

SACRED LANDSCAPES IN ASIA

Shared Traditions, Multiple Histories

Preface by

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Edited by

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Preface

The notion of a territorially defined India is historically very recent, whereas peoples of Asia have interacted throughout history with groups and communities both within the region and across continents. We are aware that Asia as a broad sweep of civilization and culture is visibly manifest in a variety of ways: the juxtaposition of contrasting physical landmasses such as deserts and mountains, marshlands and seas provides it a uniqueness so different from Europe, where there is far less contrast both in the physical environment as also in climate. Mountains and seas do not define boundaries or delimit territories; instead in Asia they facilitate movements and provide continuities. This mobility dates to the prehistoric period and has contributed in no small way to the distinctiveness of the cultures of Asia. Religions spread across the Asian continent through trading communities, religious clergy, Sufis, scholars and communities of artisans and there were no insulated or isolated religious cults.

It is keeping in mind this Asian milieu of our culture that the India International Centre's Asia Project was launched in April 1997 under the chairmanship of Dr. Karan Singh. It was felt that Asian relations had not received the attention they deserve, as nearly all the Asian countries, having experienced Western colonial domination, tended to be academically and intellectually closer to the West than to each other.

In the first phase of the Project, the focus was on the historical, cultural, and intellectual undercurrents, which influence (and which have influenced in the past) socio-economic developments and political policies in the Asian countries. The manner in which social and civilizational impulses had influenced the value systems and attitudes of countries in the region in their relations with each other were also explored. For thousands of years, Asian countries had enjoyed extremely creative inter-linkages, which saw the efflorescence of the arts, architecture, sciences, engineering, medicine, philosophy and religion. Internal disunities, invasions, wars, colonialism and various disruptive factors brought in a decline in this dynamic exchange. Many of these themes were discussed in seminars and conferences, which resulted in publications such as *Culture, Society and Politics in Central Asia and India* (1999), *Culture, Democracy and Development in South Asia* (2001), *India and East Asia: Culture and Society* (2002), *History, Culture and Society in India and West Asia* (2003), etc.

In its second phase the Asia Project (2003-08) endeavours to explore the texture of this dynamic exchange in the past and identify 'areas' and dimensions of inter-cultural dialogue which bind the diverse cultures of the region. These include the systems of transmissions

Questioning Narrativity and Inscribed Labels: Buddhist Bharhut, Sannati, and Borobudur

VIDYA DEHEJIA

The early Buddhist world gave pride of place to story-telling in the medium of stone relief sculptures to convey to its audience the life story of the historic Buddha, his many previous lives, and the major events following his death. Monastic establishments across India were built to centre around the relic stupa, which was faced with stone and surrounded with stone railings and entrance gateways covered with narrative sculpture. At the Andhra sites of southern India, additional stone slabs covered with narratives also faced the drum and the dome of the stupa. A variety of modes of story-telling were utilized by the sculptors at the various Buddhist sites (Dehejia, 1997: 3-35). Some were highly abbreviated as in the case of monoscenic narratives which present a single episode from a story; others like synoptic narrative included multiple episodes placed in an apparently random order with few clues as to where a story commenced or where it ended. One intriguing question raised by such story-telling is the extent to which the narratives were already known to its audience, and the degree to which the visual presentation merely served to jog their memory thereby causing viewers to retell the entire legend to themselves.

This issue is especially relevant at the early Buddhist stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi in north-central India, and Sannati in southern India, which were among the first to initiate the practice of narrative in stone. Should we assume the familiarity of viewers, not merely with the legend of the Buddha's last life on earth but also with his many previous lives known as *jatakas*? If so, what are we to make of the numerous inscribed labels to be found at these sites? For whose benefit were they added? Was the general level of literacy in early India high enough for visitors to the site to be able to use them in a manner that today's visitors to museums use labels to understand the works? Or were the labels intended for the monks and nuns at the various monastic sites whose level of literacy was presumably higher than that of the general population? Why are some labels so neatly and precisely cut while others are so cursively incised? Is it possible that some of the more cursive labels were intended as guidelines for the sculptors producing the carvings? These are some of the issues that this essay raises while considering, in this brief preliminary investigation, the issue of narrativity and inscribed labels at three different Buddhist sites, two in India and one in Java.

I commence this exploration with the recently excavated Buddhist stupa at Sannati, located in the northern part of the current-day state of Karnataka and the furthest west and north of the so-called Andhra group of Buddhist monastic establishments. This richly carved and extensively inscribed stupa shares with other Andhra region stupas, like Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, the traditional four-*ayaka* platform format, and the practice of covering the drum and the dome of the stupa with sculpted slabs. Each dome slab, roughly 9 1/2 feet tall and 4 feet across, is divided into three sculpted registers of which the lowest is uniformly carved with a railing pattern while the upper two carry narrative sculpture. The plain band above the railing register carries the label inscription, often casually and carelessly incised, that is to be found on just about every one of these dome slabs. Dividing the two sculpted registers is a band carved with a panel of ambling geese, while the topmost band frequently carries a donative inscription.

Dome slabs are devoted to the entire range of themes from the historic life of the Buddha, through his many previous lives, to the events following his death. The space devoted to the narration of a story varies. Anywhere from one to four dome slabs may be devoted to a single narrative; on the other hand, the upper and lower registers of a slab may carry different stories. Among dome slabs that carry a single story is one devoted to the Great Departure (Fig. XIII.1). The upper register portrays a horse, led by a groom, emerging



Figure XIII.1: Great Departure, Dome Slab, Sannati.

from the palace with his hooves held up by *devas*; a parasol hovering over empty space above the horse indicates the presence of the Buddha. The lower register portrays two incidents relating to the return of the groom and horse to the palace. First we see the groom kneeling beside the king and queen with a tray containing the Buddha's crown and other jewels; next we see him leading away the horse. The identifying inscribed label below reads *atinigamana*, or great departure. To be read again from top to bottom is a slab that depicts the events immediately preceding the enlightenment. The upper register refers to the attempt of Mara's daughters to seduce the Buddha. It indicates the presence of the Buddha by a central seat beneath a tree with footprints before it, with Mara's daughters to the right and a seated Mara to the left. The lower register portrays the arrival of Mara's forces that include warriors on horseback, elephants, and a group of his grotesque potbellied demons. The inscribed label below reads *māra-bhago*, perhaps meaning broken or dejected Mara.

A dome slab on which the two registers are to be read as occurring simultaneously is the celebration by semi-divine beings of the Buddha's turban being carried up to the heavens, with a roughly carved inscription that includes the word *cūdā* or turban. The lower register depicts the scene, carved at a number of other Andhra sites too, of a group of celestials holding a tray bearing the turban, while the upper register depicts four celestials swooping downwards in celebration of the event. A dome slab portraying the Buddha's descent at Sankissa dispenses with the division into two registers and instead extends the ladder across the entire length of the available space (Fig. XIII.2). At the very top of the ladder,



Figure XIII.2: Descent at Sankissa, Dome Slab, Sannati.

beneath a tree, is a seat with footprints that is flanked by female chowri-bearers. Below this extends a twenty-step ladder flanked, at the top, by two sets of adoring celestials looking upwards. The middle levels of the ladder are flanked by two registers of flying celestials; the upper flying being to the right holds a parasol above empty space on the ladder. The lowest step carries a pair of footprints, and on either side is a seated male worshipper. The inscribed label reads *devotharonam* or descent of the god(s).

Two sets of dome slabs are devoted to portraying the division of the relics, both inscribed *sarira vibhago*, or division of the relics. In its upper register, one slab depicts a table with eight portions of relics surrounded by male figures with their hands in the adoring *anjali* gesture. The lower register depicts two dancers in exuberant postures, a series of four drummers, and a lady watching the performance. The second dome slab is broken away entirely above its inscribed section. Two dome slabs also seem to have been given over to the procession of the relics. Both slabs are broken just below the level of the lower panel and have hence lost their inscriptions; three of the four registers portray two elephants carrying caskets on their heads, while the fourth register depicts a single elephant. Thus, between the two dome slabs we find the seven claimants to the Buddha's relics (the eighth went to the *nagas*) who are depicted at a number of other Buddhist sites.

When we turn to *jataka* portrayals on the Sannati dome slabs, we find considerable variation in the length of their treatment. The Chaddanta *jataka*, clearly popular at Sannati, gradually unravels its tale of the Buddha's prior life as the six-tusked elephant over a set of four dome slabs, of which three are inscribed *jatakam chajatiyam* (Fig. XIII.3); the



Figure XIII.3: *Jatakam chaddatiyam* inscription, Dome Slab, Sannati.

fourth is broken just at the level of the inscription. One inscribed slab portrays Chaddanta with his horde of elephants in the lotus pond, while the register above depicts the hunter with the queen and king who have summoned him to demand the tusks of the great elephant. A second inscribed slab that survives intact only in its lower register depicts Chaddanta lying down to submit to the sawing off of his tusks while the hunter stands before him with saw in hand. A third inscribed slab, similarly existing as the lower register only depicts the hunter, mission accomplished, standing before the king and queen with the six tusks slung in panniers across his shoulder. The last slab, missing its inscription, is intact as an upper register only, and depicts the hunter standing to one side with the six tusks while the king supports his wife who (as we know) fainted upon seeing the tusks; women attendants pour water to try and revive her. The fact that as many as four slabs all depict episodes towards the end of the story causes one to wonder if the artists at Sannati concentrated only on that phase, omitting the earlier phases of the story that led up to the demand for Chaddanta's tusks. The emphasis, in other words, may be on the magnanimity of Chaddanta and the repentance, no doubt, of the queen who requested the tusks.

Inscribed labels inform us that certain other *jatakas*, such as Sutasoma, Vidura, and Sadina, are allotted two dome slabs to narrate their stories, while yet others, like the Velama, Aridama, and Dagarakha *jatakas* are allotted a single slab. Yet others occupy only one of the two registers on a dome slab and when this occurs, we frequently find that the scribe has inscribed the word *upari*, or upper, to indicate the occurrence of the story on the upper register. Thus one slab portrays the Hamsa *jataka* on its upper register and the Suka *jataka* on the lower register; the inscription commences at the left with the words *hamsa jataka upari*, and after a blank space adds the words *suka jataka* to indicate the second story (Fig. XIII.4). Another comparable example portrays the Ramagrama stupa on its

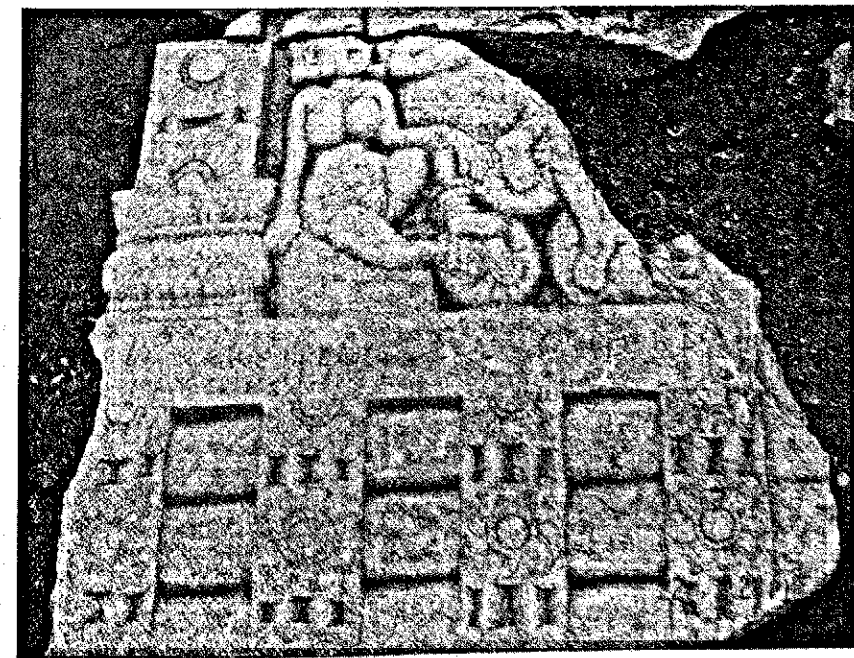


Figure XIII.4: Inscriptions *hamsa jatakam upari* . . . *suka jatakam*, Dome Slab, Sannati.

upper register and a yet unidentified story portraying a mansion in its lower register. The inscribed label reads *ramagrama upari*, and is followed by empty space, which, curiously, does not carry an identifying label for the second story. A third example of the use of *upari* comes from an inscribed fragment missing all its sculpture; it informs us that the Sonaka *jataka* was portrayed in the upper register.

Slabs that faced the drum of the Sannati stupa measure roughly five feet square, and are generally simply decorated with pilasters, with narrative treatment being reserved for those drum slabs placed along the *ayaka* platforms. Two drum slabs, each with eight precisely inscribed labels inserted into the visual field itself, depict the popular legend of merchant Anathapindaka's purchase of the park known as the Jetavana in order to present it to the Buddha and his monks for their use as a monastic establishment. The legend speaks of how Anathapindaka bought it from prince Jeta who, unwilling to sell, spoke of covering every inch of ground with gold coins. Anathapindaka took the words to form a contractual obligation. The foreground of both slabs portrays the unyoked bullock-cart that carried the coins used to cover the earth; with so riveting and well-known a story, it seems that the artist did not think it necessary to add any label to this segment, assuming rightly that the cart and workers were sufficient to place the story (Figs. XIII.5 & XIII.6).

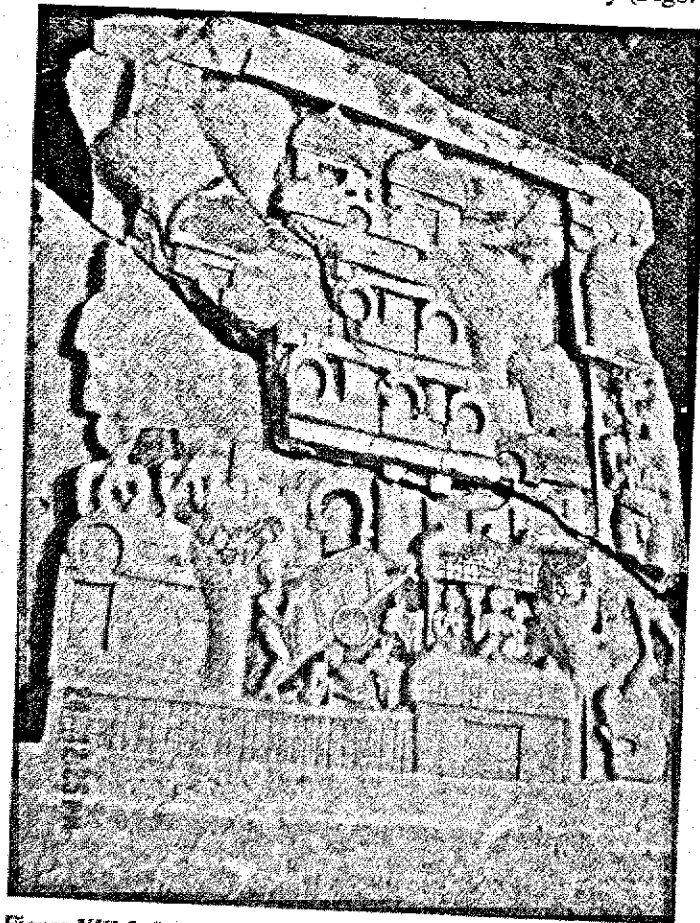


Figure XIII.5: Jetavana Drum Slab 1, Sannati.

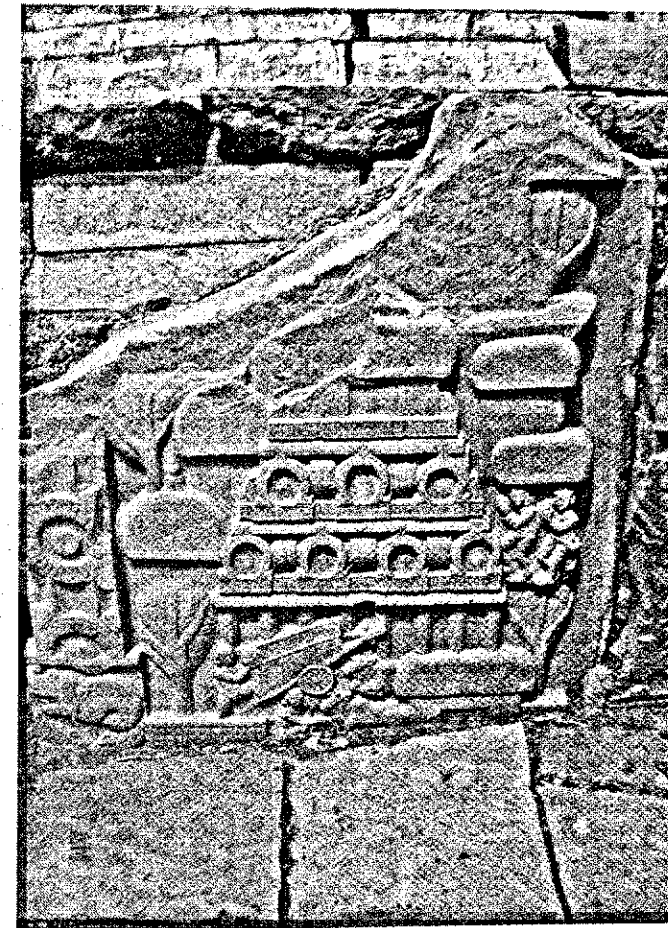


Figure XIII.6: Jetavana Drum Slab 2, Sannati.

But both slabs make extensive use of inscribed labels to identify the various structures that Anathapindaka then raised within the park. The two drum slabs share various features in common. Both include the walking path of the Buddha, indicated by a stone promenade under a tree and carved with a set of footprints. In the case of Drum Slab 1, the artist added the word *cakamo*, meaning 'walking path' so as to leave the viewer in no doubt as to the meaning (Fig. XIII.7); the artist of the Drum Slab 2 seems to have felt such a label to be superfluous (Fig. XIII.8). Both slabs further identify the Jetavana as being associated with *yakshi Piyaka's* mother (a story difficult to trace today); Drum Slab 1 identifies the figures with the inscribed label *yakhi-piyaka-mata*, while Drum Slab 2 identifies the house as *piyaka-matu-bhuvana*. It is clear that the artists of both drum slabs wished their viewers to learn the specific identity of the newly constructed Buddhist *viharas* for the Jetavana's main residents. And so in Drum Slab 1, the artist added the word *bhagavato* to identify the Buddha's own residence, placing two devotees before it with hands in the *anjali* gesture of adoration; he also added the phrase *kosabakuti* to one of the houses to identify it as a *vihara* frequently used by the Buddha. It then remained to identify two other important residents of the Jetavana and so their houses are labeled as *ayasa Anandasa*, or 'of reverend

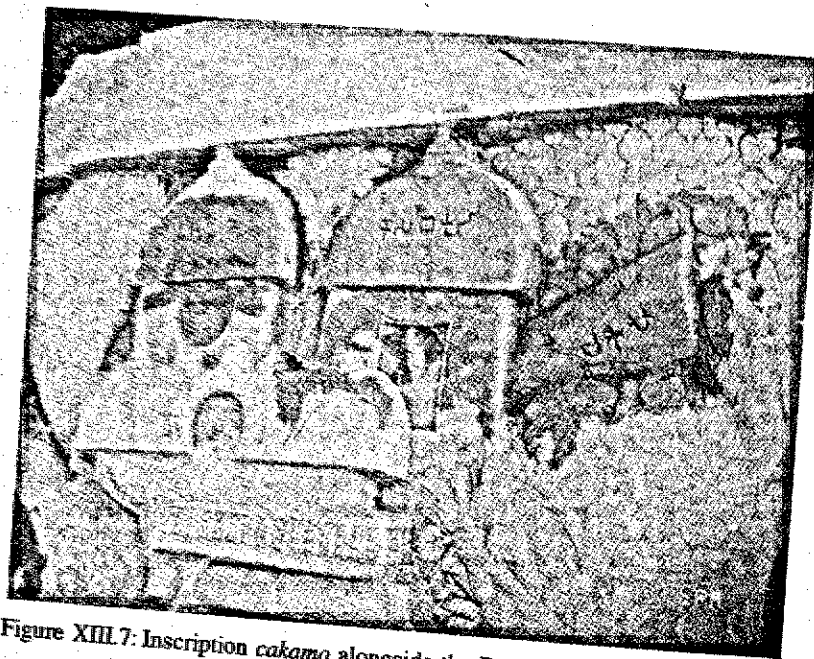


Figure XIII.7: Inscription *cakamo* alongside the Buddha's walking path with footprints, Jetavana Drum Slab 1, Sannati.



Figure XIII.8: Walking path without inscribed label, Jetavana Drum Slab 2, Sannati.

Ananda', the Buddha's favourite disciple (Fig. XIII.9), and *ayasa rahulasa* or 'of reverend Rahula', the Buddha's own son (Fig. XIII.10). Drum Slab 2 seems to have lost various sections of its relief carving judging from three carved and inscribed fragments that appear



Figure XIII.9: Inscribed label *ayasa anandasa*, Jetavana Drum Slab 1, Sannati.

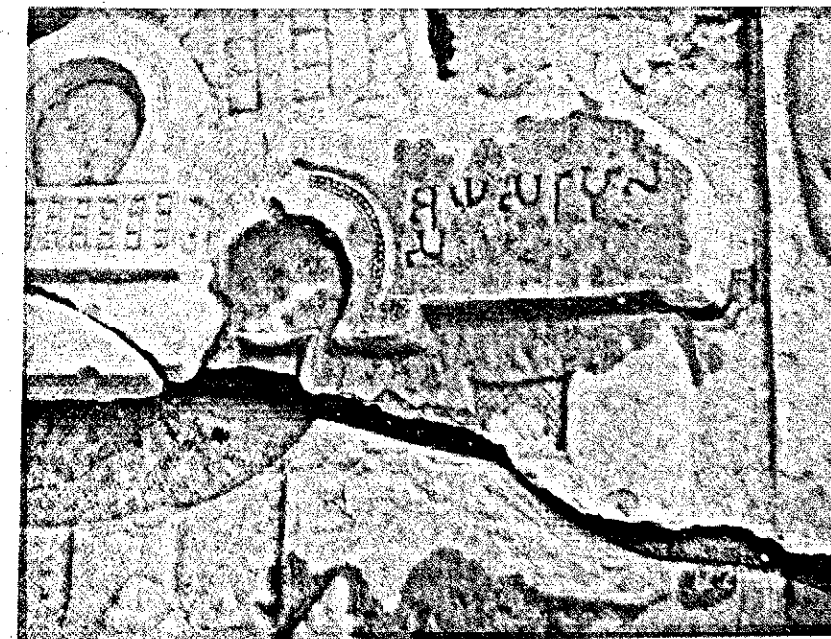


Figure XIII.10: Inscribed label *ayasa rahulasa*, Jetavana Drum Slab 2, Sannati.

to have sheered off the stone surface. If they belonged together, as seems highly probable, the slab presented a larger section of the Jetavana than Drum Slab 1. Apart from the Buddha's *kosabakuti* residence, and that of Ananda, it includes the *viharas* of two of the Buddha's closest disciples, Sariputta and Mahamoggalana, clearly labeled *ayasa sariputasa vihara* and *ayasa mahamoggalanasa vihara* (Figs. XIII.11 & XIII.12).

The inscriptions on both drum slabs are engraved precisely and in a neat firm hand after the completion of the carving; the question that must be raised is as to its audience. Did the average visitor to the Sannati stupa, coming there to experience proximity to the Buddha through his relics that were considered to be imbued with his living presence, possess the level of literacy required for this purpose? During the first and second centuries AD, which saw the completion of much of the initial work on the Sannati stupa, was reading and writing that commonly practised? The question is relevant since it is doubtful if twentieth-century villagers going to a sacred site in India would be able to read labels inscribed in their local language. If indeed one is justified in sounding skeptical, then we must assume that the labels were there for perusal by the monastic community in residence, as also monastics from other sites who might have travelled to view a major new stupa lavishly adorned with narrative sculptures. Such visitors, unfamiliar with the organization of stories at a particular site, might have found the labels an immense help. Elsewhere, I have suggested the likelihood that local monks or nuns may have taken lay visitors around their stupa, introducing them with verbal cues to well-known stories, and narrating certain less familiar legends, pointing out the details of their visual presentation (Dehejia, 1998: 22-31). Thus, a visitor unfamiliar with Buddhist *jatakas*, may have appreciated a guide pointing out to him the four dome slabs covered with the legend of the Buddhas' previous life as the six-tusked elephant, Chaddanta, and guiding him through the story.

But what, one might ask, should one make of the labels that add the word *upari* to indicate that the label belongs to the upper panel? Is this just a case of immense consideration on the part of the artists? Or should we envisage the possibility that such labels were notations for the sculptors themselves, telling them on which register to carve a particular story? Such dome slab labels at Sannati are frequently relatively cursive, as against those carefully and precisely inserted into the visual field of the two Jetavana drum slabs. In addition, many belong to the Buddha's life story, which, to those familiar with that legend, seem self-evident. For instance, the label *devaharonam*, or descent of *deva(s)*, added to the panel that depicts a tall ladder across the entire available space to depict the descent of the Buddha at Sankissa, seems somewhat superfluous. No Buddhist monk would need it, either for his own edification, or in order to explain the legend to visitors less familiar with the story. Certain other labels, however, are immensely informative, especially those relating to panels depicting royal figures; without labels it would be impossible, for instance, to tell Mauryan king Asoka from Satavahana king Pulumavi. The words *raya Asoka* engraved above a panel depicting a king with his two queens is what enables identification (Fig. XIII.13); so too a label with the king's name enables us to read a particular portrayal as victorious king Pulumavi at Ujjain.

I would like to step back in time some two centuries prior to Sannati and briefly consider the extravagant use of labels in the many sculptures at the Bharhut stupa that once stood near Allahabad, but is today reconstructed within the Indian Museum, Calcutta. At Bharhut,

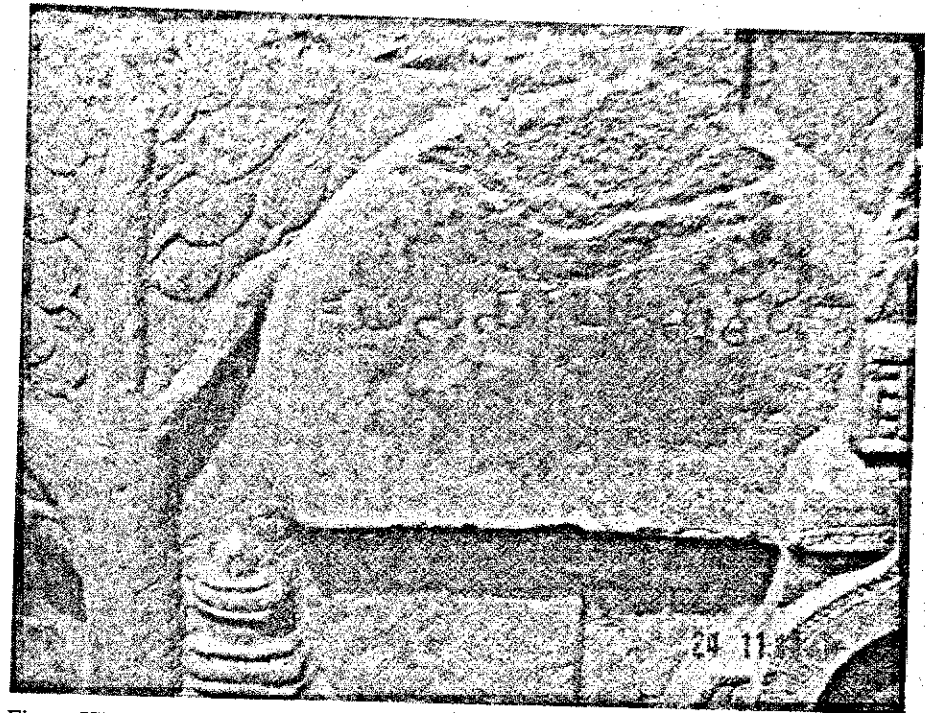


Figure XIII.11: Inscribed label *ayasa sariputasa vihara*, Jetavana Drum Slab 2, Sannati.

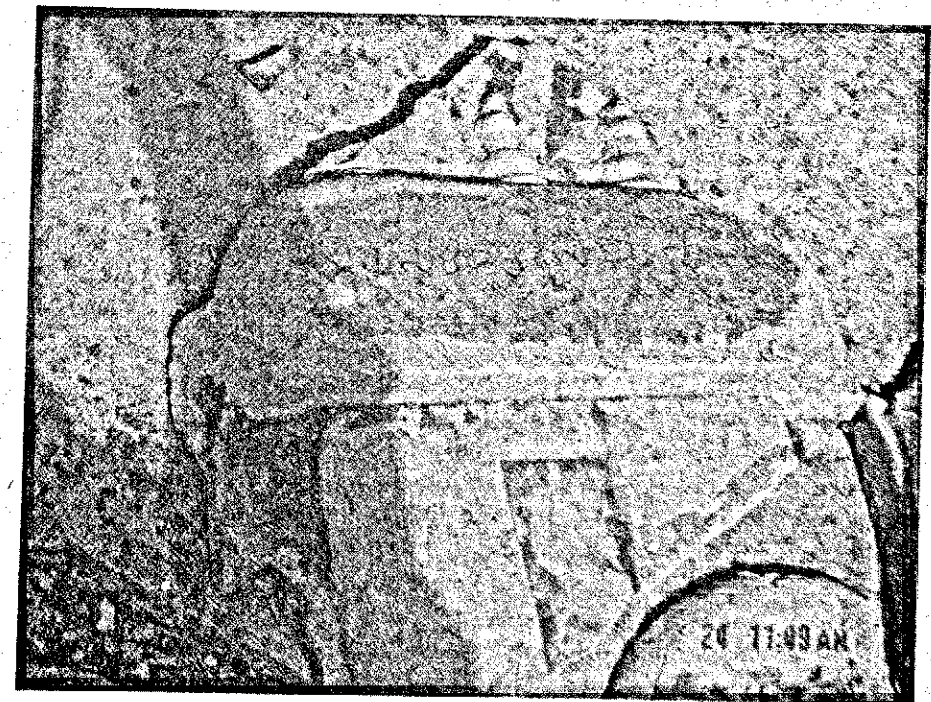


Figure XIII.12: Inscribed label *ayasa mahamoggalanasa vihara*, Jetavana Drum Slab 2, Sannati.

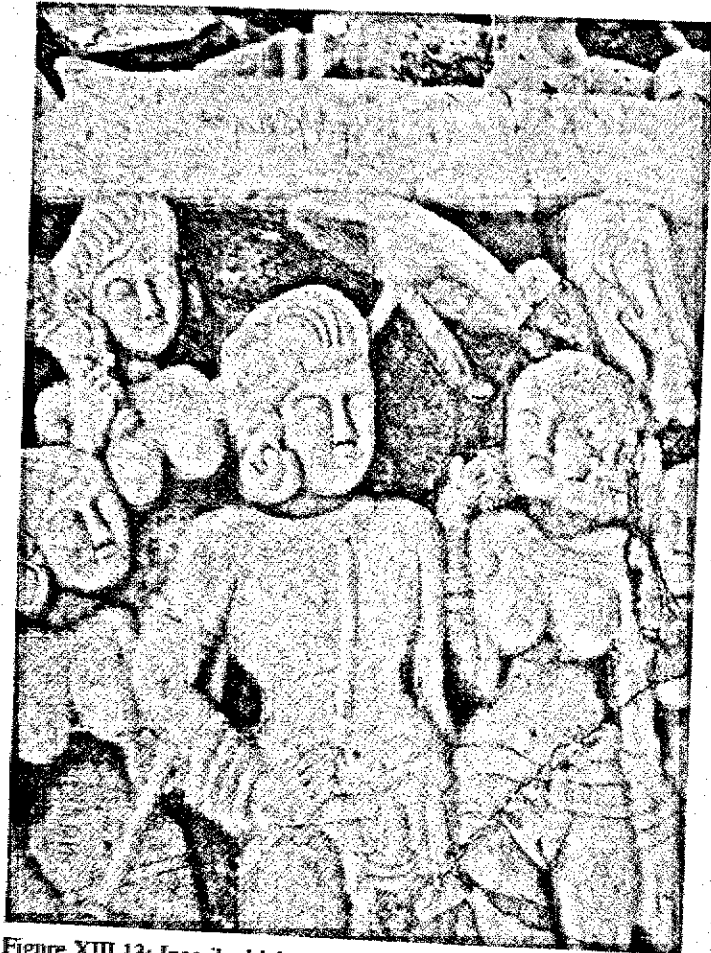


Figure XIII.13: Inscribed label *raya asoka*, Drum Slab, Sannati.

identifying labels exist above or below a piece of narrative sculpture, beside a pillar figure, as well as inserted into the visual field of a narrative relief itself in the manner we have just seen in the Jetavana slabs at Sannati. Of particular interest is the question as to why labels are found so liberally at Bharhut. One answer might lie in the fact that this was one of the very first Buddhist stupas with extensive decoration, both narrative and otherwise, and that labels were thus needed to familiarize viewers with Buddhist legend. (The earlier stupa 2 at Sanchi has barely any narrative sculpture). Every inscription at Bharhut, whether a label or a donative record, is fairly neatly and precisely incised; there is no casual cursive script of the type we see often at Sannati. The manner in which labels are inserted into the visual field, the way the artist chose spaces that were otherwise left plain, the manner in which he inserted them sideways, or split longer phrase so as to accommodate them in two lines, clearly indicates that the words or phrases were added after the carving was complete. They were intended to complement the visual image; nothing at Bharhut is in the nature of instructions for artists.

Bharhut's Anathapindaka medallion (Fig. XIII.14) has a clear label beneath it that reads



Figure XIII.14: Anathapindaka medallion, Bharhut.

'Anathapindaka presents the Jetavana, having bought it for a layer of crores', thus giving us the identity of the initial story that the Sannati artists considered so well-known that they dispensed with identifying it in this precise manner. At Bharhut, the right half of the medallion is devoted to the ground being covered with a layer of coins; to the forefront are the unyoked bullocks and the cart, while a group of workers squat on the ground covering it with coins. Anathapindaka is featured twice, once watching his workers, and the second time, with water vessel in hand, pouring water to symbolize the actual giving of the gift. To the far left a group of well-appointed townsfolk attend this ceremony. Two structures built in the park are depicted and identified by labels accommodated into the circular band of the medallion, just beside the buildings. Along the top of the medallion is inscribed *gandha-kuti*, or perfumed mansion, the title given to the Buddha's abode, and to the left, inscribed sideways along the curved band of the medallion, is *kosaba-kuti* or Kosamba mansion, a residence sometimes occupied by the Buddha. The labels are clearly added after the carving has been completed, indicating that the artist and the patron felt it would be useful to apprise viewers that this was the story of Anathapindaka's purchase and

presentation of the Jetavana, and also to let them know that the merchant had built within it two mansions for the Buddha to occupy.

A story at Bharhut that we have already encountered at Sannati portrays the Chaddanta *jataka* in pithy form within the confines of a medallion (Fig. XIII.15). Here the artist presents us with two scenes from the story; the right half of the medallion is devoted to the six-tusked elephant together with his queens and attendant elephants in a forest; to the left, giving the viewer a foretaste of what is to follow, is the hunter with saw in hand before a second depiction of Chaddanta. Above the medallion, to ensure its correct reading, are inscribed the words *chadamtiya-jatakam*, as also the donative phrase 'gift of Anuradha from Vedisa'. A large number of Bharhut medallions carry similar labels to identify them

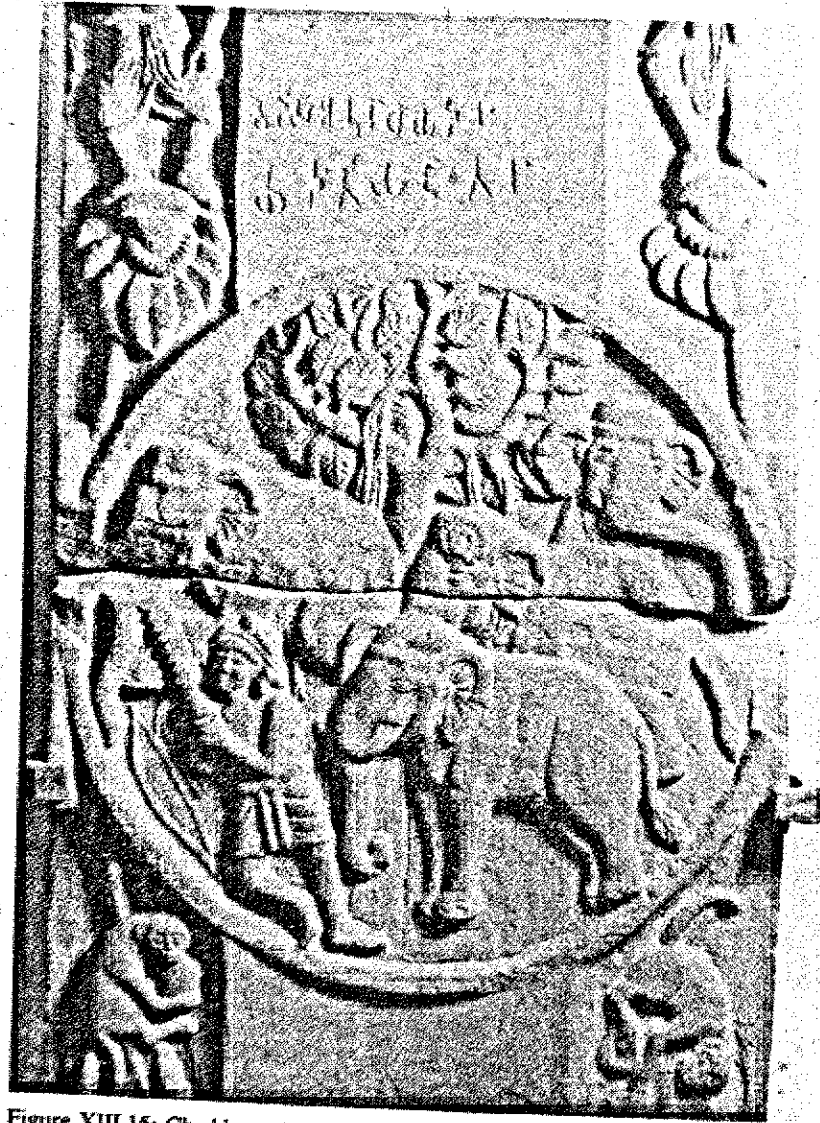


Figure XIII.15: Chaddanta *jataka* medallion, Bharhut.

including the deer *jataka*, *jataka* of the deaf mute, *latuva jataka*, elephant *jataka*, *jataka* of the market towns, and the like. Stories carved on the lengths of coping stone, to fit within the looping curves of the undulating lotus stem that runs along its entire length, likewise carry identificatory labels above the narrative. Some consist of just the name of the *jataka*, as in *kinnara-jataka*, *cat-jataka*, *hamsa-jataka*, *otter jataka*, *cock-jataka*, *makhadeva-jataka*, *isimiga-jataka*, or the *jataka* of stealing lotus stalks (Fig. XIII.16). Other labels consist of the names of the individuals who participate in a story as in 'arrow-maker, king Janaka, queen Sivala', or 'woman Asadha, jackals at cemetery, kinsmen'. Yet others give us the name of the place, as in '*chaitya* where deer rest', or 'rock of miracles', or a descriptive phrase such as '*dighatapasi* instructs pupils', or '*veduko* extracting sap from mount Nadode'. Yet others, despite their labels, portray stories not yet identified. One such is a medallion with a large triangular pathway and elephants beside a lotus pond, which is labeled 'triangular walk'. A second unidentified coping story is labeled 'walk where escape is difficult', or perhaps 'walk of strong exertion'; it depicts a path surrounded by figures with their hands in *anjali* adoration who gaze at two demonic heads in the foreground. In all these instances in which a single scene from a story is intended to recall the entire legend, the viewer (and scholar) is grateful for the help provided by the inscription.

Nevertheless, the many labels at Bharhut that are added within the visual field, though extremely helpful for identification, are intriguing. One such panel, partly damaged along its right edge, is at the base of the richly sculpted Ajatashatru pillar placed at an entranceway. Enclosed by pilasters on either side, and with a railing band both above and below is a depiction of a story clearly popular in ancient times, but whose significance eludes us today. The panel, portraying a central tree with a seat beneath it that is worshiped by elephants, carries no less than three inscribed labels. Inserted sideways into the railing



Figure XIII.16: Coping with inscribed labels, *bidala* (cat) *jataka*, *kukkuta* (cock) *jataka*, Bharhut.

band at the bottom, roughly beneath the seat is the phrase *bahuhathiko* or 'many elephants' (Fig. XIII.17); inserted sideways into the pilaster flanking to the panel to the left is *bahuhathiko-nigodho-nadode* or 'banyan of many elephants on mount Nadode'. Finally, inserted into the visual field of the panel itself, right beside the damaged portion of the relief where were carved figures to which it refers are the words *sisupalo-kodayo veduko-aramako* or 'Sisupala, the Kodaya. Veduka, park-keeper'. The number of notations almost seems like an embarrassment of riches, but was clearly thought necessary around the turn of the first century BC. One might note that mount Nadode seems to have been of especial significance in the Buddhist context since two other Bharhut inscriptions make reference to it: one speaks of rose-apple trees on mount Nadode (they are shown providing gifts), and a second speaks of extracting sap on mount Nadode.

A second panel that contains inscriptions that are intrusive into the visual field is immediately above the elephant panel on the Ajatashatru pillar and portrays the story of naga king Erapata and his search for the Buddha. Into the railing band beneath the panel are the words *erapata nagaraja* to identify the male figure, immediately above, emerging from the waters with a serpent hood behind his head (Fig. XIII.18). We see the serpent king a second time to the left of the panel where he kneels in front of an empty seat beneath a garlanded tree. Here the artist has inserted a label immediately behind the kneeling figure, against the backdrop of the ground, so to say, splitting the phrase into two lines to accommodate it in the available space. It reads *erapata nagaraja/bhagavato vadate* apprising us of the fact that the artist has portrayed 'naga king Erapata worshipping the Bhagavat [the Buddha]'. Perhaps the story was not too well known at the time so that the artists decided to insert labels into the visual field immediately adjacent to the figures themselves.

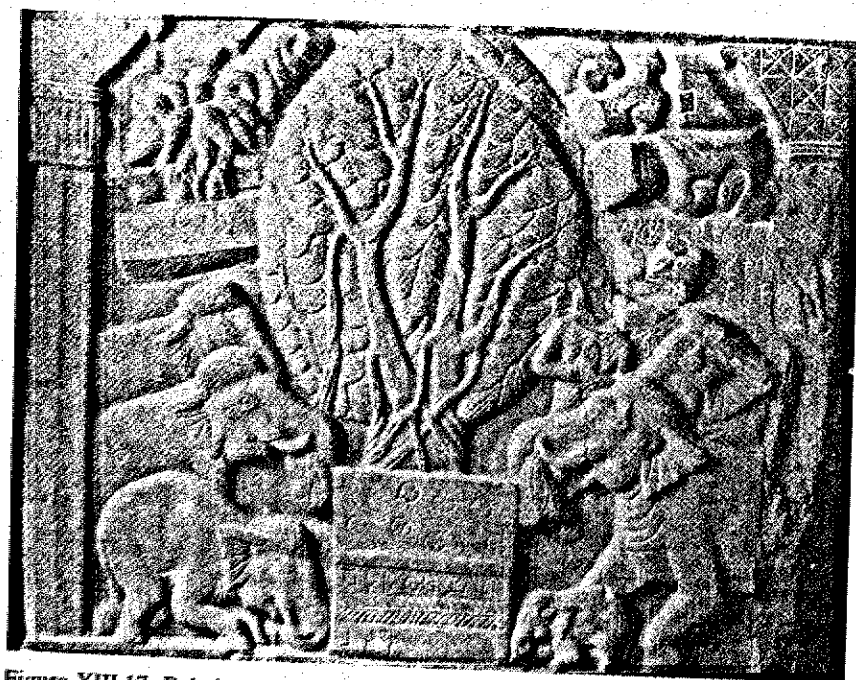


Figure XIII.17: Bahuhathiko panel, Ajatashatru pillar, Bharhut.

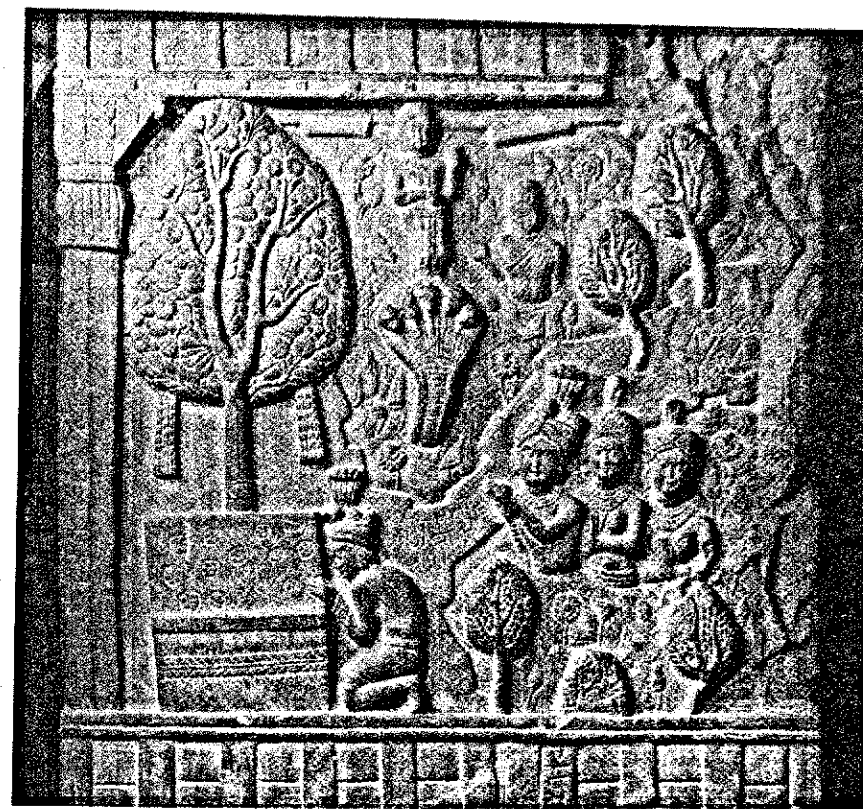


Figure XIII.18: Erapata Nagaraja panel, Ajatashatru pillar, Bharhut.

One final example, relating to the system of eight earthly Buddhas, will have to suffice here to speak about Bharhut's use of inscribed labels. Each of the six prior earthly Buddhas, together with the historic Buddha Siddhartha, and future Buddha Maitreya, all achieved enlightenment while seated on the *bodhi manda*, the seat of enlightenment, beneath a tree. Symbolized by an empty throne beneath a tree, each Buddha is recognized by the specific tree portrayed, for instance the *shal* tree for Buddha Vesabha or the *pipal* or *ficus religiosa* for the historical Buddha. To aid viewers in distinguishing the specific Buddha in the set of medallions devoted to this theme (only five survive), the Bharhut artists added an identifying label above each, occasionally specifying the species of tree too, as in *bhagavato vesabhuno bodhi salo* (Fig. XIII.19). The Bharhut artists, patrons, and the monastic community clearly placed great emphasis on the precise identification of the legends presented in stone relief sculpture along the railings surrounding their stupa.

When we turn to the main stupa on the Sanchi hill, decorated with stone narrative sculpture some fifty to hundred years after Bharhut, we find a total absence of inscribed labels. What happened in the interim that the Sanchi monastery decided to do away so completely with labels? There is no shortage of inscriptions on Sanchi's main stupa. It carries 631 epigraphs, of which four are imprecations, and the remaining 627 are donative. But there is not one single label inscription. Are we to believe that Buddhist legend caught on so fast and achieved such amazing popularity that labels became unnecessary? Did the



Figure XIII.19: Buddha Vesabha and the *shal bodhi* tree, Bharhut.

artists believe that the east gateway architrave with the Great Departure, or the three architraves on three different gateways that portray the Chaddanta *jataka*, were so easily readable that labels were not required? And what of the Kasyapas and the story of walking on the waters? Was the *chankrama* or walking path placed on the waters, the *cakamo* of the Sannati label, so evident that it was instantly recognizable at Sanchi? Questions abound to which no simple answers present themselves.

Let us consider just one scene, that of the Great Departure, a major event in the life of the Buddha. At Bharhut, it was carved along a vertical pillar at one of the stupa's four entranceways; today, the pillar split vertically into half indicates that it was to be read from top to bottom in four undifferentiated registers (Fig. XIII.20). At the very top is a palace from which emerge a set of footprints to indicate the Buddha's presence; below

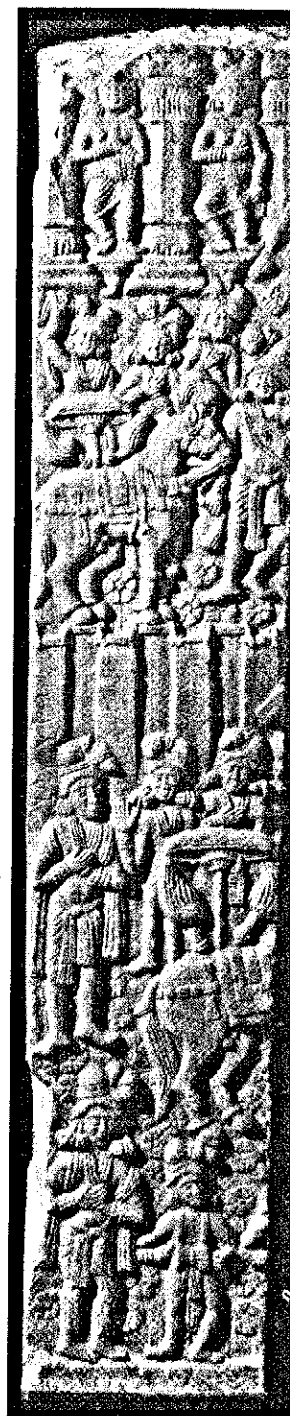


Figure XIII.20: Great Departure, Bharhut. Courtesy Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena.

this, on a flower-strewn path, is a horse with a parasol and *chowries* hovering above it to indicate the Buddha on horseback. Below this is a second depiction of the parasol/*chowrie*-topped horse to indicate its ride further away from the palace, while below drummers and gods applaud the event. An inscription inserted sideways beside one of the attendant deities identifies him as *arahaguta devaputra*, a figure encountered in another Bharhut panel where this celestial informs the Buddha, as yet seated in the heavens, that it is time for him to be born on earth. Clearly Arahguta was present here to ensure the Buddha's successful departure from the palace to which he was confined. It is highly likely that this Bharhut pillar contained a second inscribed label, perhaps with the words *nigamana* to indicate the great departure, but in its present condition this must remain mere conjecture.

At Sanchi, the Great Departure is carved in the mode of continuous narrative across the horizontal span of an architrave of the east gateway (Fig. XIII.21). The narrative moves from left to right and commences with the Buddha emerging on horseback from the palace gates with the horse's hooves held up by the gods to muffle the sounds of departure. The Buddha's presence on horseback is indicated by a parasol that hovers at an appropriate height above the horse. To indicate the progressive ride away from the palace, the artist repeated the horse-and-unseen rider three more times. The completion of the episode at the far end, when the Buddha dismounts and sends back horse and groom, is indicated by a pair of footprints above which hovers the parasol, and the parasol-less horse and groom placed contrary to the movement thus far. No label of any type is added at Sanchi. When we get to the stupa of Sannati, carved after Sanchi, we have seen that the dome slab portraying the legend, with the actual departure on the upper register, and the return of the groom with the prince's jewels and his horse on the lower register, carries the label *atinigamana*. One could counter that the label at Sannati was occasioned by the fact that the stupa is located in the south, a considerable distance away from Bharhut-Sanchi area where Buddhism was established at an earlier date.

A final example of the range of issues revolving around narrativity and inscribed labels takes us to Borobudur in Java where a magnificent stone-faced stupa-mandala was built around the year 800. No inscriptions at all are found in the

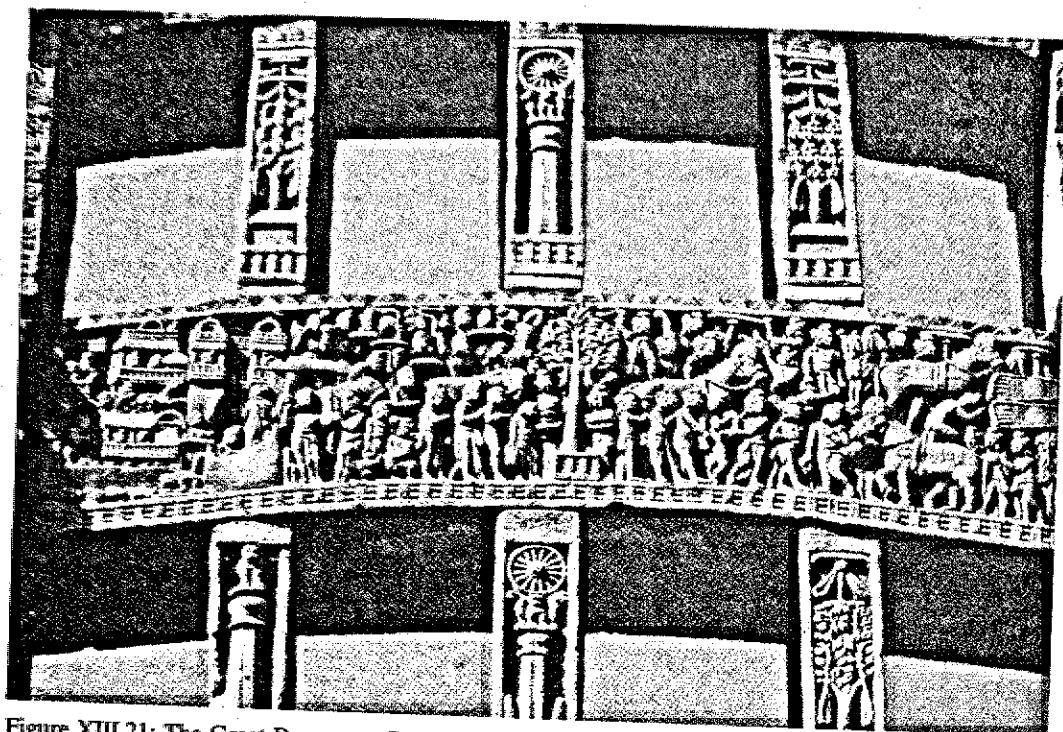


Figure XIII.21: The Great Departure, East Gateway, Sanchi stupa.

galleries devoted to the life of the Buddha in its *Lalitavistara* version that commences in the Tushita heavens and ends with the First Sermon. Nor are there labels in the upper galleries that tell the *Gandavyuha* story of Sudhana and his search for teachers that commences with Avalokitesvara and ends with Maitreya. Nor indeed are labels added along the inner faces of the terraces that portray legends from the *jatakas* and *avadanas*. Should one assume that the Buddha's life story and the Sudhana legend were really familiar to Buddhists in ninth-century Java who did not need any aid in identification? Perhaps this was in part because Borobudur portrays the entire legend making it possible for viewers to follow the story in chronological sequence. By contrast, Bharhut and Sannati do not follow any text in sequential order; instead, scenes from the life of the Buddha and stories from the *jatakas* seem to have been chosen somewhat at random, and carved at the behest of individuals donors who requested their placement wherever they wished. But then what about the familiarity of Borobudur's visitors with the *jataka* and *avadana* legends?

Labels at Borobudur were added only along the hidden terrace at the lowest level of the monument—only a small segment of the south-east corner today remains exposed to view—where some 160 reliefs portray a text known as *Karmavibhanga*. This sermon of the Law of Karma, or Cause and Effect, attributed to the Buddha himself, was disseminated widely and translated into several languages. The earliest Chinese translation dates to the year AD 316, and was followed by several other Chinese, Nepali, and Tibetan translations. The question of which of these many versions, that differ slightly one from the other, might have been followed at Borobudur, or whether there was a variant oral or written tradition that has not survived, remains a moot point. Of immediate relevance here are the forty or

so short inscriptions, mostly in the form of single words, which are engraved above these reliefs. The shorthand associated with these labels suggests that the stories were well enough known for a single word to suffice to recall the entire punishment or reward.

One example from the exposed section depicts the gift of a bell to a sanctuary and portrays people standing or kneeling by the sanctuary with the bell; the word *ghanta* or bell is engraved above the panel (Fig. XIII.22). According to one version of the *Karmavibhanga* text the gift of a bell is rewarded by 'beauty, a beautiful sound, a lovely voice like that of a certain bird' (Bernet Kempers 1976: 90). The label is too brief to satisfy the requirement of an explanatory label; those who were able to recall it from that single word could equally well recall it from seeing the presentation of the bell. A second inscription, reading *virupa* or deformed, and portraying an obviously deformed man, refers to the result of evil actions, and presents a comparable problem (Fig. XIII.23). All the inscriptions are similarly brief and include words like 'village chief', 'king', 'heaven', and

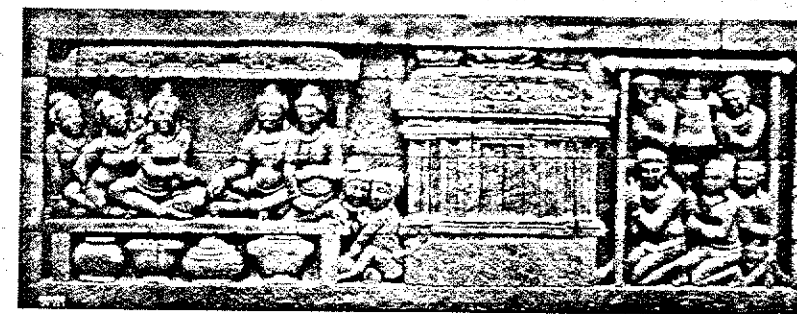


Figure XIII.22: Inscribed label *ghanta* above panel depicting gift of bell, hidden terrace, Borobudur.

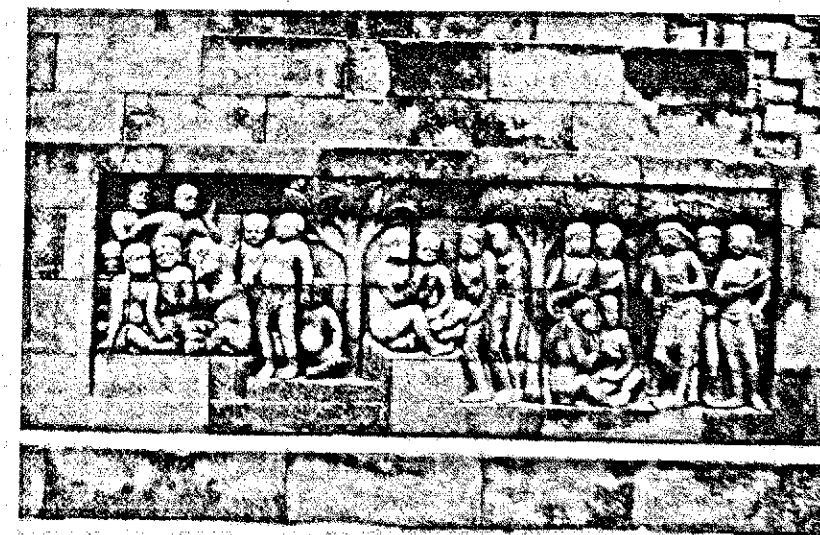


Figure XIII.23: Inscribed label *virupa* above panel with deformed man, hidden terrace, Borobudur.

the like. What might have been the purpose of these inscriptions? Could they have been cues to the artist to carve a particular good or bad deed in a particular spot? If so, it would imply that the artist knew the text well enough for the single word to enable him to recall it. Alternately, it could have been inscribed at the behest of the Chief Officer in charge of the Buddhist programme of the entire monument, and would then have been used by the local supervisors (the *navakamika* or 'supervisor of new works' of the Indian inscriptions) who ensured that the artists carried out the programme accurately. One might then ask why every panel does not carry an inscription. The suggestion has been made that there may, in fact, have been such a notation attached to each good and bad deed but that, not being intended for the visitor to the site, it was erased by the artist. Some notations might have been incised at the centre of the proposed panel and thereby automatically eradicated when carving was undertaken. The reason that all the notations were not chiselled away after the completion of the carving may lie in the fact that the architects realized early in the building sequence that this base was not sufficient to hold the monument. The reinforcement required to stabilize the monument was such that the *Karmavibhanga* terrace would be completely covered up. It may hence have been thought superfluous to spend any time over such erasure.

This preliminary essay raises a number of questions relating to visual narrative, including their readability, the general familiarity of audiences with the legends portrayed, the manner in which monastics might have played a role in facilitating the viewers' experience, and the reason behind the inscribed labels found so abundantly at Bharhut and Sannati but totally absent at Sanchi and in the mature phase at Amaravati. One obvious reason for labels must relate to the early date of a monument; structures created when Buddhism was still relatively in its infancy and its legends not yet readily familiar are more likely to carry labels than those belonging to a mature phase of Buddhism. Yet, this does not provide a total explanation. In certain instances, the possibility of labels being incised to alert artists to the subject-matter of a slab must be kept in mind. In such cases one may assume that monks in charge of work at these sites would have narrated the story to the artist and identified its main protagonists. The practice known from later painting workshops, in which incomplete paintings reveal notations for figures and colours, suggests taking this possibility seriously. And yet, several questions remain unresolved, not the least being that several narratives that seem so clearly identifiable, at least to us twentieth and twenty-first-century viewers, still carry labels.

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