

# 1.1 Material Choices<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper sketches how the use of metal and stone as artistic materials during the beginning centuries of Buddhist art in India affected the nature of the representation of the Buddha. It begins with some of the earliest Buddhist art, that of the reliefs in stone at Sāñchi Stūpa 2 and Bhaja Vihara 19 (ca. second century BCE–first century BCE). By the first century CE, images of the Buddha as a person were being created both in relief carvings and three dimensions in stone, but very rarely in metal. Metal images of the Buddha in India appear only from the fourth century CE, and are rare until the fifth and sixth centuries. My paper draws the relations between the use of stone and metal and the forms and developments of Buddhist narratives in the early centuries in Indian art.

**Keywords:** early Buddhist art, stone relief, Indian Art, images of the Buddha

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\* I will leave the discussion here, as I have another article on the topic entitled ‘Taking the Buddha out of the Monastery’. I look forward to Phyllis Grannoff’s comments, and can only thank her and Koichi for their splendid insights and scholarship over many years.

I have published several studies on how the use of metal and stone as artistic materials in the creation of Buddhist art may have affected Buddhist doctrine and practice. In this paper I want to sketch how the use of metal and stone as artistic materials during the beginning centuries of Buddhist art in India affected the nature of the representation of the Buddha. I will begin with some of the earliest Buddhist art, that of the reliefs in stone at Sāñchi Stūpa 2 and Bhaja Vihara 19 (ca. second century BCE–first century BCE). These reliefs are Buddhist reliefs carved on Buddhist monuments but have no specific Buddhist content. The reliefs of Sāñchi Stūpa 1, dating some fifty to one hundred years later, have stone reliefs of specific Buddhist content, but they tell the story of the Buddha without any images of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form, with references to places, people, and actions but without his presence as a person. By the first century CE, images of the Buddha as a person were being created both in relief carvings and three dimensions in stone, but very rarely in metal. Metal images of the Buddha in India appear only from the fourth century CE, and are rare until the fifth and sixth centuries. My paper attempts to see if relationships can be drawn between the use of stone and metal and the forms and developments of Buddhist narratives in the early centuries in Indian art.

Mireille Benisti states in her article ‘Observations concernant le stūpa no 2 de Sanci’ that the relief carvings on the fence of Stupa 2 at Sāñchi were not specifically ‘Buddhist’. She writes that Stūpa 2 is ‘un monument incontestablement bouddhique, ne comporte aucune figuration du thème bouddhiques. Il appartient encore au fond traditionnel de l’antique culture indienne.’<sup>1</sup> In other words, on the Stūpa 2 fence we have relief carvings of pan-Indian themes that had not yet been adopted and modified by the Buddhists to show specifically Buddhist iconography.

A similar argument has been made by Robert DeCaroli for the relief carvings in the porch of Vihara 19 at Bhaja. DeCaroli argues that the creation of extensive reliefs of Vihara 19 ‘was an attempt to recreate a vedika rail within the rock-cut vihara setting’.<sup>2</sup> He tracks each of the

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<sup>1</sup> Benisti, ‘Observations concernant le stupa no 2 de Sanci’, 169.

Vihara 19 relief images and finds similar images on the *vedika* fences, such as that of Stūpa 2 at Sāñchi. He also points to the contemporary large standing figures on the fence at Bharhut, some of whom are identified by inscriptions, in comparison to the guardian figures of the Vihara 19 porch. He identifies them as popular deities who have been placed around the periphery of the stūpa and, in the case of Vihara 19, in the periphery of a monastic residence. In short, the Buddhists are working to incorporate and subjugate popular deities to increase lay interest and devotion.

It has long been assumed that the early stone *vedika* images are based on images that were carved on wood fences. The evidence for this is purely circumstantial, however, as there are no wood fences extant. The circumstantial evidence includes that the stone *vedikas* are usually built using tongue and dowel construction, a method of construction usually used in joining wood sections and difficult for joining stone. Other evidence includes the use of roundels filled with open lotuses carved on the fences that suggests a mimicking of decoration of actual lotus blossoms that might have been used to decorate the wood fences. The roundel shape fits the circular lotus blossom well. However, when the roundels on the stone fences began to be used to display figures and narrative scenes, the round artistic space became awkward, forcing artists to place horizontal lines across the roundel as ground to support the figures, cutting the roundel into two oddly shaped parts. Thus, the presence of such problematic artistic techniques as the tongue and dowel joinery and the roundel relief shape argues that the artists were copying techniques of wood fences even if it produced problems for building in stone. Nevertheless, while this argues that *vedikas* were constructed in wood, apparently before the introduction of being constructed in stone, we still have no evidence for what carving there was on the wood fences.

If we consider the reliefs at Sāñchi Stūpa 2 and Bhaja Vihara 19 among the earliest Buddhist imagery carved in stone, as DeCaroli and other scholars have argued, we can only be amazed by the variety and number of images that seem to explode in the carving. We tend to

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<sup>2</sup> DeCaroli, 'Reading Bhaja', 270.

expect the visual representations of the Buddhist worshipper's world, particularly the narratives of their gods, heroes, teachers, magicians, ghosts, and goblins, to be found in a verbal version before taking a visual representation in art. This is apparently not what happened with the carved images in stone. At least, the artists do not appear to have used textual or inscriptional sources as the necessary instigation for the visual representations. Visual imagery overwhelms the artistic space, with the images jammed together, and their relationships unclear. What produced this explosion of imagery? I suggest that the use of stone as a medium should be considered as a factor.

The building of *vedikas* and *stūpas* in stone and the excavations of cave architecture provided a vast canvas on which images could be carved in great detail and permanence. It allowed experiment and rapid development. Indeed, perhaps the most amazing outcome was how rapidly the specific Buddhist visual iconography developed. Could the inspiration for Buddhist imagery have in part been due to the rapid development of the visual imagery, suggesting ways of relating to the Buddha's narrative that inspired, rather than simply followed, the spoken versions? Indeed, the visual displays surely must have amazed and thrilled the worshippers, giving them more access than the spoken or textual teaching perhaps had. The popularity of the visual imagery would not have been lost on the Buddhist monks and nuns; a point clearly made by the enormous outburst of visual imagery in *Stūpa 1* at *Sāñchi*.

Within about a century of the reliefs carved at *Sanchi Stūpa 2* and *Bhaja Vihara 19* we have the reliefs carved on *Sanchi Stūpa 1* (ca. 50 BCE–50 CE). Within this brief time period the subject of the *Stūpa 1* reliefs have become specifically Buddhist in their content and intent. I will use Sir John Marshall's and Alfred Foucher's three-volume study of *Sanchi* to briefly trace their categorization of the reliefs of the Buddha's life.

Events associated with the Buddha's life are often called miracles. These events were eventually reduced to the well-known eight life events that were produced repeatedly in art, usually as a set, from about the eighth century in India. Calling them 'miracles' can be seen in terms of their inclusion of miraculous happenings or in terms of the miracle of the Buddha's existence in itself. Marshall

has identified the Four Great Miracles of the birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death as ‘by far the most frequent subjects’ on the five stone stūpa gates (four gates of Stūpa 1 and the single gate for Stūpa 3). Their totals (by Marshall’s count) are fifteen reliefs of the birth, seventy-six of the enlightenment, ten of the first sermon, and thirty-seven for the death.<sup>3</sup> These identifications, however, and thus the numbers, can be modified in several ways. The identification of the birth, for example, as represented either by an overflowing pot of lotuses, a female seated on a lotus, or one standing on a lotus being lustrated by two elephants, is basically a guess by Marshall and has never been confirmed by other scholars.<sup>4</sup> This leaves, however, the problem that there are no scenes at Sanchi indicating the birth, and thus one of the four major miracles would not have been represented, which appears unlikely. The enlightenment, symbolized by the bodhi tree for Śākyamuni, is represented thirteen times, the remaining sixty-three trees being those of other Buddhas rather than Śākyamuni. And similarly for the stūpas indicating the Buddha’s death, fifteen are of Śākyamuni and twenty-two of other Buddhas. The large number of trees and stūpas that represent Buddhas other than Śākyamuni emphasizes the importance of past Buddhas at Sanchi. Finally, the first sermon represented by the wheel of the law, was illustrated ten times—a low frequency due (according to Marshall) to the wheels only representing Śākyamuni’s first sermon, and not the teaching of any other Buddha.<sup>5</sup> Marshall doesn’t say why he identifies the wheels as only representing Śākyamuni, a conclusion that seems somewhat unusual given the frequency of enlightenment and death, indicating other Buddhas. Likewise with the birth scenes, it appears that Marshall regards them as only indicating the birth of Śākyamuni.

Thus, the illustrations of the Four Great Miracles at Sanchi raise rather extensive questions, and their discussion is hardly without problems, one of which is the early bias toward emphasizing Śākya-

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall and Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, 196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 183–86, 197.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

muni Buddha, but only in terms of the narrative events. As noted above, the number of trees and stūpas of Buddhas other than Śākyamuni exceed those of Śākyamuni. Thus, it appears that the life events and the narratives being produced are those of Śākyamuni. The past Buddhas were represented in their aniconic symbolic forms. Here again is a possible explanation for the lack of Śākyamuni in iconic (that is, anthropomorphic) form at Sanchi, as Buddhas were only represented in this form at that time.

Marshall identifies the Four Great Miracles according to the location where each took place, thus the birth as the Miracle of Kapilavastu, the enlightenment as the Miracle of Uruvilvā (Bodhgaya), the first sermon as the Miracle of Mrgadava (Sarnath), and the death as the Miracle of Kuśinagara. Each of these geographical locations was the locus of important events in the narrative of the Buddha's life. They were places where the Buddha often spent considerable time and where many of his actions were described in Buddhist texts. Marshall identifies the reliefs that are associated with the same geographical location as narrative cycles.<sup>6</sup> The reliefs of a narrative cycle can be arranged together on the Sāñchi gates, or the reliefs can be dispersed. Another method of organization was to place together several different chronological scenes that happened at the same location within a single relief in a continuous narration. The use of geography to organize the life events at Sāñchi was a primary organizational principle used by the Indian artists. Organizing the reliefs to produce a linear chronological narrative is not apparent.

Marshall adds four other cities as locations to which the other Sāñchi reliefs can be assigned: Rājagṛha, Vaiśālī, Śrāvastī, and Sāñkāśyā. With these added cities, together we have the eight cities that became associated with the standard eight Great Miracles mentioned above. These eight have caused questions for scholars, as some—for example Sāñkāśyā—were small villages. Some of the major cities of the time have been left out. The size and importance of these large cities may, in fact, have been the reason that the Buddhists left them out of the Buddha's life story, as the smaller and more isolated locations allowed them to

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall and Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, 201–02.

have a dominant Buddhist identity, whereas the larger cities would be in competition with Brahmanical and other Śramaṇic groups.

Marshall has stitched together scenes from these eight places to create a narrative of the life of the Buddha, with most places displaying multiple events associated with the Buddha. Marshall's success relied on having a complete photographic record of the reliefs, comparing the reliefs to those at other Buddhist sites (most particularly Bharhut), consulting multiple Buddhist texts, and relying on extensive knowledge of the history of Indian Buddhism. In other words, Marshall arranged and identified the scenes using modern methods of scholarship. What the contemporary or ancient worshipper at Sāñchi would have seen and understood of the reliefs is very difficult to know, but is likely to be different in many regards from Marshall's descriptions.

How might the medium of stone have played a role in what I have outlined above? I wrote an article entitled 'Nature as Utopian Space on the Early Stūpas of India' in which I proposed that through artistic patterning and repetition of plant and female designs and figures on the four gateways (*toranas*) of Stūpa 1 the stūpa was intended to stress life, growth, and fecundity.<sup>7</sup> The plant forms were intended to be artistic patterns yet were considered as alive, as they were planted in tiny pots or attached to aquatic animals as if growing and alive. I point out that the natural patterns combine growing plants with abstract patterns along with the repetition of *yakshis* holding on to trees. It has long been argued that the stance of the *yakshis* holding on to the branch of a tree with one leg crossed to press against the trunk of the tree is the model used to depict Maya giving birth to the Buddha, the model used throughout the Buddhist world up until today. I would say, in the context of this paper, that the absence of a defined symbol indicating the birth of the Buddha on Stūpa 1 is because the entire monument was the representation of the birth and presence of the Buddha.

The many repetitions of the life scenes in the reliefs of Sāñchi can be explained in part due to the nature of the popular patronage of the monument. Hundreds of people gave financial support to support

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, 'Nature as Utopian Space'.

the monument, including monks and nuns and people identified as having common occupations, rather than elite or royal status. Their objective was the accumulation of merit. How the merit was distributed, whether it was for solving present day problems or for future births is not clear, but there was some system of merit created by supporting the monument's construction, that apparently included building sections of the structure that included the creation of reliefs and sculptures. The goal then was not only to tell the life story of the Buddha, but to attach the making of a relief or a section of the fence to the production of merit for a person or group of people. This goal perhaps best explains the lack of a coherent or chronological display of a narrative of the Buddha's life at Sāñchi Stūpa 1, as it was not needed.

I want to push the idea of the merit-centric reading to apply it to the use of the Buddha image in its iconic form in the early art of India. I have not mentioned yet the iconic creation of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form, a topic that has intrigued scholars for over a century. When the Buddha image as an icon appears, probably in the first century CE, in stone it is already well defined iconographically. Earlier images in other materials, primarily wood, have been proposed as a source for the consistency of the stone images. Again, however, there are no early wood Buddha icons extant. Just for the record, I proposed an early image in an alternate iconography in my article 'The Walking Tilya Tepe Buddha'.<sup>8</sup> But here I want to suggest that the early Buddha icons were made primarily for purposes of merit, and not for representing a moment in a narrative. We tend to want to read the image through an iconography of their narrative function. But perhaps the iconography did not particularly matter, and the early icons functioned in a more generic fashion, identified by the individual worshipper as she or he wanted. The inscriptions associated with the early images rarely attempt to identify the image, often stating '[this is] the gift of...' and the name of the donor, which is the essential point to be made rather than the identity of the Buddha. Once the Buddha image was sculpted, perhaps inscribed, and presented in some type of ceremony, it perhaps was left to continue producing merit, honoured

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, 'The Walking Tilya Tepe Buddha'.



but not necessarily worshipped. It would function in the same way as an inscribed cross bar on the *vedika* of Sāñchi Stūpa 1. As such, the sculpting an icon of the Buddha image in stone at this early period might be seen in terms of producing merit and have little to do with an identification connected to a name or a narrative. The importance of stone as a carrier of merit is that it lasts ‘forever’, and will continue producing merit for the donor ‘forever’ as well.

One of the most complex and interesting images of the Buddha is the Mohammad Nari Stele image from Gandhara that dates perhaps to the early fourth century CE. Perhaps no South Asian Buddha image has been so thoroughly studied and analysed, with the recent publication of detailed discussions by Paul Harrison and Christian Luczantis, substantiating that the Buddha may be Amitabha in *Sukhāvati*.<sup>9</sup> In a response to this lengthy model of Buddhist scholarship, Juhyung Rhi has published two very brief articles.<sup>10</sup> Rhi writes:

It may perhaps have been Amitabha, as many scholars anxiously hope. But could it have been any Buddha whom a practitioner visualized in a Samadhi? Here one needs to recall that Buddha images in Gandhara were presented in an essentially identical manner, that is to say, iconographically indistinguishable. If the iconographic distinction did not matter, the individuality of buddhas may not have seriously mattered, either.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of interest in the iconography or narrative of the Buddha image is something I noticed in the worship of the Buddha in Thailand today. The worshiper rarely appears to know or care what iconography a Buddha image displays. Indeed, both monks and worshipers were usually unable to supply a name or story for images when I asked them or showed them illustrations of Buddha images in various iconographies. The classic Thai seated Sukhothai style Buddha image

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<sup>9</sup> Harrison and Luczantis, ‘New Light on (and from) the Mohammad Nari Stele’.

<sup>10</sup> Rhi, ‘Complex Steles’; *idem*, ‘Wondrous Vision’.

<sup>11</sup> Rhi, ‘Complex Steles’, 259.

(ca. fourteenth century to present) has no markings on the image that indicate any identification or story reference. I bring this up only to suggest that the lack of a need for individuality of the Buddha can perhaps be demonstrated in some contemporary Buddhist practice.

What then of the identification of the Mohammad Nari Buddha as Amitabha? Here is Rhi's evaluation:

The Mohammad Nari stele was probably well known in the Buddhist community of Gandhara for a considerable period. And late variations of complex Gandharan steles probably found their way to the northern regions of Gandhara and eventually reached western China, where they were adapted for the depiction of a specific theme: Amitabha's paradise. This developed into a standard type in East Asia in the following centuries, eventually generating in modern scholarship a temptation to read back the Mohammad Nari stele as the depiction of the theme.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, there is a warning against reading later Buddhist art back to identify earlier art, and for a modern preference for a verbal articulation of a specific identification.

My final comment is regarding the use of metal icons for the worship of the Buddha in households in India. I have argued that metal icons become popular in Buddhist practice only in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>13</sup> I have suggested that metal images in earlier Buddhism in India were very rare, and due to changes in metal technology and new stylistic innovations at this time metal icons began to be produced and spread throughout South and Southeast Asia. I linked this new popularity in metal icons to a possible new interest in using these new types of icon for worship in the homes by lay people.

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<sup>12</sup> Rhi, 'Wondrous Vision', 115.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Carrying Buddhism*.

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