



On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art

Author(s): Vidya Dehejia

Source: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 374-392

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3045747>

Accessed: 12/07/2013 01:29

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Art Bulletin*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art

Vidya Dehejia

From the start of the century before Christ, Indian monuments display a wide range of sculptured and painted narratives portraying the legend of the Buddha. This article addresses the technique of presentation of these stories, and analyzes the structure of visual narratives as opposed to their content. Seven distinct modes of narration are identified, and it is suggested that the artists might have considered them to be equally acceptable alternatives since they frequently occur together on the same monument. In conclusion, the article considers the manner in which the viewer-cum-worshipper might have responded to these works of art.

Stories revolve around actions, human or otherwise, that occur in space and unfold in time; for the artist, the protagonists of a story, together with the elements of space and time, are the three major components of narrative. The artist has to decide how to portray his actors, how to represent the space or spaces in which his story occurs, and how to shape the time during which the story unfolds. The artist may also arrange his story in a series of more or less discrete episodes; if so, he must decide the manner in which he wishes to compose these episodes within the visual field. The sculptor or painter can also adopt a variety of modes to present the same or similar narratives to his viewers.

This essay analyzes the distinctive ways in which the Indian artist first presented Buddhist legends to his audience of monks and lay worshippers. Soon after the death of the Buddha around the year 483 B.C., a vast body of literature known as the *Tipitakas*, or "Three Baskets," began to be composed. It was written in the language of the people, *prakrit*, as distinct from the courtly refined language, *sanskrit*. From this Buddhist canon, several times the size of the Old and New Testaments put together, the artist concentrated on presenting two sets of legends. One was the life of Prince Siddhartha, who renounced the world and achieved supreme wisdom, being known thenceforward as Buddha or "Enlightened One." The second was the 550 prior lives (*jatakas*) of the Buddha, in which he came into being in a variety of forms, animal and human, until he was born finally as Prince Siddhartha, and achieved enlightenment, which put an end to his cycle of rebirth.

We are, of course, quite aware of the wide range of modes within the field of literary narrative, and the major differences between, for instance, a short story and a novel, an epic and a drama, all of which may be used with equal effect as alternate modes to narrate a story. A comparable range of variation exists in visual narration, and an analysis of these modes forms the body of this paper. An idea of the narrative modes available to the artist may be gained from a study of two depictions of the Buddha's prior life as Prince Vessantara, a prince whose extraordinary acts of generosity made his name a legend in Buddhist circles.

The story of this prince is generally broken down by the

artist into a series of episodes, prime among them being the donation of the auspicious state elephant to a brahmin, the banishment of Vessantara and his family, his donation of chariot, horses, children, and wife, and the final happy reunion in the palace. Each episode — and this is fundamental to the meaning of the term — is composed of several parts or events, which may be described artistically as "scenes." Thus the episode of the donation of the children may be broken down into three (or more) parts: the evil brahmin demands the children, Vessantara grants his wish, and the brahmin departs with the children, wielding his cane.

The artist desirous of portraying this, or any other legend, had a number of options available. He could, for instance, decide in favor of brevity and use the monoscopic mode of narration to tell the tale, utilizing a space as little as twelve inches square (Fig. 1). In this mode, a single, easily identifiable scene, excerpted from one of the episodes of the narrative, is presented to stimulate the viewer's recognition of the story. A Bharhut artist portrayed the single scene of Vessantara's gift of the white state elephant, a donation that caused his father, the king, to banish him. The viewer is presented with just three figures, albeit unmistakable ones — the elephant, the brahmin who receives the gift, and Prince Vessantara pouring water to ratify the gift. Having given enough information to identify the tale, the artist leaves the viewer to narrate the story himself, and to recall that most important of the ten Buddhist virtues or *paramitas*, charity.

On the other hand, the artist could choose the expanded mode of continuous narration, presenting his viewer with the entire series of episodes listed earlier, leading up to the climax of the tale. To do this, a Sanchi artist spread out his narrative across two faces of a gateway architrave so that the Vessantara story occupies a space some twenty-two feet long and two feet wide (Fig. 12). Each episode consists of more than one scene, and in each scene the figure of the protagonist is repeated. There are, however, no framing devices to demarcate one scene from another, or one episode from the next, and the story flows "continuously" across the available space. To decipher the pre-



1 Monoscenic narrative, *Vessantara jataka*. Bharhut coping, ca. 100-80 B.C. (photo: author)

sentation, we must be aware that the repetition of the figure of the protagonist indicates that we are seeing him in different spaces at successive moments of time.

The gulf that exists between these two modes of narration in the field of Western art has been remarked by scholars, who see a major distinction between the isolating, monoscenic mode of narration and the expanded method of continuous narration.¹ Others consider the excerpted method of monoscenic narrative as a degeneration of prior narrative cycles.² In the Indian context, however, these two modes of narration exist side by side, frequently on the same monument. The restrictions of space may have been partly responsible for the choice of narrative mode, but it does not seem to have been the deciding factor. At Sanchi, for instance, the architraves of the gateways offer a span eight feet across, which would seem ideal for the method of continuous narration. Some Sanchi artists chose to use this method, capitalizing on the available space, but others

opted for the monoscenic mode, representing just a single scene from a story to suggest the entire narrative. In two of the three architraves that depict the Buddha's prior birth as the elephant Chaddanta, the artist selected the monoscenic mode of narration, extending his single scene to occupy the entire space available (Fig. 4), while the third architrave presents the viewer with three scenes strung together to form a continuous narrative. Did the artist as well as the viewer regard these modes of narration as equally viable alternatives? For answers, we need to probe further into the function and position of the reliefs, the role of the patron, and other related questions. A popular tale, such as that of Prince Vessantara or the elephant Chaddanta, can be presented to the viewer in several of the modes of visual narration discussed below.

It is traditionally accepted that a narrative has two aspects — a story or content that generally consists of a sequence of events, and the form or expression, the means

This paper evolved out of a course on "Buddhist Visual Narrative," taught first at Columbia University and then at the University of Chicago. I am much indebted to the students in these classes: they contributed ideas, criticized models, and presented suggestions. I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleague Richard Brilliant for the stimulating comments he made on reading a draft of this paper.

¹ K. Weitzmann, "Narration in Early Christendom," *Narration in Ancient Art*, special issue of the *American Journal of Archaeology*, LXI, 1957, 91.

² R. Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Roman and Etruscan Art*, Ithaca, 1984, 52.

by which the story is communicated and its actions are presented. The dichotomy between content and form has been characterized by a range of scholars: there is the *fabula* (raw materials of a story) and *syuzhet* (procedures used to convey them) of the Russian formalists; the *histoire* and *discours* of the French structuralists; or the story and discourse proposed by Seymour Chatman.³ While it might appear simplistic to stress this dualism, it seems necessary to do so in the complete absence of the study of form, or procedure, or discourse in Indian visual narrative. Studies of painted or carved narratives in India are invariably studies of stories, identifications of legends, quests for textual versions that might have been followed, analyses of the sequence of Buddhological cycles at various sites, or refinements of typologies of Buddhist imagery. Although such studies are no doubt valuable, they do not aid our appreciation of the structure of narrative by addressing the mode of presentation of a story.⁴ It is this aspect of presentation or procedure that is my concern, and in this paper I propose seven modes of visual narration used by the artist to tell tales from Buddhist legend. Some of these modes are closely allied; others are vastly different. Thus, the story of Prince Vessantara is presented with a variety of modes of narration: apart from monoscenic and continuous narrative, the artist could use linear, synoptic, or conflated modes, as well as "narrative networks," all of which will be examined shortly. The relation between content and form is, in sum, the *affect*, leading to a consideration of reception and response, a field to which I shall turn in conclusion.

The Buddhist Canon: Oral and Written Traditions

Let us first consider the oral transmission of the Buddhist Canon, its transformation into a written text, and the extent to which one may speak of the correspondence of an image to a text. During the early days of the Buddhist monastic order, following the Buddha's death ca. 483 B.C., the Pali Canon was an orally transmitted tradition. The rules of the Buddhist Order, contained in the Canon, enumerate the entire acceptable personal property of both the individual monk or nun and that of the monastic community as a whole. Every moveable item, down to the smallest and least significant domestic utensil, is part of the listing. In addition, articles in common use among the laity, but forbidden to the monks, are mentioned, only to be disallowed. There is total silence regarding books and manuscripts; texts are referred to frequently, but as existing in the memory of those who have learned them by rote. It is in this context that one may understand the repeated use of the phrase "evam me sutam" or "thus have I heard," that so frequently introduces sections of text. It was a formula used as a guar-

antee of accurate transmission, the guarantee that we seek today in the written word.

This oral tradition was "codified" to a considerable degree. According to Buddhist tradition, a council attended by five hundred monks was convened soon after the death of the Buddha. Select disciples of the Buddha, considered to be conversant in specific areas of the Buddha's doctrine, were asked to present those doctrines to the Council. Upali, for example, was asked to present the *Vinaya* (rules for the monastic order), while Ananda was asked to expound the *Dhamma* (the doctrine). Signifying their agreement to these presentations, the entire assembly then repeated the words of Upali and Ananda, and entrusted the *Vinaya* and the *Dhamma* to those two elders and their followers for its propagation and safekeeping. Though the details of such a council may not be taken as historical documentation, there is little doubt that assemblies of this nature resulted in the origin of the system of *bhanakas* or reciters, who are cited in both Buddhist literature and inscriptions on monuments. There were, for instance, *jataka-bhanakas*, reciters who specialized in memorizing and repeating the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, and *Dhammapada-bhanakas*, who recited that book of moral maxims, the *Dhammapada*.⁵ It is believed that two further Buddhist Councils followed, one a hundred years after the death of the Buddha, and one convened by the emperor Asoka Maurya (ca. 272-230 B.C.), and such councils resulted in further consolidation of the Canon.

The oral tradition was still in use during the days of the Indo-Greek king Menander (140-110 B.C.). The Buddhist text, *Milindapanha* or "Questions of Milinda," speaks of this method of transmission when telling us about the teacher Nagasena, who converted Milinda (Menander) to Buddhism. It was from the lips of his teacher that Nagasena, as a pupil, had learned to recite by rote the entire Buddhist *Tipitaka* in the course of three months. (In this context, one may note Albert Lord's extensive studies of contemporary Yugoslav epic singers, in which he notes that, after listening to it but once, a trained singer can repeat from memory an epic of hundreds of lines, even though he had never heard it before.⁶ Lord speaks of the formulaic structure of the language of such epics, and the same may be said of sections of the Buddhist Canon.)

The date of the transformation of the oral Buddhist Canon into a written text has not been resolved beyond dispute, but the consensus favors the very end of the first century B.C. Sinhalese chronicles record that the hitherto oral Canon was written down in Sri Lanka, during the reign of Vattthagamini (29-17 B.C.), and a notable scholar of Pali literature informs us that "there is no reason to reject this

³ See, for instance, chap. 5, "Narrative Structure: A Comparison of Methods," in W. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Ithaca, 1986.

⁴ Equally disappointing from this point of view was the Panel on Buddhist Narrative at the 1989 Convention of the College Art Association. It lacked

direction, and concentrated, yet again, on the aspect of content in narrative.

⁵ A.K. Norman, *Pali Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1983, 8.

⁶ A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, 1960, 26-29, 98.

tradition."⁷ It appears that a similar date, in the second half of the first century B.C., may be assigned to the writing down of the Canon in India proper. When the first Buddhist monuments were surrounded with stone railings and decorated with narrative relief sculpture, around the year 100 B.C., however, the Buddhist Canon was still an oral tradition. The source material for artists carving reliefs at the stupa of Bharhut, for example, which was completed according to inscriptional evidence during the reign of the Sungas (dynasty ended 72 B.C.), was then an oral tradition, transmitted by reciters.

It is important to note that when an oral tradition is committed to writing, that tradition does not by any means disappear. Whether or not a large section of the population remains illiterate, cultures and societies with strong oral traditions continue to maintain them. Spence Hardy, speaking of *jataka* recitation in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century, wrote that "the Singhalese will listen the night through to recitations from this work, without any apparent weariness,"⁸ and Richard Gombrich remarks that the story of Prince Vessantara continues to be narrated as an oral epic in the Buddhist temples and monasteries of Sri Lanka.⁹ Oral narration has an enduring strength.

Precursors of Narrative in Stone: Picture-Showmen

Because Buddhist legends were narrated orally for at least four hundred years before the appearance of the earliest surviving visual narratives, in the medium of stone, at the start of the first century B.C., the tradition of "picture-showmen" is of special relevance. As early as 1929, Coomaraswamy pointed out evidence for the existence of storytellers who used pictures in the Sanskrit grammar, *Mahabhashya*, written by the grammarian Patanjali around 140 B.C. In elucidating the use of the "historical present," Patanjali gave as one example the display of paintings representing the slaying of the evil king Kamsa, a climactic event in the story of the Hindu god Krishna. The relevant portion of the text reads in literal translation: "How in the respect of the paintings? [Here too the historical present is used, for] in the pictures themselves men see the blows rained down on Kamsa, and how he is dragged about."¹⁰ Patanjali's text refers to a practice that remained widely prevalent in India until the recent introduction of television, a practice by which itinerant picture-showmen toured the countryside, telling tales, and using painted scrolls to illustrate their telling. Jain texts of the early centuries A.D.

refer to such picture-showmen, setting them apart as a distinct category from actors, dancers, and ordinary storytellers. The dramatist Bana (seventh century A.D.) speaks of a category of picture-showmen known as *Yama pat-takas*, who held a painted cloth stretched out on a support of reeds and, with a reed wand, expounded on the features of the next world forming the subject of their scrolls.¹¹ One may also point to Paithan paintings, produced till the late nineteenth century, measuring roughly twelve inches by fifteen inches, with imagery on both sides; these were held up by picture-showmen while they narrated the tales depicted there, which were from the epics or from a variety of local legends.¹² And in the famous Rajasthani *Pabuji-kapard*, a quasi-historical romance is similarly narrated, except that the painting, made on cloth, extends across a span some thirty-five feet in length and four to six feet high.¹³ Two persons are involved in this narration, which continues to be a living tradition, a male *bhopa* who tells the tale and a female *bhopi* who both sings and holds up an oil lamp to illuminate different sections of the painting.

To what extent may we assume that picture-showmen existed in an early Buddhist context? An isolated passage in the *Samyutta Nikaya* section of the Buddhist Canon contains a reference to picture-showmen.¹⁴ When his monks reply in the affirmative to the question whether they have seen *carana-citras* or "rambling pictures," the Buddha compares the work of the painter to the ability of the mind to conjure up a world of illusion. The fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosha clarifies that the Buddha's reference was to the pictures (*citras*) of an itinerant or "rambling" (*carana*) artist. In a society with a strong oral tradition, in which picture-showmen were common in a Hindu context, it seems reasonable to assume that Buddhist legends were disseminated in a similar manner. Such painted scrolls would then have been the precursors of our earliest stone narratives. We have no indication as to whether written captions accompanied such paintings; however, they do not exist today on either Paithan paintings or on the Rajasthani *pards*.

A point of interest in this context are the inscribed labels that appear on the early narrative reliefs at Bharhut and a few other sites (ca. 100-80 B.C.), and completely disappear by the time of the Sanchi stupa, whose carvings date some fifty years later. Some of the Bharhut inscriptions are neatly placed above or below a panel or medallion, and are clearly in the nature of captions, stating, for instance, "Deer ja-

⁷ Norman (as in n. 5), 5.

⁸ S. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, London, 1880, 103.

⁹ R. Gombrich and M. Cone, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, Oxford, 1977, *passim*. In addition, Roger Chartier points out that even after printing was known, reading aloud remained a pastime of both the elite and of the less privileged classes in early modern France. See his *Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, Princeton, 1987. Reading aloud must, of course, be distinguished from oral literature because, although heard, the text is written and hence fixed.

¹⁰ A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Picture-Showmen," *Indian Historical Quart-*

erly, v, 1929, 82-187.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² E. Ray, "Documentation for Paithan Paintings," *Artibus Asiae*, xi, 1978, 239-282.

¹³ Victor Mair brings together much material regarding the tradition of picture-showmen in his informative recent book *Painting and Performance. Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis*, Honolulu, 1988.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

taka" (Fig. 10) or "Descent of the Buddha" above medallions depicting those scenes. Other inscriptions, while identifying elements of a narrative, intrude into the visual field. A panel that depicts the heavenly nymphs celebrating the enlightenment of the Buddha has the names of the four dancers inserted immediately next to each, while a label describing this as a divine pantomime is inserted sideways, to fit into a vertical band of railing at the lower edge of the panel (Fig. 6). In other instances, palaces and mansions are identified by inscriptions placed on their roofs; serpentings and earthly monarchs have their names inserted beside them, and a scene of worship contains the statement that the angel Arahadguta has just announced, to the assembly of the gods, the Buddha's decision to be born again on earth.

The Bharhut carvings were executed at a time when the Buddhist Canon was transmitted solely as an oral tradition. Literacy, as such, could not have been so high that every devotee visiting the shrine could have read these labels. Yet, there is no doubt that the inscriptions are intended as aids to identification. They are not of the category that served as instructions for the sculptors, as seems to have been the case with the basement inscriptions on the eighth-century stupa of Borobudur in Java. The manner in which the Bharhut inscriptions are inserted into the visual field, running sideways along the length of a relief pillar, for instance, indicates that the epigraphs were added after the carving was finished. Perhaps the captions were intended for the literate monks, who used them as prompts when they guided worshippers around the stupa.

Equally intriguing is the fact that half a century later, on the Sanchi stupa, not a single identifying label exists, and they were rarely used again in Buddhist art. What happened in the intervening period of two, perhaps three generations, to justify the total abandonment of a system of captions? Does the answer lie merely in the increasing familiarity of the Buddhist legends? Or is it possible that the Buddhist Canon was committed to writing in India during this intervening period, and that with the existence of a written text, inscribed captions were considered superfluous?

Monoscenic Narratives: The Theme of Action

The monoscenic mode centers around a single event in a story, one that is generally neither the first nor the last, and which introduces us to a theme of action. Such a scene is usually an easily identifiable event from a story, and it serves as a reference to the narrative. This system of representation functioned well in India, as it did in the classical world, where tales were generally familiar to the viewer. The outcome of a story was known prior to its oral telling and prior to viewing its depiction in sculpture or painting. Monoscenic narratives must, of course, contain sufficient narrative content to stimulate the story-telling process in the mind of the observer. The viewer is introduced to the story in the middle of the action, and the coupling of key figures and scenic details must be unmistakable if the viewer is to complete the narrative.

Several instances of monoscenic narrative, involving a

theme of action, exist along the lengths of coping at Bharhut. One already examined here is the Vessantara *jataka* (Fig. 1), where the artist presents the single scene of the gift of the state elephant, which functions as a prelude to the story. Another instance of monoscenic narrative along the Bharhut coping is the Asilakhana *jataka* (Fig. 2), which narrates the tale of how a prince managed to elope with a princess by arranging to meet her in a cremation ground where jackals roamed, and where he would pretend to be a corpse. When, as prearranged, a confidante raised a tremendous hue and cry, causing their attendants to flee, the princess was to climb a tree and stay there until the couple was alone. Using the monoscenic mode, the artist presents us with a male figure lying prostrate on the ground, a female figure in a tree, and three jackals beneath it. The combination of key figures indicating narrative elements is so unusual and so specific that the viewer must have immediately recognized the story. The artist chose to depict the moment that is most characteristic of the story. The process is different from that of the Vessantara tale, in which the artist presents the viewer with a scene that occurs at the very start of the action, leaving him to narrate the entire story to himself. Here, the scene presented occurs toward the conclusion of the story and the viewer must recall the earlier events.

A third instance will suffice to demonstrate the varied character of monoscenic narrative. The Kukkuta *jataka* tells the tale of a she-cat who tried to induce a cock to become her mate, intending to devour him. The Bharhut coping panel merely depicts the two animals, the one at the foot of a tree and the other perched upon it, as sufficiently distinctive to identify the story (Fig. 3). The viewer must fill in the rest of the tale and remind himself of the moral — the danger of succumbing to sensual desires.

Monoscenic narratives contain fragments excerpted from a narrative that function as signal references to a viewer and rely on his prior knowledge of the tales for their narrative completion and grasp of their moral significance. The extraordinary number of such monoscenic narratives along the coping of the railing at Bharhut (some forty-five such scenes in the surviving two-fifths of the original 330 feet of coping), may perhaps be ascribed to the character of the rite of circumambulation. As the worshipper/viewer walked slowly around the stupa, repeating the ritual circling three or more times, he could stop and selectively absorb the stories. The process of telling himself all the stories represented on the railing would undoubtedly involve several visits to the stupa, but then this was expected of the devout viewer/worshipper. As the viewer progressively circled the stupa, he was induced into extended contemplation of Buddhist legend and Buddhist virtues by the presence of so many narratives.

No perceptible hierarchy is evident in the presentation of the Buddhist legends. There is no indication of a planned continuity that might have commenced, for instance, with the earlier of the 550 *jakatas* and concluded with the final ten, which tell of the human lives of the Buddha. The reason for the absence of such planning may lie partly in the collective and popular patronage of early Buddhist mon-



2 Monoscenic narrative, Asilakhana *jataka*. Bharhut coping. (photo: American Institute of Indian Studies [AIIS])



3 Monoscenic narrative, Kukkuta *jataka*. Bharhut coping. (photo: AIIS)

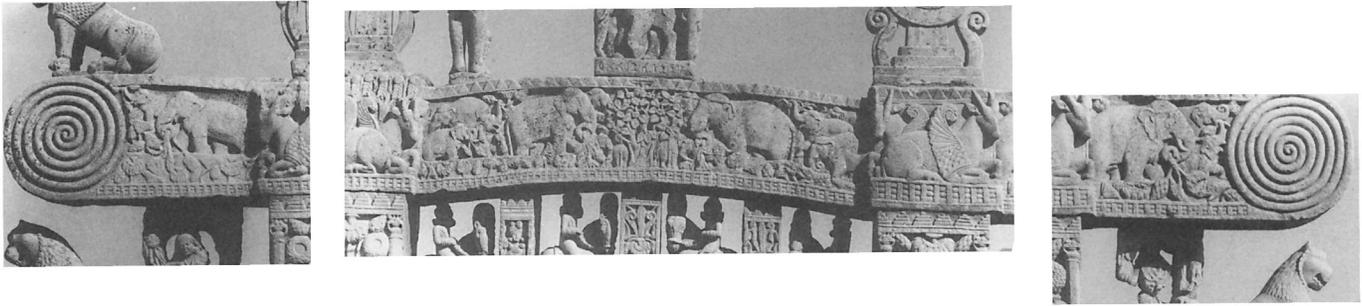
uments. The Sanchi stupa contains no less than 631 donative inscriptions,¹⁵ and though the number at Bharhut is less, there is a comparable variety and range in donations. One may deduce from the inscriptions that themes were the choice of individual donors. Specific *jatakas* seem to have been carved along the length of coping when donations were made with requests for a particular legend. The large number of captions attached to these scenes makes it likely that a literate monk took the worshipper around on his first few visits, aiding him in identification. It is intriguing, however, to note that the easily “readable” Asilakhana *jataka* has an inscribed caption that reads “woman Asadha, cemetery, jackals, kinsman” (*asadavadhu sasane sigala*

nati), identifying each element of the scene. Even the instantly recognizable cock and cat story has an inscribed label reading “cat *jataka*, cock *jataka*” (*bidala jataka kukkuta jataka*).

The instances of monoscenic narrative thus far considered were all inserted into the small spaces provided by the undulating stem of the lotus that meanders its way along the coping at Bharhut. Since such examples might seem to suggest that choice of the monoscenic mode was dictated by restrictions of space, it seems necessary to consider at least one example of the use of this mode where ample space is available. The artist carving the story of the Buddha’s previous life as the elephant Chaddanta along the inner face

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion on the nature of early patronage, see V. Dehejia, “The Popular and Collective Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage,”

in B.S. Miller, ed., *The Powers of Art. Patronage in Indian Culture*, Delhi, forthcoming.



4 Monoscentic mode, Chaddanta *jataka*. Top architrave (inner face), north gateway, Sanchi stupa, ca. 50-25 B.C. (photo: Archaeological Survey of India [ASI])

of the top architrave of the North gate at Sanchi, had at his disposal the eight-foot central span of the architrave as well as its two extensions, giving him a total space of around twelve feet. We assume that the story was chosen by the donor, but that the mode of narration was left to the artist who chose the monoscentic mode seen on the Bharhut coping. He depicted a scene of elephants in a lotus-filled lake beside a banyan tree, the introductory scene of the story that serves as a signal reference to this *jataka* tale (Fig. 4). The artist carved no less than twenty elephants to represent Chaddanta and his followers, while the lotus-filled lake is extended to cover the total space at his disposal. The extensive space available does indeed lead to a difference in the treatment of the monoscentic mode. There is a strong centralized focus around the banyan tree at the middle of the architrave, while the two extensions of the architrave display a lateral discursive movement. Two more architraves at Sanchi are devoted to the narration of the Chaddanta *jataka*; while one of them repeats the monoscentic mode, the other presents three episodes of the story, using the mode of continuous narration.

Monoscentic Narratives: Being in a State versus Being in Action

A static mode of monoscentic narration is frequently used by artists to present the viewer with scenes from the legend of the Buddha, when the supremacy of the Buddha is the prime concern. In this mode, artists generally present the single, culminating episode of a story and focus thematically on the wisdom and presence of the Buddha. In such depictions, the narrative content is sharply reduced, and the reliefs represent scenes in which the action has already taken place. The artist presents us with the result of a narrative episode, or with the situation that immediately follows that narrative episode. In this context, the term "being in a state," as contrasted with "being in action," seems suitable. An instance of the use of the static monoscentic mode

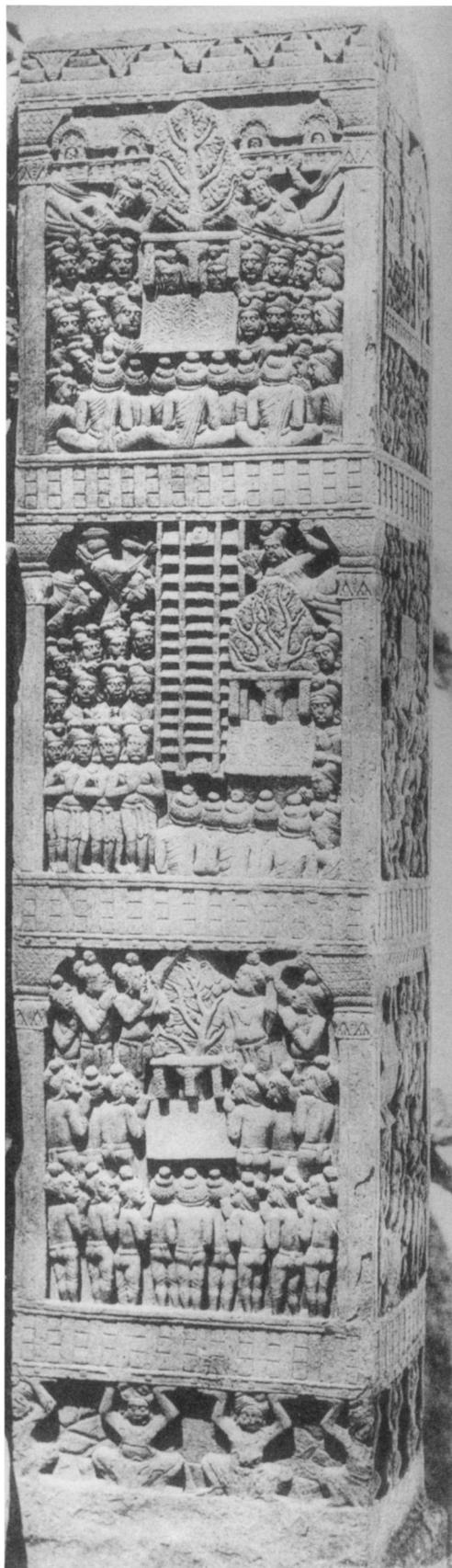
from Bharhut is the portrayal of the miracle at Sravasti, on the lowest panel of the Ajatashatru pillar (Fig. 5), in which the Buddha caused a full-grown mango tree to emerge instantly from a mango seed. The artist was not interested in presenting the viewer with the sequence of events (which constitute the episode) that led up to the performance of the miracle. Rather, he presents the state after the miracle, when the mango tree had already sprung up, and the panel focuses on the figure of the Buddha, represented by the parasol-sheltered throne placed below the mango tree, surrounded by worshippers offering him homage. It is the divine power of the Buddha that is highlighted in this narrative, in which action is totally absent. Meyer Schapiro, who discusses differences between representations revolving around "being in a state" and "being in action," establishes that static depictions were regularly used in situations where theological concerns were predominant.¹⁶ Clearly, the artist of the Bharhut Sravasti panel was interested in emphasizing the supremacy and power of the Buddha at the expense of the fascinating series of events leading up to the Sravasti miracle, events in the life of a human Buddha. Incidentally, it was an artistic convention, during the first century B.C., to depict the presence of the Buddha by a series of emblems and to eschew the anthropomorphic form.¹⁷ At certain sites, this convention lingered into a later period, existing side by side with the human image of the Buddha.

The Sravasti miracle is one of three scenes, all emphasizing "being in a state," that stand in a diachronic relationship on the Ajatashatru pillar (Fig. 5). Commencing with the miracle of the mango tree at the bottom of the pillar, the viewer must move to the topmost panel where the Buddha preaches to the gods in the Trayastrimsa heavens, and must end with the central panel that depicts the descent from the heavens at Sankissa. The preaching in the heavens that followed the Sravasti miracle likewise emphasizes the great wisdom of the Buddha, and belongs to

¹⁶ M. Schapiro, *Words and Pictures, On the Literal and Symbolic in the Interpretation of a Text*, The Hague, 1973.

¹⁷ It is not my intention here to enter into the discussion of the aniconic controversy initiated by Susan Huntington. Suffice it to say that although I agree that several panels do indeed depict pilgrimage sites (*tirthas*), I am unable to accept her theory that they represent a ritual reenactment of

scenes from the life of the Buddha. It seems undeniable that artists of the century before Christ regularly used emblems to suggest the presence of the Buddha. The reason was probably an unwritten convention that the Buddha should not be confined within a bodily form, when he had finally freed himself from the bonds of a body after over five hundred births.



5 Static monoscenic narration, diachronic mode. Ajatashatru pillar, Bharhut (photo: ASI)

the static category of narration. Its compositional similarity to the Sravasti miracle is striking and, in isolation, would present problems of identification. Its position in conjunction with the Sravasti and Sankissa miracles enables those familiar with the cycles of the life of the Buddha to place it as the intervening episode in the heavens. The descent at Sankissa includes elements of action in presenting us with ladders containing the footprint of the Buddha on the topmost and lowest rungs, as references to his act of descent. Yet, the action is complete, as indicated by the lower footprint, while the emblematic depiction of the worship of the Buddha, represented by throne, parasol, and tree to the left of the panel, reinforces the fact that the event is over. Thus, even in a panel that narrates an event of action, the static mode is predominant.

A second example from Bharhut, which represents the enlightenment of the Buddha, further demonstrates the nature of monoscenic narratives that focus on being in a state. The uppermost of the three panels that constitute the Prasenajit pillar (Fig. 6) centers around a shrine beneath the bodhi tree, flanked by worshippers, with flying figures hovering above; the emphasis is on the state of enlightenment, rather than on action or causality. The interest of the artist is not in the depiction of the sequence of events that led up to the enlightenment. Rather, emphasis is placed on the supreme wisdom of the Buddha, and the panel is thus demonstrative rather than descriptive. Narrative content, as such, is reduced, and we are presented with the aftermath of a narrative episode. In the mind of the artist responsible for the panel, it is evident that the symbolic import of the enlightenment surpassed the narrative aspect. The inscription on the shrine around the bodhi tree tells us that this is the *bodho* (enlightenment) of Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha.

While there appear to be three different episodes presented in the three panels of the Prasenajit pillar, a closer scrutiny reveals, in fact, that the three are of simultaneous occurrence and are not causally connected. The panel immediately below the enlightenment depicts the worship of the gods at the moment of that great event. The gods are identified by four separate inscriptions (one damaged), inserted sideways into the bands of railing that enclose the panel, as four different categories of deities belonging to the four directions. Connecting the two panels, on a visual level, is an elephant-topped pillar that has its origin in the central panel but culminates in the topmost one. Toward the left of the central panel is the figure of Mara, the evil one of Buddhism, seated upon the ground, drawing lines in the mud with a twig. Having failed in his attempt to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment, Mara sat on the ground, we are told, and disconsolately drew sixteen lines in the mud, stating, as he drew each line, "this I did not achieve; but *he* did."

The lowest panel depicts the simultaneous celebration of enlightenment by the heavenly nymphs. It contains no less than five inscriptions, of which four provide us with the names of the nymphs, three being inserted immediately adjacent to the dancing figures, and one carved against the pilaster flanking the scene to the right. The fifth inscription,

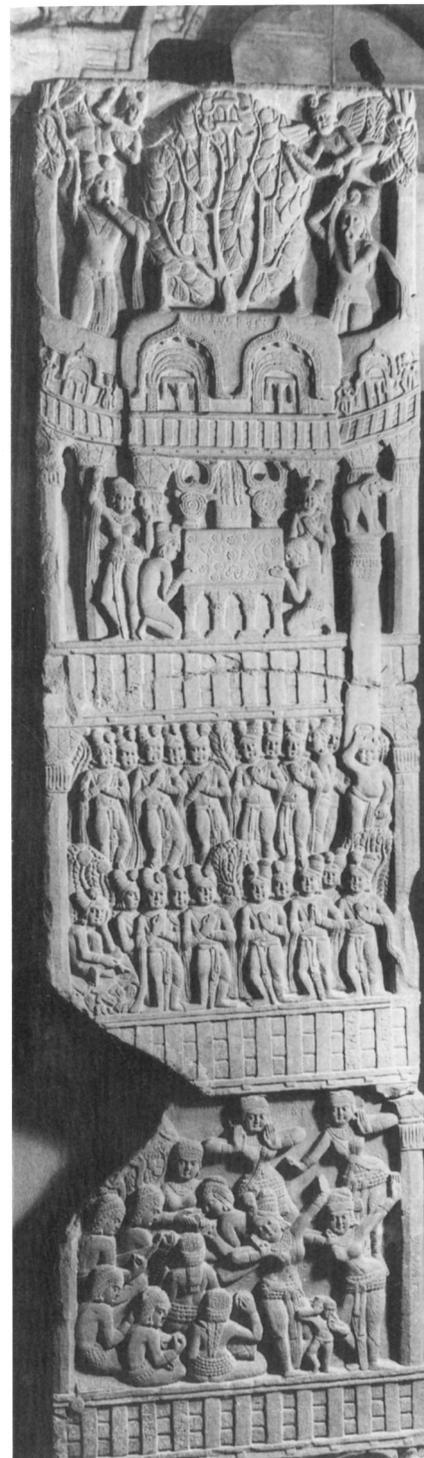
inserted sideways into the relief band bordering the scene reads, "the ravishing music of the gods, enlivened by mime." This face of the Prasenajit pillar, which emphasizes the static mode of narration, focuses on the state of enlightenment of the Buddha and presents us with the aftermath of the great event, portraying episodes that exist in a synchronic relationship. The Mara episode alone is somewhat anomalous in that it took place after the enlightenment. One can only assume that the artist did not consider this slight temporal shift to be of significance.

These two Bharhut pillars present the viewer with narrative sequences that involve a vertical movement. The Ajatashatru pillar commences its diachronous narrative at the bottom, and requires an ascent to the topmost panel before culminating at the center. The Prasenajit pillar, which presents scenes of synchronous occurrence, may be read more easily and directly from top to bottom. The choice of vertical as opposed to lateral movement would appear to depend on the particular architectural member that was being covered with narrative reliefs, and on the obvious compositional difference imposed by the vertical format of a pillar as compared to the horizontality of a gateway architrave. It must be mentioned that the panels on a pillar are not invariably related; a second face of the Prasenajit pillar, for instance, presents one event from the life of the Buddha and two from unrelated *jatakas*. Such a situation arose presumably from the vagaries of collective patronage, when a less affluent donor paid for a single panel in place of the entire face of a pillar.

Synoptic Narratives

In the synoptic mode of narration, multiple episodes from a story are depicted within a single frame, but their temporal sequence is not communicated, and there is no consistent or formal order of representation with regard to either causality or temporality. The multiple episodes of a story generally contain the repeated figure of the protagonist, and I thus use the word synoptic in a wider sense than A.M. Snodgrass, who would exclude from the synoptic category those scenes with a repetition of the protagonist.¹⁸

Five episodes from the monkey *jataka* are depicted within a rectangular panel from the Sanchi stupa (Fig. 7), with no indication whatsoever as to temporal succession or causality. The viewer's attention is likely to be caught by the river that curves across the panel, the six prominent foreground figures, and perhaps by the monkey straddling the panel at the very top. However, even the knowing viewer must closely scrutinize the panel to "read" the story accurately, and to realize that the foreground figures are of little relevance to the action, or that the entire section to the far side of the river is marginal to the tale. To the lower left, behind a group of soldiers and musicians, a monarch is seen arriving on horseback. Roughly at the center of the panel is the half-hidden figure of an archer, bending backwards as he aims his arrow directly upward. If we realize the importance of the archer and follow the upward movement of his bow, we see a monkey who has stretched himself out to form a bridge across the river below, and we



6 Static monoscenic narration, synchronic mode. Prasenajit pillar, Bharhut (photo: ASI)

surmise that his monkey friends are escaping from the archer to the safety of a tree on the opposite bank where deer slumber in a quiet forest. Below the monkey, two men hold a piece of cloth as a stretcher, and to the upper left of the panel are the seated figures of the monkey and the

¹⁸ A.M. Snodgrass, *Narration and Allusion in Archaic Greek Art*, London, 1982.



7 Synoptic narrative, Monkey *jataka*. Sanchi stupa. (photo: ASI)

monarch. Further analysis will make it evident that the river meandering across the panel creates a distinction between the area where all the activity takes place and a distant safe environment. The artist has left much unsaid and given prominence to subsidiary figures, so that even those familiar with the Buddha's previous life as the monkey-king will find it difficult to read this narrative correctly. They will need to supply more than one key element of the story, including the fact that the arch-enemy monkey jumped so heavily upon the monkey-king's back while escaping across the river that the monkey-king was mortally wounded and fell into the river. Viewers will need to supply the human monarch's admiration of the scene he has witnessed, understand the reason for the stretcher, and view the last episode as the monkey-king preaching to the monarch on the vital importance of attending, at any cost, to the welfare of his people. It is this virtue that the story exemplifies, and of which the viewer has to remind himself while stringing the episodes together. While the artist has undoubtedly supplied clues to reading the elements in some order, and while a certain structure appears to underlie that order, the viewer is able to "read" the tale in a coherent manner only after a recapitulation such as that presented above.

A second instance of synoptic narrative, which again presents a challenge in decipherment,¹⁹ even to those familiar with the story, is a medallion from the stupa at

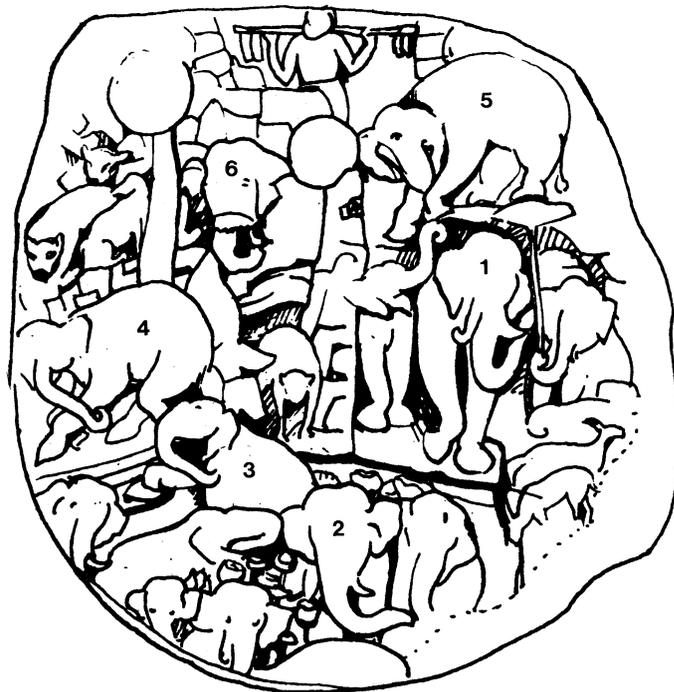
Amaravati, belonging to the second century A.D. In three episodes and a total of seven scenes, the artist presents the story of the Buddha's previous birth as the elephant Chaddanta (Fig. 8. In view of the abraded condition of the original medallion and the complex nature of the visual treatment, I have superimposed my numbering scheme upon the image in order to facilitate reading of the narrative.) The center of the medallion is "dead" space, and the artist commences at the right end of the central zone where he depicts Chaddanta in the forest, with the identifying regal parasol above him (1). The lower zone is treated as a lotus-filled pond, and here appears an important episode of this story, treated in three scenes. To the right, Chaddanta presents his chief queen, Maha-subhadda, with the trouble-causing lotus (2), and to the left, his offended and jealous junior queen, Culla-subhadda, leaves the pond (3). Her figure is repeated to the extreme left (4), just beyond the pond, where she is lying down to die (praying for revenge in a future birth). The story now moves to the upper zone, where to the far right the artist has depicted his next episode. Here is the unsuspecting Chaddanta, at whom a hunter (sent by Culla-subhadda reborn as the queen of Benares) aims an arrow from his hideout in a concealed pit (5). To the left of the upper zone, the hunter saws off the tusks requested by the queen, while Chaddanta quietly acquiesces (6). The final scene chosen by the artist, located at the very top of the medallion, portrays the hunter departing with the tusks (7). In this example of synoptic narrative, there is little indication to the viewer of either temporal sequence or causality.

Both instances of synoptic narrative present multiple episodes placed in varied patterns within a single space. One of the implications of this method is that the artist relied on a knowing viewer. These "illegible" narratives could be read only by those who previously knew the story, and could hence follow the episodes in their correct sequence, supplying the missing narrative elements from their memory. The viewer was stimulated in his own story-telling by being presented with more than one image of the same characters in diverse spaces and actions. Yet the depictions depended for their decipherment on the prior knowledge of the viewer.

The second implication of such a method concerns its tendency to undermine the chronology, and this certainly influences the depiction of a story; its outcome is visibly known and seen at the outset. The narrative layout of these medallions and panels is such that different episodes are perceived simultaneously by the viewer. The manner in which one approaches synoptic visual narrative is almost the reverse of the way one hears or reads a story. Rather than putting elements together to make a whole, a whole is given and has to be taken apart in order to be intelligible. As far as time sequence is concerned, one may first view an episode from the middle of a story, next one from the

¹⁹ In my course devoted to "Buddhist Visual Narratives" (see n. 1), I read aloud the entire Chaddanta *jataka*, halfway through a semester, at a time when we had already examined the story as presented on the architraves

at Sanchi: members of the class proposed several divergent readings of the Amaravati medallion discussed here.



8 Synoptic narrative, Chaddanta *jataka*. Amaravati, 2nd century A.D. (photo: ASI)

end, and only then one from the beginning. As Richard Brilliant has observed, "temporal succession can be conceived as a road that neither comes from somewhere nor goes anywhere but is comprehended, as if from far away, as a whole."²⁰ The various events of these *jatakas*, temporally overlapped, are meant to communicate a religious and moral message — the victory of good over evil. It is not the revealing of the facts that is important — the facts are known to the viewer. It is the telling of the story, or stimulating the viewer into telling himself the story, that is the significant experience. It is an end game, a teleological scheme.

Synoptic visual narrative, by its choice of episodes depicted, often gives priority to events that a literary narrative, whether verbal or written, does not, and it can actually persuade the viewer to consider the "story" differently. For instance, the omission of the scene of the enemy-monkey breaking his king's back (included by an artist at Bharhut), minimizes the human interest angle, and helps to focus instead on monarchical responsibilities, while the prominence given to the human monarch's retinue reinforces this emphasis on kingship. In addition, the viewer is obliged to enter into a much more active relationship with the content of a story. He is obliged to become a more or less active participant; the viewer is compelled to be the storyteller too.

Conflated Narrative

Conflated narrative is complementary to the synoptic mode, with which it shares many features. However, while multiple episodes of a story or multiple scenes of an episode

are presented, the figure of the protagonist is conflated instead of being repeated from one scene to the next; this characteristic overlapping manner of presentation undermines temporal succession even further.

Typical of conflated narrative is the Dipankara *jataka* as depicted by the Indo-Hellenistic school of Gandhara, around the third century A.D. (Fig. 9). The tale is of the young brahmin Sumedha, who worships Dipankara Buddha and is blessed by him to be reborn as the historical Gautama Buddha. The right half of the panel is occupied by the enlarged figure of Dipankara Buddha, followed by a monk. At the extreme left, Sumedha buys lotuses from a young woman. He then throws the lotuses at Dipankara (they remain suspended around the Buddha's head), prostrates himself at his feet, and rises up into the air upon hearing Dipankara's pronouncement. The single image of Dipankara is to be read as receiving the lotuses, blessing Sumedha, as well as making the prediction, and thus as participating in three scenes in which Sumedha is portrayed three times.

A second variety of conflated narrative may be seen in a medallion from Bharhut, which presents four episodes from the deer *jataka* (Fig. 10). The artist sets the scene by presenting us with a forest in which a large deer occupies the center of the space, while others of the herd, all of a smaller size, are shown beside him. Having depicted the setting, the artist moves to the lower strip of the medallion, which he schematically treats to depict a river, and shows us the deer rescuing a hunter from drowning. On the far right of the medallion, the artist positions the ungrateful hunter pointing out the deer to the king's archers, who stand with strung bows, ready to shoot. It is the same deer who set the scene for the story at whom the hunter is pointing with raised index finger. For the final episode of the *jataka*

²⁰ Brilliant (as in n. 2), 18.



9 Conflated narrative, Dipankara *jataka*. Gandhara, 2nd/3rd century A.D. (photo: author)

in which the deer preaches to the king and his followers, the artist uses this same central deer, now placing the king and his followers, all with hands joined in worship, toward the center of the medallion, beside the deer. Here is the conflation of more than one episode of the story, with the central deer intended to be read as participating in three episodes. While the various appearances of the deer have been conflated into a single figure, the narrative events are quite distinct as compared to the Dipankara *jataka* panel. The treatment shares features of continuous narrative, to be discussed next, and revolves around the central conflated deer. The composition appears eminently suitable for the format of a circular medallion, but the conflation of the figure of the protagonist certainly confuses a reading of temporal succession.

Continuous Narrative

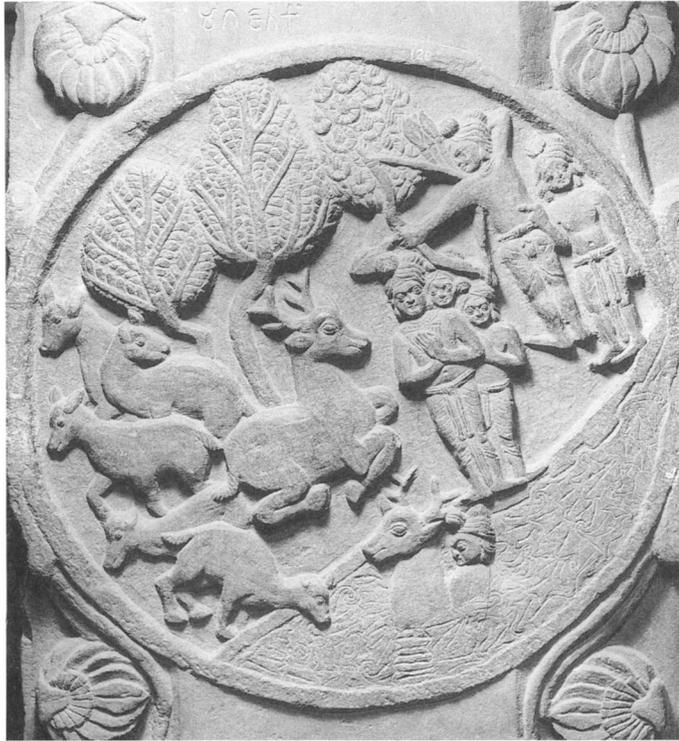
Continuous narratives depict successive episodes of a story, or successive events of an episode, within a single frame, repeating the figure of the protagonist in the course of the narrative. Consecutive time frames are presented within a single visual field, without any dividers to distinguish one time frame from the next; however, temporal succession and spatial movement are generally clearly indicated. The comprehension of continuous narrative requires awareness that more than one moment of time is presented within a single visual frame, and that multiple appearances of the protagonist indicate successive phases of action. In the words of Otto Pächt, "it is the very essence of continuous narrative to render changes visible by comparing the same person in different movements or states."²¹

A classic instance of continuous narrative that depicts successive phases of a single episode, and in which spatial

movement and temporal development are clearly presented, is the great departure of the Buddha, portrayed on the outer face of the central architrave of the east gateway at Sanchi (Fig. 11). The narrative moves from left to right along the eight-foot span of the architrave, where the Buddha-to-be emerges on horseback from the gates of his palace with the groom leading the horse. (Since the Buddha is not represented in anthropomorphic form during this phase, his presence on horseback is indicated by the regal parasol that hovers above the horse). To depict the progressive ride away from the palace, the artist has repeated the figure of the protagonist horse-and-rider another three times across the span of the architrave. The completion of this episode at the far end of the architrave, when the rider dismounts from the horse, is represented by a parasol poised above a pair of footprints. To indicate that the riderless horse and groom then return to the palace, the artist has placed them facing left, counter to the movement of the ride away from the palace. Temporal succession is clear, and spatial progression is equally straightforward in this depiction, in which horse and rider are depicted a total of five times, without any internal framing devices to distinguish their various appearances.

The dominant or prevailing movement in Buddhist visual narratives is of obvious relevance, but the nature of the rite of circumambulation rules out any categorical statement on the matter. A stupa is circumambulated in clockwise manner, both from the exterior of the sacred area, and from within its railed enclosure. When outside the sacred area, the pilgrim will view the reliefs on the railing (its outer face) from right to left, and its narratives generally follow this direction of movement. Once the pilgrim enters the railed enclosure, he will view the narratives on the same railing (its inner face) from left to right, while experiencing reliefs placed against the stupa itself from right to left. Thus the direction of movement in a narrative frieze or painting may commence from either left or right, depending on its

²¹ O. Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth-Century England*, Oxford, 1962, 8, n.1.



10 Conflated narrative, Deer *jataka*. Bharhut (photo: ASI)

position relative to the stupa or other sacred object.

A second and more extensive example of continuous narrative is the portrayal of the Vessantara *jataka*, in a series of twenty-one scenes, on the north gateway at Sanchi (Fig. 12). Both sides of the lowest architrave and its extensions (with the exception of the eastern extension of the outer face) are utilized to present the gradual unfolding of the story. The figures of the protagonists, Prince Vessantara, his wife Madri, and their two children, are repeated no less than fourteen times. On both faces of the architrave, the movement is from right to left. While such movement would be appropriate for the outer face, in which the viewer would be circumambulating the stupa on the exterior of the enclosure, it is no longer suitable for the inner face. Here, the circling viewer, keeping the stupa to his right, would view the twelve feet of narrative (the architrave and its extensions) from left to right. It would appear that the sculptor carved one face of the architrave, and then commenced the inner face at the end he had just completed, apparently disregarding the manner in which the circumambulating viewer would experience the story. In any event, the viewer must perforce abandon the general movement of circumambulation if he wishes to experience this story in its entirety. Once he has followed Prince Vessantara and his family into banishment, he must stop and enter through the gateway in order to follow the denouement of the *jataka* tale along the inner face of the same architrave. The stop, an important element in narrative construction, comes at an appropriate juncture here.

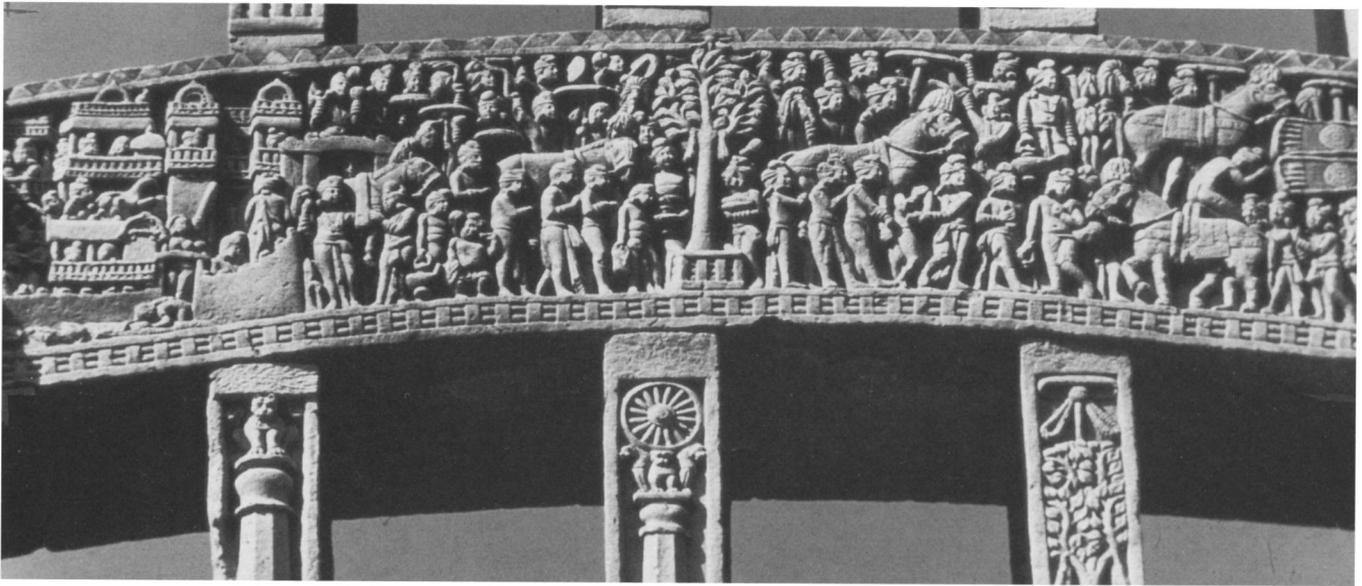
²² Sometimes referred to as cyclical narrative.

Scenes 1 to 8 on the outer face of the gateway are relatively easy to read and move from right to left using the background, with movement from left to right, to depict the completion of episodes that commenced in the foreground. Prince Vessantara gives away the state elephant, is banished together with his wife and children, gives away his horses and chariot, and proceeds on foot toward the forest. The inner face of the architrave, which contains scenes 9 to 21, is slightly more complex in its reading of temporal development. The narrative commences with a clear right-to-left movement, and uses the background extensively for the completion of the various episodes. Vessantara, seen in a forest hermitage, now gives away his children, and then his wife. Toward the end of the narrative, however, the artist introduces an unexpected movement from left to right, with the king riding into the forest to find his banished son, so that even the viewer quite familiar with the story of Prince Vessantara finds himself momentarily challenged with the decipherment of this visual narrative toward its completion. There are no internal scene dividers, and the viewer unravels the story merely by moving from one depiction of the Vessantara family to the next. Yet the spatial treatment of the story is quite logical. The first scene presents us with the palace from which Vessantara is banished, while the last scene once again portrays the palace into which Vessantara is welcomed back. The appearance of a palace thus signifies to the viewer either the commencement of the narrative or its conclusion.

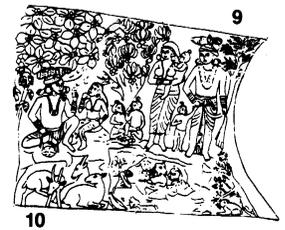
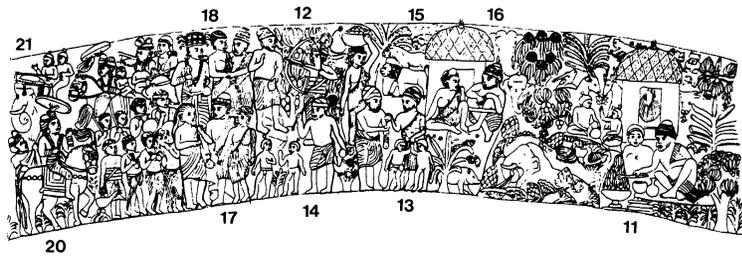
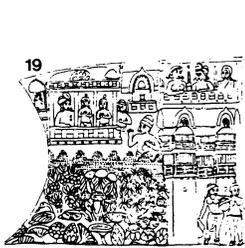
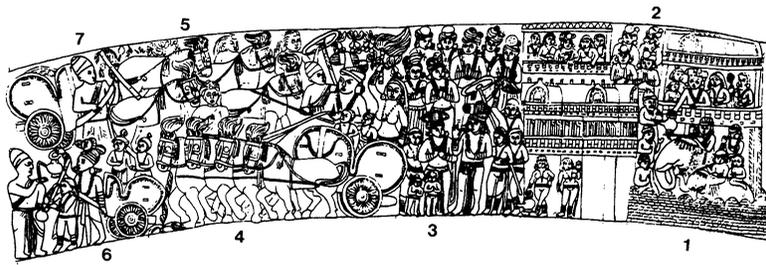
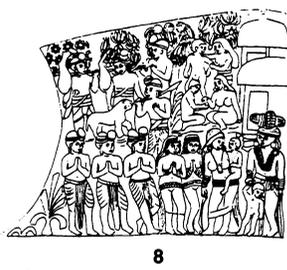
Linear Narrative: The Frieze

Linear narrative,²² like continuous narrative, contains the repeated appearance of the protagonist at different times and places; the distinction between these modes is compositional in nature, and revolves around enframing. In continuous narrative, temporal development is to be understood by means of intrinsic criteria, and requires, on the part of the viewer, an integrating effort of mind and eye. In linear narrative, on the other hand, extrinsic criteria are used to demarcate temporal divisions. Scenes are separated from one another by a variety of compositional means, and generally each episode is contained within a separate frame. The viewer does not find the reappearance of the protagonist in each unified setting illogical or inconsistent, as he may do in continuous narrative. In linear narrative, each scene is a unit in itself; each event occurs at one particular moment, in one particular space.

The Vessantara *jataka* at Goli makes effective use of this method (Fig. 13), and in a panel over ten feet long, the artist depicts the story of the prince whose charity is a byword in Buddhist legend. Different episodes of the story, to be read from left to right, are neatly demarcated by columns, trees, and other vertical devices, so that the viewer is led from one scene to the next in a clear sequential manner. Commencing with column dividers, we see Prince Vessantara riding his elephant, and then giving it away. We are next shown the departure of the banished prince, with his wife and two children in an ox cart, followed by Vessantara giving away first the oxen, then the cart, and finally the two children. This central section of narrative uses a



11 Continuous narrative, Great departure of the Buddha. Central architrave (outer face), East gateway, Sanchi stupa (photo: Wendy Holden)



12 Continuous narrative, Vessantara *jataka*, both faces of lowest architrave, east gateway, Sanchi stupa (after Schlingloff)

series of subtle markers — rocks in a pyramidal formation surmounted by a tree — to divide the various episodes. The final episodes, culminating in the reunion of the Vesantara family with the king, are once again demarcated by columns. These divisions introduced by the artist are characteristic of the style of linear narrative; they resemble the subheadings of an article introduced by an author to facilitate the reader's understanding of the whole.

A second instance of linear narrative, this time from Nagarjunakonda, demonstrates even more pointedly the extrinsic nature of the temporal divisions introduced. A long frieze, to be read from right to left, depicts a set of four episodes to tell the story of the Buddha's half-brother, Nanda. Punctuating the episodes are small panels, totally unconnected to the narrative, each one containing an amorous couple flanked by pilasters (Fig. 14). The nature of the motif used to demarcate temporal divisions is unusual, and certainly causes the viewer to stop and consider the sensually poised couples rather than move on rapidly to the next episode of the narrative. While a few friezes at Nagarjunakonda have purely architectural divisions, the use of couples flanked by pilasters is the undoubted norm.

Each enframed narrative unit of the Nanda story is complete in itself, with the repetition of the figures of Nanda and the Buddha from one unit to the next. The first scene, somewhat damaged, portrays the Buddha carrying an alms-bowl, with Nanda beside him. The next episode tells of Nanda's induction into the Buddhist Order and depicts his head being shaven in the presence of the Buddha. The artist then moves on to the flight of the Buddha and Nanda to Indra's heaven, leaving the viewer to fill in that part of the story which tells of how Nanda was unable to forget his beautiful wife and wished to leave the Order. It was to cure him of his love-sickness that the Buddha decided to confront him with the beauty of the nymphs of heaven. The artist presents us with the flying figures of Buddha and Nanda, and a group of these beings. The prominent figure of a monkey at the feet of the flying figures reminds us that Nanda now found his wife more akin to the monkey, compared to the nymphs. The final segment of the frieze portrays a cured Nanda being welcomed by the residents of his town.

While amorous figures may perhaps be appropriate to punctuate episodes of this story, they are used without regard to the theme of the narrative, and even when the frieze tells the story of the Buddha's life summarized as a series of great events. One such couple-punctuated frieze portrays five episodes from the Buddhological cycle — the birth, the departure, enlightenment, first sermon, and the death or *mahaparinirvana*. Couples, representing fertility and hence growth, abundance, and prosperity, are symbols of the auspicious in the art of India; they had clearly become conventional scene dividers in the art of the southern region of Andhra. Individual enframed units of a narrative frieze frequently partake of the nature of monoscenic narrative; however, the various units of a frieze are invariably intended to be viewed successively as a total experience. Units from friezes depicting the life of the Buddha are often of the static monoscenic mode, emphasizing the supremacy

and wisdom of the Buddha.

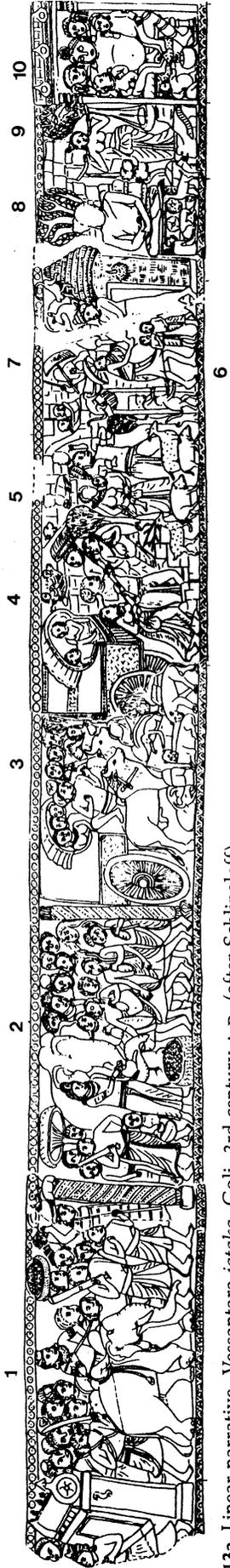
The most spectacular instance of linear narrative may be seen in the friezes, 1260 feet in length, that cover the terraces of the great stupa at Borobudur in central Java, built around 800 A.D. Running around the walls of the first terrace, along the upper section of the wall (the lower depicts the *jatakas*), are a complete series of scenes from the life of the Buddha, commencing with the scene in the Tushita heavens when the Buddha announces that it is time for him to be born on earth as Gautama, and ending with the first sermon. Using the mode of linear narrative, the artist presents his viewer with a sequence of 120 coherent, independent episodes, each contained within the boundaries of a panel, ten and a half feet long and three feet high. The circumambulating pilgrim is presented with a unique opportunity to contemplate the life cycle of the Buddha.

Narrative Networks

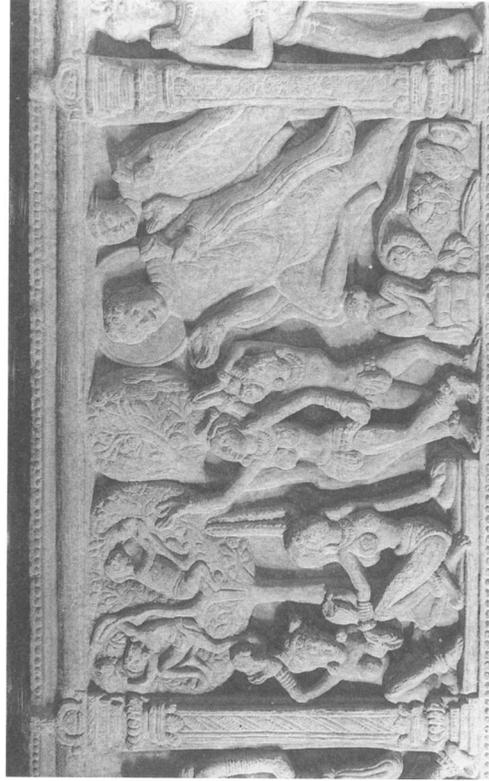
A complex variety of story-telling, which may be described as a system of networks, is seen in the murals at the monastic site of Ajanta, executed toward the end of the fifth century A.D. Though all the caves at Ajanta, including the chapels, are covered with painted scenes, the most ambitious narrative sequences are found in the residential *viharas* at the site. The entire side walls of such caves, interrupted by the doorways that lead into cells for individual monks, are given over to the depiction of a single narrative, and the result is frequently one of labyrinthine complexity. These interlaced sequences meander their way across the walls of Ajanta in such a manner that several murals remain unidentified. There are few clues as to where a story is likely to commence, and where one might expect it to conclude, and it appears that only an intimate knowledge of the Buddhist texts popular in the fifth century would enable one to unravel these tortuous sequences.

For the purpose of this essay, I shall briefly consider two narrative sequences found on the two side walls of cave 17 at Ajanta (Fig. 15), a spacious *vihara* some seventy feet square produced under the patronage of Prince Upendragupta, a feudatory of the Vakataka king Harisena who dominated the region. The story of Simhala, told in twenty-nine scenes, extends forty-five feet along the central portion of the right wall of the cave, covering the entire thirteen-foot span from floor to ceiling. Though the protagonist, the merchant Simhala, is repeated in several scenes, there is none of the coherence that accompanies continuous narrative, with its clear depiction of temporal succession and spatial movement. Instead, the action moves across the forty-five feet of wall in an unpredictable manner, commencing at the lower level of the right end and moving upward, then working its way across the upper segment of wall to the left where it meanders downward, finally culminating in the central section of the available space. Within each of these three segments — right, left, and center — the action moves in crisscross fashion, and no specific pattern emerges from a close study of the painted wall. In fact, one is confronted with a complete network of movement in space and time.

A line drawing of the Simhala story (Fig. 16) as analyzed



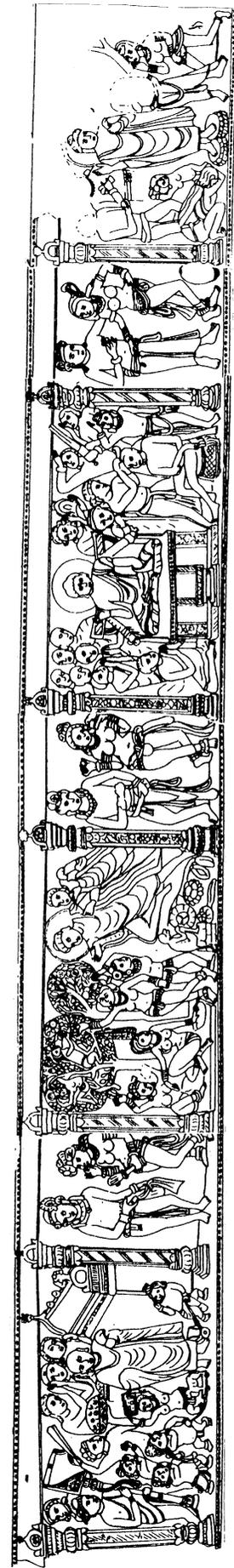
13a Linear narrative, Vessantara *jātaka*. Goli, 3rd century A.D. (after Schlingloff)



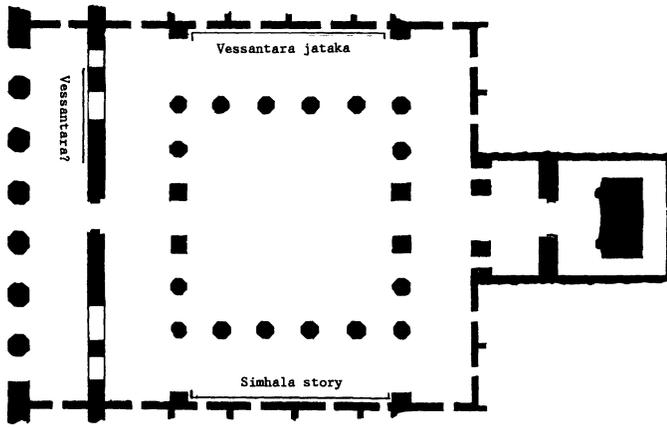
14b Detail of 14a (photo: ASI)



13b Detail of 13a (photo: ASI)



14a Linear narrative, Story of Nanda. Nagarjunakonda, 3rd century A.D. (after Schlingloff)



15 Plan of cave 17 at Ajanta, showing location of narrative sequences discussed (after Schlingloff)

by Schlingloff,²³ accompanied by an abbreviated summary of the story, makes it possible to follow the action. Schlingloff's drawing of the architectural motifs (minus the human figures) used by the artist in this complex narration to demarcate and set off certain segments and scenes (Fig. 17), is helpful. Yet, these architectural frames do not stand out sufficiently on the painted wall, and we are left with doubts as to where one scene ends and another starts.

- (1) Simhala and fellow traders shipwrecked on island.
- (2-6) Witches transform themselves into beautiful women and entice traders to live with them.
- (7) [destroyed] Simhala discovers imprisoned merchants in an iron chamber and is told the truth about the witches. Only the magic horse Balhala can save them.
- (8) Simhala takes the news to the traders.
- (9-13) Balhala agrees to "fly" traders to India, but if they look down with longing at the witches, they will fall and be devoured by them. Simhala alone reaches home.
- (14) Simhala's witch-wife arrives in India with her son, and he rejects her as a witch.
- (15-18) The king of the land takes her into his harem.
- (19-23) She admits fellow-witches who devour the king and members of his court.
- (24-26) The people decide to crown Simhala.
- (27-29) Simhala takes his army to the witches' island and defeats them.

The basic arrangement of the Simhala story across the wall of the cave may be viewed in terms of geographical relationships. The right third of the narrative takes place on the witches' island, and the left third is located in the palace of the king. The central area, containing the conclusion of the story, as well as earlier episodes relating to Simhala, is space that belongs to Simhala. The upper zone contains Simhala's home, the central zone his coronation, while the lower area depicts the climactic confrontation between Simhala's army and the hordes of witches. Yet, it

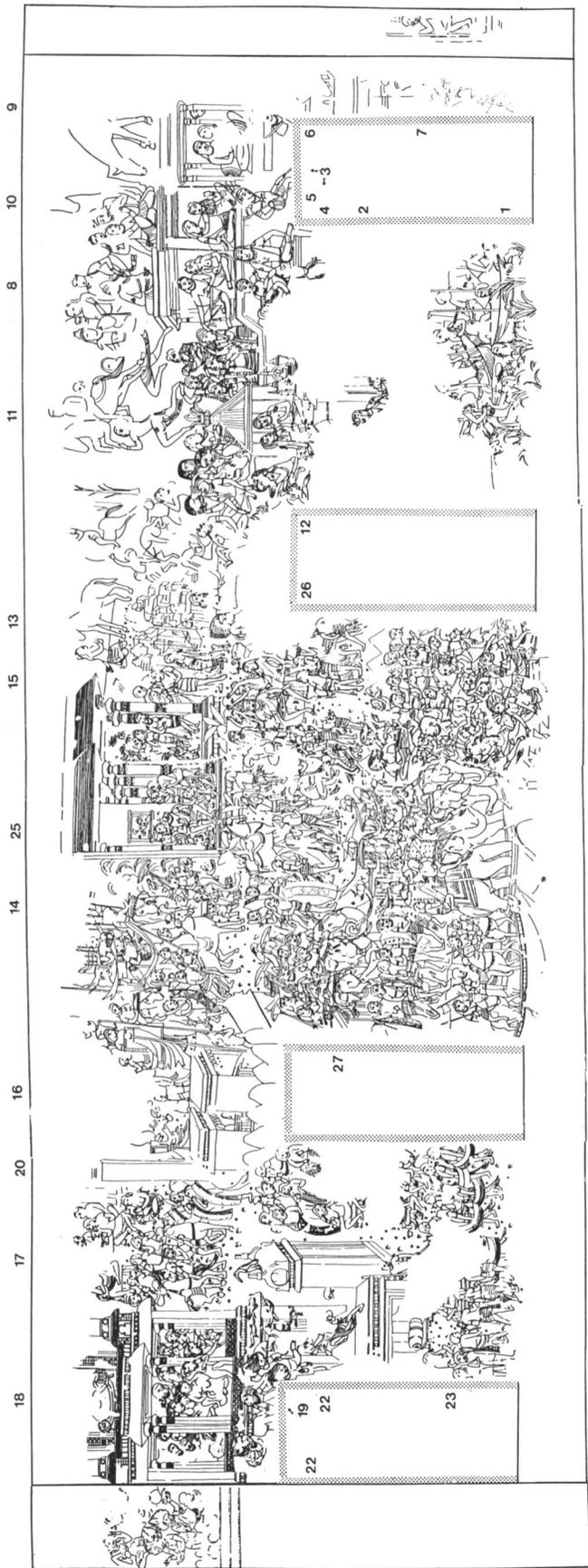
would appear that in certain ways the artists of this extensive narrative failed to achieve narrative coherency. There are, for instance, multiple points of entry into the story of Simhala, and thus too many immediate options to the viewer. In addition, if one walks around the cave in the circumambulatory mode, such movement will bring us via the conclusion of the story to its commencement. Perhaps the artist's intention was merely to have the viewer recognize the story and view its major episodes, rather than follow its detailed denouement.

The second major narrative in cave 17 is the well-known *Vessantara jataka*, the various episodes of which are well-nigh impossible to mistake. Yet the mural depicting this story along forty-five feet of the left wall of the cave, directly opposite the Simhala legend, presents the viewer with a number of problems. Though the story commences on the left and moves gradually across the wall to the far right, the often achronological and apparently random arrangement of the episodes is curious. For instance, the scene depicting the evil brahmin Jujuka asking Vessantara for his children is placed high up on the wall above the doorway of the third cell, while the actual gift of the children, with the pouring of water to legitimize it, is placed at ground level beside that same doorway. It is also strange, given the expansive space at the disposal of the artist, that the gift of the state elephant that resulted in the banishment is not depicted, nor is the giving away of Madri. The events are not arranged geographically, as in the case of the Simhala narrative, and we do not find palace scenes at the commencement and the end, with forest scenes between, as in the continuous narrative on the Sanchi architrave. The artist appears, however, to have conceived of the story in terms of thematic clusters, which he placed at an easily readable eye-level. Between doorways 1 and 2 is the gift of the horses; between 2 and 3 is the gift of the chariot; and between doorways 3 and 4 are scenes relating to the gift of the children. All acts of giving (charity is the moral exemplified by this tale) are thus in readily viewable locations.

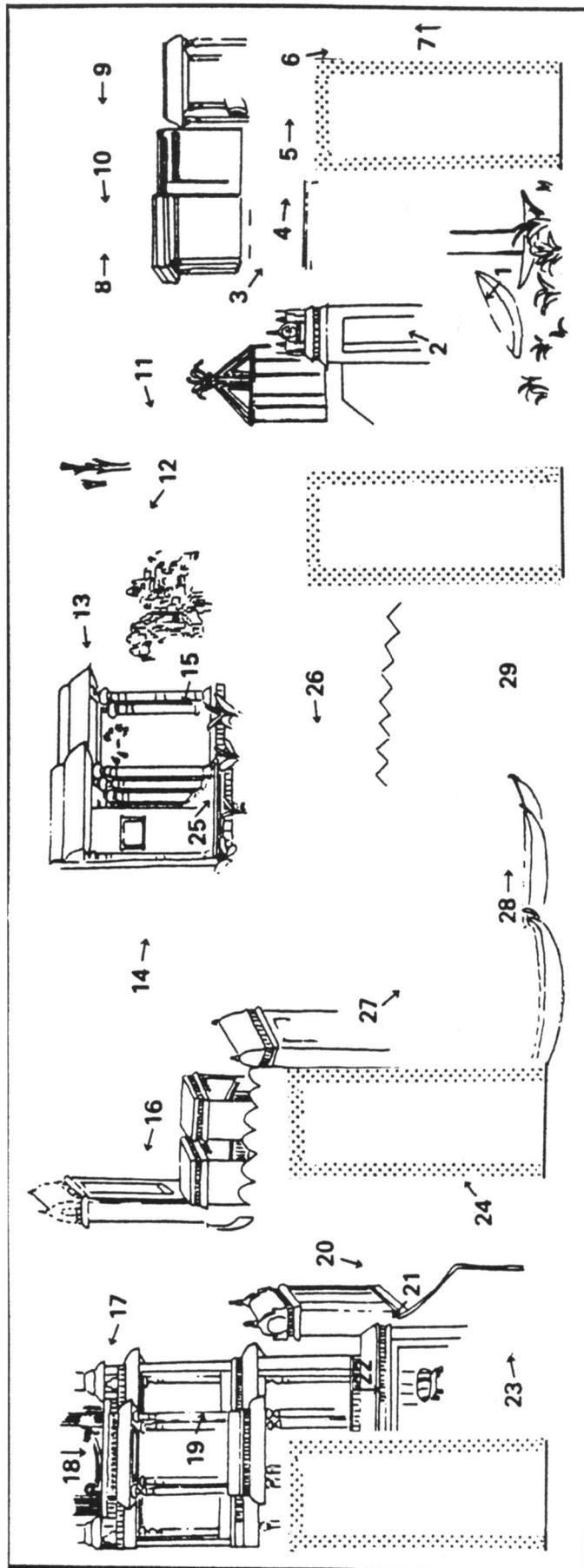
Reading the Vessantara narrative is further complicated by the problematic nature of scenes in the front veranda, which appear to represent vignettes from the initial stages of the story, which then continues within the cave on the left wall. One such scene depicts Vessantara and Madri leaving the palace, while to the right of the banishment, a prince distributes goods to charity. Are these intended to be signal references to the Vessantara legend? If so, is their placement in the veranda intended to draw worshippers into the cave to view the complete denouement of the tale along the left side wall?

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to discuss the reception of a narrative and the viewer's response to the manner in which a tale is presented. It is possible to view the work of art as having two aspects — artistic and aesthetic. The artistic aspect refers to the work created by the artist, while

²³ D. Schlingloff, *Studies in Ajanta Paintings*, New Delhi, 1988, 408-412.



16 Narrative network, Story of Simhala, Ajanta cave 17, late 5th century A.D. (after Schlingloff)



17 Line drawing of architectural elements in the Simhala story (after Schlingloff)

the aesthetic aspect refers to the response of the viewer.²⁴ Such an emphasis would find easy and obvious acceptance in the Indian context. For more than two thousand years, Indian aesthetics has propounded the theory of *rasa*, which revolves around audience participation. Indian theorists spoke of nine *bhavas* or sentiments, and of the corresponding nine *rasas* or emotions that these should arouse in its audience. The nine *rasas* are *shringara* (erotic), *hasya* (amusing), *karuna* (pathetic), *raudra* (furious), *vira* (heroic), *bhayanaka* (fearsome), *bibhatsa* (odious), *adbhuta* (wondering), and *shanta* (quiescent). The theory of *rasa* was propounded for the performing arts, music, dance, and drama, and was never really extended to literature or the fine arts. In addition, the theory of *bhava/rasa* was intended as one of universal response, and the individual was discounted. If the artist was successful in portraying a particular sentiment (*bhava*), every viewer should respond in identical fashion and experience the same emotion (*rasa*). Nevertheless, viewer response to art seems but an extension of the *rasa* theory, though it appears not to have been visualized by the ancient theorists.

One of the problems that face us when we try to analyze the experience of the viewer at Ajanta lies in our uncertainty regarding the audience for whom the paintings were produced, and the precise manner in which such an audience was exposed to the murals. In the case of a stupa, the entire viewing process is much clearer since we may assume an audience composed largely of laity who came to worship the relics of the Buddha. Such devotees would have followed the prescribed rite of circumambulation, viewing the narrative reliefs slowly and at leisure as they made their repeated rounds of a monument that was located in the open air. At the monastic caves at Ajanta, the murals are located in *viharas*, which were primarily residential caves, even though each contained, in its back wall, a shrine with a Buddha image. While the rite of circumambulation may not have been required in such a cave, it seems fair to assume that anyone entering a *vihara* would automatically follow the clockwise direction of circumambulation. To this day, it is considered improper in India to walk around a monument counterclockwise. If, for instance, you wish to photograph a sculpture on the right wall of a shrine, you must walk around the monument clockwise until you reach your position, and not just approach it directly by walking counterclockwise. With this assumption, one approaches the Simhala story from its

conclusion rather than from its commencement. However, we have already seen that this also occurs occasionally when viewing narrative reliefs that adorn a stupa.

Another problem pertains to the darkness that envelops the interior of the *viharas*. Even the flashlights provided today by the Archaeological Survey in a few of the caves do little more than light up a limited section of a mural. When lit only by flickering oil lamps, the murals would have required "strong eyes, great persistence and an excellent retentive memory"²⁵ in order to follow the narrative course. As a purely practical matter, one wonders if any viewer was inclined to put in so much effort. Yet, the sense of the narrative must have been clear to him through familiarity with the subject. Perhaps identifying the story and gathering its general sense were all that interested the viewer, or indeed were expected from him. Perhaps, too, it is in this context that one may best understand the thematic clusters in cave 17's treatment of the Vessantara *jata-taka*. In a dimly lighted cave, where it is impossible to view the entire narrative, clusters of episodes dealing with the fate of the children or acts of giving become a logical way of handling an extensive legend.

Yet another way of understanding the experience of these extended narratives is to postulate that the viewer was inducted into the experience by a monk who held aloft oil lamps and guided the viewer through the course of the narratives. In fact, it seems nearly impossible for a viewer to manage without such guidance. There is a final possibility. Perhaps the painted narratives were not intended exclusively or even primarily for public viewing. In view of their location within residential *viharas*, it is possible that the murals were intended primarily to be experienced by the monastic community of Ajanta. In other words, Ajanta's narrative networks must have required a competent "reader" in order to function in the manner in which they were intended.

A graduate of Cambridge University, where she obtained her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D., Vidya Dehejia has written extensively on the art and architecture of India. She was the recipient of Guggenheim and NEH Fellowships in 1990 toward further work on visual narratives in early Indian art [Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027].

²⁴ See W. Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," 50-69, in J. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism*, Baltimore, 1980. I have applied Iser's comments on reader-response to literature to viewer-response to art.

²⁵ Brilliant (as in n. 2), 63.