



The Role of Sculptures on *Stūpas*, by [Wannaporn Rienjang](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

If you are citing this introductory essay, please incorporate key information about the source, date, and authorship, such as the following:

W. Rienjang, 'The Role of Sculptures on *Stūpas*', Gandhara Connections website, <<http://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/GandharaConnections/otherResources.htm>>, last accessed xx/xx/20xx.

The Role of Sculptures on *Stūpas*

The meaning of the word, 'stūpa', is still debated. Some argue that it is derived from the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{stūp}$, meaning 'to heap up, pile, erect' (Trainor 1997: 36), while others suggest its origin from another Sanskrit root \sqrt{stu} , which means 'to be clotted, or conglomerated, to trickle' (Turner 1966: 790), or 'to praise, laud, eulogize, extol' (Sivaramamurti 1942: 17). It is, however, generally accepted that the word *stūpa* is used to describe a mound or dome, which can be topped by a parasol, and/or surrounded by a railed pathway. This form of mound or dome is not exclusively Buddhist, but also exists in Jain and Brahmanical contexts (Irwin 1979; Flügel 2010a). The meaning of Buddhist *stūpas* therefore cannot avoid associations with contemporary religions, and the term has also evolved differently in different periods and places (Fussman 1986).

One of the main theories regarding the symbolism of *stūpas* involves the Vedic cosmogonic myth. Major scholars of this theory are A.M. Hocart (1924), P. Mus (1935), N. Brown (1942), and J. Irwin (1979; 1980). The theory is perhaps best summarised by Irwin (1979), who explained the meanings of the main components of *stūpas*, i.e. the pole (*yūpa*, *yaṣṭi*), the dome (*aṅḍa*), the pathway for circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa-patha*), the square railing (*harmikā*) and the parasol (*chatra*), and relates them to the creation of the universe. While acknowledging the Vedic significance, scholars such as A. Snodgrass (1985), however, also relate the Vedic components of *stūpas* to specifically Buddhist contexts. For Snodgrass, the *stūpa* dome (*aṅḍa*) is perceived as the ordered world demarcated from the chaotic, providing a serene arena wherein meditation can be practised. The square railing (*harmikā*) marks the area of the Bodhi tree as well as the Buddha throne, and the parasol (*chatra*) symbolises

kingship, simultaneously representing the Buddha as *cakravartin*, the universal king (Snodgrass 1985).

The primary function of Buddhist *stūpas* was to enshrine the relics, remains of the cremated body, of the Buddha (*DN* ii.166-167). For this reason, *stūpas* can serve as memorials or reminders of the ‘historical’ Buddha. J. Shaw (2009: 128) draws attention to the Indic term *dassana* or ‘seeing’. She notes that the notion of ‘seeing’ (*dassana*) does not simply mean to see or to visit but also means to worship. She also points out that according to the Indian faiths ‘seeing’ venerated objects results in spiritual merit and blessings (Shaw 2000; 2009; Eck 1981). In connection to this, it may be said that upon seeing the *stūpa*, people ‘worship’ the Buddha and his Dharma, inducing in them a good thought (*kusala-citta*), which in turn produces good karma (Fussman 1986; Lamotte 1958). The notion of ‘seeing’ in combination with the idea of *stūpas* serving as receptacles of the Buddha relics can be extended to the theory that *stūpas* themselves are living entities. This is suggested by epigraphic evidence, written in Kharoṣṭhī, which mentions the relics of the Buddha as ‘endowed with life’ (*praṇasame[da]*) (Baums 2012: 202-3) and spatial arrangements of main *stūpas* in Buddhist establishments in Gandhāra and India, whereby the main *stūpa* is generally situated in the central spot or in the place easily visible as if to provide surveillance and protections of the relics housed in them (Schopen 1997; Shaw 1999, 2000, 2009).

However, it is important to bear in mind that not all monuments that share conceptual and/or morphological similarities with the Buddhist *stūpas* are to be identified as Buddhist. Although Jaina *stūpas* from early period may have not survived until today (Bruhn 1993: 54), there is clear evidence of bone relic *stūpas* and relic veneration in contemporary Jainism in India (Flügel 2010a; 2010b). For this reason, sculptures may play an important role in distinguishing Buddhist *stūpas* from monuments of other religious traditions.

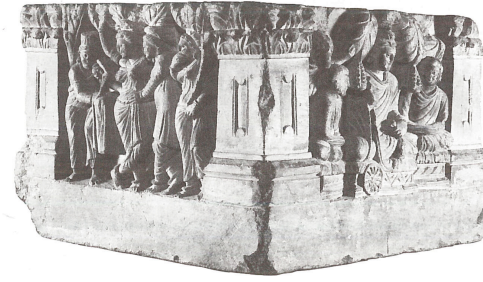


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the Main Stupa of Saidu Sharif I. Photo © Ian Haynes (based on reconstruction by Faccenna 1995)

As in India, sculptures that adorned Buddhist *stūpas* in Gandhāra are both narrative and non-narrative in nature. Narrative sculptures are generally carved in relief panels, and often occupy the space on the drum of the main *stūpa* (Fig. 1). They also occasionally appear on the *harmikā* and the false gable that adorn the *stūpa* dome (Figs. 2 a, b & 3 a, b). Scenes forming narrative panels on the *stūpa* drum include life stories of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni and his past lives or *jātakas*. Those adorning the *harmikā* usually include a set of four key events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and *parinirvāṇa* (Figs. 2 a, b). In Gandhāra, *jātaka* scenes depicted in sculptures constitute a repertoire of approximately sixteen subjects, although future research may increase that number. The most popular of these is the Dipankara *jātaka*, while the Śyama and Viśvantara *jātakas* are also depicted on a number of Gandhāran sculptures (Jongeward, forthcoming). Other than *jātakas*, narrative scenes include legendary episodes in the life of the Buddha such as his performing of the miracle at Śrāvastī, his descending from Trāyastriṃśa heaven, and his visit at Indra Śāla cave. All these scenes testify to the Buddhist nature of the *stūpas* adorned by such sculptures.



a



b

Figs. 2. a-b Narrative scenes from a *harmikā*: (a) the birth of the Buddha and (b) the first sermon (shown on the right). (After Zwalf 1996, figs. 145 and 200)

Non-narrative sculptures are also found adorning *stūpa* drums, as well as on other parts of *stūpas* including their bases. Note that they can be in the form of relief panels and images attached to *stūpas*, which are different from devotional icons usually found inside shrines. Non-narrative sculptures on *stūpas* usually depict the Buddha and bodhisattavas in meditation, and sometimes deities whose origins are not Buddhist but later became incorporated into Buddhist iconography such as Pañcika and Hārītī (e.g. Hargreaves 1914: pl.XXII.b). Non-narrative sculptures also appear on stair-risers and their side panels, which may include more ‘mundane’ scenes such as drinking and dancing as well as non-Buddhist deities like sea monsters (Behrendt 2007: 27-29).



a



b

Fig. 3 a-b:

(a) Miniature *stūpa*, after restoration, from Loriyan Tangai. Photo © British Library online item no. 10031036; Photo 1003/(1036).

(b) False gable from Sanghao showing, from top, the Buddha's descent from Trāyatrimśa, the adoration of the Buddha's turban, and the adoration of the Buddha (Bhattacharyya 2002: fig. 339)

As most narrative sculptures apparently were originally placed on *stūpa* drums particularly of the main *stūpas*, they must have been visible from afar, and 'seen' during the circumambulation. The worshippers who took part of this ritual (and who did to look at sculptures) experienced the stories depicted as they walked clockwise around the *stūpa*. The reconstruction of the main frieze of the Main Stupa of Saidu Sharif in Swat by Faccenna (2003: 343, fig. 44), for example, suggests that the clockwise arrangement begins with the birth scenes, followed by life in the palace of Siddhartha, then his paths towards enlightenment, his teaching activities, and his *parinirvāṇa*.

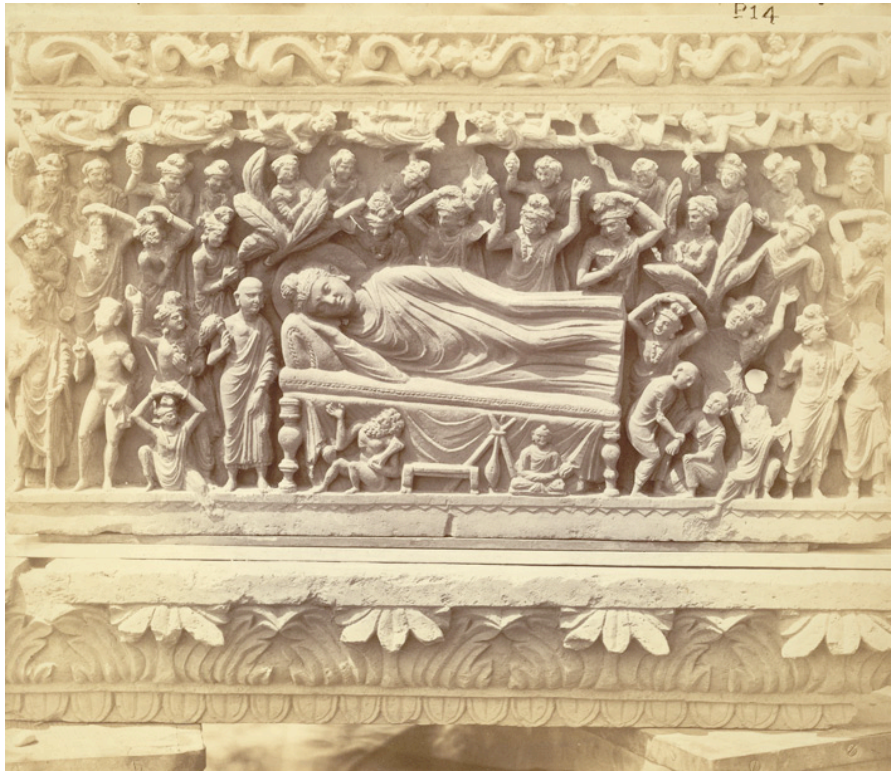


Fig. 4 Relief panel from Loritan Tangai depicting the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*.

Photo © British Library online item no. 10031059; Photo 1003/(1059).

While such depictions show memorable episodes in the life of the Buddha Sakyamuni, they may as well have been used to communicate the authenticity of the relics enshrined within. In this way, the 'biography' of the Buddha, depicted on sculptures, re-enforces his historical existence and living presence at the place where the stupa is located. The *parinirvāṇa* scene (Fig. 4), in particular, is a good example to show that the Buddha once lived and went through a biological death. Likewise, as Behrendt notes (2007: 42) non-narrative sculptures can also 'glorify' or give a 'manifest form to the radiating power of the enshrined relics at the stupa core'. Gandhāra, which the Buddha may have not visited during his biological life, was afforded the Buddha's presence through relics, whose identity and authenticity could be communicated by sculptures adorning monuments in which they were housed.

Schopen (2004) also argues that 'art and beauty' in Buddhist establishments, particularly those in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, could play important role in attracting gifts and donations. Such art and beauty included paintings and sculptures as well as the setting of monasteries in beautiful, sometimes, picturesque areas. He draws an attention to the term *prasanna* used in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-*

vinaya, a Buddhist monastic code preserved in Sanskrit and Tibetan most likely compiled during the turn of the Common Era in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. According to Schopen (2004: 32, 36-7), *prasanna* denotes ‘an emotional state or aesthetic reaction’, and art and beauty, in a Buddhist monastery, could ‘captivate the eye and the heart’ of those who are affected:

The text in question is so straightforward as to be startling. In it ‘some merchants from the Northern Road’ were travelling... they saw *vihāras* that had high arched gateways, were ornamented with windows, latticed windows, and railings, *vihāras* that captivated the eye and the heart and were the stairways to heaven, and they were deeply affected (*dad par gyur te, prasanna*). They went to a *vihāra* and said to the monks, ‘Noble Ones, we would make an offering feast (*mchod ston*) for the Community!’ (Schopen 2004: 32).

In the case of Gandhāra, such beauty must have included sculptures, some of which were found *in situ* at excavations (Fig. 5). Although there are only five inscribed Gandhāran sculptures, their inscriptions say that these sculptures were objects of gifts and donations, and that they came from monastic and lay communities (Rhi 2018). Of course, through sculptures these donors can hope to gain merit, as the inscription on one of sculptures states that through the act of donating sculptures, the donors wished to attain nirvāṇa (Salomon 2007: 283; cf. CKI 256). However, if Schopen is right, they must also have attracted further donations. Sculptures on Buddhist *stūpas* are therefore not merely objects of art, but may also have played important roles amongst which were the need to communicate messages about identity and authenticity, to glorify the Buddha, to be media for merit-making, as well as to attract more donations. These may help to explain the large corpus of Gandhāran sculptures available for study today.



Fig. 5 *In situ* sculptures at a *stūpa* base of Pipala, Taxila (Marshall 1951: pl. 99.c)

Abbreviations

- CKI* *Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions*, by S. Baums & A. Glass.
http://www.gandhari.org/a_inscriptions.php
- DN* *Digha Nikaya*, Rhys Davids and Estlin Carpenter, 1889-1910.
- S* *Samyutta-Nikaya*. Rhys Davids and Woodward, 1917.

References

- Bhattacharyya, D. C. (ed.) *Gandhāra Sculpture in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh*. Chandigarh.
- Baums, S. 2012. Catalog and Revised Texts and Translations of Gandharan Reliquary Inscriptions. In : D. Jongward, E. Errington, R. Salomon and S. Baums, *Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries*. Seattle, 200-252.
- Behrendt, K. 2007. *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York.
- Bénisti, M. 1960. Etude sur le stūpa dans l'Inde ancien. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 50, 37-116.
- Brown, N. 1942. The Creation Myth of the Rig-Veda. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62, 85-98.
- Bruhn, K. 1993. The Study of Jaina Art. In: R. Smet and K. Watanabe (eds.) *Jaina Studies in Honour of Jozef Deleu*. Tokyo, 53-66.
- Eck, D. 1981. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Chambersberg: Anima Books
- Faccenna, D. 1995. *Saidu Sharif I (Swat, Pakistan). The Buddhist Sacred Area: the Stupa Terrace*. Rome.
- Faccenna, D. 2003. The Frieze on the Main Stupa of Saidu Sharif I. *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 9/10, 319-349.
- Falk, N. 1977. To Gaze on the Sacred Traces. *History of Religions* 16, 281-293.
- Flügel, P. 2010a. The Jaina cult of relic stūpas. *Numen*, 57/3, 389-504.
- Flügel, P. 2010b. New Developments in Aniconic Jaina Iconography. *Centre of Jaina Studies Newsletters*, 5, 24-28.
- Fussman, G. 1986. Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa. *Journal of the International*

- Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, 37-53.
- Hargreaves, H. 1914. Excavations at Takht-i-Bāhī. *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1910-11*, Calcutta, 33-9.
- Hocart, A.M. 1924. The Origin of the Stūpa. *Ceylon Journal of Science* I 1.
- Irwin, J. 1979. The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis: The Archaeological Evidence. In: M. Taddei (ed.) *South Asian Archaeology 1977*. Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 799-846.
- Irwin, J. 1980. The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa: An Exegesis. In: A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.) *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*. Weisbaden: Steiner.
- Jongeward, D. Forthcoming. *Survey of Gandharan Jatakas*.
- Lamotte, E. 1958. *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*. Louvain: Institut Orientaliste
- Marshall, J. 1951. *Taxila*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mus, P. 1935. *Esquisse d'une histoire du Bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes*. Hanoi.
- Rhi, J. 2018. Positioning Gandhāran Buddhas in Chronology: Significant Coordinates and Anomalies. In: W. Rienjang and P. Stewart (eds) *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art*. Oxford, 35-52.
- Rhys Davids, T.W., and Estlin, C. J. (eds.) 1889-1910. *The Digha Nikaya*. 3 vols. London.
- Rhys Davids, C.F. and Woodward, F.L. (eds.) 1917. *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Samyutta-Nikaya)*. 5 vols. London.
- Roth, G. 1980. Symbolism of the Buddhist stūpa. In: A.L. Dallapiccola (ed.) *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*. Weisbaden: Steiner.
- Salomon, R. 2007. Dynastic and Institutional Connections in the Pre-and Early Kuṣāṇa Period: New Manuscript and Epigraphic Evidence. In: D. M. Srinivasan (ed.) *On the Cusp of an Era: Art in the Pre-Kuṣāṇa World*. Leiden, 267-86.
- Schopen, G. 1997. Burial *Ad Sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: a Study in the Archaeology of Religions. In: G. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 114-147.

- Schopen, G. 2004. Art, Beauty and the Business of Running a Buddhist Monastery in Early Northwest India. In: G. Schopen. *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, 19-44.
- Shaw, J. 1999. Buddhist Landscapes and Monastic Planning in Eastern Malwa: The Elements of Intervisibility, Surveillance and the Protection of Relics. In: T. Insoll, (ed.), *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion: the proceedings of the Cambridge conference*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 5-17.
- Shaw, J. 2000. The Sacred Landscape. In: M. Willis, with contributions by J. Cribb and J. Shaw. *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*. London: British Museum Press, 27-38.
- Shaw, J. 2009. Stūpas, Monasteries, and Relics in the Landscape. Typological, Spatial, and Temporal Patterns in the Sanchi Area. In: A. Shimada and J. Hawkes (eds.) *Buddhist stūpas in South Asia: Recent Archaeological, Art-Historical, and Historical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 114-145.
- Shaw, J. 2015. Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Mortuary Traditions in Ancient India: Stupas, Relics and the Archaeological Landscape. In: C. Renfrew, M. Boyd, & L. Morley (eds.) *Death Rituals and Social Order in the Ancient World: Death Shall Have No Dominion*. Cambridge, 382-403.
- Sivaramamurti, M. 1942. Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum. *Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum*.
- Snodgrass, A. 1985. *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*. New York.
- Trainor, K. 1997. *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, R.L. 1966. *Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Willis, M. 2000. Relics and Reliquaries. In: M. Willis, with contributions by J. Cribb and J. Shaw. *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*. London: British Museum Press, 12-26.
- Zwalf, V. 1996. *A Catalogue of Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*. London.

