika* might appropriately wear the type of lay dress visible in the art. See Also Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London and New York, 1988), pp. 74-76.



the designation *upasaka/upasika* implies taking important steps in Buddhist practice, including certain vows and living a life that more stringently adheres to various Buddhist precepts than more broad-based followers of the Buddha. The *upasakas/upasikas* are, therefore, logically distinguished in the inscriptions from other lay devotees.

The fact that the distinction is made in the inscriptions but not in the art, however, suggests a deliberate choice on the part of the artists and their patrons to represent the most broadly construed laity. Based on practices in later Buddhism, the *upasaka/upasika* would be expected to wear simple white clothing and no jewelry or other adornments. While we cannot determine the color of the garb worn by the figures in the reliefs, the jewelry and headgear in particular suggest that the lay people in the art of these early sites are not *upaska/upasika* but are depictions of the broader category of the laity.

In other words, like the monks and nuns, then, who are not shown in the art, the *upasakas/upasikas* are also absent from the pictorial representations. Yet, also, like the monks and nuns, the *upasakas/upasikas* are represented in the corpus of donative inscriptions. It is puzzling, then, that the people depicted in the art are neither members of the monastic community nor *upasaka/upasikas*, but, rather, those Buddhist disciples who are the least advanced and who have made only the most preliminary commitment to Buddhist practice. Despite the fact that the reasons for this emphasis on the laity are unknown, the presence of the laity as a dominant theme in the art is indisputable.

#### RELATIONSHIP OF THIS STUDY TO RITUAL STUDIES AND RITUAL THEORY

In this essay, I use the term ritual in its most elemental sense to refer to simple actions as well as more complex ceremonies and activities. I have not attempted to engage in a theoretical discussion about the definition, nature, and purpose of ritual. This I leave to specialists in ritual studies, which has become a very well established field of scholarship in its own right. Here, I employ a simple definition of ritual as an act or a series of acts that are performed for a purpose, that are intended to have meaning or a series of meanings, that are customarily repeated and used on specific occasions, and that are intended to bring some result.

I have attempted to show that a great many of the works of art that comprise the very earliest surviving narrative art in Buddhism clearly documents the prevalence of lay ritual practices. The variety of activities performed by the laity depicted in the carvings allows us to infer several things about ancient

Buddhist lay rituals, despite the fact that much of the specific detail eludes modern scholars. We may presume that in Buddhism, as in other religious traditions, rituals were part of the regular activities of practitioners but were also performed on special occasions, including important calendrical events, the anniversaries of important religious occasions (such as the birthday of Shakyamuni Buddha), as well as life passage events of the devotees, among others. Certain rituals may have been appropriate to different times of day and different seasons. Unfortunately, these dimensions of lay ritual are not discernible in the art, although they may be present.

Buddhist lay ritual practices are often intertwined, so that some rituals include actions that are familiar from other contexts. For example, *pranama* is a common element that can serve as a building block of larger rituals. Similarly, veneration of relics is an important component associated with making pilgrimage. These and other issues, both specific and theoretical, are fruitful areas for future studies. The early art clearly demonstrates that early Buddhists had already developed a rich store of ritual activities to utilize in their practice.

#### BUDDHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

Much of our modern understanding of this early phase of Buddhism has been based on literary documents. However, the Buddhist texts informing us about this very period of Buddhism are known only through much later recensions. In contrast, the sculptures and the monuments that they adorn are documents of the actual period of their origin. Therefore, the subjects they reveal provide important evidence about the practices and beliefs of the time. Further, while written sources, such as the Vinaya, reveal much about Buddhism as practiced by professionals—that is, members of the monastic community—these artistic monuments provide vital information about the members of the lay community.

The observations I make in this paper are based on the material remains. These remains can be firmly dated to range from around 100 B.C.E to the early decades of the first century C.E. The material record of Buddhism is scant for the first few centuries after the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha, and the artistic corpus to which the compositions discussed in this essay belong comprises the first narrative sculpture known in Buddhist art history. Because the surviving stone monuments were certainly preceded by a lengthy development of architecture and sculpture in ephemeral materials, most likely wood, the origin of these practices arguably dates to a very early point in Buddhist history, perhaps

during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha as suggested by the Jetavana scene (Figure 11) or soon after.<sup>41</sup>

Although the answer is not known at present, the very fact that lay activities are a dominant subject in the earliest surviving narrative art and that their rituals are recorded in detail is an issue worth pondering. Recognition of this observation based on the art demands that we expand our focus from monasticism to the laity in Buddhism, even from the date of the earliest significant bodies of art, and inquire about the role of the laity in the religious phenomena of Buddhism. That the members of the laity in this early art are depicted showing reverence to Buddhist relics, particularly those contained within *stupas*, is important for those who argue that veneration of *stupas* by the laity is a distinctive characteristic of the Mahayana and that Mahayana is a development that occurs later than the art under discussion.

At the same time, it is notable that the ritual practices identified in this analysis are by no means exclusive to the laity. Throughout the Buddhist world and in virtually every known period of Buddhism, these very same rituals were practiced by members of both the monastic and lay communities. This fact underscores the significance of the phenomenon that only the laity are shown in the art. Thus, it is not the exclusiveness of the activities to the laity that is the important issue. What is remarkable here is the fact that the surviving monuments show only the laity.

That the rituals depicted in the early art are still at the heart of Buddhist practices today—some 2500 years after Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime and in every region and school where Buddhism is still alive—says something remarkable about the efficacy of these practices. The rituals of *pradakshina*, *puja*, *darshan*, pilgrimage, and the others discussed are not only still prevalent but they are among the principal means by which the laity participate in the religion. Their appearance and prominence in the very earliest surviving Buddhist narrative art suggests that from the earliest phase of Buddhism, these activities were fundamental to Buddhism itself.

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41 John Huntington shows that a number of "Buddhist" subjects were depicted on Indian coins that predate the stone sculptures under discussion. A common motif on these coins is a tree enclosed by a railing, not unlike that illustrated here as Figure 17. On the coins, no humans are shown interacting with the tree but the prevalence of this and other motifs suggests the importance of sacred trees from an early date in India. See John C. Huntington, "Marks, Maps, & Microscopes: A Preliminary Report on a Study of Early Indic Symbol Systems and a Partial 'Proof of Concept' Demonstration," in *Exemplar: The Journal of South Asian Studies*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 9-16.

LOOKING BACK: EARLIER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE IMAGERY

To those unfamiliar with the century or more of scholarship about the early relief carvings that have been the focus of this paper, the explanations of the activities depicted in the carvings may seem obvious, perhaps even simplistic. After all, these ritualistic activities are easily recognizable and observable among lay practices throughout the Buddhist world even today and they are clearly depicted in the art. However, a discussion of lay rituals in the early Buddhist art of India involves more than merely calling attention to a previously neglected aspect of the art, for agreement with the analysis presented here hinges on the acceptance of a paradigm for the subject matter of the art that goes against the grain of a hundred years of scholarship. To calibrate this new interpretation of the art with earlier readings, a brief review of the earlier interpretations is necessary.

Englishman James Fergusson put forth the first explanation in 1868, claiming that the early carvings at Sanchi and Amaravati, and, by implication, the related carvings at other sites, such as Bharhut and Bodh Gaya, documented an Indic cult of tree and serpent worship.<sup>42</sup> Various reliefs in the early corpus illustrate Fergusson's viewpoint (for example, my Figures 3-6, 10, 17-25), and others that show a tree as the focus of veneration). Fergusson considered such carvings to be typical examples of tree worship. In the case of one sculpture that he published (shown here as Figure 23), Fergusson correctly identified the species of the central tree, which he recognized as Shakyamuni Buddha's *bodhi* tree.<sup>43</sup> However, to Fergusson, although on a Buddhist monument, such a depiction was not Buddhist in subject matter. Instead, Fergusson believed that these compositions documented a non-Buddhist custom of tree worship. The popularity of similar compositions among the known artistic remains in India led Fergusson to believe that tree worship—along with what Fergusson considered its baser partner, serpent worship—were dominant features of early ritual practices in India. However, under the rubric of “tree and serpent worship” Fergusson included sculptures that do not even depict trees, and very few, in fact, show serpents. Nonetheless, to Fergusson, these tree and serpent cults illustrated a worldwide, primitive nature worship phenomenon that involved little, if any, higher philosophical thinking. Fergusson inferred that pre-Bud-

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42 James Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship: Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the First and Fourth Centuries After Christ From the Sculptures of the Buddhist Topes at Sanchi and Amravati*. (London: Indian Museum and W. H. Allen and Co., 1873).

43 Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, pl. XXV, Fig. 3, and p. 115.

dhistic practices associated with tree and serpent worship had been absorbed into Buddhism with little modification, as demonstrated by the presence of the artistic compositions on what are clearly Buddhist monuments.<sup>44</sup>

The second theory interpreting these artistic remains, the so-called theory of aniconism, soon overshadowed Fergusson's "tree and serpent worship" model. The "aniconic theory," which evolved primarily over the first half of the twentieth century, is largely traceable to the Frenchman Alfred Foucher, and has dominated twentieth-century thought on the issue to the exclusion of other interpretations. In a seminal essay published in 1911, Foucher laid the foundation for what soon became the all-encompassing theory relating to the subject matter of early Buddhist art.<sup>45</sup> This theory has been so powerful that it has not only shaped scholarship on Buddhist art for more than a century but it has also influenced the scholarship on Buddhism itself.

According to the aniconic theory, the subject matter of the art was the life of the Buddha, but the Buddha himself was never shown ("an-iconism"). The relief just discussed, which Fergusson interpreted as recording the practice of non-Buddhist, "primitive" tree worship, was said by Foucher to represent the "second Great Miracle in the Master's life—the Sambodhi."<sup>46</sup> In other words, Foucher read this carving as a life event of Shakyamuni Buddha, and, specifically, his enlightenment—an iconographic interpretation that is still widely accepted today. While the tree is clearly identifiable as the type of tree under which Shakyamuni meditated and achieved enlightenment, the lack of a figure of a Buddha is notable. To Foucher and his followers, the scene, nonetheless, was regarded as a depiction of the actual life event of the Buddha, with the tree serving as an emblem or signifier of the event itself. The lack of congruence between textual depictions of the event and the elements in the artistic rendering, such as the activities of the people in the scenes and the fact that they are all lay persons, have been ignored, dismissed, or explained away by aniconic

44 Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*.

45 Foucher, "The Beginnings of Buddhist Art," in *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1917), pp. 1-29. The theory has been embellished and built upon by other authors but there is no single publication in which all of the details of what has come to be embodied in the theory are laid out together. Further, early writers, such as Fergusson and Foucher, did not use the term aniconic. As far as I can determine, the first writer to use the term aniconic in his writings was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy, who is well known for his great interest in European medieval art, apparently borrowed this term from western writers discussing both medieval art and the Islamic tradition.

46 Foucher in Marshall's *Monuments of Sāñchi*, vol. 2, description for plate 51, opposite the plate.

proponents. The fact that a temple is shown surrounding the tree when textual accounts and archaeological evidence clearly indicate that there was no structure at the time of the Buddha's meditation has been attributed to artistic inaccuracy or a lack of historicity in the renderings. Foucher calls it, simply, an anachronism."<sup>47</sup>

The disjuncture between the visual representations and Buddhist textual narratives of the life of Shakyamuni Buddha is no trivial matter since the underlying assumption that has been operative in such interpretations is that the visual evidence of the art—what is actually depicted in the scenes—should be discredited in favor of alternative means of interpreting the subject matter. According to the model I offer, the scene may be interpreted as a depiction of the site of Bodh Gaya, or another site that housed an *asvattha* tree as a *paribohika* relic. If the site is Bodh Gaya, the depiction may show the site as it appeared around the time of Ashoka in the third century B.C.E, or even as late as the time of the carving during the first few decades of the first century C.E. The presence of the building surrounding the tree is evidence for this proposed timeframe after the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha. Ashoka is widely considered to have been the first to build a temple associated with the tree, a suggestion that is borne out by archaeological evidence attesting to Maurya-period artistic production at the site. From the activities and the garb of the figures in the scene, the subject is lay devotion at the site. The composition shows two pairs of male lay devotees, who have come to venerate the tree relic. They are showing their devotion to the tree, and the temple later erected there, which marks the spot of the Buddha's meditation. As a *paribhogika* relic, the site/tree holds great power, and in addition to showing reverence (as indicated by their gestures) the figures are, presumably, experiencing the relic power of the site.

I further suggest that the activities depicted in such scenes are fully within the scope of Buddhist practices and need not be explained as Fergusson does as examples of a "primitive" form of pre-Buddhist tree and serpent worship. While veneration of trees and the spirits that dwell within them was likely to have been a broadly shared cultural viewpoint in ancient India and while the practice of tree veneration by Buddhists may indeed relate to a non-Buddhist practice, the representation of trees and other venerated objects in the early art falls squarely within the Buddhist context by the time of the carvings. In addition, I suggest, it might not be simply the tree that is the focus of veneration, but also the spot marked by the throne or altar that is likely to represent a sacred Buddhist place where an important event occurred.

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47 Foucher in Marshall's *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 2, description for plate 51, opposite the plate.

Another composition at Sanchi, discussed above, further illustrates the two earlier viewpoints (Figure 10). Fergusson identifies this scene as “eighteen men in Hindu costume, some sitting, some standing, doing homage to a Pipal tree surmounted by a Chatta and attended by Garudas.”<sup>48</sup> Foucher says of this composition: “...only one identification is possible—namely the ‘Conversion of the Śākya’...”<sup>49</sup> Foucher further explains that “A pious assembly seated around an empty throne under a *ficus indica* will be enough to represent this [Buddha life] scene [without a figure of a Buddha].”<sup>50</sup> In contrast, I suggest that the scene shows an assembly of men, all of whom are members of the laity. They are part of an assembly that is taking place around a sacred tree, with a platform or altar marking the sacred site. As far as I can determine, there is no means of specifically identifying the occasion for this assembly.

Despite that fact that the aniconic theory is the one that has prevailed, elements of the tree and worship interpretation have persisted in many subsequent discussions of the art. In some cases, both theories have been given selective acceptance—sometimes by single authors while discussing a single monument. Not only are these two theories mutually incompatible, neither succeeds in explaining what I believe to be the activities depicted in the reliefs, and therefore their relevance in the interpretation of early Buddhist religious and ritual activity. Fergusson was certainly correct in seeing these compositions as depictions of ritual devotion, for, indeed, this is what many of them are, and Foucher was correct in noting an association with Buddhism. But neither author nor their followers recognized the scenes for their importance to the understanding of ancient Buddhist lay practices.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This discussion of the role of the laity and their rituals in the early Buddhist art of India is not intended as a universal explanation for all of the subject matter in the early carvings at Sanchi, Bharhut, and other sites. Additional subjects, such as *jatakas*, are also present. However, the ritual practices of the laity were clearly a dominant theme, as indicated by the overwhelming popularity of this subject on the early monuments. As testaments to the lives and practices of the legions of Buddhist followers who never took monastic vows nor perhaps even

48 Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, plate XXVII, Figure 1; p. 119. That Fergusson identifies the figures as Hindu is also problematic.

49 Foucher in Marshall’s *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 2, description for pl. 65.

50 Foucher in Marshall’s *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 1, p. 205.

the vows of the *upasaka/upasika*, these sculptural remains are powerful reminders of the importance of the laity to the Buddhist religion even in its earliest traces. In light of the fact that in every period and in every sectarian or regional manifestation Buddhism is at its core a monastic religion, the prevalence of this early imagery relating to the laity is remarkable. Whether the scenes shown in the art were intended to inform the activities of the lay devotee or fulfill another purpose is unknown. But the fact that the earliest known narrative carvings depict the activities of the laity, without whose contributions the monastic institutions could not have flourished to the extent that they did, is testament to the symbiotic relationship between the laity and monasticism that is at the heart of Buddhism.

The ritual “objects” discussed in this paper are not the type of objects that can be held in one’s hands or put into a museum exhibition. Consisting of architectural monuments, such as the *stupas* that are found ubiquitously throughout the Buddhist world, sacred trees, pillars, wheels, and sacred places that are marked in other ways, the ritual objects engage the viewer, both physically and mentally, in acts of devotion. The practice of utilizing architectural monuments, like *stupas*, as well as trees and other sacred objects, in the ritual practices of Buddhism is not limited to India alone but occurs throughout the Buddhist world. Indeed, it is a hallmark of the Buddhist religious systems.

To the devotees who visited the sites where the reliefs were installed, the pictorial representations of devotional and ritual practices likely inspired, instructed, and reinforced the practice of their own religious devotions. To the ancient pilgrims who travelled to such sites, these artistic compositions were mirrors of their own ritual actions. To us, these compositions provide the fossil record of their practices and an unparalleled clue to the rituals of early Buddhism.

This discussion has centered on what, to me, seems like a very obvious interpretation of the reliefs of ancient India. Yet, because art historical scholarship for over a century has focused on the central objects, such as *stupas* and trees, as substitutes for figurative representations of Shakyamuni Buddha rather than the activities of the participants—even this simple explanation has eluded scholars. Rather than reflecting non-Buddhist tree and serpent cults or aniconic renderings of the Buddha’s life, these works, I suggest, are the earliest known visual documents of the ritual offerings and devotions of the Buddhist laity. As such, they are a priceless treasurehouse of information about the devotional activities of some of Buddhism’s most eager and loyal practitioners—the lay population.



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*Figure 1. View of Stupa 1 at Sanchi from the southwest. Madhya Pradesh, India. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 2. Eastern gateway (torana), Stupa 1 at Sanchi. Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century. C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 3. Relief showing figures performing pranama. Stupa 1 at Sanchi. Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 4. Relief showing figures offering garlands. Stupa 1 at Sanchi. Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 5. Relief showing figures taking darshan of a sacred tree. From Bharhut. Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 6. Relief showing figures performing a puja. Stupa 1 at Sanchi. Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





Figure 7. Relief showing "Prasenajit" scene. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.



*Figure 8. Relief showing figures circumambulating a stupa. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 9. Relief showing figures circumambulating a pillar. Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India. Ca. first century B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 10. Relief showing assembly scene. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





*Figure 11. Relief showing gift of the Jetavanarama. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 12. Relief showing relic procession. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



Figure 13. Relief showing veneration of Buddhist relics in a stupa. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.



Figure 14. Relief showing veneration of Buddhist relics in a stupa. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.



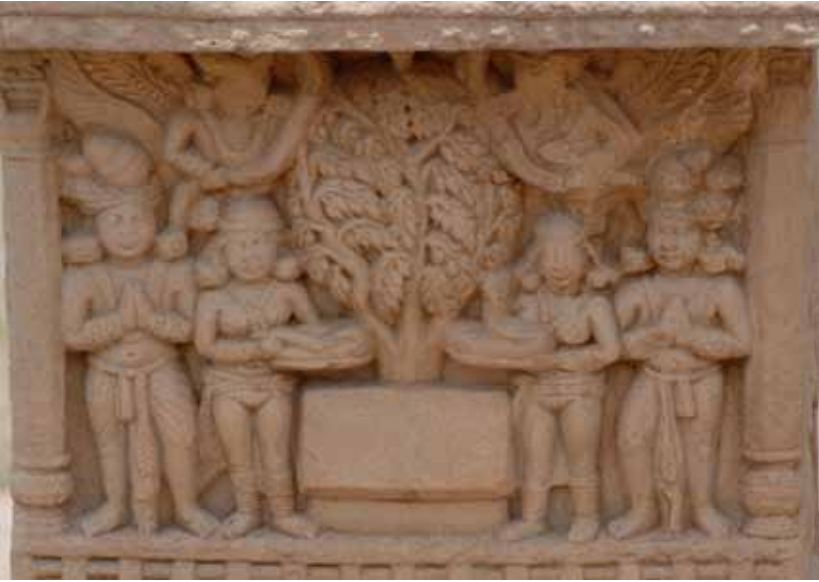
Figure 15. Relief showing veneration of Buddhist relics in a stupa. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.



*Figure 16. Relief showing veneration of Buddhist relics in a stupa. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 17. Relief showing veneration of a tree. Stupa 1 and 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 18. Relief showing veneration of a tree. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*

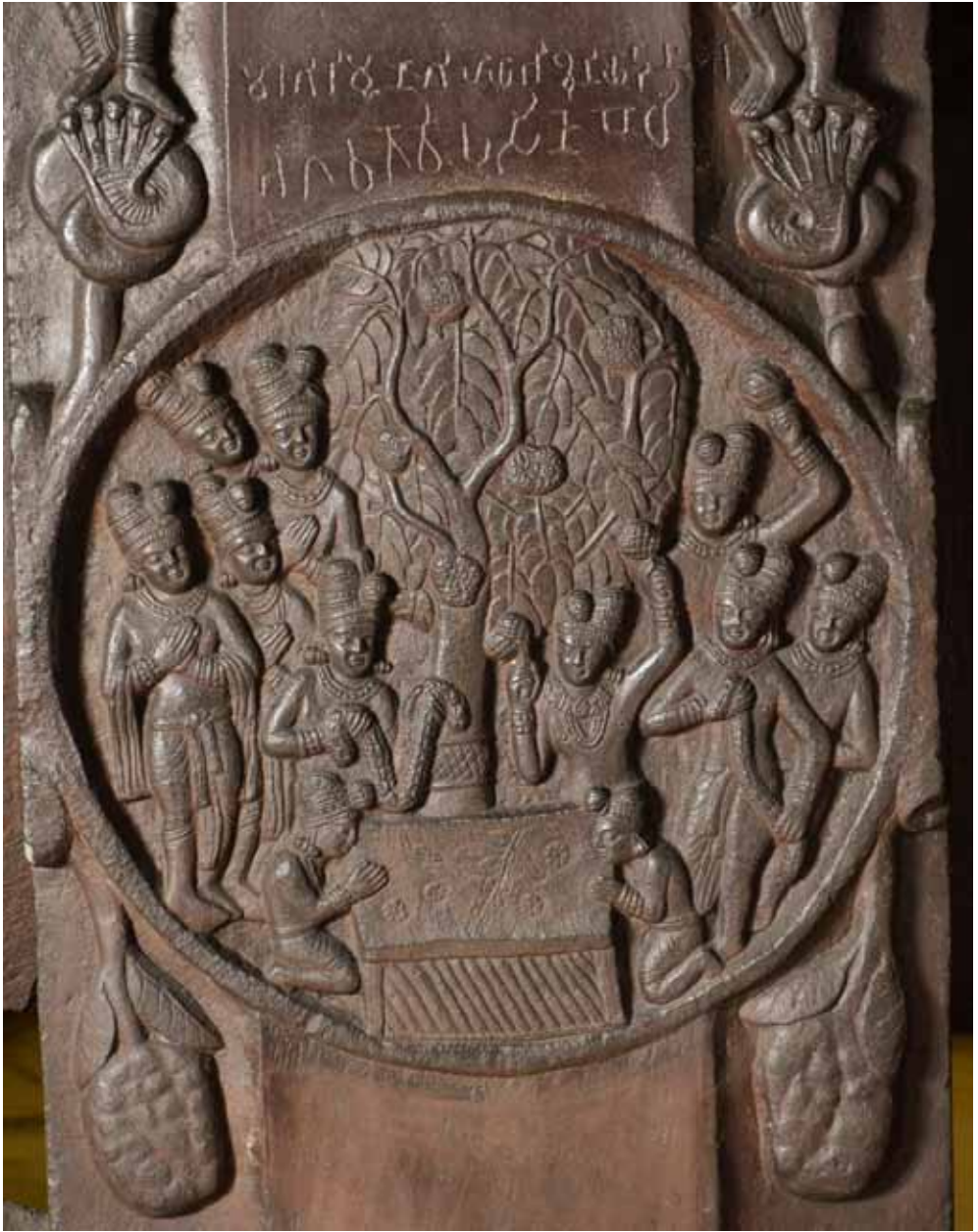


*Figure 19. Relief showing veneration of a tree. Stupa 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





*Figure 20. Relief showing veneration of the bodhi tree of Buddha Veshabhu. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*

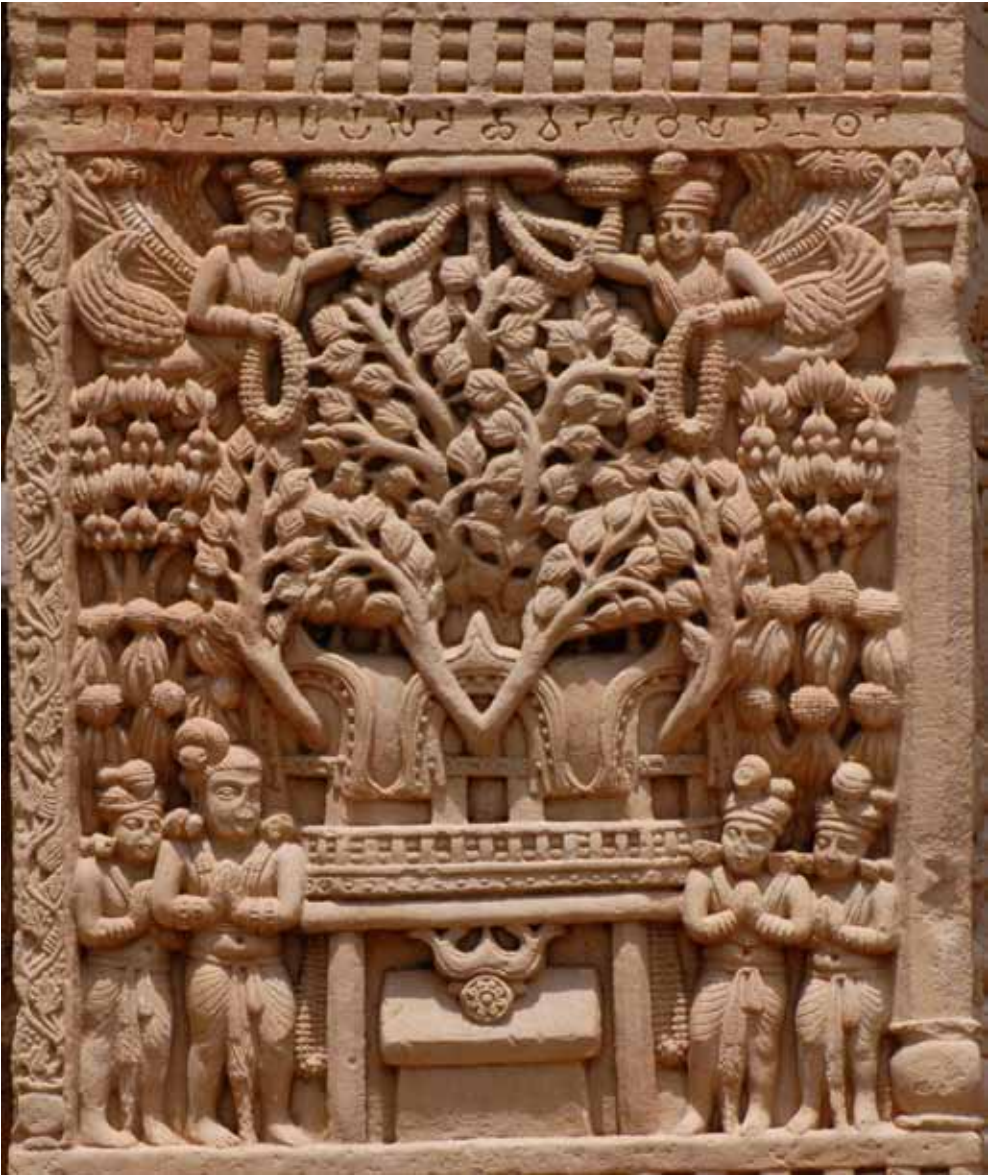


*Figure 21. Relief showing veneration of bodhi tree of Buddha Vipashyin. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 22. Relief showing veneration of the bodhi tree of Shakyamuni. From Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. 100-80 B.C.E. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





*Figure 23. Relief showing veneration of a bodhi tree, probably that of Shakyamuni. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





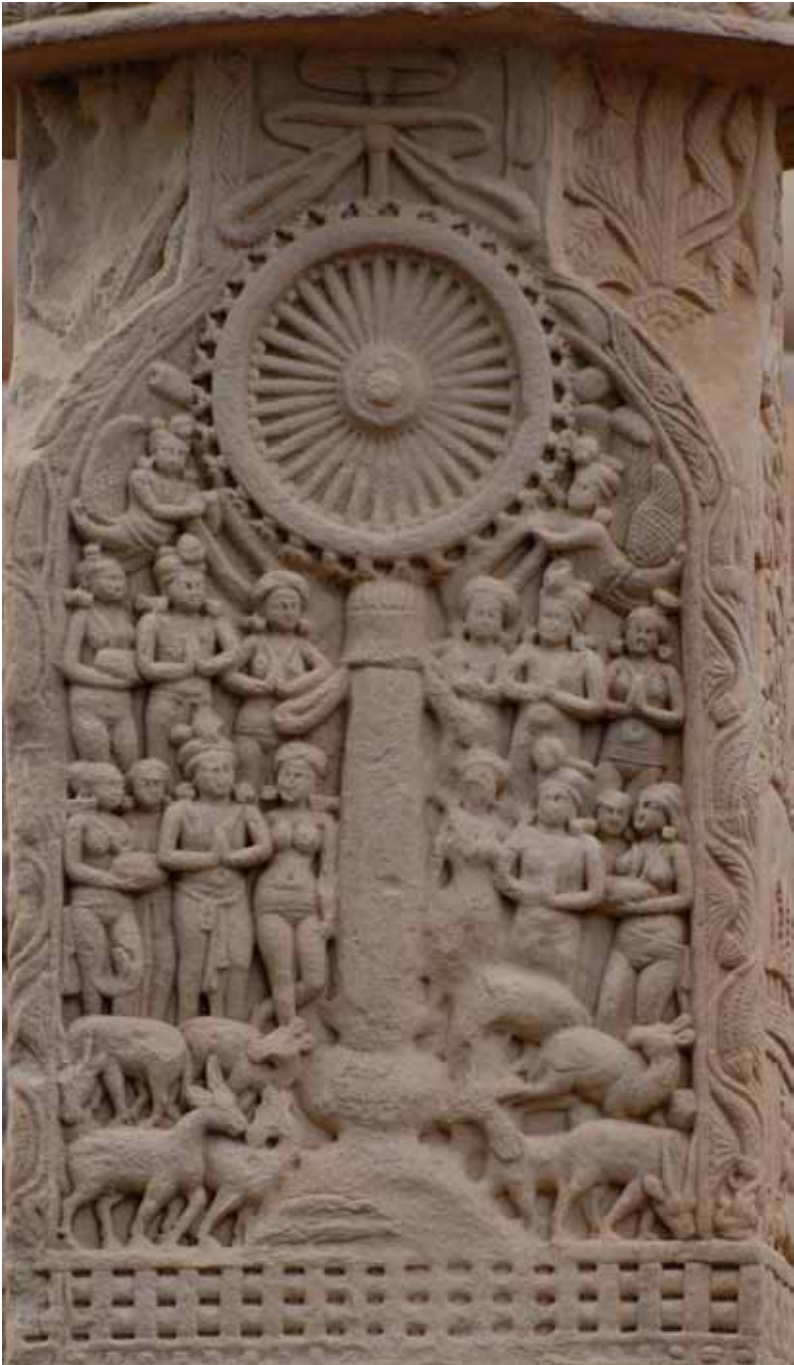
Figure 24. Relief showing veneration of a tree. Stupa 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.



Figure 25. Relief showing veneration of a tree. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.



*Figure 26. Relief showing veneration of a pillar. Stupa 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 27. Relief showing veneration of a pillar. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 28. Relief showing veneration of a pillar. Stupa 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 29. Relief showing veneration of a wheel. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*





*Figure 30. Relief showing veneration of a wheel. Stupa 3 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 31. Relief possibly showing Ashoka visiting Sarnath. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*



*Figure 32. Relief possibly showing Ashoka visiting Bodh Gaya. Stupa 1 at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Ca. second-third decade of first century C.E. Photo by Eric Huntington.*