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When Stones are All that Survived: The Case of Buddhism in Andhra

Abstract

The conclusion of the project of the University of Munich, aiming at a new publication of all narrative reliefs from the Amaravati School of sculptures (Andhra Pradesh 1st c. BCE – the 4th c. CE) is that there are many reliefs in Andhra for which no explanation can be given, neither in Pali nor in the texts of the ‘northern’ schools. The reason for this is that not a single text is available today from the Buddhist culture of the region (predominantly the Caitika or Śaila Schools associated later with the Mahāsāṅghikas), so that the narrative reliefs are all that survived today. A typical example presented here is a relief from Amaravati (Fig. 1), explained previously as illustration of the *Morajātaka*, which in fact must be a different narration of the peacock that gave or saved a child, perhaps from a serpent bite. The story is not known today.

Keywords: Buddhist art, Amaravati, sculpture, Buddhist narrative literature, Mahāsāṅghika

The University of Munich hosts the project undertaken by the German Research Society (DFG), aiming at a new publication of reliefs from the so-called Amaravati School of sculptures. The project includes narrative reliefs not only from Amaravati but also sites like Ghantasala or Gummaddidurru, as well as from the later centres of Nagarjunakonda and Goli, i.e. it includes narrative reliefs from all the Buddhist sites in Andhra Pradesh from the 1st c. BCE till the 4th c. CE. Initially the project was to be based on the black and white photographs taken in the early 1980s. Thanks to the DFG’s generosity in covering all travel expenses (including renting an off-road car) and thanks to the permission granted by the Archaeological Survey of India to take pictures, the

project can benefit not only from standard photographs but also from numerous digital photos that allow for an enlargement of details.

Since the relative chronology of the Amaravati School based on a stylistic analysis of the reliefs has been established¹, the Munich Project can concentrate on their narrative content. As a matter of fact, the primary objective is not solely an interpretation of reliefs but rather an identification of the school affiliations of Buddhism in the region and their characteristics. It would indeed be of utmost importance to ascertain if the reliefs had Theravāda Buddhism as their literary tradition or the Hīnayāna Schools of “northern” Buddhism, in which Mahāyāna Buddhism developed over the centuries. The schools known from the inscriptions in the region are predominantly the Caitika or Śāilas,² which were associated in later sources with the Mahāsāṅghikas.³

The main reason for undertaking the study, which should culminate in the publication *Narrative Reliefs of the Amaravati School*, was the observation that technically poor publications of very many reliefs not only excluded the possibility of using them for the sake of research but also that the research was in a way hampered by the erroneous interpretations provided in those publications.

Anyone who – at least generally – has been dealing with the art of Amaravati, will in all probability be surprised to hear that there is a need for re-interpreting the reliefs. After all, in the standard publication by Sivaramamurti,⁴ which influenced later interpretations (including the sculptures in the British Museum),⁵ only a handful of the reliefs are described as ‘unidentified’, the rest have been given either Sivaramamurti’s own identifications or interpretations taken from earlier works.⁶ However, these identifications are frequently uncertain or simply erroneous, as they only take as starting point some detail of the relief.

¹ For the dating of the Amaravati reliefs cf. e.g. Knox 1992, pp. 31ff. (with references to earlier research); for more recent research cf. a study by Akira Shimada (2006) on the great railing in Amaravati.

² Lamotte 1958, pp. 580–581.

³ Bareau 1955, pp. 23–33, for the characteristics of the schools cf. *ibid.*, pp. 87–105.

⁴ Sivaramamurti’s book *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum*, published in Madras 1942 was reprinted several times (1956, 1977, 2000) and is still considered a standard publication on the subject.

⁵ For interpretations of the Amaravati reliefs kept in London cf. Knox 1992, *ibid.* references to earlier research.

⁶ Sivaramamurti gives references and also lists the scholars he took the identifications from (1942: XV): “Since the publication of ‘The Buddhist Stupas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta’ by Burgess in 1887, excavations by Rea have added a number of sculptures to the already rich collection in the Madras Museum. Great scholars such as Foucher, Coomaraswamy, Vogel and Dubreuil have written discussing problems concerning the Amaravati stupa and have identified some of the scenes in the sculptures. Bachhofer, Mlle. Linossier, Rene Grousset, Ramachandran, and Barnet Kempers have identified other scenes. Mr. Ramachandran’s paper on two labelled early scenes on a pillar from Amaravati has definitely brought early Amaravati and Bharhut together. Hultsch and Burgess edited the Amaravati inscriptions and later Franke corrected their readings. Many inscriptions of the old collection that remained unpublished and those on the slabs dug out later and brought to the Museum were edited by Chanda. But many scenes still remained to be identified, some inscriptions still unread and some uncorrected.”

A typical example is a relief from Amaravati (Fig. 1),⁷ identified as the *Morajātaka*.⁸ The depiction was placed on a railing pillar from which only the lower part is preserved today, covering the lower part of the medallion and the fluted area below.

The representation inside the medallion is partially preserved but the significant elements that could link it with a particular story, are missing. The scene had originally depicted a royal court encamped in the park, in front of the beautiful lotus pond. On the left-hand side, to the left of the wide throne on which a male person surrounded by ladies is seated, there are rests of a tiny woman moving to the left in a bent posture. The woman displays the characteristic pose of a female guard, *pratihārī*, who in this case is probably going to receive someone arriving to meet the royal personage.

The reason for identifying the relief as the *Morajātaka* is given below. *Mora*, i.e. the peacock, is actually shown here, in the centre of the fluted area. The *jātaka*⁹ narrates a story about the golden peacock which was brought to the royal court where he answered the king's questions and instructed him. According to generally applied rules of Indian pictorial representations, the peacock should be seated at a height that is at least on par with that of the king whom he instructs, if not even higher; this is however not the case here. More importantly, there are details in the relief which can by no means be matched with the *jātaka's* content: above the peacock a monk (? or at least a tonsured person wearing a simple cloth covering his shoulders) is represented. The man is holding his left arm in a particular way while touching his left shoulder, while with his right he is pointing to a little infant lying on the lap of the seated male figure. The man, as also a woman behind him, clasp their hands together in the gesture of worship which is undoubtedly meant for the peacock. The scene plays outdoors, as is suggested by the depiction of a tree at the back.

The register on the right provides numerous possibilities for interpretation and can be linked to different narratives, since it shows a male person of rank sending off or receiving a messenger. What may be significant here is the portrayal of the man on the throne in a state of apparent grief.

The left side, though seriously damaged, reveals several elements of a distinctive, obviously unique, story. In the upper section, we see a male person standing and holding in his arms another smaller person, probably a child. The right foot of this smaller person (of whom we see only the right leg preserved) has an instrument (knife?) being applied to it by another man. Below we see a woman kneeling in front of another figure seated

⁷ Chennai Government Museum, No. 158, ill. e.g.: Burgess 1887, Pl. 8.2; Bachhofer 1929, Pl. 113.1; Sivaramamurti 1942, Pl. 32.1; Stern/Bénisti 1961, Pl. 36b; Sugimoto 2001, Fig. 15.

⁸ The identification of the relief as the *Morajātaka* was first given in 1914 by Foucher at the conference in Musée Guimet (the paper was published only in 1928) and repeated since without any reservation. Sivaramamurti incorporated the interpretation into his standard work (1942, p. 226): "The Peacock preaches the Law, Mora Jātaka".

⁹ *Morajātaka* No. 159, ed. Vol. 2, pp. 33–38; transl. pp. 23–26. The story as told in the *Mahāmorajātaka*, No. 491 (ed. Vol. 4, pp. 332–342; transl. pp. 210–216) should not be taken as a possible textual basis, since there, the peacock is not brought to the court at all. The hunter, moved by his teachings, stays in the woods as the Pratyekabuddha.

on a chair (only the legs of this person have been preserved). The kneeling woman is holding an object, apparently a round bowl.

All these details of the depiction – the infant, the monk (?), the operation on the foot – which do not find mention in the *Morajātaka*, make it clear that it is not this *Jātaka* that is illustrated here. What we see is, rather, an illustration of a story in which the peacock participates, without however preaching. The story must be the narration of the peacock that gave or saved a child (or perhaps its mother?) perhaps from a serpent bite – thus the operation on the foot may represent the cleaning of the wound after a serpent bite.

In the standard publication *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum* Sivaramamurty – citing earlier interpretations or presenting his own – sometimes “notices” that the details do not match the literary sources, after which he writes that the artist ‘has taken the liberty of adopting the story’. However in those reliefs whose interpretations are certain, such as Viśvantara or Śaḍdanta, no deviations from literary traditions can be found.

Sivaramamurty *a priori* accepts Pali literature as the literary basis for the reliefs, and he uses such texts as the *Nidānakathā*, the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* or prose from the *Jātaka*. These texts, from the 5th century, should not be applied without reservation to older reliefs. Naturally the sources may contain older stories, but what is it that really tells us to draw upon them to provide explanations for the Amaravati reliefs in the first place? Even in the usual representations of episodes from the life story of the Buddha, there appear incidents not known in the Pali tradition at all. One such incident is the presentation of the new-born Bodhisattva to the Yakṣa of the Śākya clan, very popular in the relief depictions of the Amaravati School¹⁰, the quarrel in the house of Māra, where his good sons do not allow Māra to disturb the Buddha in his efforts to achieve enlightenment,¹¹ or the subjugation of the Nāga Apalāla¹². Also several *jātakas* illustrate versions of the stories known from the ‘northern’ traditions – as I wrote in another publication.¹³ Sometimes the stories are totally unknown in Pali.

¹⁰ The episode is represented in the Amaravati-School at least 15 times (e.g. British Museum, No. 44, it was illustrated several times, for example in Knox 1992, No. 61, p. 121); it shows the Yakṣa coming out of his tree-sanctuary to pay homage to the new-born Bodhisattva. The episode is not known in the Pali scripture and corresponds with the story as rendered in the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins (cf. Schlingloff 2000, No. 64(13), pp. 338–339). The earliest depiction of the episode was recently discovered in the *stūpa* at Kanaganahalli.

¹¹ Also this episode is not rendered in the Pali tradition and known only from the ‘northern’ sources (cf. Schlingloff 2000, No. 80). The quarrel in which some of Māra’s sons try to stop their father is depicted several times in the Amaravati School, among others in two particularly fine representations on the *uṣṇīṣa* stones kept in the Chennai Government Museum, No. 10 (illus. e.g. Sivaramamurti 1942, Pl. 57.1; Stern/Bénisti 1961, Pl. 23a) and No. 153 (illus. e.g. Burgess 1887, Pl. 21.2; Sivaramamurti 1942, Pl. 42.1).

¹² For literary sources and pictorial representations cf. Zin 2006, chapter 3.

¹³ Zin 2004, with the identification of one Amaravati relief (Chennai Government Museum, No. 148) as the narrative of Mukapangu according to the ‘northern’ sources, and of one relief from Nagarjunakonda (Nagarjunakonda Museum, No. 19) as the story of Prabhāsa, not known in relevant Pali sources at all.

It must also be noticed here that in Nagarjunakonda (3rd c.), where the affiliations of several monasteries are substantiated by inscriptions, no narrative reliefs have been found on *stūpas* belonging to the Theravāda, nor in the monasteries of the Mahīśāsakas and the Bahūśrutiyas. These schools were apparently not too much interested in the pictorial representations of the stories, even if the Buddha images were discovered in their monasteries.

The main problem with the Amaravati School, however, is that there are many reliefs there for which no explanation at all has been given, neither in Pali nor in the texts of the ‘northern’ schools. Coming back to our relief (Fig. 1), it may be concluded that the relief does not illustrate the *Morajātaka*, also that the story that it illustrates is not known today.

What is characteristic of the entire Amaravati School is that, after rejecting the doubtful interpretations, it must be stated that the literary basis of the reliefs is not known today. The “Mora-Jātaka” is just one example among many.

The question that arises here is whether we can ever get to know the correct interpretations. It is possible that we never may. These interpretations may, for instance, have belonged to the Vinaya of the Caitika or Śāila Schools, known from inscriptions in the region (cf. fn. 2). These Vinayas are lost. We can only hope that the narrative that has been depicted perhaps survived in the texts of other schools.

For the time being we can only rely on the pictorial tradition which should be analysed much more carefully and considered as important as the textual sources.

The reliefs of the Amaravati School only seldom illustrate a story just once; usually we are dealing with several representations of one and the same narrative. This is not only true of reliefs whose contents have been explained but also unidentified ones; i.e. the representation may be unexplained but it is clear that it has been repeated. A comparison of the depictions might bring further details of the story or ascertain which of the details are important for the illustration of the narrative, on the basis of their being repeated in every relief.

The representations of the same story reappear in two forms. The first one involves a replica of the visual form. A good example of this is a scene on a frieze in the Chennai Government Museum, No. 105 (Fig. 2)¹⁴ showing a king, or some other person of rank, being attacked by several soldiers. It is quite obvious that in view of the violent actions of the assailants, so clearly depicted, the frightened looks of the women, the harassment of the main character – one of the assailants is pulling at his cloth while on the verge of striking him with the object held in his right hand – the explanation given by Sivaramamurti that “Prince Siddhartha lives in three pleasant palaces carefully guarded from the ills of life”¹⁵ is absolutely unacceptable. Even if the scene is not properly identified, we must

¹⁴ Chennai Government Museum, No. 105, 3rd register, illus. e.g.: Burgess 1887, Pl. 21.2; Sivaramamurti 1942, Pl. 42.1; Parimoo 1982, Fig. 119; Rao 1984, Pl. 241; Zin 2004, Fig. 10 (drawing).

¹⁵ Sivaramamurti 1942, Pl. LIX, I c.

agree that the story was obviously known since its representation was reproduced. The replica is to be found on one of the Amaravati slabs depicting a *stūpa*, to be found today in the British Museum, No. 69 (Fig. 3 a, b)¹⁶. The tiny register repeats quite accurately the entire scene from the frieze in Chennai. Except for one servant in the upper right corner (for whom there was no more space), all the other persons are shown in the same arrangement and making the same gestures.

The second type of representing what is apparently the one and the same narrative differs from the first in that the content of the story is represented but the composition of the representation differs. This kind of depiction is characteristic of the majority of the narrative reliefs; first and foremost it applies to all those whose explanations are certain: there are always distinctive elements of the iconography that make identification of the entire story possible, like for instance, the hare jumping into the fire in the Śaśa narrative, or the king cutting off his flesh for Śibi (in the Amaravati School actually Sarvaṃdada) etc., but the rest of the depiction, the arrangement of the persons in the composition etc., varies.

What is of great importance is to distinguish the iconographic features of the story, which can only be done by comparing the various reliefs. To avoid a feeling of frustration that the Amaravati reliefs defy identification, it is necessary that a positive example be provided here.

A relief in the British Museum, No. 37 (Fig. 4)¹⁷, has been identified by Parimoo¹⁸ as a representation of the Kusajātaka.¹⁹

Only by comparing the relief with two other illustrations of the same narrative (Figs. 5²⁰ and 6²¹) does a clear identification emerge. All three reliefs represent a king leaving the city to war; the battle is depicted in front of his elephant. All three representations show the king riding on an elephant together with his consort, and in all three of them there is a flying god above the couple, carrying a necklace. Only in one of the depictions, however (Fig. 6), is the god identifiable as Indra through his distinctive crown. This corresponds – as Parimoo observed with regard to the relief in London (Fig. 4) – with the text of the *jātaka*, precisely speaking with the *gāthās* 78-81,²² which tell us that Kusa's wife Pabhāvātī sat on the elephant behind her husband to whom Indra brought a solar

¹⁶ British Museum, No. 69, illus. e.g.: Stern/Bénisti 1952, Pl. 43; Knox 1992, No. 68, p. 130.

¹⁷ British Museum, No. 37, illus. e.g.: Burgess 1887, Fig. 8, p. 38 (drawing); Barrett 1954, No. 33, Pl. 24 (only upper area); Rao 1984, Pl. 178; Knox 1992, No. 15, p. 67; Parimoo 1995, Fig. 2.

¹⁸ Parimoo 1995, pp. 130–132.

¹⁹ *Kusajātaka*, No. 531, ed. Vol. 5, pp. 278–312; transl. pp. 141–164. The identification did not seem to be wholly conclusive because PARIMOO took the typical depiction of a woman holding a fan (in the small preserved fragment of the fluted area below the central lotus rosette) to be the princess Pabhāvātī refusing to take a palm-leaf fan from Kusa.

²⁰ Amaravati, Archaeological Site Museum, No. 61, illus.: Roy 1994, Pl. 145; Gupta 2008, Pl. 9.

²¹ Mackenzie drawing of August 1817, British Library, No. WD1061, folio 74, illus.: Fergusson 1868, Pl. 66.

²² Ed. Vol. 5, p. 310; transl. p. 163: "Mounted on back of elephant, the queen behind her lord, Kusa descending to the fray with voice of lion roared. All beasts, when Kusa's lion-voice thus roaring loud they hear, And warrior kings flee from the field, smitten with panic fear. Life-guardsmen, soldiers, horse and foot, with any a charioteer,

jewel (*maṇim verocanam*). The couple leaving the city on an elephant, the flying god bringing the necklace and the scene of the battle must be recognized as the iconographic features of the narrative on king Kusa.

Such a small deviation between text and depiction, as between jewel and necklace, can actually be understood as the artist's 'liberty in adapting the story'. For, the "gem" would not be noticeable in the relief.²³

Unfortunately it is very seldom that a comparison of the reliefs yields positive results, and there are a large number of reliefs from the Amaravati School, also those in which elements repeatedly appear that must be iconographic features of the narratives, that are still not identified.

Let us go back to our relief with the peacock. This relief too may be compared with other depictions.

The first representation is small and does not say much about the content of the narrative. The depiction is placed in one of the registers on the drum-slab of a *stūpa* (Fig. 7).²⁴ The scene shows a court, with a peacock standing in front of the throne. The entire composition of the scene is different, as shown in Fig. 1. Since the relief is known today only from the old drawing, it is not possible to ascertain if further details were represented here and perhaps not recognized by the draftsman. One thing is certain, namely that it is also not the *Moraḷātaka*, since the bird also stands on the floor, i.e. he is not instructing the king. The representation provides no further details, yet it provides an important piece of evidence that the illustrated narrative was well known when it was placed in the "depiction of the depiction" as a tiny register on the *stūpa* slab.

The second representation which can be taken for comparison is more interesting even though it survived only in the old drawing (Fig. 8)²⁵. The piece is a part of the railing pillar which, at the time when the drawing was made, only had its lower section preserved, this ending beneath the middle of the central medallion. The peacock is represented in the medallion; he is shown surrounded by a group of women and children and, as he is standing on the ground here too, he is not preaching but shown as receiving great respect. There is a bowl of food placed in front of him. The scene with the peacock appears in the lowest part of the medallion which mainly consists of the representation of a court scene. Still recognizable are the lower parts of two persons sitting on chairs – a woman on the viewer's left, a man on the right. The persons are seated so far away from each other that it can be taken for granted that somebody or something was represented between

At Kusa's voice break up and flee, all paralysed with fear. Sakka right glad at heart looked on in forefront of the fight, And to king Kusa gave a gem, Verocana 'twas hight."

²³ The relief corresponds quite precisely with the Pali *gāthās* and not with the versions in 'northern' Buddhism (for references cf. Panglung 1982, p. 38); yet only from these versions is it possible to understand the significance of the gem: Lord Indra gave it to Kuśa to make him handsome (e.g. Schiefner 1906, p. 28; Schmidt 1843, p. 95). Kusa's ugliness is the main motif of the story; it is also referred to in the Pali *gāthās*.

²⁴ Mackenzie drawing of September 1817, British Library, No. WD1061, folio 78, illus.: Burgess 1887, Pl. 37.2.

²⁵ Mackenzie drawing of March 1817, British Library, No. WD1061, folio 43, illus.: Burgess 1887, Pl. 15.2.

them, which – placed as it was in the centre of the medallion – must have once formed the essential part of the scene.

In most of the pillars from the Amaravati railings, the same narrative was represented in the medallion and in the fluted areas above and below; this may also be presumed for our piece. The preserved lower section divided into three compartments is characteristic of such pieces and designed more or less symmetrically since there are persons lying on beds in both the outer registers. The scene on the viewer's left shows a lady lying on the bed. In front of her is a long object which the artist had drawn without really understanding what it was. Around the bed, there are women sleeping on the floor, and above, a female deity is shown flying in the air. The goddess seems to carry something in her right hand.

The scene on the right is even more unusual: here the person on the bed is holding an infant, but the person, unmistakably male, and is surrounded by the usual royal court.²⁶ Below, on the left, a lady is sitting on a chair and in front of her another woman is kneeling holding a bowl in her hands.

In the middle compartment there appear again the turbaned man, several women, the courtiers and the infant. The scene is set inside an enclosure surrounded by a wall, probably representing a city or a palace area; trees grow outside the walls. The man, accompanied by two male and one female servant, stands in front of a building on whose balcony three women appear, the middle one holding the infant.

The peacock represented at the royal court in all three reliefs allows us to assume that they all illustrate one and the same narrative. In Fig. 1 and Fig 8, we find not only the peacock appearing but also a reoccurrence of other elements, first of all the man holding the infant – which is very unusual. One common element of the depiction is apparently also the woman kneeling in front of another holding a bowl, since this group has been repeated in both representations. It might also be significant that in both cases the group is placed beneath the man holding the infant (in Fig. 8) or the child (?) on whose foot someone operates (Fig. 1). That not all elements of one depiction can be recognized in the other might be the result of the fact that both representations are incomplete. Perhaps it was the monk (?) from Fig. 1 who was represented in the middle of the medallion in Fig. 8?

As long as a text is not found, it will be impossible to interpret the depictions. Nevertheless, we may be sure that the narrative is not the *Morajātaka*. The reliefs cannot

²⁶ Burgess (1887: 41) who was not able to identify the scene writes thus: "What scene in Buddhist legend this is intended to represent I do not recognize. Is it a case of "*couvade*"? This curious practice is in vogue among the Erukalavaṅḍlu or people of the Erukala or Yerukala tribe, that wanders about the Krishṇā, Godāvārī, and Nelur districts to the present day [...]. When a child is about to be born, the husband goes to bed, and as soon as the infant is born it is at once placed beside him. But this does not explain the other two connected scenes. [...] Of the central disc [...] the object engaging their attention is a peacock, to which the two principal figures in the foreground, attended by a *chauri*-bearer, are paying marked attention. This does not suggest any connection with the story in the *Nachcha Jātaka*, and perhaps without the complete scene it will be difficult to identify it."

be adequately identified on the basis of just one element – here: the peacock – besides, differences between the text and the relief cannot be interpreted as the artist’s ‘liberty of adapting the story’.

It is apparent through several examples similar to the “Mora Jātaka” that the problem is much deeper and concerns Andhra Buddhism as a whole, from whose flourishing Buddhist culture not even a single text is available today. The study of the pictorial representations must play a crucial role in research.

In the forthcoming publication *Narrative Reliefs of the Amaravati School*, all the reliefs with unidentified content will be brought together and “released” for further research in the hope that one day, a related text or representation from another region of South, Southeast or Central Asia will be found to explain their meaning.

The narrative reliefs of the Amaravati School are of the greatest importance, not just for art historians alone. They are the repositories of lost literature – for, today, it is only the stones that survive.

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Fig. 1. Chennai Government Museum, No. 158, © Wojtek Oczkowski



Fig. 2. Chennai Government Museum, No. 105, 3rd register, © Wojtek Oczkowski

Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b

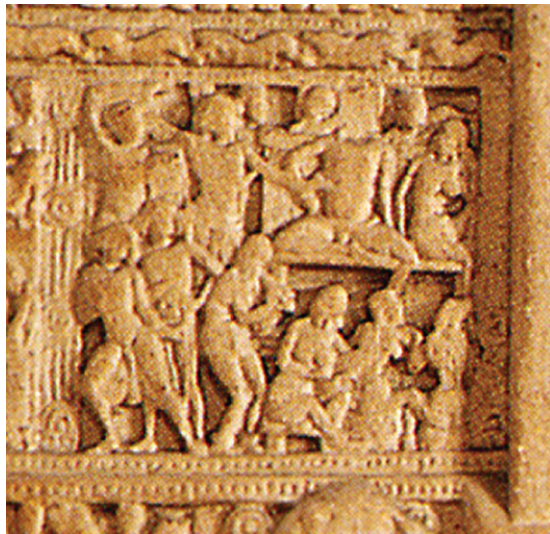


Fig. 3. British Museum, No. 69, after Knox, 1992, No. 68, p. 130



Fig. 4. British Museum, No. 37, after Knox, 1992, No. 15, p. 67



Fig. 5. Amaravati, Archaeological Site Museum, No. 61, © Wojtek Oczkowski



Fig. 6. Mackenzie drawing of August 1817, after Fergusson, 1868, Pl. 66

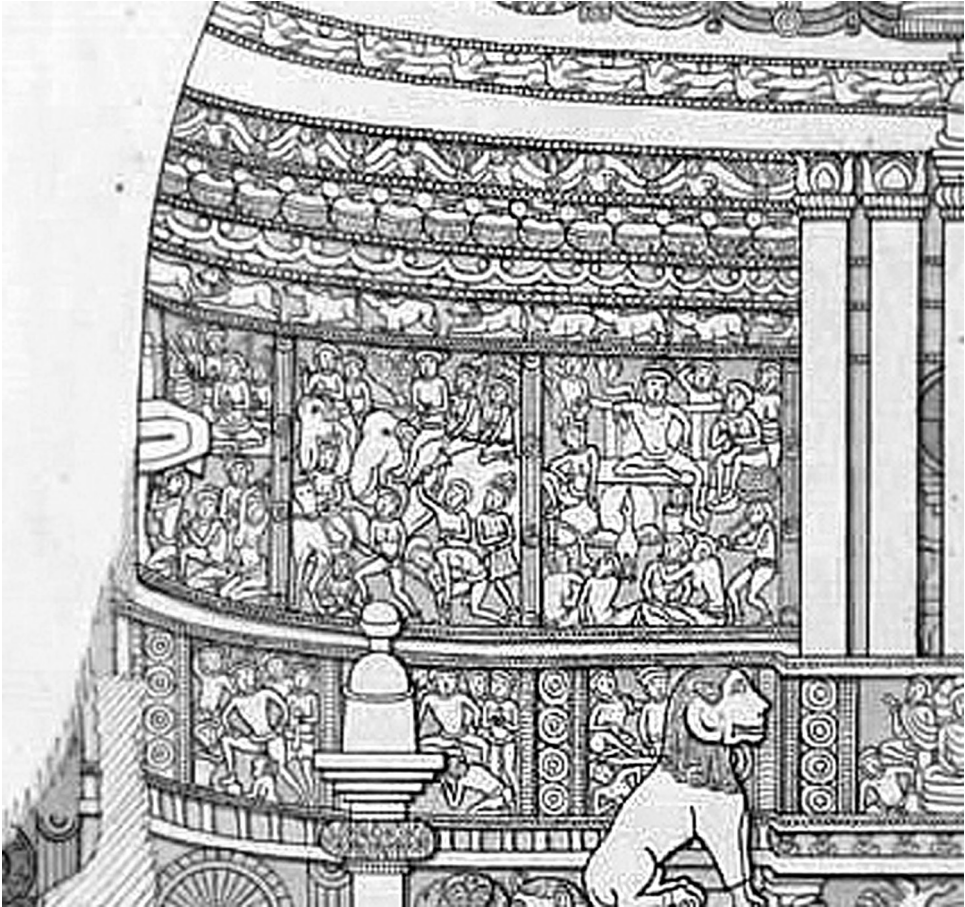


Fig. 7. Mackenzie drawing of September 1817, after Burgess, 1887, Pl. 37.2



Fig. 8. Mackenzie drawing of March 1817, after Burgess, 1887, Pl. 15.2