

## ANICONISM AND THE MULTIVALENCE OF EMBLEMS\*

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ALTHOUGH IT IS AXIOMATIC AMONG LITERARY CRITICS THAT A work may contain multiple layers of meaning, many historians of art, particularly of early Buddhist art, seem curiously reluctant to accept a comparable conflation of meanings. Yet if Āśvaghōṣa, writing his *Buddhacharita* around A.D. 100, could make habitual use of words in two or more meanings,<sup>1</sup> and if Āryaśūra could constantly use *śleṣa* or double entendre in his fourth-century *Jātakamālā*,<sup>2</sup> parallel skills were undoubtedly known to the artist producing visual narratives in the media of stone and paint. This essay advocates the need to recognize, accept, and even admire the multiplicity of meanings apparent in early Buddhist sculpture and painting, in which the artist reminded the viewer of the manifold religious interpretations that may be suggested by any single emblem. Scholars have insisted too much upon singular and exclusive explanations of early Buddhist reliefs, from the totally aniconic interpretation of the early 1900s<sup>3</sup> to the somewhat restrictive site-oriented interpretation of this last decade.<sup>4</sup>

There are two critical and complementary prerequisites for the accurate interpretation of early Buddhist art. The first is an awareness of the multiple meanings conveyed by the major Buddhist emblems of the tree, the pillar, and the *stūpa*. The emblem is a picture that represents something different from itself. The tree, pillar, and *stūpa* may in fact be interpreted in three distinct and equally valid ways in different contexts and in varying visual compositions. In their first aspect, emblems may be read as aniconic presentations of the Buddha. The term "aniconic" carries the dictionary meaning of "symbolizing without aiming at resemblance," and "aniconism" is defined as "worship or veneration of an object that represents a god without being an image of him."<sup>5</sup> This essay will show that a variety of emblems, including footprints, a seat or throne, a parasol, and a pillar of radiance, were frequently used, singly or in combination, to represent the person of the Buddha in a narrative art that was primarily concerned with the biography of the Buddha. To deny the validity of this concern of the ancient artists, devotees, monks, and nuns<sup>6</sup> is to misread the overall message of the monuments. In their second aspect, the emblems of the tree, pillar, and *stūpa*, seen in relief sculptures, may

represent sacred spots, or *śrīthas*, and the devotions performed there. Thus, the *bodhi* tree may be intended to represent Bodh Gayā, site of the enlightenment; the wheel-crowned pillar may represent Sārnāth, site of the first sermon; and the *stūpa* may represent one of the sacred relic mounds built at a variety of sites. In their third aspect, these same emblems of tree, pillar, and *stūpa* are to be viewed as attributes of the faith; thus the tree is intended to recall the divine wisdom of the Buddha, while the pillar suggests his sacred doctrine.

The exact interpretation of the emblems depends on their visual context. In one panel, the tree sheltering a seat may be an emblem that portrays the presence of the Buddha himself; the sacred *pīpal* tree may indicate the enlightenment of the Buddha, while a mango tree may indicate his presence at Śrāvastī. In another panel, the tree with a seat beneath it may stand for a hallowed pilgrimage site; the sacred *pīpal* tree may indicate Bodh Gayā, site of the enlightenment. In yet other panels, the *pīpal* tree is intended to recall the essence of the enlightenment—the supreme wisdom of the Buddha. Clearly, not every depiction of symbols should be read as an aniconic portrayal of the Buddha, but it is equally invalid to deny the existence of an aniconic phase and to maintain that scenes with symbols should be interpreted either as sacred *śrīthas* or as pageantry reenactments of events from the life of the Buddha.

The second crucial prerequisite for interpreting the emblems is to acknowledge their multilayered significance. The nonfigural emblem, in narrative presentations, makes simultaneous reference both to the presence of the Buddha and to the truths that his life manifested. Equally, a relief may be read both as an event in the life of the Buddha and as the holy site at which that event occurred. It must be emphasized that the artists working at the early Buddhist sites frequently seem to have intended a conflation of meanings. When the primary intention was to depict an event from the Buddha's biography, the artist often included a reference to the site as a *śrītha*. For instance, the Bhārhut scenes of the Buddha's enlightenment on the Prasenañjit pillar, considered below, include a shrine around the *bodhi* tree that was not built until two centuries after the historical moment of the enlightenment. While the prime intention of this panel was to depict the historical event, the artist's portrayal of the shrine also suggests the holy site. In fact, as explained below, parallel instances of

\* Editor's note: The *Ars Orientalis* Editorial Board has invited Susan Huntington of Ohio State University to respond to this article. Her rejoinder will appear in volume 22.



FIG. 1. Visit of King Prasenajit of Kosala to Shrine Built to Honor the Buddha, Bhārhut.  
Courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS).

such depictions exist in non-Buddhist contexts too. It is probable that neither the artist nor the early Indian worshipper at Bhārhut found anything incongruous in such conflation. Panels with the reverse emphasis also occur: When a wheel is portrayed to suggest primarily the site of the first sermon, it is also surely intended to remind the viewer of the Buddha who preached that sermon at the site. In a similar manner, the attribute and the aniconic portrayal are conflated: a wheel, intended to indicate the wisdom of

the Buddha, also serves to remind the viewer of the Buddha whose wisdom it exemplifies. Through its capacity for multiple reference, the emblem suggests the simultaneity of events that occur at separate times.

Significantly, a double layer of meaning appears to inform the greater number of narrative reliefs at Bhārhut, Sānchi, and other early Buddhist sites. One such instance of multilayered meaning may be seen on the Prasenajit pillar at Bhārhut, in a panel that uses

the synoptic mode<sup>7</sup> to depict the visit of King Prasenajit to the shrine he built in honor of the Buddha (fig. 1). It is important to understand that the panel does not depict Sarnāth, the site of the first sermon.<sup>8</sup> To the lower right is a barrel-roofed gateway from which emerge horse and riders who represent the monarch and his entourage; they are repeated to the lower left as they ride on towards the shrine. On the roof of the gateway is the inscribed identifying label "King Pasenaji of Kosala," which may not be ignored; it suggests the actual historical event in which the monarch visited the Buddha at Prasenajit's capital of Śrāvastī and listened to his sermon. A large barrel-vaulted shrine housing a garlanded wheel surmounted by a garlanded parasol occupies the larger part of the panel; the two flanking figures probably represent the circumambulating monarch rather than two separate worshippers. The circumambulation of the shrine building itself is suggested by the placement, on either side, of figures riding horses and elephants. The shrine roof carries the words "*Bhagavato dhammachakka*," or "Wheel of doctrine of the Holy One,"<sup>9</sup> suggesting that the intention is to portray the wheel as an object of worship in the shrine erected by King Prasenajit and to recall the sermon given there rather than to indicate the actual presence of the Buddha. However, the conflation of meanings is inevitable and surely intentional. The shrine was built by King Prasenajit at the spot where the Buddha had preached to him; undoubtedly, the artist intended that the relief should also recall that event. As a nonfigural emblem, the wheel emphasizes the Law and also refers to the Buddha as the Giver of that Law. Most early Buddhist visual narratives contain this double layer of meaning. As soon as we accept the validity of such a system, with its accent on the fluidity of meanings, and cease to insist upon a single explanation to be applied in every instance, aniconism ceases to be such a vexed problem.

It may be advisable first to correct certain misconceptions that have arisen around the problem of aniconism so that we may clearly distinguish the

"baby" from the "bath water." Certainly, the oversimplistic assumption of a Hīnayāna phase which produced aniconic art, followed by a Mahāyāna phase which introduced the anthropomorphic icon, must be abandoned. The basic split of early Buddhism into the Sarvāstivādin (Hīnayāna) and the Mahāsamāghika (from which all Mahāyāna schools probably developed) occurred prior to the time of Aśoka, and the two systems coexisted from an early date. Evidence of such coexistence at around the turn of the Christian era is provided by the inscriptions of Rajūvala (ca. A.D. 1-15) and Śoḍaśa (ca. A.D. 10-25). Their Kharoṣṭhī record on the Mathurā lion capital refers to the dedication of a Sarvāstivādin *stūpa* and monastery for the monks of the four directions and to the gift of a *vihāra* to the Sarvāstivādins as *dhammadāna*; it concludes with a mention of *ācārya* Budhi, "who had knowledge to teach the foremost Mahāsamāghikas the truth:"<sup>10</sup>

In addition, it is today accepted that Hīnayāna schools were actively involved in the worship of the Buddha image; in fact, it has been demonstrated that some of the earliest images were Hīnayāna dedications.<sup>11</sup> One such is the ten-foot-tall Śrāvastī image of the Buddha, which, together with its monumental umbrella and shaft, was dedicated in the year 3 of Kanishka by the monk Bala, who was well versed in the Tripiṭakas. The image was set up in the hall known as Kosambakuṭī "for possession of the Sarvāstivādin Teachers." Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools<sup>12</sup> coexisted for centuries, and both were interested in images; it would be quite incorrect to associate the one with aniconism and the other with the anthropomorphic icon. The differences between them lay in other and more complex realms.

The pageantry theory proposed as an alternative to aniconism is riddled with complications; in particular, there is little evidence, if any, that Buddhism had a tradition akin to that of the Christian passion plays, in which events from a sacred biography were staged.<sup>13</sup> The suggestion that the great departure of the Buddha (fig. 2), portrayed on the central architrave



FIG. 2. *The Great Departure*, Sanchi. Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

(inner face) of the east gateway at Sānchi, depicts not the actual event in the life of the Buddha but a later reenactment<sup>14</sup> poses major problems both for the interpretation of the visual material and for the perception of early Buddhist devotions at a sacred site. In visual terms, if aniconism did not exist, what could possibly have led the artist to avoid portraying upon the horse the human actor who played the part of the Buddha? Why would he have resorted to the extraordinary device of portraying a parasol hovering at an appropriate height above empty space over the horse? Equally problematic is the effect of the pagentry interpretation on the concept of the expression of Buddhist religious sentiment. It does a disservice to the notion of the religious devotion of the many hundreds of monks, nuns, and lay worshippers who contributed towards the decoration of the Sānchi *stūpa* (no less than 631 donative records) to suggest that they would build the immense stone structure and then decorate it merely with pictures of a pagentry! Surely it was unnecessary to depict the enactment of an event when the artist could easily circumvent that middle step and depict the event itself.

The whole purpose of going to a *stūpa* was indeed to experience the presence of the Buddha through proximity with his enshrined relic. The inscription on the Bajaur relic casket, dated in the reign of the Indo-Greek King Menander (ca. 140–110 B.C.), speaks of the bodily relics of Śākyamuni as *prāṇa-samāda*, or "endowed with life."<sup>15</sup> Recent study of the inscription at the main *stūpa* at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa suggests that both monks and lay worshippers considered the essence of the Buddha, perhaps even his living presence, to be actually contained within the relic.<sup>16</sup> However, the presence of the relic does not thereby preclude the need for stories from the life; in fact, reliving the historic life through viewing narrative sculptures recounting those events would enrich the experience of going to a *stūpa*. Equally, it is not valid to assume that the prevailing religion during this early period emphasized the perfection of virtues narrated in the *jātaka*s, thereby obviating the need for life scenes. The proposition that the early art of India was not primarily concerned with the biography of the Buddha<sup>17</sup> is difficult to sustain. On the contrary, scenes from the Buddha biography took pride of place in the decorative scheme of the first extensively decorated *stūpa* at Bhārhut. Life scenes were carved primarily on the prominent entrance pillars of the Bhārhut railing, where they would be readily seen by those who visited the site. Not a single biographical scene exists on the smaller spaces created by the meandering lotus stem along the Bhārhut coping, several feet above eye level, where only *jātaka* tales are placed. The half dozen or so portrayals of *līrthas* at

Bhārhut are all to be found sculpted upon the cross-bars of the railing.<sup>18</sup>

The interpretation of the emblem, with its inherent fluidity of meanings, will be considered under its three valid categories—first as an aniconic presentation of the Buddha, next as a sacred site, and finally as an attribute. Relief panels from Bhārhut, Sānchi, Amarāvati, and the Gandhāran region will illustrate the discussion, although this brief analysis makes no attempt to present a chronological development. The necessary independent treatment of each site will be found in my book-length study of Buddhist visual narratives.

### *The Aniconic Presence*

A number of panels at Bhārhut, some with inscriptions of vital importance, provide incontrovertible evidence that the artist is depicting not the site of a great event but rather incidents from the sacred biography in which the Buddha is portrayed in aniconic form. One such is the story of the Serpent King Erapata, told through the mode of synoptic narrative in three distinct episodes on the central panel of the outer face of the Prasenajit pillar (fig. 3). To the rear of the panel, Erapata emerges from the waters of a river in purely reptilian form with his daughter upon his hood; beside them, also half submerged, is the young *brahmin* who provides the answer to Erapata's question. The second scene, in the right foreground, depicts Erapata in human form with a snake hood above his head, accompanied by his two queens as they emerge from the waters to go in search of the Buddha. The identifying label "*Erapato Nāgarāja*" is inscribed directly below the serpent king, along the vertical pillar of the band of railing that encloses the scene. Of crucial importance to the interpretation of aniconism is the final episode, which occupies the left third of the panel: Erapata, with hands joined in adoration, kneels in front of a seat beneath a garlanded tree. To ensure that the viewer is aware of the significance of the seat and garlanded tree as the emblematic presence of the Buddha, the words "*Erapato Nāgarāja Bhagavato Vadate*," or "Serpent King Erapata adores the Holy One," are inscribed intrusively into the visual field, just behind the kneeling figure. It seems difficult to read this inscribed piece of visual narrative as anything other than an instance of the aniconic depiction of the Buddha.

A second panel that provides undeniable evidence of aniconism is the visit of King Ajātashatru to the Buddha (fig. 4), narrated in a set of four scenes on the lowest panel of face one of the Ajātashatru pillar. To the lower left, the monarch and his queens ride upon

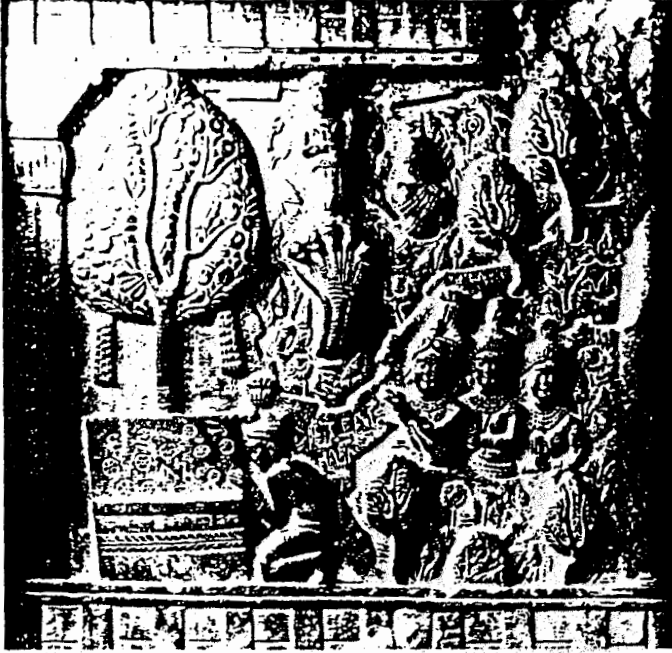


FIG. 3. *Story of Serpent King Erapata, Bharhut. Courtesy ASI.*



FIG. 4. *King Ajatashatru Visits the Buddha. Courtesy ASI.*

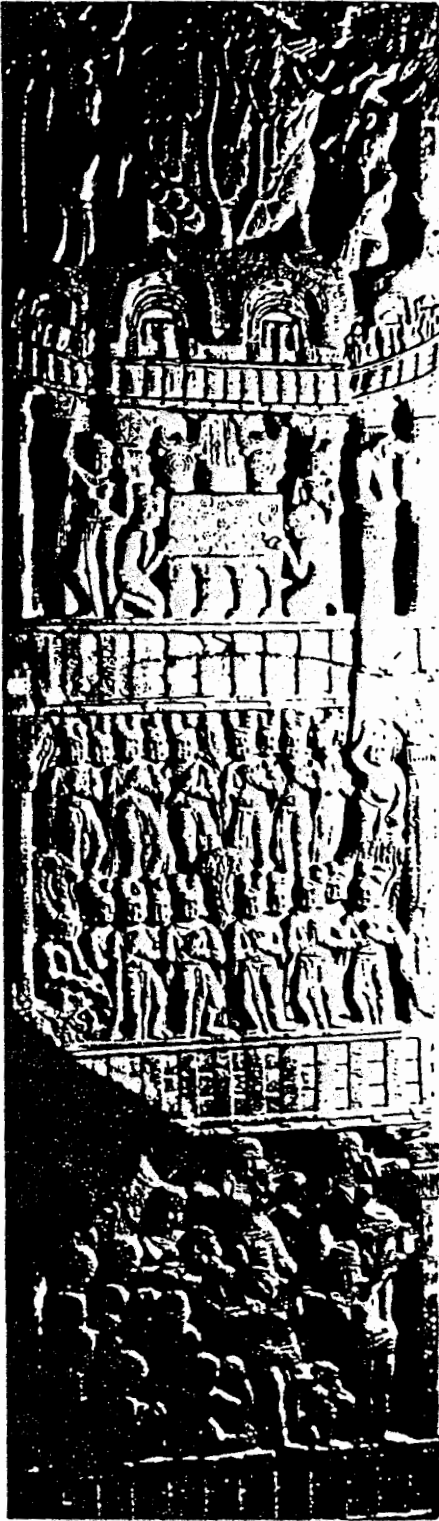


FIG. 5. Enlightenment face of Prasenañit pillar, Bhārhut. Courtesy ASI.

elephants on their way to visit the Buddha, while to the right is a kneeling elephant from which Ajātashatru has dismounted in the mango grove (two trees suffice) of Jīva, where the Buddha is residing. The third scene, occupying the left rear of the panel, depicts the king and his queens standing with hands joined in adoration while a hanging lamp places the incident in the nighttime hours.<sup>19</sup> The final scene to the right rear is crucial to the issue under discussion; it depicts Ajātashatru kneeling before footprints, throne, and parasol. To ensure that the viewer correctly identifies the footprints, throne, and parasol as the Buddha, the artist added the label "*Ajātasatu Bhagavato vamdāte,*" or "Ajātashatru bows to the Blessed One," which is inscribed sideways along the pilaster enclosing the panel to the right. It is difficult to misconstrue the artist's intention.

Three interrelated panels pertaining to the enlightenment (fig. 5) on the inner face of the Prasenañit pillar at Bhārhut provide a third instance of aniconism, in which inscriptional evidence (all of nine epigraphs) confirms the interpretation. The uppermost panel depicts the *bodhi* tree surrounded by a shrine upon whose roof are inscribed the words "*Bhagavato sakamunino bodho,*" to be interpreted as "enlightenment of the Holy One Śakyāmuni."<sup>20</sup> The throne, which is surmounted by *triratna* emblems and stands beneath the *bodhi* tree encircled by a hypaethral shrine, represents, in this instance, the presence of the enlightened Buddha. The inclusion of a pillar or shrine that was built after the event represented in the relief need not invalidate this identification. First, a double layer of meaning appears to be intended. By including in a scene of the enlightenment the shrine around the tree that was built some time after the event, the artist surely intended that the viewer also recall the sacred site of the *bodhi* tree at Gayā. Secondly, there are other instances in which artists included later structures in scenes of a life event. In one of these a sixteenth-century artist painted events from the life of the seventh-century Tamil saint Sambandar around the temple tank at Madurai.<sup>21</sup> The sacred sites visited by Sambandar in seventh-century Tamilnāḍu consisted merely of hallowed *lingas* standing out in the open air beneath trees; the temples that enshrine them were built three hundred years later under Chola rule. The sixteenth-century artist, however, quite happily portrayed Sambandar visiting temples that never existed during the life portrayed. Temples had become the hallmark of the sites; it probably never occurred to him, nor to the Bhārhut artist, that such a portrayal might be considered anachronistic.

On the panel immediately below, four sets of gods,

separated by the compositional device of a tree, arrive to praise the enlightened Buddha—an event that occurred simultaneously with the enlightenment. Confirming the identification are the inscriptions, which identify the gods thus: “in the northern quarter, the three [classes of] Savaganisissas,” “in the eastern quarter, the Sudhāvāsa gods,” and “in the southern quarter, the six thousand Kāmāvacharas.” There does not appear to be an inscription in the damaged portion of the panel to identify the gods of the western direction, among whom winged figures and *nāgas* are clearly evident. To the far left, disconsolately drawing pictures on the ground with a stick, is the figure of Māra, whom certain texts<sup>22</sup> place at the event. Connecting the two panels on a visual level is an elephant-crowned column that rises from the lower into the upper level.

The lowest panel, depicting a group of female musicians and four dancing figures, also portrays an event simultaneous with the enlightenment; it represents the heavenly nymphs who in the tradition referred to above<sup>23</sup> arrive to honor the enlightened Buddha. The five inscriptions on this panel substantiate the identification of the scene. The names Subhadrā *apsarā*, Padmāvati *apsarā*, and Alambusā *apsarā* are inscribed immediately beside three of the dancing figures; lack of space apparently required the name of the fourth, Miśrakeśi *apsarā*, to be engraved along the pilaster that flanks the panel to the right. As a further aid to identification, the sculptor added the caption “music of the gods enlivened by mimic dance,” engraving it sideways along the fourth and fifth bands of the railing (from the left) that served as a lower border for the scene. The three panels on this face of the Prasenajit panel thus represent simultaneous events; they pertain to the enlightenment of the Buddha, as proclaimed by the inscription in the topmost panel, in which the Buddha’s presence is indicated by aniconic emblems. Read thus, the presence of the gods of the four directions and of the heavenly *apsarās* becomes meaningful.

A Bhārhut medallion that uses the monoscenic mode to tell the tale of Mucalinda *nāga*, who sheltered the Buddha from a torrential rain storm in the sixth week<sup>24</sup> after his enlightenment, provides further evidence of aniconism (fig. 6). The Buddha’s biography recounts that, oblivious to everything around him, the Buddha sat in deep contemplation under a tree, while Mucalinda coiled himself to form a seat for the Buddha, with his multiheaded hood serving as a parasol above the Buddha’s head. Mucalinda, portrayed in purely repulian form beneath a tree, occupies the larger part of the medallion as he envelops the Buddha, represented by a seat and a pair



FIG. 6. Serpent Mucalinda Shelters the Buddha, Bhārhut. Courtesy AIIS.



FIG. 7. *The Enlightenment, Gandhāra*. Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

of footprints. The identifying label on the pillar, above the medallion, reads "*Mucilido Nāgarāja*." This seems to be another clear instance of aniconism. The only way to suggest that the medallion represents the spot where the Buddha was sheltered by Mucalinda would be to propose that the spot was marked in later days by the image of a serpent enveloping a seat and footprints. But the fact that the serpent image was portrayed sheltering a seat and footprints rather than an anthropomorphic image of the Buddha in itself constitutes evidence of a one-time aniconic tradition.

The exact time and place of an event are certainly key indicators of the depiction of episodes from the Buddha's life; *śīrtha* proponents maintain that these elements are always explicitly indicated in iconic life scenes but generally absent in aniconic renderings, which are hence, presumably, to be understood as sacred sites.<sup>25</sup> It is an interesting exercise to compare

two scenes depicting the enlightenment of the Buddha—an iconic version from Gandhāra (fig. 7) and the aniconic rendering (fig. 8) from Sānchi's west gateway (south pillar, inner face, top panel). The Gandhāran panel portrays the Buddha seated in the earth-touching gesture beneath the *pīpal* tree; the Sānchi panel depicts a seat beneath the tree. Māra's demon armies—some purely animal, others humanized but with animal heads—are placed on either side of the Buddha in the Gandhāran panel; at Sānchi, the demon armies, animal and humanized, are placed to the right of the Buddha. The Gandhāran panel portrays Māra and his warriors in the foreground, first attempting to confront the Buddha and then having abandoned the attempt; Māra is portrayed once more to the far left, sitting disconsolately in defeat. At Sānchi, the artist chose to portray defeated Māra accompanied by his three daughters, bowing before the Buddha. The Sānchi panel also portrays the gods.





FIG. 8. *The Enlightenment, Sanchi west gateway.*  
After Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*.

with their hands raised in a gesture of wonder as they marvel at the events. (The foreground of the Sanchi panel contains an additional detail that precedes the events of the enlightenment; referring to the earlier penance of the Buddha, it portrays three gods hovering anxiously over the weakened Buddha.) If place and time are key clues indicating a life scene, both elements occur in the aniconic portrayal at Sanchi.

Recent excavations in the Gandhāran region, where the anthropomorphic Buddha image appears in great numbers, have yielded a few instances of aniconism. A significant panel from Butkara, now in the museum at Swāt, portrays the Sānkissa descent of the Buddha from the heavens (fig. 9). A central ladder displays a pair of footprints upon its lowest rung, while flanking ladders carry standing figures of the gods Indra and Brahmā. Kneeling at the foot of the central ladder is the figure of nun Utpala, whom several traditions, including the accounts of Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanxang, view as the first to greet the Buddha upon his descent to earth. Those who deny the exist-

ence of aniconism would see the ladders as the actual set of stairs set up at the pilgrimage site of Sānkissa, whose one-time existence is attested in the memoirs of the Chinese pilgrims. This, however, conveniently ignores the footprints—depicted both here and on a similar scene from Bhārhut<sup>26</sup>—which suggest that for one reason or another the artist avoided presenting the bodily image of the Buddha.<sup>27</sup> Even if the panel represents not the actual event but the pilgrimage site of Sānkissa, the portrayal of footprints in place of the bodily image can only suggest a tradition of aniconism that persisted into early Gandhāran art. In this context, one must further query why a Mathurā relief of the descent at Sānkissa, which portrays an anthropomorphic Buddha on the central ladder flanked by Indra and Brahmā on the side ladders, is unhesitatingly accepted as a life scene. After all, Xuanxang's account of the site of Sānkissa speaks of an image atop the steps. Why is it suddenly assumed that "depictions of events of the life of the Buddha, as opposed to the *pīthas*, became commonplace"<sup>28</sup> at the precise stage when the iconic replaces the aniconic?

It is instructive, in this context, to consider the many Gandhāran representations of the first sermon in which a seated anthropomorphic image of the Buddha reaches out a hand to turn a wheel that either



FIG. 9. *The Buddha's Descent at Sānkissa, Swāt, Gandhāra.*  
Courtesy Martha Carter.



FIG. 10. *The Buddha Turns the Wheel of Law, Gandhāra.* Courtesy ASI.



FIG. 11. *Buddha Touches a Triratna-Crowned Pillar*  
Courtesy Martha Carter.

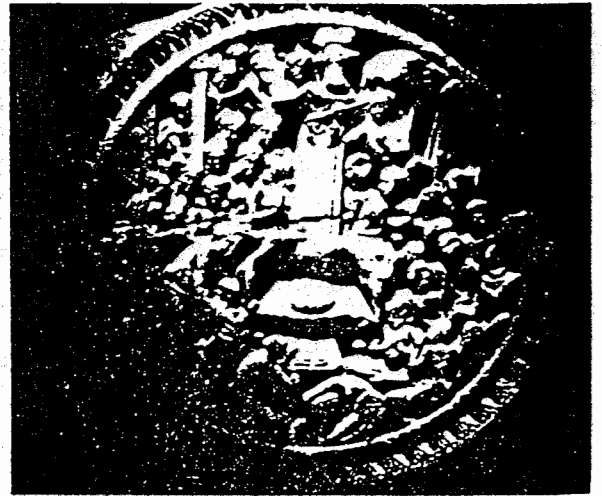


FIG. 12. *Buddha as an "Emblematic Body," Amarāvati.*  
Courtesy Amarāvati Site Museum.

rests by itself or is placed upon a pillar or a *triratna* emblem (fig. 10). The Pāli or Sanskrit term for the first sermon helps explain this imagery; the event was known as *dharma-chakra-pravartana*, or "turning the wheel of the law," which is literally the action of the Buddha. Such panels may also be understood as the anthropomorphic Buddha giving his sanction to the earlier homage paid to the wheel-topped pillar. In several instances, Gandhāra sculptors portrayed a standing Buddha figure touching a pillar topped with the *triratna*, or three jewels—the Buddha, the *Dhamma* or doctrine, and the *Samgha* or monastic community (fig. 11). Once again, the Buddha figure is apparently giving his sanction to this pivotal emblem of the Buddhist faith. Those who believe in the primacy of emblems may suggest that the anthropomorphic figure derives its validity from the earlier established emblem!

The problem of aniconism takes on an engrossing twist in the Amarāvati carvings, produced largely at a time when the anthropomorphic Buddha image had been introduced into the art of the northern centers of Gandhāra and Mathurā. While artists at Bhārhut and Sānci portrayed simple and often single emblems, those at Amarāvati made use of a series of emblems in combination to build up an "emblematic

body" for the Buddha. One instance of this system is an Amarāvati medallion portraying child Rāhula being presented to the Buddha (fig. 12). The footprints, cushioned throne, pillar of radiance, and crowning *triratna* may indeed be read visually to suggest the feet, limbs, torso, and head of the seated Buddha. The set of emblems stacked visually one above the other suggests a body for the Buddha, albeit an emblematic one. Equally persuasive as examples of this system are Amarāvati portrayals of the standing Buddha as an emblematic body. One such, on a now lost railing pillar that narrated a set of incidents from the story of the conversion of the Kāśyapas, may be examined in its context from an early drawing published by Fergusson (fig. 13). The fluted right segment, depicting a group of monks (the converted Kāśyapas) following the Buddha to Rājagriha, indicates the Buddha's presence by a pair of footprints upon a lotus, a pillar of radiance, and a crowning *triratna* emblem. Such depictions are not "manifestations of regional *pīthas*, the local heritage of which is now lost."<sup>29</sup> The emblems are not flanked by worshippers, lay or otherwise; rather, the manner in which the monks are placed behind the emblems clearly indicates the presence of the walking Buddha, whom the monks are following. Two such standing images,

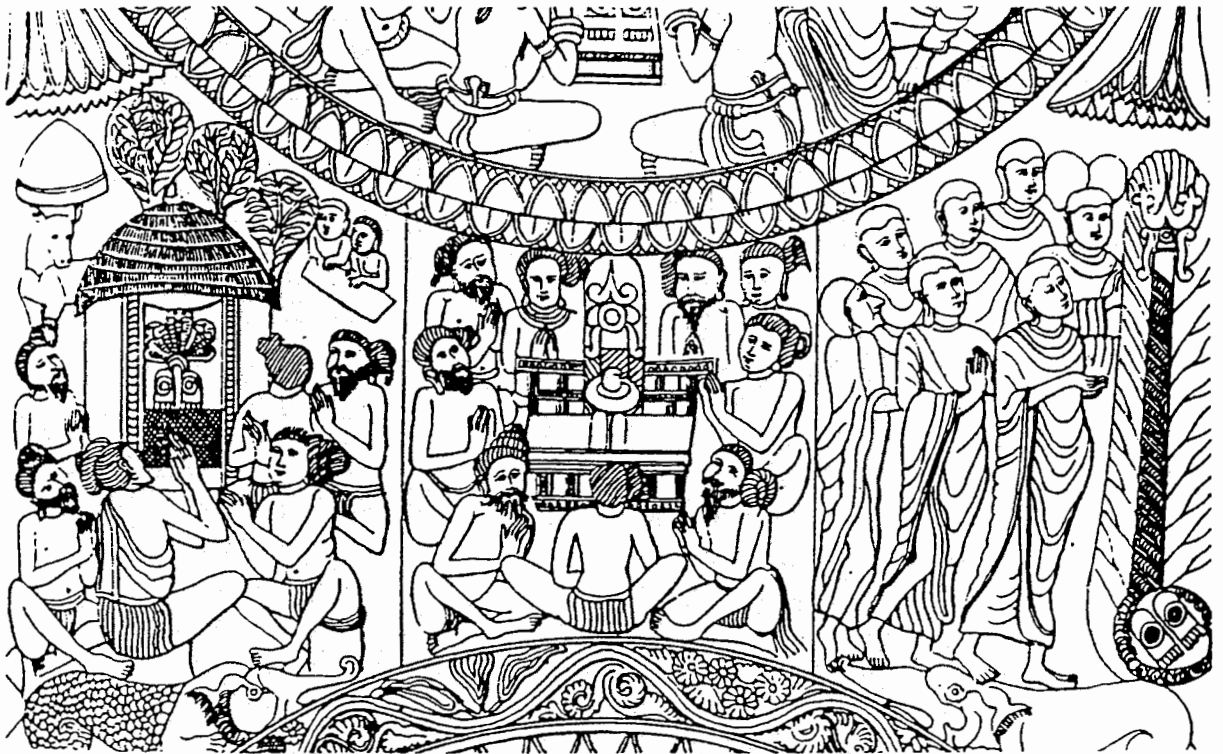


FIG. 13. Buddha as an "Emblematic Body," Amarāvati. After Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*.

which make use of the identical set of emblems, may be seen among the pillar fragments displayed in the Madras Museum; in addition, an exact replica of such an "image" was once carved along the badly damaged edge of the Nalagiri medallion, where the elephant bows at the feet of the Buddha (this identical set of emblems) followed by his monks. It is intriguing to note that even at the third/fourth-century site of Nāgarjunakoṇḍa, artists produced at least one such emblematic standing Buddha body, which may be seen in a fragmentary piece preserved in the site museum.

### Sacred Sites

Sacred sites, or *śrīthas*, and their place in the rite of pilgrimage, are crucial within the Indic religious tradition. The Buddha himself underscored their relevance for both the laity and the monastic community. A well-known passage from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* states that on his deathbed, when asked by Ānanda what the monks should do after his death when they were no longer able to receive his audience or wait upon him, the Buddha replied:

There are four places, Ānanda, which the believing man should visit with feelings of reverence and awe. Which are the four?  
The place . . . at which . . . the Tathāgata was born . . .  
The place . . . at which . . . the Tathāgata attained to the supreme and perfect insight . . .  
The place . . . at which . . . the kingdom of righteousness was set on foot by the Tathāgata . . .  
The place . . . at which . . . the Tathāgata passed finally away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever to remain behind.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of pilgrimage to the sacred spots of Buddhism is undeniable. However, it is questionable whether, in the early Buddhist ethos, pilgrimage to *śrīthas* ever took priority over the life of the Buddha and, equally, whether artistic depictions of pilgrim-

age sites took precedence over portrayals of events from the life of the Buddha.

The imperial pilgrimage of Emperor Aśoka (ca. 273–232 B.C.) to thirty-two sacred spots associated with the life of the Buddha, commencing with the birthplace at Lumbini grove and ending with the *parinirvāṇa* site at Kuśinagara, is the archetypal pilgrimage. Importantly, however, Aśoka's pilgrimage emphasized the physical form in which the Buddha had lived the life that was being experienced, not merely the sanctity acquired by the site of an event. At Lumbini, the emperor asks a tree spirit who had witnessed the birth to describe the glory of the infant's form:

You witnessed his birth and saw  
his body adorned with the marks!  
You gazed upon his large lotus-like eyes!  
You heard in this wood  
the first delightful words  
of the leader of mankind!

Tell me, goddess, what was it like—the magnificent moment of the Blessed One's birth?<sup>31</sup>

At Gayā, the emperor requests Serpent King Kālika, who encountered the Buddha immediately prior to his enlightenment, to recount his bodily splendor:

You saw my peerless Master  
his complexion like blazing gold  
and his face like the autumn moon.  
Recount for me some of the Buddha's qualities,  
tell me what it was like—  
the splendor of the Sugata.<sup>32</sup>

Their eyewitness accounts, which send Aśoka into an ecstasy of devotion, stress the person of the Buddha and his charismatic qualities.<sup>33</sup> Even in a pilgrimage cycle, the emphasis is on the desire to experience the Buddha himself in all his glory. It is difficult to sustain the argument that early Buddhist artists and

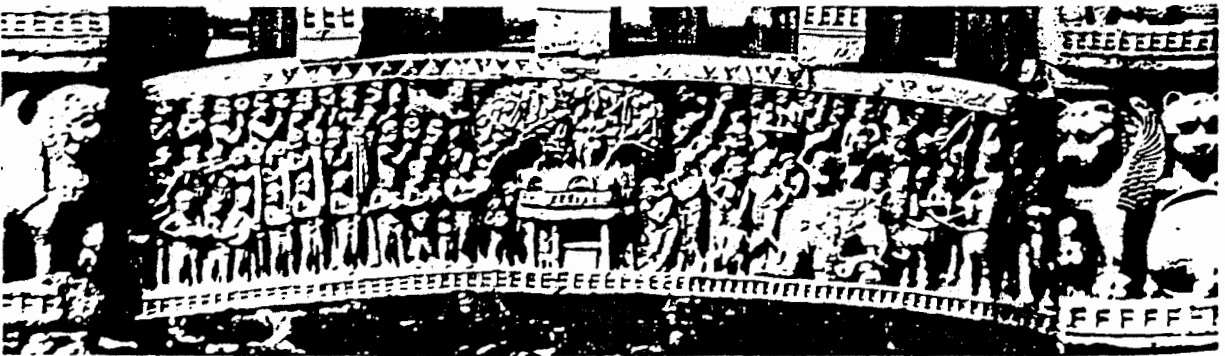


FIG. 14. Visit of Emperor Aśoka to the Bodhi Tree at Gayā, Sānci. Courtesy ASI.



FIG. 15. *Worship of a Stūpa, Sānchi.* Courtesy AIIS.

devotees were not primarily concerned with the biography of the Buddha.

Artists at Sānchi chose to depict on their monument two momentous events in the life of King Aśoka. Perhaps not surprisingly, both revolve around visits to sacred sites—the incident of the *bodhi* tree and the encounter with the *nāgās* at the Rāmagrāma *stūpa*—although neither episode was part of Aśoka's Buddhist pilgrimage. There is universal agreement that the lowest architrave of the east gateway at Sānchi (outer face) depicts the pilgrimage of Aśoka to the *bodhi* tree (fig. 14). In order to revive the dying tree, which had been subjected to a curse by his jealous chief queen Tishyarakshitā, Aśoka is said to have ordered a thousand jars of fragrant water to be poured over its roots. The architrave portrays Aśoka and his queen to one side and courtiers with jars of water on the other. It is noteworthy that the tree is portrayed surrounded by an elaborate shrine while textual sources, including the *Aśokavadāna*, merely speak of building a platform from which the tree could be watered.<sup>24</sup> Those who consider time and place of the

utmost importance in the interpretation of a scene might note this instance of a sacred site where the artist was unconcerned that the shrine did not exist at the moment of this famous pilgrimage. The second Aśokan episode at Sānchi, as everyone agrees, is the emperor's visit to the Rāmagrāma *stūpa*, portrayed on the central architrave (outer face) of the south gateway. To one side of the *stūpa* is Aśoka in his chariot, while to the other side stand the hosts of *nāgās*, the serpent beings who have been worshipping the *stūpa* and who dissuaded Aśoka from removing the relics in order to redistribute them among the many *stūpās* he was building throughout his empire.

In a certain number of reliefs at Bhārhut and Sānchi, the *stūpa* and pillar represent memorials erected at sacred sites of pilgrimage and clearly do not indicate the presence of the Buddha. One such instance is the worship of a *stūpa* on the west pillar of the north gateway at Sānchi (fig. 15). Here, certainly, is no portrayal of the great decease of the Buddha, which occurred at Kuśināra. Instead a group of northerners dressed in tunics, cloaks, and boots—some



FIG. 16. Site of Sarnāth, Sānchi south gateway. Courtesy AIIS.



FIG. 17. Site of Bodh Gayā, Sānchi south gateway. Courtesy AIIS.

wearing peaked caps and others with filets bound around their heads—honor a sacred relic mound with music, dance, and offerings. The only clue to the site of this *stūpa*<sup>35</sup> is the northern costume of its worshippers.

A second instance of the portrayal of sacred sites is represented by two panels, one featuring a pillar (fig. 16) and the other a tree (fig. 17), on adjacent sides of the west pillar of the south gateway. The pillar, with deer clustered at its base and groups of turbaned worshippers on either side, seems to represent the site of Sarnāth; the tree circled by a shrine on the adjoining panel indicates the site of Bodh Gayā. In these instances, the pillar is not intended to portray the Buddha's presence and his preaching of the first sermon any more than the tree is meant to suggest the aniconic presence of the Buddha. Their context, within the panel's composition, makes this evident. It is vital to recognize the multivalence of the major Buddhist emblems; in different contexts, they may represent the Buddha, portray sacred sites, or make

reference to Buddhist attributes.

It is significant that the Buddha's words on the importance of pilgrimage, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* passage quoted earlier, were prompted by Ānanda's query regarding the plight of the monks who could no longer serve him or receive his audience. In his reply, the Buddha speaks of pilgrimage for both monks and laity:

And there will come, Ānanda, to such spots, believers, brethren and sisters of the order, or devout men and devout women, and will say, "Here was the Tathāgata born!", or "Here did the Tathāgata attain to the supreme and perfect insight!" or "Here was the kingdom of righteousness set on foot by the Tathāgata!" or, "Here the Tathāgata passed away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever to remain behind!"<sup>36</sup>

It is strange that lay worship alone should be highlighted by those who wish to explain emblematic reliefs as portrayals of pilgrimage sites.<sup>37</sup> These depictions of lay worship may have occurred by chance in the course of portraying, on each monument, no more

than six to eight scenes of worship. While it is true that the *Mahāparinibbhāna Sutta* entrusts the Buddha's relics to the laity rather than the clergy, recent Buddhological studies make it amply evident that the Buddhist ecclesiastic community was closely involved from the very beginning with the relic cult and the *stūpa*, with cultic practice of every kind, as also with religious giving and with the image of the Buddha.<sup>38</sup>

The denial of aniconism and the accent on sacred sites make it necessary to address panels from the site of Amarāvati (and also Nāgārjunakoṇḍa) that have always been viewed as portraying the birth of the Buddha (fig. 18). These repetitively portray Queen Māyā standing under a tree; to one side are her maids, and to the other side are the gods, headed by Indra and Brahmā. Upon the swaddling clothes held by the gods are a pair of infant footprints (occasionally seven infant footprints), generally interpreted as evidence of aniconism and representing the event

from the sacred biography in which the infant Buddha took his first seven steps. Is there an alternate way of interpreting such panels, and could they depict homage at a sacred site? It would be necessary to assume that an image of Queen Māyā beneath a śāl tree, flanked by maids and the gods, was set up at an early date at Lumbini, site of the miraculous birth. Of this we have no evidence; certainly the *Aśokāvadāna* makes no reference to any such images. An additional intractable problem is the presence of the infant footprints. Why would an artist have portrayed footprints, rather than a tiny Buddha child, in a group of modeled figures if not because he was constrained by a previous aniconic tradition? Any suggestion of pagentry reenactment runs into insuperable problems. Even if such plays were performed, what place do infant footprints, rather than a little child, have in them? Only the theory of aniconism offers a reasonable explanation for the large number of such



FIG. 18. *Birth of Buddha, Amarāvati.* Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.



FIG. 19. *Birth of Buddha*, Gandhāra. Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

depictions. Indeed, Gandhāra provides numerous panels with a similar arrangement of figures, except that the infant Buddha child in anthropomorphic form is now received upon the swaddling clothes held by the gods (fig. 19). No one questions that these Gandhāran panels depict the actual birth of the Buddha or suggests that they portray either the sacred site of Lumbini or pageantry reenactments of the birth. The obvious compositional similarity of the Gandhāran panels to those from Amarāvati (and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa) reinforces the conclusion that the latter too portray the birth of the Buddha, who, on occasion, is represented at these sites in aniconic form.

From Amarāvati, a site largely executed after the anthropomorphic Buddha was a known feature in the art of the northern Kushān sites, come two portrayals of actual images, one as a bas relief and one

apparently as a metal icon. They are noticed here as possible representations of worship at local sites. Both portrayals come from slabs, some eleven feet high and carved in three registers, that cased the dome of the Amarāvati *stūpa*. One dome slab, drastically pared down for reuse in modern construction, survives in two registers; the lower is a scene of worship of a now-lost object, while the upper depicts the adoration of a circular medallion with a relief carving of a seated Buddha, placed upon a seat beneath a *bodhi* tree, with footprints below the seat (fig. 20). Since the Amarāvati *stūpa* railing itself is renowned for its circular carved medallions, the scene appears to represent a local site where one such medallion was worshipped; if that is the case, the artist of the dome slab perhaps added the footprints to reinforce the sanctity of the medallion. It is intriguing to note that Jain literature provides evidence of





FIG. 20. *Homage to Relief Medallion of the Buddha*, dome slab from Amarāvati. Courtesy Amarāvati Site Museum.

the worship of plaques placed upon thrones beneath trees. U. P. Shah quotes the canonical *Aupāpatika Sūtra*'s passage on the Pūrṇābhadrā Chaitya, which speaks of a *prithivi-śilā-paṭṭa* placed upon a lion throne and resting against the trunk of the best *āsoka* tree in a forest grove; the addition of the word *prithivi* (earth) to the *śilā-paṭṭa* (slab) suggests to Shah a terracotta plaque.<sup>39</sup> The noncanonical Jain text *Vasudevahiṇḍī* (ca. A.D. 350–450) similarly speaks of a *śilā* of *yaksha* Sumanā, placed upon a platform beneath an *āsoka* tree, where it was worshipped.<sup>40</sup> The second such Amarāvati slab, now missing, is known only from an 1816 drawing made by Colonel Mackenzie; it represents the worship of a portable shrine placed beneath a *bodhi* tree and containing a Buddha icon flanked by attendants (fig. 21). Further studies may clarify the exact significance of these two intriguing site-related portrayals.

### Attributes

The third critical aspect in the interpretation of emblems is the recognition that, on occasion, the pillar may represent neither the first sermon of the Buddha nor the site of the first sermon but rather the doctrine that the Buddha enunciated on that

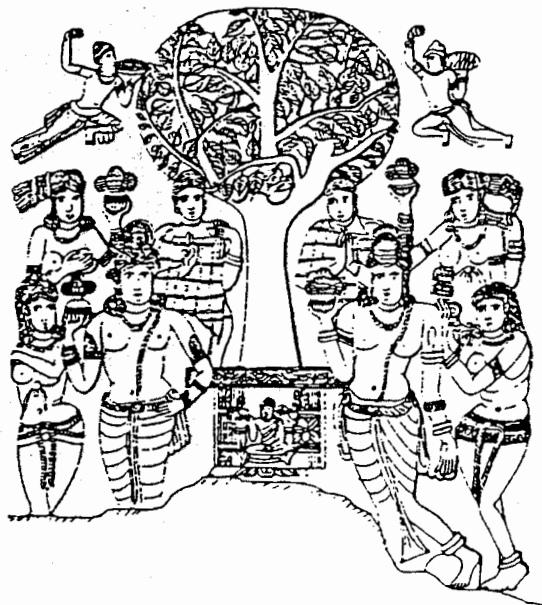


FIG. 21. *Homage to Portable Shrine with Buddha Icon*, Amarāvati. After Burgess, *The Buddhist Stupas of Amarāvati and Jaggayyapeta*

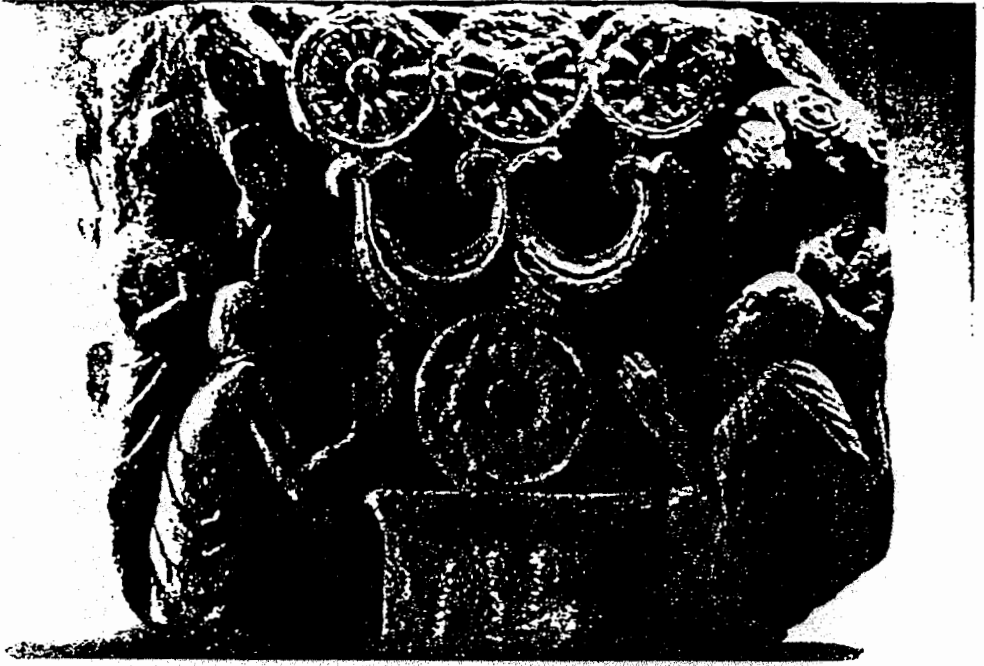


FIG. 22. *Homage to the Triratna, Gandhāra.* Courtesy Peshawar Museum.

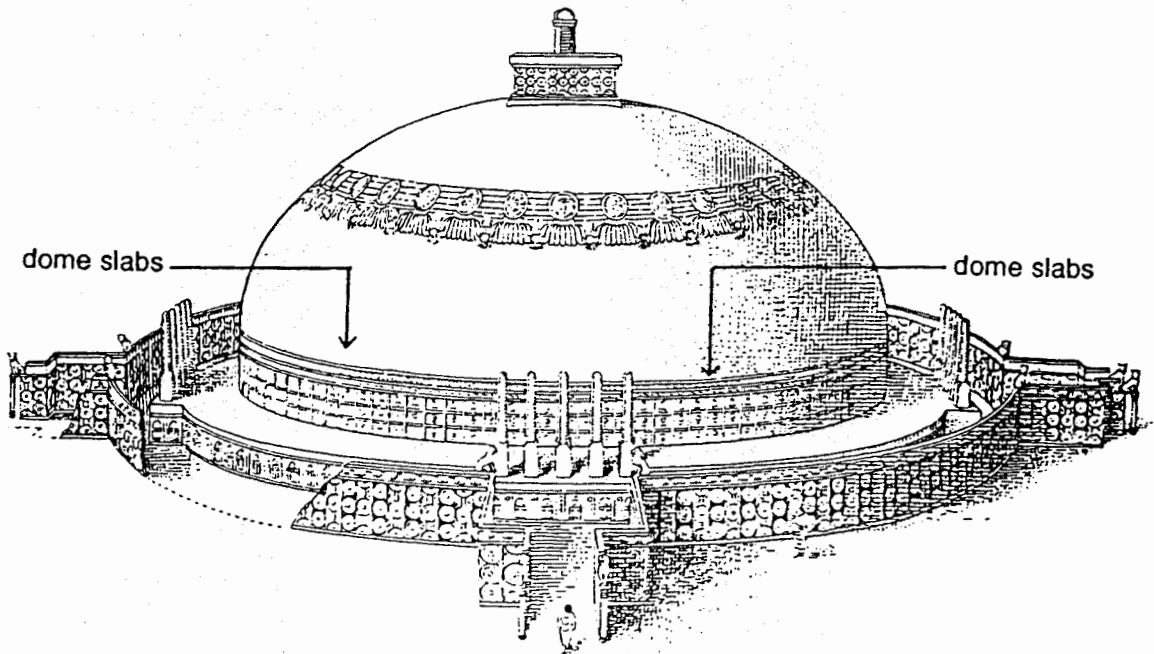


FIG. 23. *Amarāvati stūpa showing location of dome slabs.* After Barrett, *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum*.

momentous occasion. In like manner, the sacred tree and the seat beneath may indicate neither the event of the Buddha's enlightenment nor the site of Bodhi Gaya but the wisdom and supremacy of the Buddha established at that event. Similarly, the *stūpa* may indicate neither the great decease of the Buddha nor a sacred *stūpa* site but rather the Buddha's achievement in finally severing the bonds of rebirth. Not infrequently, the main intention of the artist depicting a pillar, tree, or *stūpa* was to emphasize the Buddhist truth to which it attests. Such seems to have been the case with the emblems carved on the "dies" or blocks between the architraves of the Sānchi toranas, as also on the uprights between architraves. However, due to their capacity for multiple reference, emblems intended to indicate the attributes of the Buddhist faith also serve to remind the viewer of the Buddha himself and of the site with which an attribute is associated.

A number of Gandhāran panels depict the worship of the Buddha's halo, as also of the *triratna* emblem, or three jewels of Buddhism (fig. 22). A declaration of belief in this triple refuge—the Buddha, the *Dhamma* or doctrine, and the *Samgha* or monastic community—is a key expression of commitment to Buddhism. New adherents to the faith would repeat three times their belief in this triple refuge; the formula was chanted repeatedly in Buddhist devotional worship; and Buddhist occasions commenced with its affirmation. The great store placed on declaration of belief in this triple refuge is well exemplified by a tale in the *Divyāvadāna*. A minor god, destined to be born from the womb of a sow, was reborn instead in the Tushita heavens by the mere expedient of following Śakra's advice to repeat: "I go for refuge to the Buddha, the best of men; I go for refuge to the *Dhamma*, the best of the destroyers of desire; I go for refuge to the *Samgha*, the best of orders."<sup>41</sup> Gandhāran panels centering on the halo, or *triratna*, depict neither the worship of the Buddha in aniconic form nor worship at any specific site; rather they represent homage paid to the Buddhist faith itself through adoration of its attributive emblems.

The most impressive use of emblems as attributes is apparent in the decoration of the dome of the Amarāvati *stūpa* (fig. 23). Each of the two hundred and more dome slabs, roughly eleven feet in height and three feet wide, was divided into three registers, and, during the final phase of embellishment of the *stūpa*,<sup>42</sup> their design followed a standard repetitive scheme (fig. 24). The lowest register depicts either a tree sheltering a seat or the Buddha himself seated beneath a tree. The central register usually portrays a wheel upon a pillar, although occasionally the



FIG. 24. Dome slab with attributes, Amarāvati. Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.

image of the preaching Buddha took its place. The upper register invariably portrays a *stūpa*. In each register, the emblem, or the image in characteristic pose that replaced the emblem, is flanked by worshippers. The slabs are completed by a band of running lions and a band of *triratna* emblems.

The precise interpretation of these dome slabs is crucial to an appreciation of the Buddhist message of the site. On this occasion, the tree or the image beneath the tree represents neither the event of the enlightenment nor the site of the event; the wheel or the preaching Buddha represents neither the first sermon nor its site; and the *stūpa* stands neither for the great decease of the Buddha nor for a *stūpa* site. The intention seems to lie in quite another direction. While inextricably connected with the life events of the Buddha and the sites at which these occurred, the dome slabs refer to the attributes suggested by the emblems. They repetitively reiterate the belief in the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha (lowest register), the *Dhamma* or doctrine (central panel), and the *Samgha* or community of monks (top register).<sup>43</sup> For the lay worshippers and the monks circumambulating this large hemispherical monument, the slabs were a visual affirmation of the formula that was upon their lips: "*Buddham śaraṇam gaicchāmi, Dhammam śaraṇam gaicchāmi, samīgham śaraṇam gaicchāmi,*" or "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Doctrine, I take refuge in the Monastic community." For a group of largely illiterate laymen and laywomen who made the pilgrimage to this great *stūpa*, a visual reiteration of the creed was an effective means of religious propagation. The upper row of lions may have been intended as a reference to the Buddha as *śākyasimha*, or "lion of the Śākyas," while the topmost band of *triratnas* serves only to reemphasize the message of the dome slabs.

### Conclusion

While it is true that Foucher, writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, misstated the nature and extent of aniconism, he was certainly accurate in perceiving its existence. No doubt, the general correlation of Hīnayāna with aniconism and Mahāyāna with the anthropomorphic image is false. No doubt, too, early scholars did not perceive that certain reliefs on the early Buddhist monuments depict the devotions performed at sacred sites. However, denying the existence of aniconism is equally invalid.

I argue that an emblem may carry different meanings in varying contexts. The worship of a *bodhi* tree may, in certain circumstances, be interpreted as the enlightenment, and thus a scene in the biography of the Buddha. In other instances it may represent devotions at the site of Bodh Gayā. In yet another context, it merely serves as a reminder of the supreme wisdom of the Buddha. One must accept the multilayered significance of many early bas reliefs and recognize that more than one meaning may have been intended by the artist, as well as read by the ancient beholder. Twentieth-century analytical viewers may find it strange that a scene portraying the enlightenment of the Buddha should include a shrine erected two hundred years after the event. They may also consider it anachronistic that a panel portraying Aśoka's visit to the site of the sacred *bodhi* tree should include a shrine built only after the visit. Yet artists and devotees of the first century B.C. probably viewed such a scene as a perfectly reasonable way to present a reminder of both the sacred site at Bodh Gayā and an event in the life of the Buddha or of King Aśoka.

## Notes

1. See E. H. Johnston, ed., *Aśvaghoṣa's Buddhacarita, or, Acts of the Buddha, in Three Parts* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984 reprint), xciii.
2. Peter Khoroché, ed., *Once the Buddha was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xvii, describes Śūra's constant use of double entendre as the despair of the translator.
3. Alfred Foucher, "The Beginnings of Buddhist Art," in his *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*, trans. L. A. Thomas (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972), 1-29. This essay first appeared as "Les débuts de l'art bouddhique," *Journal Asiatique*, 10th ser., 17 (January-February 1911): 55-79.
4. Susan Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism," *Art Journal* 49 (Winter 1990): 401-7. See also her *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986), esp. 70-73, 98-100. For further understanding of their argument, see also John C. Huntington, "Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism," pts. 1-5, *Orientalism* 16, no. 11 (Nov. 1985): 46-61, 17, no. 2 (Feb. 1986): 28-43, 17, no. 3 (March 1986): 32-46, 17, no. 7 (July 1986): 28-40, 17, no. 9 (Sept. 1986): 46-58. See also his "Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*," pts. 1-2, *Orientalism* 18, no. 4 (April 1987): 55-63, 18, no. 8 (August 1987): 56-68. Though Susan Huntington asks that critics await her forthcoming book, we have considered it necessary to address their arguments because these have been presented in a volume (not just in specialized journals) that has entered the textbook repertoire as early as 1985.
5. W. Geddie, ed., *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh and London, 1959); the negative connotation sometimes associated with the word is absent here. However, *The Random House Dictionary* speaks of "opposition to the use of idols," and the Webster of "a primitive form of worship."
6. S. Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art," 405: "Essentially, I suggest that the early Buddhist art of India was not primarily concerned with the biography of Śakyāmuni Buddha, as has been assumed for so many decades."
7. Those interested in my classification of narration may refer to Vidya Dehejia, "On Modes of Narration in Early Buddhist Art," *Art Bulletin* 72 (September 1990): 374-92.
8. John Huntington's caption to this panel reads: "Relief depicting the temple of the First Sermon," which suggests the site of Sārnāth. See his "Sowing the Seeds," pt. 2, 34.
9. Since early Buddhist inscriptions are so easily readable, I have used my own translations to avoid burdening the text unduly with footnotes. In the single instance where variant readings are possible, a note has been added.
10. Sten Konow, ed., "Kharoṣṭhi Inscriptions, with the Exception of Those of Aśoka," *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1929), 99.
11. Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns, and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49, no. 1/2 (1989): 153-68.
12. The terms "Hīnayāna" and "Mahāyāna" are being used, somewhat loosely, for convenience of reference.
13. John S. Strong's statement in *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokavādaṇa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 34, that, according to Tāranātha, the poet Māṛceṣa rewrote his hymns in praise of the Buddha in the form of dramatic performances to be staged by troupes of actors is misleading. Tāranātha merely states that Māṛceṣa's *ślotras*, or hymns of praise, were recited even by singers, dancers, and jesters; there is no suggestion of dramatic performances and enactment of plays. See Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya, trans., *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970), 134. A detailed search through Buddhist texts for any evidence of pageants uncovered just one instance—in a tale titled "The Overreached Actor" from Anton Schiefner's *Tibetan Tales, Derived from Indian Sources* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1882), which is an English version of selected stories from the Tibetan translation of the original Sanskrit *Mūlasarvastivādin Vinaya*. According to the tale, an actor, having acquired the facts of the Buddha's life up to the enlightenment, pitched a booth at Rājagriha and sounded a drum. When a great crowd gathered, he exhibited in a drama the events from the life of the Buddha (p. 244). The tale adds that he made a good profit from this venture. This is intriguing information but certainly not the same as a regular tradition of reenactment of significant events from the Buddha's life.
14. S. Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, 99. John Huntington's suggestion ("Sowing the Seeds," pt. 4, 30) that the monkey's offering of a bowl of honey at Vaiśālī (west pillar of north gateway at Sānchi) "may be a reenactment of the event at the site before a group of pilgrims" is even more problematic.
15. N. G. Majumdar, "The Bajaur Casket of the Reign of Menander," *Epigraphia Indica* 24 (1932): 1-7; See also *Epigraphia Indica* 26 (1942): 318-22; *Epigraphia Indica* 27 (1947): 52-58.
16. Gregory Schopen, "On the Buddha and his Bones: The Conception of a Relic in the Inscriptions from Nāgarjunikoṇḍa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 4 (1988): 527-37.
17. See n. 6 above.
18. Evidence for this distribution will be found in my forthcoming full-length study of Buddhist visual narratives.
19. The canonical "Śamanaphala Sutta" of the *Dīgha Nikaya*, which narrates this story at length, specifies that the incident occurred on the night of a full moon. See Maurice Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (London: Wisdom, 1987), 91-110.
20. My interpretation is at variance with H. Luders, *Bhārhut Inscriptions, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963),

- 95, who reads the phrase as "the building around the Bodhi tree of the holy Sakamuni." Much as I respect Luders, there is no word in the inscription that could be read as "building." R. C. Childers, *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (1875; reprint, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1979), 93, col. 2, specifies, "BODHO, Knowledge, wisdom, intelligence; supreme knowledge, Buddhahship." The tree is not included under BODHO. Admittedly, Childers (93, col. 2) gives three meanings for BODHI: the knowledge possessed by a Buddha, *arhat*, etc. (as in BODHO); a Bodhi tree; a precept. It is worth noting that each of the inscribed medallions at Bhārhut that depicts the worship of the tree of one of the previous Buddhas (five such medallions survive) uses the term *bodhi*, while in the case of the Buddha Vessabha, the label specifies *bodhi jāla*, or the *jāla* tree (of enlightenment).
21. See K. Dessigane, P. Z. Pattabhiraman, and J. Filliozat, *La Légende de jeux de Civa à Madurai* (Pondicherry: Institut Français d'Indologie, 1960), vol. 2, pl. 34.
  22. The *Lalitavistara* places Māra at the scene and immediately thereafter speaks of the arrival of the Suddhāvāsa gods. See Rajendralala Mitra, *The Lalitavistara* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1877), 457 (end of ch. 22 and beginning of ch. 23).
  23. Mitra, *Lalitavistara*, 451 (ch. 22).
  24. The exact week varies in different textual accounts.
  25. S. Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art," 402, where she italicizes the two words to emphasize their importance.
  26. Susan Huntington has bypassed the problem of the footprints in the Sānkissa depiction at Bhārhut, both in her *Art of Ancient India*, 72f., and in her more recent article "Early Buddhist Art," 404.
  27. The Bhārhut panel avoids the human form even for the gods Indra and Brahmā. Such an avoidance is to be seen in the context of Hindu worship which, in the Vedic period, was concerned only with sacrifice and in which images of the gods played no part. Few early images of Hindu deities exist. It was mainly with the spread of Purāṇic Hinduism that images of the Hindu gods proliferated. This fact has been largely lost sight of, particularly with the nineteenth-century projection of Hindu India as a polytheistic country whose multitudes of gods had multiple heads and hands!
  28. J. Huntington, "Pilgrimage as Image," pt. 1, 56.
  29. J. Huntington, "Pilgrimage as Image," pt. 1, 56.
  30. T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Buddhist Suttas* (London: Dover, 1969), 90.
  31. Strong, *Legend of King Asoka*, 245.
  32. Strong, *Legend of King Asoka*, 249.
  33. The point is well made by Strong, *Legend of King Asoka*, 120-22.
  34. Strong, *Legend of King Asoka*, 266.
  35. John Huntington's suggestion that this is the Vaiśālī *stūpa*s based on the premise that since the monkey incident on the same pillar occurred at Vaiśālī, all other incidents refer to the same site. See his "Sowing the Seeds," pt. 4, 29-31. Such a premise, as I shall show in my book-length study, is unjustified: frequently, the Sānchi pillars group together incidents that have no geographical or temporal connection with one another.
  36. Davids, *Buddhist Suttas*, 91.
  37. The *śrīṣṭhā* theory states that the emphasis on sacred pilgrimage to sites never waned. One has to ask, then, why representations of the lay worship of trees, pillars, and *stūpa*s do not occur at Gandhāra or Ajanṭā or on Gupta monuments. Would not the absence of such emblematic depictions, after the period of the sites of Bhārhut, Sānchi, and Amarāvati, indicate that emphasis on devotions at sacred sites faded into insignificance, as did the "exaltation of lay worship"? It is perhaps pertinent to quote here S. Huntington's "Early Buddhist Art," 408, n. 45, in which she takes a less rigid stand on aniconism: "At this time, I am unable to predict whether there are indeed some images that require a Buddha figure and must be seen as truly 'aniconic' in the sense that they employ a symbol as a substitute for what should be an anthropomorphic representation. However, even if a few images are truly aniconic, the vast majority are not, and the role of 'aniconism' has been vastly overemphasized, ultimately leading to the misinterpretation of most of the extant art."
  38. Schopen, "On the Buddha and His Bones," 527-37, and his "On Monks, Nuns," 153-68.
  39. U. P. Shah, *Studies in Jaina Art* (Banares: Jaina Cultural Research Society, 1955), 68.
  40. Shah, *Studies in Jaina Art*, 67.
  41. James R. Ware, "Studies in the Divyāvadāna," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 48 (1928): 159-65. The tale is titled "Śūkarikāvadāna."
  42. While the three registers of dome slabs belonging to earlier work at the site are decorated with a range of themes, including the *chakravartin*, the great departure, Rāmagrāma, the enlightenment, and certain unidentified scenes, all later slabs conform to the scheme described.
  43. I. K. Sarma (verbal communication), who seems to agree with such an interpretation, informs me that dome slabs recently unearthed at the site reveal the letters *bo* and *dha*, for "bodhi tree" and "dhammachakra," presumably inscribed as shorthand notations for sculptors' information. As he rightly pointed out, Gaṇapati Śhapatī, who is in charge of the Sculpture School at Mahabalipuram, similarly writes *Nata* and *Vi* upon slabs of stone for "Natarāja" and "Vāṇan." Why should the *stūpa* stand for the Saṃgha? I suggest it was because the relic mound was indeed the center of the monastery and the very *raison d'être* for the formation of the monastic community that congregated around a *stūpa*.