



Picture Showmen

Insights into the
Narrative Tradition
in Indian Art

Edited by Jyotindra Jain

9 publications

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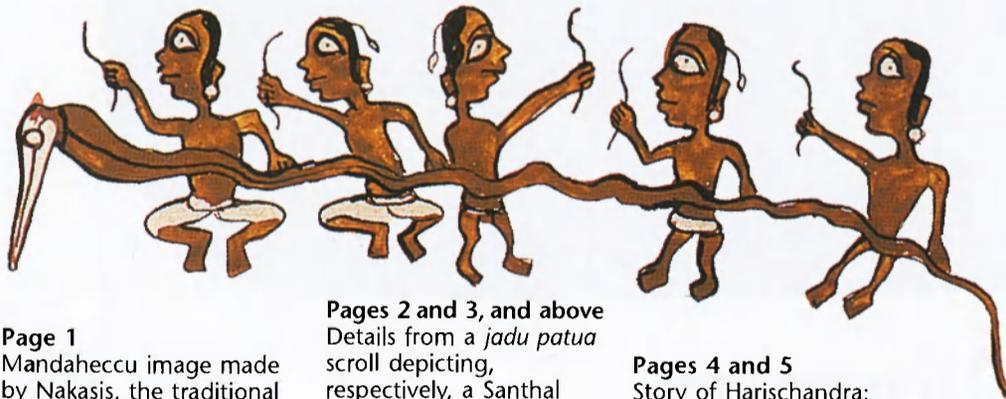
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Page 1
Mandaheccu image made by Nakasis, the traditional artists of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh. Mid-twentieth century. Sawdust core covered with cloth and pigment painted. Private collection, New Delhi.
Photograph: Jutta Jain-Neubauer.

Pages 2 and 3, and above
Details from a *jadu patua* scroll depicting, respectively, a Santhal tribal dance and the Santhal myth of creation. West Bengal or Bihar, early twentieth century. Water-based colours on paper. Private collection, New Delhi.
Photographs: Jutta Jain-Neubauer.

Pages 4 and 5
Story of Harischandra: Visvamitra ascends to heaven and entreats the sun and the moon to torture Harischandra. Paithan, Maharashtra, mid-nineteenth century. Private collection.
Photograph: Anna L. Dallapiccola.

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ambulating arhut Stupa: ewers' ive Experience

Vidya Dehejia

The Buddhist monastery of Bharhut is located in the central Indian region of Malwa, along the trade route connecting the ports of the west coast to the eastern metropolis of Pataliputra. Around the year 100 BC, Bharhut was bustling with activity as work neared completion on a richly embellished railing enclosing the sacred stupa (figure 1). Narratives from the historic life of the Buddha as Prince Siddhartha formed one of the main themes, while second in popularity were the Jataka tales of the Buddha's previous 549 lives in a variety of human and animal forms.

Bharhut's location made it easy of access for all manner of visitors. Individual donors, men and women, from towns as distant as Karhad in southern Maharashtra and Patna in the east, donated money for the creation of carved pillars, crossbars, and coping lengths. Monks and nuns too were generous with their contributions. Bharhut was one of the first stupas to abandon wooden construction in favour of a stone railing that would stand the test of time, and as such it probably attracted large numbers of visitors. This exciting new venture intrigued the ruling Sunga monarch Dhanabhuti who announced that he would dedicate four elegant *toranas* to stand at the railing's four entrance-ways.

Buddhist pilgrims visited a stupa mainly to experience the unseen presence of the Buddha through proximity to his relics enshrined deep within the mound. Inscriptions indicate the ancient belief that the living presence of the Buddha was contained in the relics. Ritual activity at a stupa involved the rite of circumambulation and, in the course of repeated circlings, devotees would have the opportunity to view, "read", and contemplate the many narratives carved along the enclosing railing. These narratives enriched the pilgrims' experience by enabling them to relive the events of the Buddha's historic and prior lives.

The exterior face of the railing, viewed by devotees as they circled the stupa from outside the sacred enclosure, carried only decorative motifs. The Buddhist narrative message of the site was contained along the inner face of the railing and on the L-shaped returns at the four entrances. It seems likely that the first-time visitor to Bharhut was taken around the stupa by a monk who acted as a spiritual guide. After all, is that not our experience even today when we visit Puri, Hardwar, or Varanasi? While the Buddhist pilgrim would have been familiar with the Buddha's life story and the



1
The Bharhut railing as
reconstructed within the
Indian Museum,
Calcutta.
Photograph courtesy
Archaeological Survey of
India.



important Jatakas, he or she would not have deciphered too many narratives without a mentor's guidance.

Visitors would have been conducted via the eastern entrance where the railing's "first pillar" is located. Donated by Chapadevi, a woman belonging to the town of Vidisha some 200 miles away, the first pillar (so named in its inscription) portrays a relic procession, perhaps the very procession held in honour of Bharhut's relic. Its end face depicts a rider on an elephant holding a relic casket, while its inner face portrays a horse and rider with an eagle banner (figure 2).

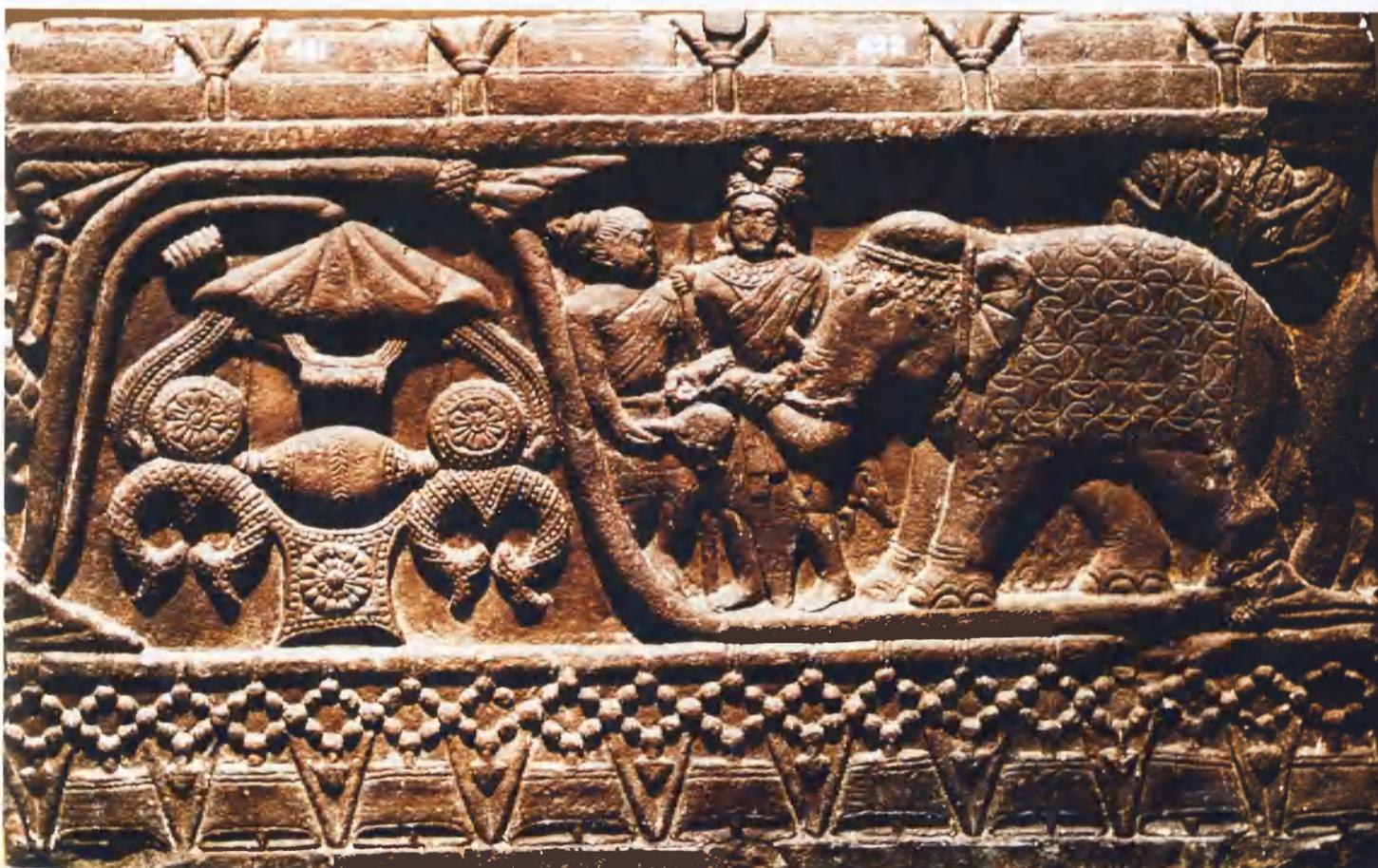
Narratives were presented to Bharhut pilgrims in a variety of different modes, some of which were simple in structure and easy to unravel, while others were more intricate and would have required interpretation. Most popular was monoscenic narrative in which a single, easily identifiable scene was presented to stimulate recognition of the story. To portray the story of prince Vessantara, the artist sculpted the single scene of the donation of the auspicious state elephant which resulted in Vessantara's banishment by his father. The panel presents just three figures — the elephant, the brahmin who receives the gift, and Vessantara pouring water to ratify the gift (figure 3). Having stimulated viewers into identifying the tale, the artist leaves them to narrate the story to themselves; with the mentor's

prompting they would recognize the importance of charity, the most valued of the ten Buddhist virtues (*paramitas*).

A second typical example of monoscenic narrative is the Kukkuta Jataka tale of a she-cat who tried unsuccessfully to induce a cock to become her mate, with the intention of devouring him. The artist merely depicted the two characteristic animals, the one at the foot of a tree and the other perched upon it, as sufficiently distinctive to stimulate recognition of the story (figure 4). Viewers must narrate the entire tale to themselves, and then contemplate its moral — the danger of succumbing to sensual desires. The Bharhut railing contains numerous examples of monoscenic narratives which viewers familiar with Buddhist legends would have been able to "read" for themselves.

Second in popularity with the artists was the more complex mode of synoptic narration in which multiple episodes from a story are depicted within a single frame, and the figure of the protagonist is repeated from one scene to the next. However, the temporal sequence of events is not communicated, and there is no consistent or formal order of presentation with regard to either causality or temporality. Devotees are likely to have been grateful for the mentor's guidance in deciphering synoptic narratives such as the Jataka tale of a crab and a brahmin (figure 5). To the rear of

3
Vessantara Jataka.
Monoscenic narrative.
Photograph:
Vidya Dehejia.

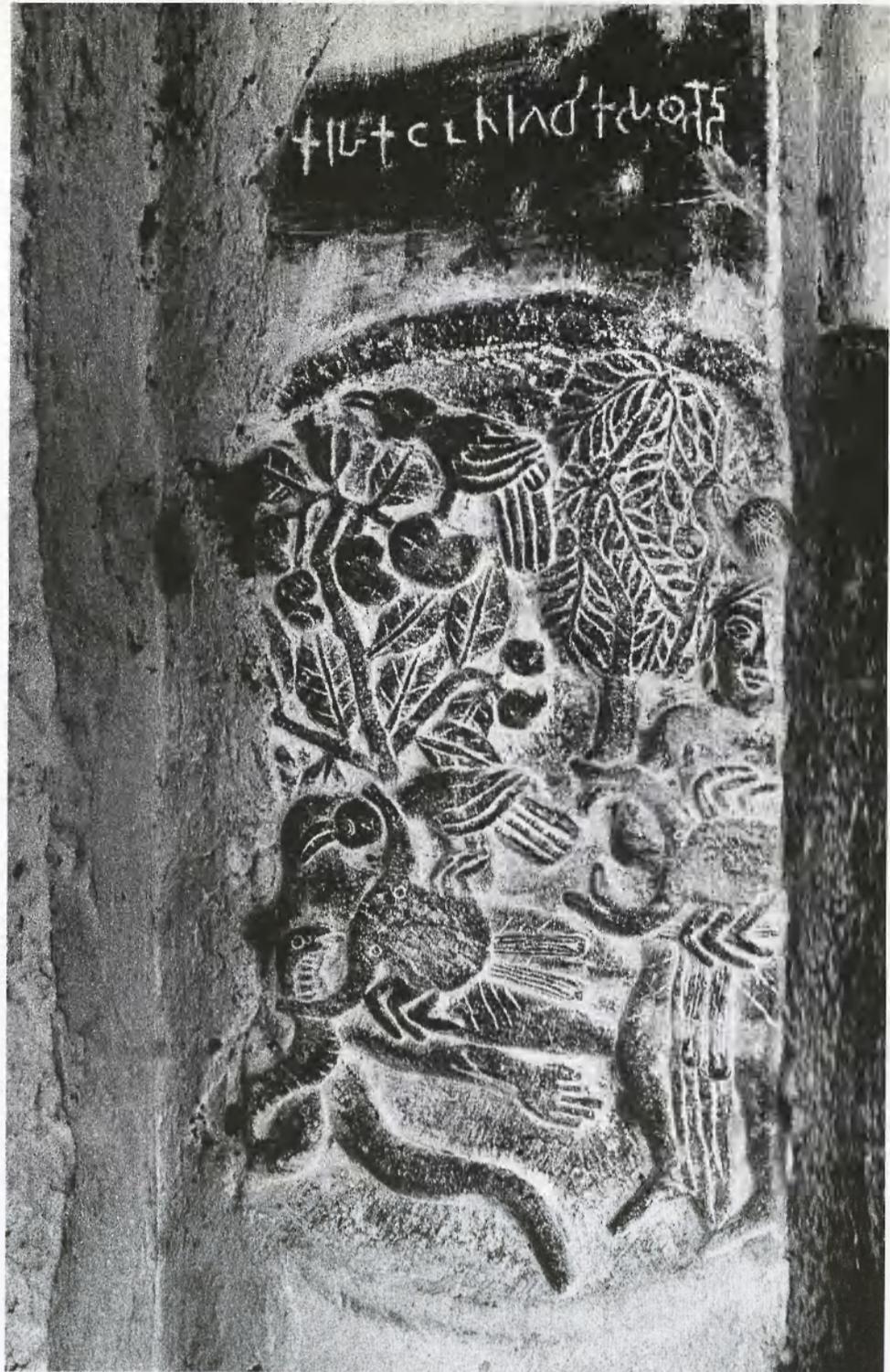




the medallion are two crows in a mango tree; the mentor's prompting apprises viewers that the female crow asked her mate to procure the eye of a young brahmin since she had a compelling desire to consume it. Immediately below, the brahmin lies prostrate on the ground; upon him rests a crab with one set of claws gripping a snake and the other set around the neck of a crow. The mentor must here supply several missing elements, starting with the intervening incident in which the crow persuaded his friend, a snake, to bite the brahmin so that he could procure the eye. The mentor must emphasize the extraordinary friendship between brahmin and crab which caused the crab to come immediately to the rescue of the stricken young man. He must also explain that the crab forced the snake to withdraw its poison before killing both snake and crow. Only then will viewers comprehend the moral of the tale which revolves around the theme of friendship. The right half of the medallion supplies the happy ending by depicting the brahmin, quite recovered, with the crab happily clinging to him. It is possible that the irregular pattern of staging that would confuse the uninitiated, may have created interest for knowledgeable Buddhist ecclesiastic viewers, adding spice and enjoyment to their viewing!

Synoptic narrative was used in a variety of tales including Serpent King Erapata's search for the Buddha, which unravels in three episodes on an entrance pillar. To the rear of the panel, Erapata in purely reptile form emerges from the waters of a river with his daughter standing upon his hood. Beside them, also half submerged, is the young brahmin eager to marry the daughter, who procures from the Buddha the answer to Erapata's question. The mentor may have reminded the viewer that this was Erapata's way of discovering the whereabouts of the Buddha at whose feet he wished to seek refuge. In the right foreground, Erapata emerges from the waters accompanied by his two queens, to go in search of the Buddha. The final episode occupies the left third of the panel, and portrays Erapata, with hands joined in adoration, kneeling beside the Buddha whose presence is indicated by a seat beneath a garlanded tree (figure 6). (At Bharhut the Buddha was never represented in anthropomorphic form.)

A static mode of monoscenic narration was regularly used at Bharhut to present scenes from the Buddha's life when the supremacy of the Buddha was the prime concern. The single, culminating episode of a story was presented with a focus on the wisdom and



presence of the Buddha. The Sravasti miracle, in which the Buddha caused a full-grown mango tree to emerge instantly from a mango seed, is presented in the static mode (figure 7). The Buddha's presence is indicated by a series of signs — a seat beneath a tree, footprints, and a regal parasol. The artist was not interested in the sequence of events that led up to the miracle. Rather, he presented the state after the miracle when the mango tree had already sprung up and the Buddha was surrounded by worshippers offering him homage. By using the static mode, the artist sought to emphasize the pre-eminence and power of the Buddha at the expense of narrativity.

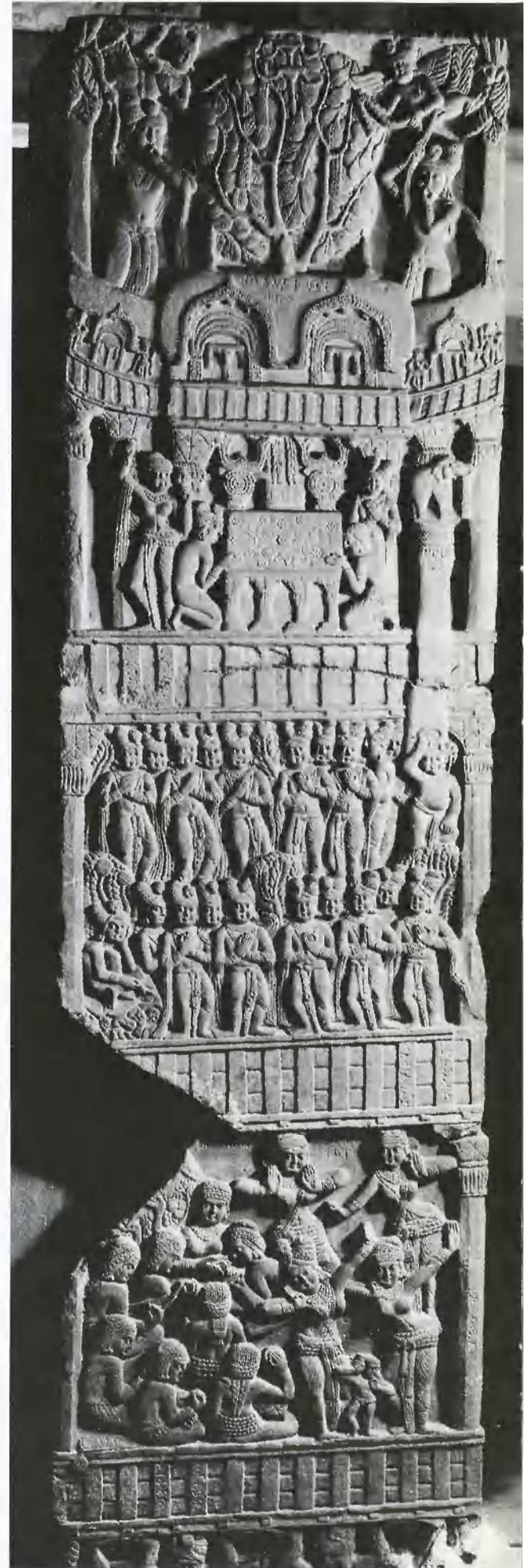
The mentor escorting the visitor around the stupa would have made a prolonged stop at each of the

5
Crab Jataka. Synoptic narrative. Photograph courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.



of

7
Sravasti miracle. Static
monoscenic narrative.
Photograph courtesy
American Institute of
Indian Studies, Varanasi.



8
Enlightenment pillar.
Static mode.
Photograph courtesy
Archaeological Survey of
India.

entrance-ways where tales from the historic life are concentrated. He may well have stopped to display and interpret the enlightenment pillar (figure 8). The topmost of three panels centres around a shrine beneath the *bodhi* tree flanked by worshippers, while flying figures hover above. The scene contains reference to the Buddha's presence and its emphasis is on the supreme achievement of enlightenment. The second panel depicts the worship of the gods at the moment of enlightenment; the mentor may have indicated that inscribed labels helped identify the assembly of deities. The lowest panel, depicting a group of female dancers and musicians, represents the heavenly nymphs who arrived to honour the enlightened Buddha. Here too inscriptions give the names of the *apsaras* and clarify the story. Educated viewers would have found the inscribed labels useful aids in deciphering the legends by themselves.

Bharhut legends generally utilized one of the three narrative modes discussed — simple monoscenic, synoptic narration, or static monoscenic. Very occasional

use is made of conflated narrative in which multiple episodes of a story are presented, but the figure of the protagonist is conflated instead of being repeated from one scene to the next. Once the mentor has explained this principle, the viewer may be able to unravel the presentation of the Quail Jataka in which the quail is placed on a tree to the right centre of a medallion, and a set of six scenes that unfold around her all refer to her single presence (figure 9). In the lower half of the medallion, two elephants represent the herd of the *bodhisattva* elephant who protected her nest on the ground in which were baby quails too young to fly. Above is the rogue elephant who ignored the quail's appeal and deliberately trampled upon the nest. The quail swore revenge and sought the help of three friends, a crow, a fruit fly, and a frog, to destroy the elephant. The medallion contains a second instance of conflation in the figure of the rogue elephant who is part of three different episodes, all of which refer to a single image. The same elephant who crushed the nest of baby quails, has his eyes pecked out by a crow, and eggs laid in the



sightless eye by a fruit fly. The croaking frog at the top of the medallion, seated on the edge of a precipice, brings about the elephant's death; the half-blinded elephant follows the sound, expecting to find water but plunging instead to his death. The artist provides us with a second image of the evil elephant whose rear end is seen as he falls over the cliff. Deciphering this intricate presentation requires total familiarity with the story and with the principle of conflation.

It is because of its novelty that the mentor may have introduced the single entrance pillar that used the complicated mode of the narrative network. In its portrayal of the Vidura Jataka, the protagonist is repeated from scene to scene but the action moves across the pillar in an unpredictable manner, commencing at the top, moving to the bottom, and then crisscrossing the central section to conclude in an upper segment (figure 10). At the top is a rocky mountain landscape where *yaksha* Punnaka is entranced by *naga* princess Irandati; immediately below he enters the *naga* palace and is promised her hand in marriage provided he can produce Vidura's heart. The mentor would have directed the viewer to the lowest panel where Punnaka plays a dice game with the king of the Kurus and, upon winning, asks for his minister Vidura whom we see leaving the Kuru palace. The central panel contains four scenes that follow in crisscross manner. Punnaka is seen on his flying horse with Vidura hanging on to its tail. He tries to kill Vidura by throwing him over a precipice; Vidura convinces him that he should be taken alive to the *naga* queen; and Punnaka places Vidura on his horse and flies off to the *naga* palace. The final scene depicts the *naga* king and queen, with Punnaka and Vidura standing before them. The mentor may have explained to viewers that they should look at geographical zones; the *naga* realm is at the top of the pillar while the Kuru kingdom is at the bottom. Yet there is a convoluted network of movement in space and time, and the viewer could scarcely do without the mentor's assistance.

In the course of ritual circumambulation, the mentor may have stopped and explicated some dozen or so of the well-over-hundred narratives depicted on the railing. To experience fully the rich array of narratives portrayed at Bharhut, several visits to the site would be necessary. Perhaps the departing pilgrim noted the name of the monk who guided him through his narrative experience, determined to ask for him by name on his next visit.



10
Vidura Pandita Jataka.
Narrative network.
Photograph courtesy
Indian Museum,
Calcutta.