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**Tracing Buddhism in the British Museum:  
Biographies of Select Buddhist Objects acquired by the  
British Museum in the 19th - 20th c.**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Mphil

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis studies the history, acquisition and exhibition history of the Amaravati Marbles, the Bimaran Reliquary, the Kanishka Reliquary and the Shalabhanjika Yakshi currently held by the British Museum. It additionally examines the interaction between the life of these objects from their point of entry into Western epistemological structures and the specific development of the academic discipline of Buddhist art. These objects have been selected for study because of their wealth of contributions to the development of Buddhist art, mainly as they have become focal points of debates on the aniconic and iconic in Buddhist Art History.

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# INTRODUCTION

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In a description of the British Museum, Edward Miller wrote, ‘One generation gives place to another, and yet the Museum lives on, ever-changing, yet, in a sense, ever unchanged.’<sup>1</sup> Over time, the British Museum has continued to grow, evolve, and acquire new objects, yet still, it upholds the traditions and protocols established at its founding.

The British Museum was established by Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) who donated his collection of over 71,000 objects to the nation. Montagu House in Bloomsbury was converted to hold the collection in trust for the country as a free national museum, and it opened to the public in 1759. In the 1820s, King George IV donated the King’s library, expanding the collection substantially.<sup>2</sup> Along with this, the museum acquired large groups of Egyptian and Grecian art, until Montagu House was no longer fit to contain everything and had to be expanded. Designed by Sir Robert Smirke, the new building and the Reading Room we know today were completed in 1852, but by then the original outline for the collections had to be reconfigured to accommodate the influx of items. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the museum began to acquire large collections and became involved in archaeological digs abroad.

As an assistant in the Department of Antiquities, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826 - 1897) began to expand the collection in 1851. He wanted to create a timeline of the world through archaeological items, ‘[expanding] the collection in new directions, collecting not only British and medieval antiquities but also prehistoric, ethnographic and archaeological material from Europe and beyond as well as oriental art and objects.’<sup>3</sup> It was through these items that the public could become aware of

1 Miller, E. (1974). *That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. p. 17.

2 Hillier, Francesca. (2017). Montagu House: the First British Museum. In *The British Museum Blog*, 23 June 2017, from <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/montagu-house-the-first-british-museum/>.

3 The Eighteenth Century: Origins of the British Museum. In *British Museum*, Trustees of the British Museum, 2017. From: [www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/the\\_museums\\_story/general\\_history.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history.aspx).

other cultures outside the nation's borders. In the 19th century, the British Empire had expanded to colonize parts of Africa, India, Asia, and Latin America in an attempt to control world trade routes; this overseas expansion and the subsequent material acquisition benefitted the museum greatly.

The British Museum, with its grand sweeping staircases in the Weston Hall and high ceilings, conveys an air of reverence to the history of British art collecting. In the late 19th century, a growing upper class in Britain deemed the amassing of art a sign of wealth, status, and power that needed to be preserved and encouraged. The idea elicited was that Britain as a nation must maintain the history of the world where others might destroy. This was also enabled by a growing academic class with expendable income.

Do we value cultures simply for their artistic achievements and contributions, or for their culture and ethnographic information and history? It is through the display that we answer these questions. With 6.7 million visitors annually, the British Museum is constantly an example of how to exhibit items and the impact of the knowledge imparted by those displays.<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Moser writes:

By displaying items of material culture that had been donated, purchased or unearthed from excavations, museums have played a vital role in explaining past cultures. More significantly, by exhibiting collections of antiquities in particular ways, museums have actively functioned to define cultures or societies from the past. Thus, museum displays have influenced scholarly understandings of the past because they have established interpretive frameworks that served to structure subsequent study.<sup>5</sup>

However, is there a correct display that can define cultures from the past and is it possible to create one? Through the frameworks established in museums, we can analyze how displays have interpreted other cultures.

By tracing the Amaravati sculptures, the Bimaran reliquary, the Kanishka casket, and the Shalabhanjika Yakshi unearthed during the late 19th to early 20th

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4 British Museum. (2015). *Annual Review 2015*.

5 Moser, Stephanie. (2006). *Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at the British Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 6.

centuries, I will examine the history of this series of objects and their current museum display at the British Museum. By considering these museum displays in the British Museum this thesis considers the different descriptions of Buddhist art studies through museum rhetoric and exhibition. I have chosen to focus on Buddhist art historical items as they belong to a field of study that has developed alongside the growth of the British Museum, due in part to items that were donated to the British Museum as a center of study. Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks not only contributed a great deal to the development of the British Museum but obtained and curated items that today form the basis of Buddhist art historical theory. Debates in Buddhist art theory in the academic world are based on these items, such as the aniconic versus the anthropomorphic manifestations of the living Buddha, the origin of Buddha figure from either Gandhara or Mathura art schools of style, and the influence of Hellenistic art style on Buddhist art. These debates and theories were created as a result of the expansion of the British Empire. The collection of items by the British Museum has formed the foundations of the Buddhist art scholarship.

Specifically, this thesis examines the history, acquisition and exhibition history of the Amaravati sculptures, the Bimaran reliquary, the Kanishka casket, and the Shalabhanjika Yakshi currently held by the British Museum. Additionally, it explores the interaction between the life of these objects, from their point of entry into Western epistemological structures, and the specific development of the academic discipline of Buddhist art history. When discussing ‘object biographies,’ I am referring to the Kopytoff’s definition of an object that carries various biographies and sets of identities depending on the item’s current use and assignment of status.<sup>6</sup> These four objects have been selected for study because of their wealth of contributions to the development of Buddhist art history, mainly as they have become focal points of essential debates on the aniconic and iconic and how they have impacted our understanding of Buddhism as a religion. Through these displays, we can understand how such exhibitions have influenced the education of audiences in their views towards Buddhist art. Display

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<sup>6</sup> Kopytoff, Igor. (1986). The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 64-92.

practices dictate how an audience absorbs information, yet also give a historical and cultural narrative of the subject matter from the position of the museum. In this case, we will be looking at the interpretation of an 'Eastern' religion, Buddhism, and its presentation in a 'Western' context in one of the largest public museums in the world. Buddhism has been chosen as means of outlining this study, not only because of its wealth of artistic contributions over many cultures and time periods but also because of the complex nature of its teachings and rhetoric which make it a difficult idea to transmit through artistic means. ' This case study will look at how an objects's display reflects the biography and art historical significance surrounding the item. It will provide insight into this interpretation by looking at museum display practices and how the further study into cultural decontextualization is interpreted by its audience.

First, we will look at the idea of material culture and ethnography and its place in the Museum, in the context of the founding and the history of the British Museum. Then, by tracing the history of the objects, we will see how they were acquired and displayed over the years. A study of the objects and the British Museum will lead to a further discussion of current museum practices and how they are reflected in the display strategies.

Sir Hans Sloane's collection had a great deal of exotic material that showed a study of cultures through its objects. The British Museum has collected a variety of selections that reflect the cultural history of the world. The study of material culture gives us the ability to deconstruct a culture through its objects. Though this study is more applicable to the field of archaeology, how is it reflected in a museum context? In the display of non-Western objects, the interpretation of the object by the curator can create the background for a viewer and how they absorb and attach meaning to another culture.

By looking at the history of the British Museum, we must also consider how pieces in the collection have initially been acquired. The acquisition of items in the early history of the museum collections provides precedence for the museum's policies and plans by laying the foundation on which further selection is based. The position of the British Museum as a public museum and place of education makes it a valuable

source to view how Buddhist art is seen and interpreted from a Western understanding. The British Museum has an extensive collection of Buddhist art which it uses as a lens through which to view the object's original cultural and religious context. As an established secular institution, the British Museum makes an ideal candidate for an analysis of display techniques dealing with religious objects. In the case of museum positioning, the Museum's collection was started with donations of large groups of items, but a vast number of items in the British Museum have been obtained through questionable colonial means. For example, the acquisition of material in 19th-20th centuries were due to British colonial ventures in India, Hong Kong, as well as the Burmese Wars (1824 -1826, 1852-1853, 1885) Opium Wars (183-1842, 1856-1860), Younghusband (1903 - 1904) and Stein expeditions (1901, 1906-1908, 1913-1916, 1930). R. Davis writes:

Theoretically, all items appropriated under duress during colonial conditions might be viewed as the cultural property of India. In practice, however, reclaiming national heritage is a selective and difficult procedure. Most resolutions stress that only property of great historical or artistic importance to a nation qualifies for consideration. And of course, the current holders of such treasures, the former colonial powers, are not eager to return them. The massive cultural repositories like the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, with their comprehensive, world-spanning collections, have their own interests to protect. Likewise, the British government would be loath to watch its premier national institutions denuded of their colonial acquisitions. . . . So, from among the great wealth of objects that passed from India to the United Kingdom during British colonial control, the Indian government has pressed claims on only a small handful.<sup>7</sup>

Because many of the items had no apparent owner, explorers felt it their right to find and excavate items as they saw fit. In their attempts to discover and sometimes preserve

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<sup>7</sup> Davis, R. (1997). *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 180.

the past, they also displaced pieces of India's history through their relocation to England.

# METHODOLOGY

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While compiling the research on the Amaravati Marbles, the Bimaran Reliquary, Kanishka Reliquary, and the Shalabhanjika Yakshi I have used qualitative methods to examine the detail and context of these items to highlight pieces of information that have not been published hitherto. By creating an annotated bibliography for each piece under investigation, I have been able to follow existing literature surrounding them. Since they have been ‘discovered’ and moved into the academic sphere each item has contributed in some way to the Buddhist art academia. There has been a steady movement away from using these items as pieces of evidence to support various academic theories, such as Greco-Buddhist art movement, to viewing items as multi-dimensional objects with biographies that are singular, unique histories that connect them to places, cultures, religions, and people. The items I have chosen have all been analyzed from various academic sources that explored the development of Buddhist art through their artistic features. There have been few to no efforts to combine all of the items’ biographies into one, and finding primary sources has been a challenge. The Amaravati Sculptures have had significant research done on their history, yet little analysis has been made about their current or past displays. When I researched the Yakshi figure from Sanchi, I found no research by academics or the British Museum into how the item came to London.

My method for researching this topic has been a process of gathering and analyzing primary sources: creating an annotated biography of each piece by reading as many available sources and taking steps to examine the gaps in others’ research. Primary sources include periodicals such as the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *The Art Bulletin*, *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report*, and *The Burlington Magazine*. Another critical source of information was the British Museum itself. I

looked for any information available about the acquisition of each item and any display information. I discussed what information I was looking for with the British Museum Central Archivists and they assisted me and were very helpful. Unfortunately, the information I was looking for was not organized as I was expecting. Information was not available by item, so research consisted of digging through years of microfilm.

By looking at ‘Meeting Minutes’ of the Board of Trustees at the British Museum, I was able to pinpoint notes of thanks given to donors. For display information, I found that Guidebooks to British Museum displays became the most reliable source for what was happening to the Museum during the late nineteenth century, as they were usually recommissioned every few years or after major renovations. When looking for information regarding the explorers, I relied on genealogy records: birth records, death records, ship manifests, and newspaper articles. I used this method of taking steps backward in the research to find the gaps that no one had researched before. Those were the pieces of information to me that held the most value. For example research has been done into the Yakshi from Sanchi’s figure, and the similarities of iconography between it and the Bharhut Stupa, but no research had been done into the process through which the Yakshi figure had been transferred from India to England. There was no information on the items donors except for the statement, ‘Hindu female figure holding a tree. Presented by Mrs. Tucker, 1843’<sup>8</sup>. I found it strange that there was no information about a Mr. or Mrs. Tucker, given the importance of their donation. I started with what I knew, and from there I moved backwards and researched as much information as possible. In doing so I have researched the London Missionary Society Collection at the SOAS Library as well as family history records to find as much information as possible on the Tuckers. I have also checked the original accession register at the British Museum with the help of the British Museum, the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory. The archivists at the British Museum were extremely helpful and assist and answer research questions.

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<sup>8</sup> British Museum. (1844). *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*. Vol. 47, G. Woodfall and Son. p. 94.

The item number for the object is 1842,1210.1. Indicating the acquisition date of the item was 1842 and not 1843 as copied.

The limitation of this method is that Buddhist art history is a well researched academic field but the genealogical information and primary sources have been challenging to search. I have spent a great deal of time going through British Museum minutes as many times as I could. Many primary sources, which have been digitized, are not manually available. I have had some setbacks with the British Museum as I have gotten little to no information from the Department of Asia via email: when I have enquired about acquisition information, I have merely been sent a link to the collections website with the suggestion that I ‘find out more information by viewing its information on our online collection database’ or that I could visit the item in person in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery. I have been fortunate to correspond with Dr. Sushma Jansari, the Project Curator for Asian Ethnographic and South Asia Collections and the Medieval South Asia collections, to answer the questions I had about the recent 2017 renovations in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery. The British Museum Central Archives is a valuable, but time intensive, resource that endeavor to assist researchers in going through the archives.

# A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE RECENT SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON THE DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS OBJECTS IN MUSEUMS

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In this thesis I will be examining four objects taken from different Buddhist Stupas that are now residing in the British Museum. One question I raise in this chapter is how to determine an appropriate mode of display – and even if there can be such a thing as an appropriate museum display of objects taken from within stupas. Yiao-hwei Chuang states in her article, ‘Presenting Buddhism in Museums’, that ‘Buddhist objects are the visual expression of Buddhist ideals and the embodiment of Buddhist teachings.’<sup>9</sup> So how do we – and can we –, as an institution or a curator, respectfully display and appreciate these objects for what Chuang terms their ‘spiritual dimension’?<sup>10</sup> There are a number of intrinsic problems with the museum display system. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in her book *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* states that ‘knowledge is now well understood as the commodity that museums offer.’<sup>11</sup> Yet Hooper-Greenhill lists a number of difficulties in the shaping of that knowledge in museums. These also concern respect due the objects and their ‘spiritual dimension’. First, ‘there is a difficulty in accommodating a plurality of histories.’<sup>12</sup> There are a large number of items in the museum and accommodating each of their histories in the timeline created by the museum is very difficult. Secondly, ‘is the lack of historical specificity.’<sup>13</sup> Meaning, there is a perfunctory link created between objects with similar histories and linking these pieces together can erase the differences in their past. Thus, facts about individual items are often overlooked in order to broadly classify many

<sup>9</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). Presenting Buddhism in Museums. In: C. Paine, ed., *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*. London and New York: Leicester University Press, p. 107- 119. p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. Routledge. p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). p. 8.

objects. Finally, ‘concepts of change are in themselves difficult to articulate’.<sup>14</sup> Objects change contextually a multitude of times before and after their acquisition. In regards to this thesis, these four objects have changed in status throughout their ‘life’, how can this be articulated through a museum display?

A modern museum does not want to look at items for simply their aesthetic qualities, but rather to understand that item and its original cultural context. It hopes to solve these problems pointed out by Eileen Hooper-Greenhill. This is a move away from the ‘scientific epistemic configuration’ of categorizing objects which once dominated museum display.<sup>15</sup> However, there is not a clean separation between the two systems of categorization. Elements of both are still discernible in museums today that impact how a museum shapes and teaches knowledge. Buddhist objects have another layer of meaning added to their history. Their religious contextualization is impacted by Hooper-Greenhill’s list of difficulties that shape knowledge. As with many objects, there is a fundamental disconnect between the object in its original context and the object in the museum display: any display design is fated to inadequately render the object’s religiosity.

In preparing this thesis I have researched recent academic literature that deals with the display of sacred objects in museum spaces. In this chapter I will give a critical assessment of key academic works that deal with Buddhist religious objects on display in museums. This literature review will assess six pieces: ‘Presenting Buddhism in Museums’ by Chuang (2000), ‘Our Gods, Their Museums: The Contrary Careers of India’s Art Objects’ by Guha-Thakurta (2007), *The Lives of Chinese Objects* by Louise Tythacott (2011), *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces* by Sullivan (2015), ‘Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at the World Museum Liverpool’ by Louise Tythacott (2017), and ‘Rich and Varied: Religion in Museums’ by Crispin Paine (2017). Each of these works addresses a dimension of my study, from questions of decontextualization and aestheticization, to the ‘lives of objects’, to the implications of the secular mission of the museum, to the presentation of the religious in a secular institution. Together, they comprise a solid body of critical reflection on the broad topic of Western museum

<sup>14</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). p. 37.

display of non-Western religious objects with which my thesis is concerned.

Taiwanese Museologist Yiao-hwei Chuang's article 'Presenting Buddhism in Museums' appeared in 2000 in the edited book *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*. In this piece, she argues that Buddhist objects in Western museums have the possibility to teach and contribute to a cultural narrative through the display of objects. However, exhibits of religious objects are not always well done and miss subtle ideas about Buddhism. The article begins with 'The essentials of Buddhism' where Chuang summarizes the teachings of Buddhism and follows with 'Buddhism and Buddhist objects'. This is succeeded by a review of recent exhibitions of Buddhist objects beginning in 1993. This article deals with the fragmentary nature of all Buddhist museum displays by stating that 'the display of Buddhist objects in museums is not always successful.'<sup>16</sup> The displays can't impress the sacredness of an item when it is part of a larger collection. There is not a way to describe the religious importance of a Buddhist object though these objects are continually used to expand the audiences awareness and appreciation of the religion through objects. There is a 'limited understanding of the objects' and the displays have no means to demonstrate the message of Buddhism portrayed through the item.<sup>17</sup> Chuang does give some recommendations for improvement of Buddhist museum displays simply through awareness. Teaching what these objects are to a viewer is how to impart 'the intangible messages embodied in the objects.'<sup>18</sup> Chuang is very direct that these items were not created for aesthetically inclined museum displays. These items are the embodiment of Buddhist religious ideals, Chuang states 'they are religious objects.'<sup>19</sup> Though Chuang's message of imparting Buddhist knowledge through a display is essential, it does little to tell the reader how to do this. Understandably, this is a very difficult message to convey to a visitor by the museum and the curator and may be an impossible task to fully accomplish.

Professor Tapati Guha-Thakurta's article 'Our Gods, Their Museums: The

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<sup>16</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Chuang, Yiao-hwei (2000). p. 118.

Contrary Careers of India's Art Objects' from the edited book *Art History* was published in 2007. Today, Professor Tapati Guha-Thakurta is a Professor of Humanities at Brown University. In this article, she considers how Indian art is transplanted into Western art museums shifting the purpose of the image to be both sacred and secular and how this balance is accomplished. The sculptures that Guha-Thakurta mentions are those objects that are worshipped as living gods. There is a growing practice to recognize the 'sacredness' of these items through exhibition processes by allowing ritualistic practices to be performed in the museum settings alongside these items. One example cited is the 'Creating a Durga' which invites idol-makers into the museum to ritualistically create these sculptures through a working museum display, once created in the Great Court of the British Museum. Though this trend is a movement forward in recognizing the sacred nature of these items, the idea of a museum setting is still a foreign concept to Indian sculptural worship. Guha-Thakurta's point is to 'think of the "religious and the artistic" less as fixed and stable values, anymore as a shifting, transmuting ground for the position of these sculpted icons.'<sup>20</sup>

To demonstrate the shifting position of sculptural art she uses *The Sculpture of India* exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC in 1985 as an example. *The Sculpture of India* was a large-scale exhibition that focused on the magnitude and history of Indian sculptural art. The designation of the sculptures as 'idols' by both Indian and American media melded both the items 'sacred' and 'artistic' identities and blurred the lines between 'sculptures and gods'.<sup>21</sup> However, Guha-Thakurta highlights the many problems the exhibit had. Pieces were selected for their aesthetic and historical significance. This exhibit was meant to highlight the achievement in Indian sculptural art and was an ambitious project. From the beginning there were problems acquiring pieces that were originally promised to the exhibit. Bronzes from Tamil Nadu were made the center pieces of the exhibit and featured on catalogue cover but were not cleared by the courts for loan until after the opening of the gallery. Other problems were in the form of damage to the 'Didarganj Yakshi'. A rare piece that was acquired

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<sup>20</sup> Guha-Thakurta, T. (2007). Our Gods, Their Museums: The Contrary Careers of India's Art Objects. In: D. Price and J. Nuechterlein, ed., *Art History*, Volume 30, Issue 4. pp. 154-183. p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> Guha-Thakurta, T. (2007). p. 169. p. 171.

by questionable means from a worshipping community by D. B. Spooner and was added to the Patna Museum. It was loaned to *The Sculpture of India* exhibit but once it had returned home, it had a small chip on her left cheek which resulted in national complaint against the treatment of the sculpture. Though the National Gallery denies the claim, asserting that it was an error due to shipping, the case has been used as an example of why not to loan out sculptures to other institutions. There is a demand for these items both as religious items and secular items, so then there is less distinction between the two when they have both artistic and religious identities. The essay gives the reader insight to the complications dealing with the loaning of religious items and how difficult it is to balance the different identities of these objects. Though the article does not offer any recommendations on how to successfully display such items except through demonstration of rituals in Western museums. But even when this is achieved, there is always a disconnected nature when displaying religious objects in the museum.

In Yiao-hwei Chuang's article, she discusses how the visitor at a museum cannot comprehend Buddhist objects without the help of the museum. The museum in return has limitless options for how to display these objects and make them accessible to visitors, including loaning objects. Professor Tapati Guha-Thakurta's article contrasts these comments by illustrating how religiosity and nationalism have become imprinted onto an exhibits themes and how this makes it difficult to loan items.

In her monograph *The Lives of Chinese Objects*, Museum Studies and China specialist Dr. Louise Tythacott traces the biographies of five Chinese Buddhist bronzes now located at the National Museums Liverpool. While curator of the Asian Collections and Head of Ethnology for the museum from 1996 to 2003, she found a number of intriguing pieces, but, missing accession numbers, these pieces were missing their history prior to entering the institution. In 2005, Tythacott discovered an image of the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace that showed a central Chinese bronze image of Guanyin and made it possible to reconnect five bronzes without accession numbers with their histories. This book traces the 'lives' of the five bronze objects and how they have come to World Museum Liverpool. The 'lives' of the item depends on the context into which the item is placed, an analogy illustrated by Igor Kopytoff in

1986 in 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process'<sup>22</sup>. Tythacott uses Kopytoff and Appadurai's ideas of items having biographies to trace the five sculptures back to Putuo, China. The Putuo Five were once sacred deities at a temple on a pilgrimage island off the coast of Zhejiang province before their removal by a British army officer. The objects were then brought to Britain and entered into the Great Exhibition before being sold at various auctions. They were eventually given to the Liverpool Museum where they were 'lost'. They were metaphorically 'lost' meaning that once the items were separated from their item numbers their acquisition details, including where they are from, who donated them, and any historical details, were 'lost' to the item. It wasn't until the items were 'found' by Tythacott that these items were reconnected with their histories. Today they are on display in the World Cultures Gallery at the World Museum Liverpool.

When discussing the display of the items in the 'World Cultures' gallery, Tythacott explains how she displayed the sculptures to focus primarily on the original context of the items and their sacred nature. The curator wanted to evoke the atmosphere of a Buddhist temple by painting the display a deep red, lowering the lighting, and the use of sound in the form of Buddhist throat chants played in the area. Architectural details of a temple are reproduced by creating an empty place in front of the display for worship.

In this book, the reader is able to see the display process through the role of the curator. Tythacott offers a unique perspective of the process through which the display was designed and created but also challenged. Ideas such as adding 'flowers, candles, and incense' to the display were dismissed because of the possible harm they could have on the objects.<sup>23</sup> Tythacott states, 'The final product was moulded by constraint and compromise: conservation restrictions, cost-cutting, reduction of case sized and de-selections of objects in 1999, editing and deletion of integrative text in 2003.'<sup>24</sup> The display reflects Tythacott's desire to show the story of where the objects originated

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<sup>22</sup> Kopytoff, Igor. (1986) *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process*. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. p. 64-91, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 64-92.

<sup>23</sup> Tythacott, L. (2011). *The Lives of Chinese Objects*. New York: Berghahn Books, Inc. p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> Tythacott, L. (2011). p. 217.

by re-contextualizing the objects. However, with the institution editing Tythacott's original design, we must again, like Chuang, acknowledge the fragmentary nature of the museum display.

Though my research is not as extensive, in my thesis I have followed in Tythacott's footsteps in attempting to track the progress of the selected items to their current museum placements. This book has been influential on my research as I was similarly fascinated by the biographies of items displayed in the British Museum. I set out to trace the biographies of a number of items back to their excavation to further understand their nuanced lives. As a book-length study arising from curatorial experience, Tythacott's book gives a robust framework for reconstructing an item's biography, setting as it does her own study in an exhaustive review of relevant published academic works.

How do we display religiously significant objects in a museum setting? This is, again, the question posed in the edited volume *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces*, a collection of eleven essays gathered by Religious Studies professor Bruce M. Sullivan. Each essay develops on the issue of what is sacred and the authors are a range of academics and curators. The essays all focus on Asian art items and the book chapters are broken down into religious categories such as: Hindu and Sikh Religious Objects, Exhibiting Buddhist Religious Objects, and Religions, Museums, and Memory. All of these essays have some application to this thesis, but I have focused on the essays dealing with the display of Buddhist religious objects, that of 'Planning the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture, 2009-2014' and 'Discovery and Display: Case Studies from the Metropolitan Museum of Art'.

In curator John Clarke's essay 'Planning the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture, 2009-2014' Clarke seeks to show the process through which a Buddhist gallery was developed for the Victoria and Albert Museum. When generating the narrative around which the gallery would be created, he, the curator, focused on the 'evolving aesthetics' of Buddhist imagery as it moved away from place of origin. One quote resonates particularly clearly with the fragmentary nature of museum displays as I have evoked it above through other authors. Clarke states, 'it

seemed self-evident that no one could understand Buddhist objects without the addition of a substantial element of religious as well as social and political contexts.<sup>25</sup> He goes on to say that the secular nature of both the V&A and the British Museum make it difficult to ‘display objects without promoting any particular religion’.<sup>26</sup> Thus we are presented with a dilemma of not being able to successfully display a Buddhist object without the context of Buddhist teachings but we again reach the catch of the secular versus the religious in a museum space. Here it seems that the secular nature of the museum is presented as not just an accidental impediment to rendering the objects’ religiosity; maintaining a secular viewpoint, and refraining from appearing to promote any religious point of view, is fundamental to the museum’s mission.

Denise Patry Leidy is curator of the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this essay, ‘Discovery and Display: Case Studies from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’, she discusses how Buddhist objects were introduced to the institution. The first Buddhist works acquired by the institution were pieces with Buddhist imagery but were not religious items. Leidy states, ‘Many of the first examples of Buddhist imagery to enter the Metropolitan Museum’s collection were introduced as motifs in the decorative arts, and the objects in question were selected primarily for the materials in which they were crafted, such as porcelain.’<sup>27</sup> She continues to chronologically list how the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired Buddhist objects based on the interest of the time. Starting with porcelain with Buddhist motifs, then a portable lacquer shrine during the time of japonisme (1856-95), followed by Cambodian images of seated Buddhas affiliated with a popular travel record published in 1873, then the acquisition of two Pali manuscripts after a growing interest in Theravada Buddhism and the academic interest in Sanskrit. Leidy’s case studies demonstrate how the acquisition history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has followed the growing field of Asian studies. Some of these items were acquired for the materials they were made

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25 Clarke, J. (2015). Planning the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture, 2009-2014. In: B. Sullivan, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*. Bloomsbury. p. 68.

26 Clarke, J. (2015). p. 68-69.

27 Leidy, Denise Patry. (2015). Discovery and Display: Case Studies from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In: B. Sullivan, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*. Bloomsbury. p. 96.

from or their aesthetic appeals. It is only recently that these items have been studied to understand their original use and origins. Today the museum has a total of 54 rooms dedicated to Asian art and over 6,000,000 visitors annual. Leidy states that 'gauging [visitors'] needs and interests can be challenging (if not impossible) in a museum that has global collections, many of which represent religious traditions.'<sup>28</sup> In a museum with this amount of visitors it is impossible to create a quiet, contemplative space for religious practitioners. Though it would be ideal to follow display advice suggested by Chuang or demonstrated by Tythacott's displays at the National Museums Liverpool, the galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are constrained by the number of visitors. Many times the pieces themselves must be displayed in key places because of their weight or objects can only be on display for 6-8 months at a time because of conservation regulations.

These two essays in the edited volume *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces*, address the particular problems of displaying religious items from Asia. They considers the question of how objects are interpreted and viewed through the perspective of the museum visitor, the curator, and scholars. Yet, similar to Tythacott's narrative, Clarke and Leidy acknowledge that though there was an effort to make an ideal display for Buddhist objects, they were inhibited by both the institution and the range and possibility by both the display and the audience to understand the various threads of knowledge presented to them. The fundamental ideas of Buddhist are difficult to understand, how can an exhibit impart a large amount of knowledge to a viewer without the appropriate context?

In a 2017 article, 'Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at the World Museum Liverpool' Louise Tythacott pursues similar questions. In this article, Tythacott re-examines representation of Buddhism in museums based on her experience as curator. Unlike her previous book, *The Lives of Chinese Objects*, this article focuses specifically on the 'process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization' of sacred items and how they are formatted and approached within a museum setting.<sup>29</sup> The article

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<sup>28</sup> Leidy, Denise Patry. (2015). p. 106.

<sup>29</sup> Tythacott, L. (2017). Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at the World Museum Liverpool. *Buddhist Studies Review* (Vol. 34). P. 115-133. ' p. 115.

contextualizes the study of displaying Buddhist religious objects through a review of the published academic literature. One approach she notes as put forward by Professor Carol Duncan is whether museums are sacred buildings because of their similarity in architecture and layout to many temples.<sup>30</sup> Tythacott acknowledges that modern museum settings create a ‘reverential’ aura that influences the visitors attitude, however museums also function ‘to de-sanctify objects once considered sacred.’<sup>31</sup> She then details how museums, since the Enlightenment period, have categorized and classified objects, thus overlooking the items’ original religious affiliation. The article presents an analytical timeline of how museums have developed from the Enlightenment period, through post-colonial critiques, to developments of material culture research that have created a deeper discourse on the meanings and lives of objects following Kopytoff’s research.<sup>32</sup>

So how, she asks, does this affect Buddhist objects in a museum setting? Though there has been an acknowledgment of the sacredness of Buddhist objects in this article, Tythacott recognizes that there are still ‘problems of exhibiting Buddhism images as ‘art’’.<sup>33</sup> In creating these displays, the museum and curator, she argues, must strive ‘to create a display that evoked the original environments for these religious objects.’<sup>34</sup> She illustrates this by describing the process of curating the Buddhism display at the World Museum Liverpool and the means which were taken to create a display that evoked the religion it represented. The article demonstrates Tythacott’s dedication to creating an accurate display. It recognizes recent scholarly literature on the topic of religious displays in the museum. There is not much acknowledgment of the problems with curating faced during the creation of the display though I assume this is to not reiterate what has already been stated in her book, *The Lives of Chinese Objects*, about the issues. Similar to Leidy’s case studies in her article, the Buddhist objects collected by the National Museums Liverpool were at first acquired not for their religious purpose. However since their acquisition they have been researched and analyzed to re-

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30 Duncan, Carol. (1995). *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London: Routledge.

31 Tythacott, L. (2017). p. 117.

32 Kopytoff, Igor. (1986).

33 Tythacott, L. (2017). p. 121.

34 Tythacott, L. (2017). p. 130.

contextualize the object so they can now be identified and displayed accurately.

Crispin Paine is an honorary lecturer in the Institute of Archaeology at UCL and a former museum curator. He has written a number of articles on museumology, but I have focused on an article he wrote entitled ‘Rich and Varied: Religion in Museums’ which was published in an edited book called *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (2017). In this article he identifies different types of museums; such as: Religious Museums, Scholarly Museums, Rescue Museums, ‘Many-Routes’ Museums, Community Harmony Museums, Science Museums, Art Museums, and Museums of the Human Story. For each of these types of museums, Paine describes how religion is addressed and displayed to an audience. Essentially, Paine surmises that religious items will always be displayed in museums as ‘an extraordinary high proportion of the art displayed in museums and galleries worldwide has a religious theme, comes from a religious context, or was indeed created to serve a ritual, liturgical, purpose.’<sup>35</sup> In institutions such as the British Museum, which could be identified as a Museum of the Human Story, Paine suggests that if an exhibition ‘involves “religious” objects, it should surely employ a religious studies specialist to ensure that that side of the story is told well, alongside the art history and wider social history story.’<sup>36</sup> However, this is an ideal solution and unfortunately not all museums are able to employ a specialist or research the subject adequately. Even then, as demonstrated by Tythacott’s book and article the display is still subject to many constraints. Though Paine insists that museums have a responsibility to accurately tell the history of an item, that does not necessarily mean they can.

In the following chapters, I trace the biographies of four objects. In doing so, I aim to recount the lives of these objects which are *not* available to the viewer through their museum display. That is not to say that the display is ‘wrong’ or missing something, rather that all displays are at various degrees incomplete. There is no successful way to recount to a viewer the entirety of an object’s history through a

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35 Paine, Crispin. (2017). Rich and Varied: Religion in Museums. In: G. Buggeln, C. Paine and S. Brent Plate, ed., *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury, pp.213 - 223. p. 219.

36 Paine, Crispin. (2017). p. 221.

display. Hooper-Greenhill states that 'ideas are now more important than objects.'<sup>37</sup>

The story of the item that has been created alongside the object creates a more relatable experience for the viewer and are another way by which we impart and shape knowledge of the item. But it is not always conceivable to add all of this information to a display as the literature I have reviewed has demonstrated. I hope that my work adds to the deep knowledge of the objects in question, in and out of original context, as well as to our understandings of the necessarily fragmentary nature of museum display.

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<sup>37</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). p. 206.

# CHAPTER 1: AMARAVATI

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The Amaravati display at the British Museum opened in 1992, and is embellished to present a grand image matching the importance of the object: an early Buddhist stupa excavated by British teams and partially transported to England in the 19th century. Sectioned off behind a glass wall and surrounded by gold leaf walls, the display exudes a sense of grandeur that impresses upon the viewer its importance. The exhibit alludes to the art historical contributions that have been achieved through research of the Amaravati marbles. Because it is considered an artistic high point of Buddhist art, this object has lent a great deal to the chronology of the Western understanding of Buddhist iconography. Jacob Kinnard writes in his paper ‘*Amaravati as Lens*’ that not only has Amaravati been one of the most analyzed structures in Buddhist Art History, but that ‘along with the stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut, there has been no more influential Buddhist structure.’<sup>38</sup> The academic knowledge of Buddhist art has grown alongside the discovery, analysis, and display of the Amaravati Marbles. Today, the British Museum’s Amaravati gallery reflects the honored position it holds in the development of the Buddhist art historical field.

In this chapter, I will trace the biography of the Amaravati Marbles as they became integrated into Western epistemological structures and how they contributed to the development of Buddhist art history. This study will serve as an outline to examine the context of current displays at the British Museum. How, I will ultimately ask, does the British Museum’s presentation of the Amaravati marbles construct an understanding or misunderstanding of Buddhist art?

The Amaravati stupa is the result of the spread of Buddhism in the 3rd c.

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<sup>38</sup> Kinnard, Jacob N. (2008). *Amaravati As Lens: Envisioning Buddhism in the Ruins of the Great Stupa*. In *Buddhism in the Krishna River Valley of Andhr*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY. p. 81.

BCE from Northern India to the lower Krishna valley, what is now known as Andhra Pradesh.<sup>39</sup> During the Maurya Empire (323 - 185 BCE), Buddhism experienced exponential growth from the Northern Plains of India into the Indian subcontinent, which could be attributed to Emperor Ashoka who reigned from approximately 273 - 232 BCE. Once a conquering force, he expanded his empire from the edges of modern-day Afghanistan to Bengal, then down to the southern state of Tamil Nadu. According to Ashoka's edicts, during his reign he conquered the region of Kalinga where an estimated one hundred thousand people were slain under his command. It is told by 'an edict carved upon a rock at the boundary of the ancient Kalinga country' that after witnessing the destruction wrought by his army he converted and dedicated the rest of his life to a 'missionary zeal for the non-violence of Buddhism.'<sup>40</sup> To show his remorse, the Emperor dedicated himself to the spread of Buddhism throughout his kingdom by encouraging missionaries and the creation of Buddhist monuments, such as the Amaravati stupa.

According to legend, at the death of Shakyamuni Buddha between the 5th and 3rd c. BCE, the Buddha's remains were divided and enshrined as relics into eight separate stupas between each nation. During Ashoka's reign, he unearthed the remnants and further divided the Buddha's remains into 84,000 stupas across the empire. These shrines were created alongside numerous rock-cut edicts and pillars that have come to symbolize Ashoka's reign. The inscriptions on the pillars spread the principles of Dharma which have come to be interpreted as Buddhism.

Though it is uncertain whether one of these relics was entombed at Amaravati, we can attribute the building of the Amaravati stupa to the Emperor Ashoka's proselytizing mission. The stupa was built around 200 - 250 BCE (though these dates are debated) before it was abandoned in the 14th century after the decline of Buddhism.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, pieces of the stupa were unearthed to be used as building materials for the palace of Vassareddy Nayudu, the Rajah of Chintapalle.<sup>41</sup> The practice of reusing old materials is not uncommon in India and the

39 Craven, R. (1977). *A Concise History of Indian Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.

40 Craven, R. (1977). p. 37.

41 [Ramaswami, N. S. (1975). *Amaravati: The Art and History of the Stupa and the Temple*. Hyderabad,

stupa would have been an excellent source of precut stone slabs.<sup>42</sup>

A Scottish officer working for the British East India Company, Colin Mackenzie (1754-1821) participated in military campaigns across India from 1783 through 1815, before becoming the first Surveyor General of India on the 26th of May, 1815. Throughout his military campaigns, Mackenzie had started a collection of illustrations and maps, explored extensively in *Illustrating India: the Early Colonial Investigations of Colin Mackenzie* by Jennifer Howes. The Mackenzie collection encompasses more than 1,700 pieces which give a glimpse into pre-colonial and early colonial India through the eyes of British colonial explorers.<sup>43</sup> Today these are the only documentation of how the location of the Amaravati, or ‘the mound at Dipaldinna’ (Hill of Lamps), appeared before the excavation around 24th February 1797, which Mackenzie investigated before he was appointed as Surveyor.<sup>44</sup>

During Mackenzie’s excavations, it is estimated by the archaeologist Robert Sewell that the southeast section of the stupa was unearthed, leaving nothing behind.<sup>45</sup> The Amaravati location was of great interest to Mackenzie, and it was not until his new position as Surveyor of India that he had the freedom to pursue his interest in antiquities, and return, survey the site, and create illustrations of visible panels which he believed were associated with Jainism.

In March 1816 Mackenzie went to Amaravati along with a team of draftsman to oversee the commencement of survey work. He remained on site for two to three months, but his team of draftsmen continued to produce drawings until October 1817.

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India: Government of Andhra Pradesh; see also Singh, Upinder. (2001). Amaravati: The Dismembering of the Mahacaitya (1797–1886). In *Society for South Asian Studies*, Vol 17:1. p. 19-40.] Kinnard, Jacob N. (2008).

42 Other accounts state that Raja Vessareddy Nayudu later dug out the center mound looking for treasures that would typically be stored in the center. Shimada, A. (2012). *Early Buddhist Architecture in Context: The Great Stupa at Amarāvati (ca. 300 BCE - 300 CE)*. Brill. p. 4.

43 Howes, J. (2010). *Illustrating India: the Early Colonial Investigations of Colin Mackenzie (1784-1821)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 1.

44 Due to differing accounts, Howes believes that the date of discovery is wrong, as it conflicts with other times written by him, placing him 500 kilometers away. She thinks that date is instead closer to February 1798. Howes, J. (2010). p. 49.

45 Burgess, James. (1882). *The Buddhist stupas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta in the Krishna District, Madras Presidency, surveyed in 1882*. Varanasi: Indological Book House, 2nd ed. 1970. p. 52.

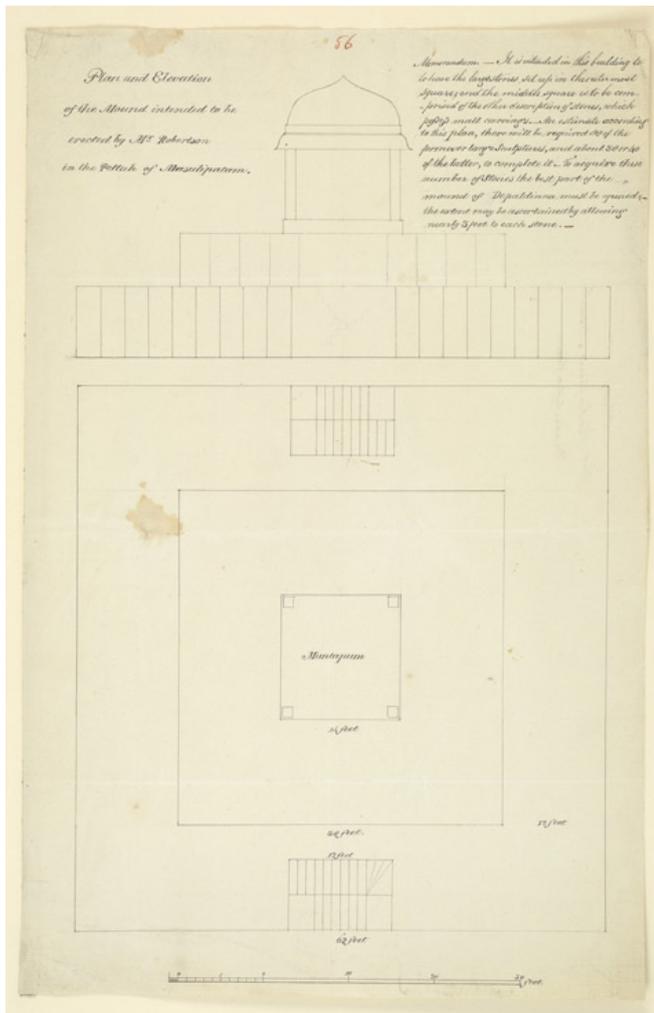


Fig. 1-1. Plan and Elevation of the Mound intended to be erected by Mr Robertson in the Pettah of Masulipatam. (1816).

In April 1817 Mackenzie arranged for eleven stones to be moved from Amaravati to Machilipatnam on a ship bound for Calcutta. In 1821, nine of the original eleven<sup>46</sup> were transferred to the East India Company museum on Leadenhall Street, two of which are in the British Museum today.<sup>47</sup>

Mackenzie supervised the site at intermittent times during the excavation, sketching pieces as they were unearthed: the parts sent to Machilipatnam were illustrated before being shipped off-site.

In 1830, Francis W. Robertson took these pieces and designed a monument known as ‘Robertson’s Mound’ in the center of a

marketplace.<sup>48</sup> This consisted of thirty-three slabs, set up in a circle to resemble a stupa. These were recorded by Dr. Benza in 1835.<sup>49</sup> While there are no illustrations of the display, there is one anonymous drawing of the plan seen in Figure 1-1. The information remaining suggests they were built as a public monument in a busy area in Madras before being disassembled.

While a few of the pieces of the original site were removed, the whole stupa

46 Two other of the original eleven sculptures were presented by Mackenzie to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, later brought to the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

Barrett, D. (1954). *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum*. London: British Museum Press. p. 24.

47 Howes states that there were seven images removed, [Howes, J. (2010). p. 219.] In Kinnard, [Kinnard, Jacob N. (2008). p. 83.] he states that 11 were removed and nine were sent to London.

48 Howes, J. (2010). p. 221.

49 Barret, Douglas. (1954). p. 24.

was not excavated under Mackenzie. Many fragments of the stupa were left above ground and went missing or undocumented. These were not the only problems with Mackenzie's excavation process: insufficient records were created beside the illustrations. At the time, it was believed that the stupa was a Jain religious monument, and thus compared symbolically to known Jain iconography. Though there were comparisons done by Captain Edward Fell, who was investigating the Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh in 1818 located more than a thousand kilometers to the northwest of the Dipaldinna mound, he felt Sanchi and Amaravati showed similarity in carving styles. In a series of correspondence between Fell and Mackenzie, Fell suggests that the similarity in styles could mean a commonality of Buddhism between the two sites.<sup>50</sup> At this time, Buddhism was not thought to have traveled this far south in India and was therefore discarded as a possibility. Colin Mackenzie continued collecting ethnographic material and drawings of India until his death in 1821, never knowing the true nature of Amaravati.

Excavations were continued by Sir Walter Elliot (1803 - 1887) in 1845. Through his efforts to unify the fragments, the Amaravati marbles gained the nickname 'the Elliot Marbles'. Elliot describes the Amaravati site as being a 'round mound or hillock, with a hollow or depression at the summit, but without a vestige or indication of an architectural structure, or even a fragment of wrought stone, to show that a building had once stood there, every fragment of former excavations having been carried away and burnt into lime.'<sup>51</sup> It is evident that proper procedures were not observed when the sculptured stones were excavated because of the nonexistent excavation notes and the lack of recording archaeological finds. Small pieces of ethnographic evidence were ignored and undocumented, which could have given us a better look at the cultural evidence of early Indian society. We have also lost parts of stone that may have indicated a greater detail in the architectural construction of the stupa, as they were deemed less artistic or unnecessary.

Jennifer Howes writes that, even though the site had been disrupted before colonial forces, 'it is also unhelpful that whatever records Elliot made of his excavations

<sup>50</sup> Howes, J. (2010). p. 221.

<sup>51</sup> Barret, Douglas. (1954). p. 24.

in the late 1840s, which were just as disruptive as Mackenzie's work, have all gone missing.<sup>52</sup> Little information remains of the excavation or the original arrangement of Amaravati. Even though the stones were numbered as they were extracted, there was never a record of their original location, and there was no consistency in their identification. Though the initial configuration has been reconstructed with reference to similar structures such as the Sanchi and Bharhut, we have lost any evidence of the original structure that may have enlightened Buddhist art scholars as to the development of stupa structures over time.

Elliot sought to re-combine the group of sculptures that he had excavated with the pieces of marble that had already been removed from the site, the ones on display at Robertson's Mound in Machilipatnam. After they had been dismantled at the orders of Lieutenant-General Sir Fredrick Adam, who was Governor over the area, they were given into the care of Richard Alexander, a gentleman in the area who they believed would guarantee the safety of the objects. Unfortunately, he grew very fond of the objects in his garden and refused to return them so they could be transferred to the museum in Madras. The East India Company eventually had to negotiate a purchase to unify the collection.

Under Alexander's care, three pieces of the stupa were lost. It is unknown if these were ever documented.<sup>53</sup> Elliot eventually reunited all but three pieces of the marbles in Madras, where illustrations were made in 1858 and sent to London. Howes writes, 'It appears that the Court of Directors in London were pleased by the drawings because the sculptures depicted in those drawings are now in the British Museum's collection.'<sup>54</sup> While the Sanchi stupa survives at its original location, the location of the excavation mound of Dipaldinna had been disturbed several times, with 121 sculptures being sent to London in 1859.<sup>55</sup> They reached London in 1860 and were stored for a year in Beale's Wharf in Southwark. The next step was for the East India Company to find a new home for the Amaravati Marbles.

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<sup>52</sup> Howes, J. (2009). A Colonial History of Sculptures from the Amaravati Stupa. In: J. Hawkes & A. Shimada, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia* (1st ed., pp. 20-39). Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Howes, J. (2009). p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Howes, J. (2009). p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Howes, J. (2009). p. 27.

# FROM THE INDIAN MUSEUM TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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The East India Company – the commercial enterprise which paved the way for British colonial dominion over India – had a museum, located at Leadenhall Street in central London, displaying the many things it had acquired during its dominance of India, and described in guidebooks from the 1850’s as a plethora of items the company had appropriated through its campaigns. In an excerpt from *The Leisure Hour* journal, the Museum was described as follows:

Owing to the absence of systematic classification, and the want of a catalogue—to which we may add, the evident want of room for the proper display of the treasures accumulated—it is not easy at one view to acquire anything like a correct notion of the whole, much less to note every object worthy of observation. The collection is, in fact, well deserving of the closest study and scrutiny, and it is much to be regretted that every facility, with regard to space, to the distribution of annotated catalogues, and the affixing of descriptive labels to the several articles, is not afforded to the public. There is enough here . . . to teach the people of England, in a few hours, more of the inner life and social customs of the *Hindoos* than they are likely to get from years of desultory reading, or, indeed, than is to be got at all from any existing published works . . . we gaze with surprise and wonder at their industrial miracles—at their inimitable textile fabrics—at the proofs they send us of their unaccountable perseverance in minute and laborious undertakings, and of their unrivaled skill in such masterpieces of patience and manual dexterity; but of the Indian

people—the power that produces these astonishing results—we know nothing, or next to nothing.<sup>56</sup>

According to the review in the article, the museum was divided into sections based on item types such as leather, metalwork, fabric, sculptures, Indian Arms, lacquer, and ethnographic items. These items came with little, if no, description, but were used to exhibit the profits and power of the East India Company in India, functioning as proof of the Company's colonial accomplishments. Although it was described as a free museum, it was difficult to obtain entry: to get a ticket, a visitor would have to contact 'a person of authority' in the East India Company, and it was open only one day of the week; it was meant for the privileged members of society to view.

The museum was often described as overcrowded, utilizing every space available. Peter Gordon of Northamptonshire Record Society, published a review in 1835, writing that 'the administration [of the India Museum] ought surely to be conducted as by the Trustees of the British Museum'.<sup>57</sup> The India Museum continued to collect more items with no changes.

Meanwhile, in India, the East India Company was concerned with the Indian Rebellion of 1857. As a result, the British government lost faith that the East India Company could successfully steward over the seized regions of India. This led to the company losing their position with the British crown in 1858, marking the start of colonial rule in India. The British government assigned a member of the India Office to preside over all of the East India Company's holdings, including the museum. The Secretary of State for India, Lord Stanley, the 15th Earl of Derby, took control of the India Office in 1858. John Forbes Watson was assigned to the collections the same year. He was determined to start a new museum in a new building with the title 'Imperial Museum of India and the Colonies'. However, with the loss of revenue from India, there were no funds to support this project. The East India Company's collection at Leadenhall Street was one of the most prolific Indian collections in Europe, but the Museum languished after the Company had been removed and replaced with the India Office. Many people of the India Office wanted to get rid of the collection all together.

<sup>56</sup> W. Stevens, P. (1858). East India House Museum. *The Leisure Hour*. Print.

<sup>57</sup> IOR, I/F/2/238, Finance and Home committee, 24 April 1835.

The Amaravati sculptures acquisition in 1860 came at an inconvenient time, as the Indian Office was already occupied with the disintegration of the East India Company and the shifting of the museum. The collection was moved from the East India Company's Indian Museum at Beale's Wharf in Southwark to the Fife House, separate from the location for the Indian Office, in 1861 and became the Indian Museum.<sup>58</sup> The nine pieces sent ahead by Mackenzie in 1821 were on display at the Leadenhall Street Museum before the museum dissolved, as Fergusson makes a note of it in his book. It was at Fife House that all of the Amaravati marbles in London were reunited and then forgotten until 1867. In this excerpt of *The Indian Museum (1801 - 1879)*, Ray Desmond articulates how James Fergusson (1808 - 1886), an art critic and architect with interest in historic Indian architecture, found the sculptures:

Then [Fergusson] remembered the Amaravati sculpture he had admired so much in the Museum in its old home in Leadenhall Street. One exceptionally fine piece of the sculpture had thoughtlessly been fixed to the outer wall of Fife House, exposed to successive frosts which had destroyed a good deal of its intricate carvings. To his consternation he discovered the rest buried under rubbish in the coach house in the grounds of Fife House.<sup>59</sup>

It was at the Fife House that the marbles received a great deal of damage due to weathering from exposure to pollutants and the weather of London. Fergusson understood the sculptural importance of the Amaravati marbles and was shocked at their treatment. Through Fergusson's publications, including *Tree and Serpent Worship: or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India from the Sculptures of the Buddhist Topes at Sanchi and Amaravati*, it came to be understood that the architectural similarities between the Sanchi and Amaravati were due to their similar Buddhist iconography and display pattern.<sup>60</sup> As a result of his research and publications, Buddhist art historians

<sup>58</sup> Shimada, A. (2012). p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Desmond, Ray. (1982). *The India Museum 1801-1879*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office: London. p. 115.

<sup>60</sup> 'attributes both these topes[Sanchi and Amaravati], with all their elaborate decorations, to the displays of Buddha, and of this there cannot be any doubt.'

Fergusson, James. (1868). *Tree and Serpent Worship, or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the 1st and 4th Centuries before Christ, from the Sculptures of the Buddhist Topes at Sanchi and Amaravati*.



Fig. 1-2. *The New Indian Section, South Kensington Museum.* (1880). Engraving.

reexamined the potential of the Amaravati sculptures. It is unknown whether the statues were immediately moved to a more appropriate location after Fergusson's discovery in 1867. However, we do know much of the Indian Museum Collection, including the Amaravati Marbles, were relocated to the Indian Office stores in Belvedere Road, Lambeth in 1869 when the lease at Fife House expired.<sup>61</sup> With the future of the Indian Museum unknown, the decision to store parts of the collection in the newly opened South Kensington Museum, today the Victoria & Albert Museum, before the collection was officially transferred to the care of the Museum in 1875, was the most practical alternative. There, 'the Amaravati sculpture enjoyed the distinction of being at the principal entrance in Exhibition Road.'<sup>62</sup> An honorable position, considering its previous location at the coach house. Though there is no existing image of the Amaravati display at the South Kensington Museum we can see how the museum incorporated pieces from the Indian Office into their presentation in Figure 1-2.

In 1879, the House of Commons decided that reestablishing the Indian Museum

Reprint, Delhi: Indological Bookhouse, 1971. Facsimile Publisher. p. 220.

61 British Museum, (Central Archive) *Standing Committee Minutes*, 10 January 1880, C. 14,955-6. Microform.

62 Desmond, Ray. (1982). p. 143.

would require too much funding; thus the decision was made to dissolve its collection. Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826 - 1897), Keeper of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnology at the British Museum, was one of the representatives sent to assist the Museum Committee in charge of the dispersal of objects.<sup>63</sup> Franks, who was aware of the Amaravati marbles because of James Fergusson's publication, let it be known that 'such objects as the Amaravati and other ancient sculptures [should] be transferred to the British Museum, with casts being retained at South Kensington.'<sup>64</sup> During this period, the British Museum was building its collection with the intention of featuring the history of the world through its archaeological collection. The Indian collection was lacking and would profit from the acquisition of the Indian Museum's collection. During the British Museum Trustees Minutes from January 10, 1880, it was recorded:

The South Kensington Museum has decided not to have casts taken of the Amaravati Sculptures, as originally proposed; that the principal sculptures might be arranged on the landing of the Great Staircase in the British Museum, following, mainly, the plates in Mr. James Fergusson's work *Tree and Serpent Worship* - Mr. Fergusson to be consulted as to the arrangement; that it would be advisable to have the more delicately carved of these sculptures, and the smaller and more ancient sculptures, exhibited under glass in the two rooms at present used for the exhibition of botanical specimens, on the removal of the collections to the Natural History Museum.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout 1880, Franks was dedicated to preserving the Amaravati sculptures and creating an exhibition space on the Great Staircase. He was very concerned about making the display as historically accurate as possible. Franks was in contact with scholars such as James Fergusson, James Burgess, and Robert Sewell who had studied the original location and could give some perspective of the monument.<sup>66</sup> In a drawing  
63 IOR, C/43. Council of India Minutes, 8 July 1879, ff. 36-8; BM (Central Archive) *Standing Committee Minutes*, 12 July 1879, C. 14,770.

64 Desmond, Ray. (1982). p. 178.

65 British Museum, (Central Archive) *Standing Committee Minutes*, 10 January 1880, C. 14,955-6.

66 Willis, Michael D., Caygill, Marjorie, et al. (1997). *Sculpture from India*. In A. W. Franks: *Nineteenth-*  
40

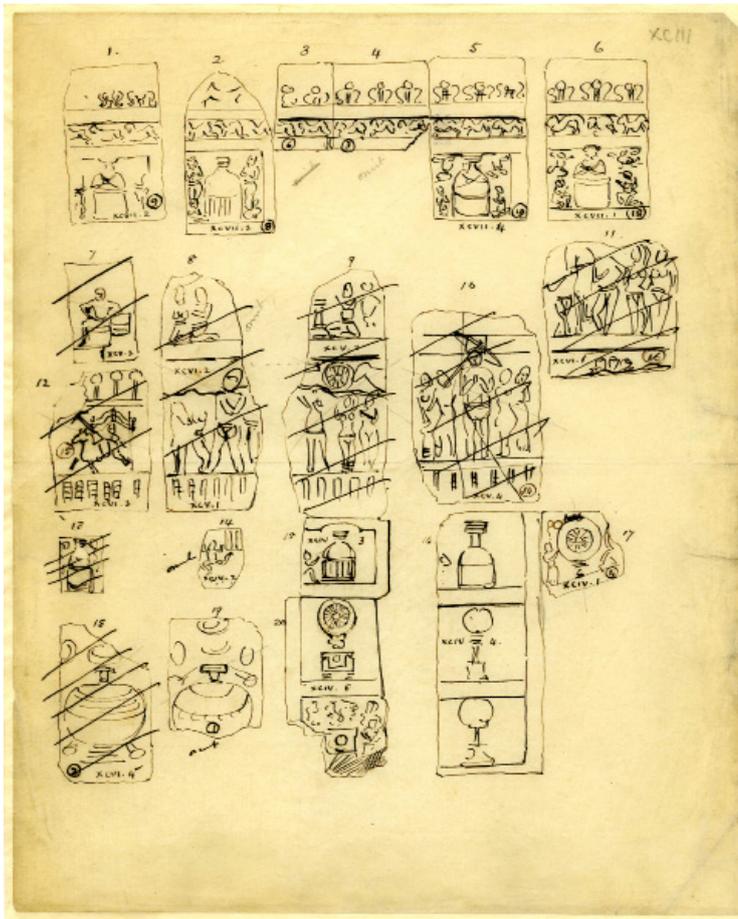


Fig. 1-3. Preparatory sketch for the Amaravati display. Franks, A.W. (Artist). (1880 circa). *Drawing*.

done by Franks in 1880 (Figure 1-3) the preparations he was making to create an accurate display by drafting the pieces himself are visible. In April of 1880, he asked for funds to glaze the sculptures, to highlight and preserve the carvings. He created a complete arrangement for the sculptures in their new location; their integration into the museum would fill a gap in the British Museum's archaeological timeline of the world. Franks considered the

sculptures of Amaravati to be done with amazing skill and often viewed them to rival the Elgin Marbles of Ancient Greece. In a letter to Alexander Cunningham, he wrote, 'I am ambitious to show the fanatics for Greek and Roman sculpture that the art of India is not to be despised.'<sup>67</sup> Franks was passionate about Indian art and wanted to create a display that highlighted the artistic achievements and validity of the field; he wanted to show Indian sculpture in another light, worthy of academic consideration and not merely a colonial acquisition.

At the time, the British Museum's collection was a public reminder of the country's colonial accomplishments overseas. Since the museum was conserved on behalf of the nation, the selection of artistic, archaeological, and ethnographic material continues to be held 'in trust for the nation', and was therefore, a reflection of the

*Century Collecting and the British Museum*. British Museum Press. p. 250-261.

67 A. W. Franks to General Cunningham, a draft of a letter dated 21 February 1881 (BM OA: Amaravati papers).

Cited in Willis, Michael D., Caygill, Marjorie, et al. (1997). p. 259.

nation's interest in preserving and acquiring the history of the world. The sculptures were coveted for their artistic accomplishment. However there was no information about the history or context on display.

After they were transferred, the Amaravati sculptures were displayed behind protective sheets of glass on the landing of the Great Staircase, a picture of which can be seen in Figure 1-4, taken in 1880 of the Great Staircase display. Franks' efforts into gaining the collection, consulting experts, and creating a coherent exhibit all paid off with a display that was true to the original monument (with limitations). There is a section labeled 'Principal Staircase' from *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum* from 1899, which reads:

On the walls of the Staircase have been arranged some of the sculptures from the great Buddhist tope at Amaravati, in Southern India. It is probable that the construction of this tope extended over some centuries, perhaps between A.D. 200 and A.D. 400.

A Tope or dagoba is a shrine peculiar to the Buddhist religion (see p. 55). In the centre is a solid dome-shaped structure enclosing relics of Buddha or of his principal followers. This is generally

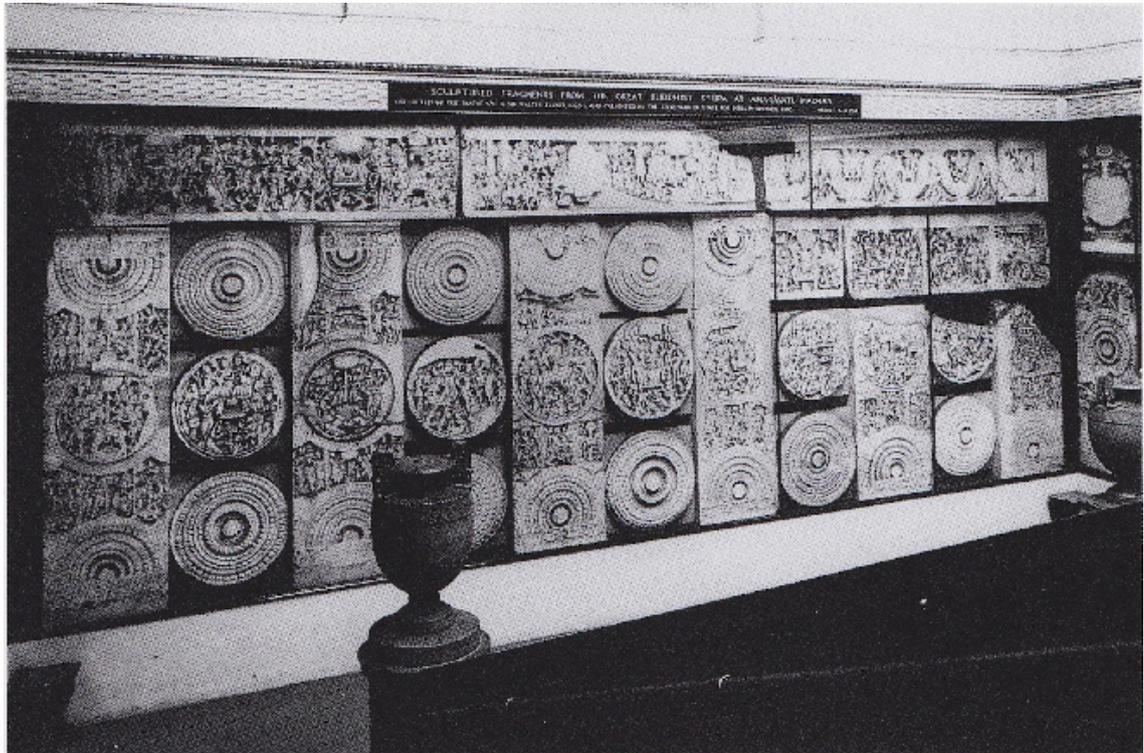


Fig. 1-4. Photograph of Amaravati display installed by Franks in 1880 in the Great Staircase. *Railing section from Amaravati.* (200-300 c. CE) Photograph.

surrounded by an elaborately carved rail. The sculptures from Amaravati may be divided into three classes. The older and coarser slabs are considered to have formed part of the central building. The delicately carved slabs representing topes lined an internal wall. The large upright slabs and intervening discs formed the outer rail, which was surmounted by a rich frieze and was sculptured on both sides. Some of the subjects illustrate events in the life of Gautama Buddha, the former founder of Buddhism.<sup>68</sup>

This same description is written in the guide for the years 1900, 1907, and 1908. The information in the guides stays the same until 1914 when the guidebook is significantly shortened and cuts information about the 'Principal Staircase'. However, the Amaravati Marbles were still on display. The Amaravati stone slabs would have been considered an example of highest artistic achievement of India readily available to the British public.

The display of the Amaravati Marbles was only intact until the evacuation of the Museum during World War II. In 1941 the Museum was closed, and the Marbles, along with other pieces of the collection, were removed for fear of damage during the bombings. The British Museum did sustain significant damage during the war and reconstruction prolonged reopening. After the war, the Amaravati Marbles were on display from 1951 to 1959, before they were moved to the basement to preserve them. This was a result of the unfavorable conditions of London air which would have significantly damaged the white-green limestone. In November 1992, the current Amaravati exhibit was curated by Robert Knox for the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum.

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<sup>68</sup> British Museum Trustees, comp. (1899). *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum*. 2nd ed. N.p.: British Museum. p. 74 - 75.  
British Museum Trustees, comp. (1900). p. 74 - 75.  
British Museum Trustees, comp. (1907). p. 75 - 76.  
British Museum Trustees, comp. (1908). p. 75 - 76.

## CURRENT DISPLAY

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The display today curated by Knox was explicitly created for the Amaravati items and opened in November 1992. A section of the Asian Art Gallery known as the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery was walled off to create a climate controlled environment for the Amaravati display, known as the Asahi Shimbun Gallery. The Asahi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper, donated half a million euros to the British Museum for the exhibit and continues to support other museum displays; it is credited on a plaque at the exit of the gallery. The Amaravati display was reopened in the Asahi Shimbun Gallery in 2014 after the construction of the Museum's World Conservation, and Exhibitions Centre closed the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery in 2010.<sup>69</sup>

A section of railing from the stupa is recreated in the center of the room while pieces of the main drum of the stupa are located on the outside walls.<sup>70</sup> The display is large, bringing the railing display standing about 12 feet tall, with a pillar and two lions which would have marked the entrance to the stupa located in front of the glass. Though the display is not made to recreate the original form, which would be impractical and too large for the space, a piece of the railing has been reconstructed, featuring the more detailed sculptures available to the British Museum. The section label near the left entrance for the Amaravati collection reads:

The Great stupa at Amaravati: A large dome-shaped mound or stupa was first made at Amaravati, south-east India, in the 3rd c. BCE. It was built to house a relic, probably of the Buddha. The site flourished for over a thousand years. From about 150 BCE, the stupa was surrounded with sandstone railing carved with emblems and stories

<sup>69</sup> Conference - *Amaravati: The Art of an Early Buddhist Monument in Context*. 2014. International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Retrieved 6 May 2016, from <https://www.iiconservation.org/node/5073>.

<sup>70</sup> The drum of the stupa refers to the main rounded body of the center.

from the life of the Buddha. The sides of the stupa were also decorated with large carved slabs. The sculptures were constantly renewed, paid for by people from many walks of life, from merchants to queens and nobles. Buddhism declined in India from the 9th century and Amaravati was finally abandoned by 1350. In 1798, Colin Mackenzie, Surveyor General of India, undertook excavations at the site and made detailed drawings. Sculptures were removed throughout the 19th century, and in 1880 a selection was acquired by the British Museum. The display in this room recreates the railing and the open space between the railing and the slabs that were mounted on the side of the stupa.<sup>71</sup>

The section label is a preface to the history of the Amaravati marbles and its function. As part of this caption there is a drawing illustrated in Figure 1-5 with the caption, ‘A reconstruction of the Great stupa at Amaravati as it may have appeared in about AD 300’. It is not very apparent how the displayed railing fits into the recreations drawing, until you read the label next to it explaining the architectural pieces of the stupa.<sup>72</sup> It is

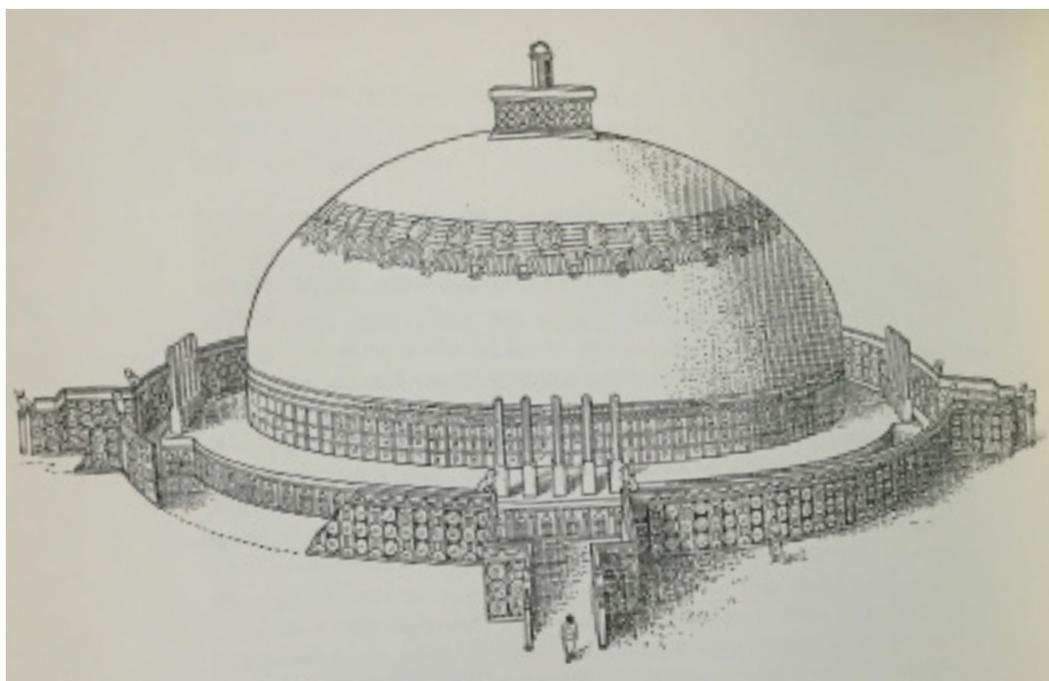


Fig. 1-5. Label Illustration from the Amaravati Display. *A reconstruction of the Amaravati.* (1954).

<sup>71</sup> Display notes from the Amaravati Exhibit at the British Museum.

<sup>72</sup> Label title is: Architecture of the Great stupa, with subcategories labeled The Dome, The Drum, and The Railing and Gateways.

through this label drawing and description that you start to understand the scale of the stupa. The railing is estimated to have a circumference of 240m around the central dome.

The Amaravati display is an exceptional space for the sculptural pieces to be kept safely, but there has been an issue with accessibility. Viewing this display can be difficult, as it is only available if a guard is posted in the gallery; due to the delicate nature of the pieces, if there is a shortage of personnel at the British Museum the Amaravati exhibit will be closed. Thus, access to the gallery is often unavailable, but the large display is still visible through the glass wall that sections it off. The closed-off nature of the display from the rest of the gallery makes visitors hesitant to enter this area. Although ethnographic material is fundamental to the understanding of the Amaravati's Buddhist art history, viewers' focus is on the aesthetics of the items, seeing only the structures themselves, and less descriptions of their use or meaning. The museum labels have less descriptions that may be because of the lack of space.

It is difficult in any Buddhist art display, in physical layout and textual presentation, to convey the purpose of circumambulation that would have been one of the primary functions of a stupa and its pathways. One caption in the Amaravati gallery reads, the 'display in this room recreates the railing and the open space between the railing', but doesn't necessarily clarify that the space would have been an original architectural design intended to allow for the devotional act of walking around a sacred object. The center stupa could have contained a sacred relic of the Buddha, possibly entombed there by Emperor Ashoka; the act of circumambulation would entail the ritualistic process of approaching the stupa in a distinct pattern that involved a series of rotations around the center to acquire merit. The central piece of the Amaravati display is the recreation of a portion of the railing, but the most critical structure would have been the central dome housing the relics around which circumambulation would have been performed.

Another point of ethnographic and related art historical importance pertinent to the Amaravati sculptures and its material culture is the merit-making practice of restoration through donations. The label reads: 'the sculptures were constantly

renewed, paid for by people from many walks of life, from merchants to queens and nobles.<sup>73</sup> This is confirmed by a series of inscriptions found on the stupa that relate how enhancement was done on the original monument thanks to specific patrons.<sup>74</sup> These indicate the contribution to a stupa was also a source of merit or status. It would have occasionally been done in the name of others such as family members who had already passed. The merit from donating to the stupa would continue to benefit the patron into the next life, and these surviving inscriptions are telling of how important it was to accumulate merit. Though the act of donation is cited in the label statement, the religious implications are unmentioned. However, this could be due to the lack of space to explain such a complicated religious concept. The meanings of items are established by these labels and vary depending on how they are interpreted. However, since the British Museum is a secular institution it does not necessitate the inclusion of this information, the religious purpose does not need to be defined by curators or the institution. Still, the Amaravati materials have informed foundational debates in Buddhist art history around the evolution from ‘aniconic’ to the anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha.

One example of how the display has limited religious and historical connotation is evident in the display of a marble drum that is key to the development of the image of the Buddha at Amaravati. Figure 1-6 and 1-7 shows both sides of a double-sided drum: on one side we see an empty throne underneath a Bodhi tree while flying celestials and devotees worship on either side. The throne indicates the presence of an ‘aniconic’ Buddha by the two footprints located underneath and the parasol above. An example of such footprints is seen in Figure 1-8. Though it has been argued by Huntington that this depicts the ritual of worshipping at a pilgrimage site by devotees after the Sakyamuni Buddha obtained enlightenment, the depiction of the celestial beings suggests that this is not a realistic representation but an aniconic Buddha figure.<sup>75</sup> This side was estimated

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73 Display notes from the Amaravati Exhibit at the British Museum.

74 Schopen, Gregory. 1991. ‘An Old Inscription from Amarāvati and the Cult of the Local Monastic Dead in Indian Buddhist Monasteries.’ In *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14 (1991): p. 281-329.

75 Huntington, S. (1990). Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism. In *Art Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4, *New Approaches to South Asian Art (Winter, 1990)*, p. 401-408.

Huntington, S. (2015). Shifting the Paradigm: The Aniconic Theory and Its Terminology. In *South*



Fig. 1-6. Back: Relief of the Bodhi tree and an empty dias. Amaravati. *Drum-slab (two-sided)*. (1st c. BCE - 3rd c. CE.)



Fig. 1-7. Front: Relief depicting a stupa with a figure of the Buddha standing at the entrance. Amaravati. *Drum-slab (two-sided)*. (1st c. BCE - 3rd c. CE.)

to have been carved in the 1st c. BCE. The opposite side of this drum panel, carved in 3rd c. CE., shows an anthropomorphic relief of the Buddha standing at the entrance of the stupa, with similar flying celestials above and devotees on either side. The stupa has architectural similarities to Amaravati, such as the lion sculptures and railings. Located behind the Buddha on the dome of the stupa are drum slabs that depict scenes from the Buddha's life seen in Figure 1-9 and Figure 1-10. If you look carefully at Figure 1-7 you can see the First Sermon, the Great Departure, and Māyā's Dream on the stupa's surface. It has been suggested that this particular double-sided limestone drum was flipped over and reused. The artistic styles differ, showing the progression of the Amaravati school of art over four centuries, and a movement away from the aniconic to the anthropomorphic. The debate of the aniconic versus the iconic is a contextual issue that has followed the Amaravati display since its iconography was analyzed by Fergusson. The chronology of this debate will be discussed later in this chapter.

This marble is displayed sideways at the British Museum near the entrance with both sides visible. The two labels, one for each side, reads:

### Drum slab

Limestone, 3rd century AD

This slab was first carved in about the 1st century BC. When the Great stupa was refurbished under the patronage of the Satavahana rulers beginning in about the 2nd century AD, the slab was turned over and carved on this side with a Buddha figure within the stupa.

### Side B

The Great stupa at Amaravati with the Buddha standing in human form in the entrance to the monument.

### Drum slab

Limestone, about 1st century BC

This side of the slab was carved in about the 1st century BC with a scene from the Buddha's Enlightenment. When the Great stupa was refurbished under the patronage of the Satavahana rulers beginning in about the 2nd century AD, the slab was turned over and carved on the other side with a Buddha image within the stupa.

### Side A

The Enlightenment: an empty throne below the Bodhi tree is flanked by worshippers.



Fig. 1-8. Set of footprints of the Buddha with each foot bearing a dharmacakra (wheel of the law). Amaravati. *Dome-Slab*. (2nd c. CE.).

Though the labels are for two different images on one object, the separate labels are interchangeable. Figure 1-6 and 1-7 shows two very different examples in stylistic carving, but little is defined in the description. A nonspecialist would be unaware of the importance of this one sculpture and how it represents the evolving of the Buddhist artistic style. The British Museum has created an excellent space to preserve the Amaravati



Fig. 1-9. A drum slab carved in limestone with the four events related to the Buddha's birth. Amaravati. *Drum-slab*. (1st c. CE.).

Marbles, but through the display and museumification process we have lost a great deal of its cultural and religious context.

While the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery was closed during 2016-2017 for renovations, a small gallery exhibit was held near the south exit of the British Museum in Room 3, from 10 August to 8 October 2017. Sponsored by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper, it was titled '*Virtual pilgrimage: Reimagining India's Great Shrine of Amaravati*'. A glass case in the center of the room featured the double-sided relief seen in Figure 1-6 and Figure 1-7. On the far wall was an enlarged image of

the sculpture with a digital interactive remote to zoom in on specific iconography. On the walls around the small gallery were displayed interactive videos of four different pilgrims from separate time periods: 50 BC, 50 AD, 100 AD, and 250 AD. The viewer could interact with each video, and when triggered the pilgrim told of their experiences with the Amaravati stupa. It was a digitally creative gallery that focused on the religious context of the sculptures that cannot be displayed in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery because of space.

Since the 2017 renovations and the reopening of Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, little has changed about the Amaravati gallery, but a few small things have been affected. Dr. Sushma Jansari said, 'One big change is moving the large sculptures out of the central aisle of the South Asia section so that there is a clear vista to the Amaravati

material.’<sup>76</sup> Moving the more significant sculptural pieces so there is a direct line of sight to the glass walls of the Asahi Shimbun Gallery creates interest and a direct route to the area. Additionally, new information has been added to the Amaravati gallery due to the work of Richard Blurton. Now, at the entrance to the gallery, there is a new label that reads:

#### Amaravati

The great Buddhist shrine of Amaravati in southeastern India was founded around 200 BC. The domed structure (or stupa) was decorated with sculptures, some donated by devotees over many centuries.

The sculptures displayed here include some of the earliest surviving stone examples from India. Their carved scenes were inspired by the teachings and life of the Buddha. They are displayed separately as they require carefully controlled environmental conditions.



Fig. 1-10. Dome-slab carved with the Great Departure, Prince Siddhartha's horse with empty saddle leaving the palace. Amaravati. *Dome-Slab*. (2nd c. CE.).

This label, seen in Figure 1-11, addresses concerns mentioned earlier about the original 1992 display, including donations by devotees and the religious context. A video has been added to the entrance of the gallery which shows the original scale of the Amaravati Stupa: it begins with an overhead shot, then moves closer to the stupa identifies pieces of the structure as if the viewer were walking through; it then zooms back out and shows their particular positions in the gallery. It runs on a loop and is an incredible digital recreation of the monument.

The presentation of the Amaravati

<sup>76</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.



Fig. 1-11. Amaravati Display. *Photography of Amaravati Display*. (September, 17, 2018).

Marbles is mainly structured around the craftsmanship and artist achievement of the carvings rather than creating an understanding of the subject matter as the display is limited by space. Because of these limitations the display is dissociated from its Buddhist origins, similar to the way the original stupa monument is separated from its religious relics. The religious rituals and context have been removed from the exhibit to create a static atmosphere in which to view the stupa carvings. This is most likely due to the lack of space for more information at the display: curators are often limited by word counts and can only include the most basic information about an object. In the case of Figure 1-6 and Figure 1-7, a whole separate exhibit was created in 2017 to explain the deeper Buddhist art historical context of the piece. That type of detail is not achievable in this gallery. Another explanation could be that much of the information about Amaravati's iconography is debatable and reinterpreted by art historians. Including theoretical information about an object is not always practical, as it allows unconfirmed theories to influence historical knowledge.

Nonetheless, with the Amaravati Marbles, the general history is a critical component, and it is through the analysis of these sculptures that our understanding of



Fig. 1-12. Amaravati Display. *Photography of Amaravati Section Label*. (January, 25, 2019).

early Buddhist art and iconography has been shaped and redefined. The 1992 display showcased the item but conveyed little of these contributions to the Buddhist artistic study or the object's biblio<sup>77</sup>graphy. Since the 2017 renovations, changes have been made to increase cultural and religious context. New digital displays have been added to present more information that a text label would not be able to convey. A section label near the left entrance for the Amaravati collection, as seen in Figure 1-11, has also been added. This label also gives a visitor some context of the gallery before entering and encourages them to enter. Another text label seen in Figure 1-12 has been remade, seen in Figure 1-5, with more information about the Amaravati's rediscovery and travel to Britian. There has been an effort to continually improve and modernize the display. The next section of this thesis will discuss academic dialogue surrounding the Amaravati has developed and shifted the understanding of Buddhist iconography.

# ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION

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The Amaravati stupa has been influential concerning the dating and origin of the image of the Buddha. What the sculpture at Amaravati shows is the development from aniconic to iconic Buddha image over the centuries. This evolution has been explored by academics seeking a connection between the origins of the image of the Buddha and the Hellenistic style. Beginning in 1807, Mackenzie was the first Westerner to describe the sculpture during his excavation; his journal and illustrations attempted to analyze the iconography before suggesting it was from Jain origins. He was not originally looking for a Buddhist monument, but he took the opportunity to excavate the site, deducing it was influential.

Mackenzie was followed by Walter Elliot in 1854 and Robert Sewell in 1880, both of whom reported on the excavation site for the British Museum. Their reports were more archaeological and sought to understand the site of the Amaravati stupa. Both reports described the site and what remained after the excavation.

James Fergusson was one of the first to sincerely try and identify the iconology of the Amaravati sculptures. His book, *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868), not only looks at the iconology of Sanchi and Amaravati, but begins with an attempt to link iconographic worship throughout the world before moving onto the history, ethnography, plates, and descriptions of the sculpture. The focus of Fergusson's study of Amaravati was to identify acts of tree and serpent worship in the carvings. When looking at images such as Figure 1-6, the worship of the empty throne, Fergusson interprets this as tree worship attributed to 'native rituals'. When talking about Figure 1-6, Fergusson wrote:

It is so difficult, however, to know what allowance should be made for locality or the personal equation of the artist, that it is impossible to

speaking positively on such a subject. Be this as it may, the very archaic form of the sculpture on one side of this slab, compared with the elaborate finish of that on the other, is another proof among many of the long period that must have elapsed between the date of the erection of this Tope as compared with that at Sanchi.<sup>78</sup>

Fergusson concludes that the aniconic was less 'evolved' than the iconic Buddha produced in later centuries at the stupa. Though he is very critical of the aniconic style, he determines that there has been an evolution of design at Amaravati. He does identify the form of the Buddha on the sculpture and starts what became a great debate on the iconographic interpretations of the site. However, what Fergusson identifies as tree worship could be interpreted as the worship of an aniconic Buddha figure both in Sanchi and Amaravati. Though he does understand the symbolism of a spoke wheel as referring to the scriptures that represent the Wheel of the Law, the Chakra or the Wheel 'one of the most common phrases in Buddhist scriptures.' Fergusson does, however, attribute the lack of Buddha figures at Sanchi and the development of figures at Amaravati to a progression in Buddhist art. Fergusson's interpretations are very literal; he looks at these sculptures and fits them to either local legends or what he interprets as tree or snake worship; he does not attribute any of the images to ritual worship. For example: he deciphers an image of The Great Departure where Siddhartha leaves the palace, Figure 1-10. This Amaravati sculpture shows what could be seen as a riderless horse leaving the city with a royal procession, or an aniconic Siddhartha. Fergusson interprets this as horse worship. He recounts a local tale called the Story of Aśwamedha:

A Raja who claimed to be lord paramount in India, let loose a steed to wander wherever he listed, and followed close behind him prepared to fight anyone who dared to meddle with the horse, and to release him if anyone took possession of him. If he accomplished this, and brought the steed back in safety, he was acknowledged a Chakravartti Raja.<sup>79</sup>

This is a unique analysis of the sculpture, as others have interpreted it as an aniconic scene of 'The Great Departure'. No matter Fergusson's interpretations, his attention

<sup>78</sup> Fergusson, James. (1868). p. 220.

<sup>79</sup> Fergusson, James. (1868). p. 215.

to the Amaravati sculptures preserved them from continued disrepair in the coach house and started the Amaravati's academic bibliography. His book *Tree and Serpent Worship* demonstrates the existing Western knowledge of Buddhist art at the time while trying to identify the date of the stupa.

In 1882, James Burgess paper *The Buddhist Stupas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta* was one of the first to take the aniconic scenes of Amaravati at face value. The worship of an empty throne with two footsteps at the base could be interpreted as merely the worship of a throne instead of the worship of a symbol representing the aniconic Buddha. It is possible that this could be a scene of ritualistic worship. Though Burgess was the first to theorize this he did not expound on the idea, but rather further analyzed the statuary pieces.

While Fergusson attributed the aniconic Buddha to the lack of development in artistic style, Alfred Foucher theorized that the omission of the Buddha figure was on purpose. In his essay, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art, and other Essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology* (1917), he argues that the replacement of the figure with symbols was intentional. His understanding of the scenes from the Shakyamuni Buddha's life is very developed in his understanding of the iconography. When reinterpreting 'The Great Departure', he understands that it is a scene from the Buddha's life when he abandons his home, but inquires whether this choice to make the image aniconic was created before similar iconic scenes at Sanchi or Bharhut. Thus, he is trying to create a chronology of artistic style and has assigned Amaravati and the avoidance of images to an 'early date'. Foucher writes, 'These selected examples suffice to demonstrate that the ancient Indian sculptures abstained absolutely from representing either Bodhisattva or Buddha in the course of his last earth existence.'<sup>80</sup> He argues that understanding why this image was created 'can give us the key to the later improbably compositions, child-births without children, rides without riders.'<sup>81</sup> His theories assume that the aniconic were less advanced and inferior to the later iconic scenes. However, in the north, near Gandhara, where the Graeco-Buddhist artistic style creates iconic figures were removed from 'traditional influences', so they did not participate in the aniconic

80 Foucher, Alfred. (1918). *L'Art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhara*, II, E. Leroux, Paris. p. 5.

81 Foucher, Alfred. (1918). p. 22.

figures. Thus, as a result of interactions with western schools of art, Buddhist art evolved through the Gandharan school to portray Hellenistic style of Buddhist figures with traditional iconography.

To celebrate the reinstating of the Amaravati sculptures in the British Museum after World War II, Douglas E. Barrett, Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum from 1969-1977, published *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum* for the British Museum.<sup>82</sup> His book acts as a catalog for the pieces with photographs for each sculpture. Barrett had made a critical study of the items and the original site of the stupa to reconstruct the original monument at the British Museum entrance. Barrett split the book into the historical setting for the stupa, the history of the site, creating the stupa, and the sculptures themselves in a catalog form. Though he does not discuss the aniconic versus iconic debate, as he believed the subject has been thoroughly discussed, he does consider that the date of the Amaravati is later than initially suggested. He debates that the earliest piece was created in the second century CE as opposed to the initially suggested third to second century BCE. Barrett also includes the history of the sculpture and its travel to London, creating a biography for the item and its movement.

Ananda Coomaraswamy published *The Indian Origin of the Buddha Image* in 1926, which argued against the idea that the image of the Buddha was thanks to western influences.<sup>83</sup> He was opposed to the view, put forward by Foucher in the paper *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, that Gandhara style was a result of interactions with Hellenistic style influences. Coomaraswamy argues that these styles, both Gandhara and Mathura 'were created by the internal development of the Buddhism common to both areas.' He instead argues that Mathura was the location for the origin of the Buddha Image developed from the Yaksha archetypes that were eventually developed into the image of a king. Coomaraswamy finishes by stating that to suggest that the image of the Buddha was developed outside of India or as a result of outside influences is to undermine the centuries of Indian artistic development.

In her well-known paper, 'Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism'

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<sup>82</sup> Barrett, D. (1954).

<sup>83</sup> Coomaraswamy, A. (1926). *The Indian Origin of the Buddha Image*. In *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*, Vol. 46, p. 165-170.

published in 1990, Susan L. Huntington challenges the idea of aniconism in early Buddhist art first purposed by Foucher in his essay, 'The Beginnings of Buddhist Art'.<sup>84</sup> The long-standing idea of aniconism and the notion that Buddha was not shown had merely been accepted and not challenged. Huntington claimed such narrative scenes were not depicting settings from the life of the Buddha using symbols in place of the figure of the Buddha, but instead claimed those scenes to be the worship of relics or re-enactments of the location by worshipers. The empty throne with the footsteps of the Buddha that would symbolize his place on the throne but not visually. Instead the worship of a throne with sculpted footprints symbolizing that the Buddha was there in the past. She writes, 'I contend that at least some of the so-called aniconic scenes depict sacred locations of Buddhism being visited by laypersons, most likely sometime after the Buddha had lived.' So instead of an aniconic scene they portray ritualist worship by the devout at a scene. Huntington builds on this theory by saying that at the time these aniconic scenes were built at Amaravati, there were sculpted figures of the Buddha that already existed. So why would the Amaravati refuse to sculpt the figure of the Buddha in stone, when figures already existed elsewhere? The main theme of Huntington's paper is that the symbols in narrative art of early Buddhism did not necessarily stand for something else, but depicted the worship of the symbols themselves.

Vidya Dehejia, professor of India and South Asian Art at Columbia University, published her paper 'Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems' in 1991.<sup>85</sup> The purpose of the paper is to deconstruct Buddhist art by purposing that there is a 'multiplicity of meanings' in these pieces with a multitude of interpretations. She writes, 'Scholars have insisted too much upon singular reliefs, from the aniconic interpretation of the early 1900s [Foucher] to the somewhat restrictive site-oriented interpretation of this last decade [Huntington].' Dehejia suggests a third interpretation: that it is not merely aniconic or iconic but a scene of visual contextualization. The visual image of a body tree and empty throne could portray the Buddha, the pipal tree under which the Buddha obtained enlightenment, the mango tree from the Jataka of the miracle of

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<sup>84</sup> Huntington, S. (1990).

<sup>85</sup> Dehejia, Vidya (1991). 'Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems, In *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 21, p. 45-66.

Sravasti, the location of Bodh Gaya, or merely recall the image of the Buddha to mind through a combination of all the symbols so that the viewer and worshipper is prompted to think over the image. Dehejia acknowledges that the Amaravati sculptures seem to be the center of debate in aniconism, combining emblems, the missing figure of the Buddha, and large ritualistic scenes. Thus, the question of aniconism is magnified here as it shows a development of style over an extended period of time, adding a multilayer significance to the carvings.

Huntington, in response to the Dehejia's paper in 1991, wrote the article, 'Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look' in 1992.<sup>86</sup> While Dehejia's paper argued that Buddhist art was imbued with multiple meanings portrayed by symbols, Huntington writes that the 'unstated purpose of the article is to challenge some of the ideas I have presented regarding the long-held theory of aniconism that has been used to interpret these early Buddhist materials for more than a century.' She presents all the evidence she had researched to support her theories versus what she claims are Dehejia's early reactions to an unfinished research topic. She also criticizes Dehejia for '[arguing] for my viewpoint without acknowledging her indebtedness to my work.' Huntington disagreed with the claim that her original paper was created to disprove aniconism, but was instead intended to suggest that some panels that are interpreted as aniconism are actually scenes of ritualistic worship at a location. The paper is a mammoth of a rebuttal with forty-four pages going into significant detail of her theories. In the final statement, she again writes that Dehejia had taken many of her statements out of context, but that the theme of her work was to reanalyze predefined concepts that have dictated the Buddhist art research for centuries. She ends by saying, 'it is time [. . .] that we examine art for what is there and look beyond the expectations that may have their origins largely in the imaginations of those who encounter and interpret, but did not create, the art.'<sup>87</sup>

In a rejoinder to Susan Huntington's 'Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look' and the discussion of aniconism, Dehejia writes her paper,

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<sup>86</sup> Huntington, Susan L. (1992). Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look. In *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 22 (1992), p. 111-156.

<sup>87</sup> Huntington, Susan L. (1992). p. 145.

a 'Rejoinder to Susan Huntington', that the narrative scenes at Amaravati 'do indeed contain a visual reference to the presence of the Buddha.'<sup>88</sup> She argues that the symbols and emblems are a reference to the Buddha's presences. Dehejia writes that 'absent signifiers', or symbols referencing the Buddha, contain additional meanings by referring back to times or places in his life. The article is written to specifically clarify her position in regards to Huntington's argument and ends with a simple, 'it may be best to agree to disagree'.

Knox published a catalog of the Amaravati sculpture at the British Museum which was intended, as most books about the Amaravati, to give a basic introduction to Indian Sculpture in the new the Asahi Shimbun Gallery.<sup>89</sup> The book, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa* (1992), was released at the same time as the Gallery's opening and can be used as a catalog for the Amaravati display as it contains an introduction to the sculptures. It reviews the history of the stupa as a Buddhist monument in the Andhra Pradesh until its excavation and acquisition through Mackenzie and Elliot in 1845. It then briefly discusses how the collection came to London where it was discovered by Fergusson, as described in *Tree and Serpent Worship*, before it made its way to the British Museum in 1880. The book then looks at the architectural composition of the stupa and the carved panels that are illustrated by photographs. The catalog is an excellent look at the individual carvings available at the British Museum and gives the reader a closer look at the details of the pieces. However, it does not inform the reader of the sculpture's Buddhist contextualization. This may be in part because it was published by the British Museum Press for the Trustees of the British Museum. This source has a brief description of its history and display in London, and does mention the acquisition from the Indian Museum, which is generally overlooked. Knox argues that the Amaravati's chronological place in Indian sculpture can be dated to the third century BCE as opposed to Douglas E. Barrett, a previous Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum.

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88 Dehejia, Vidya (1992). Rejoinder to Susan Huntington. In *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 22 (1992), The Smithsonian Institution and Department of the History of Art: University of Michigan. p. 157.

89 Knox, R. (1992). *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa*. London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Press.

# CONCLUSION

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This object biography has discussed the movement and academic contributions of the Amaravati sculptures, exploring the relations between anthropology, object biography, and academic studies concerning one object. The shifts in identity the object has undergone throughout its modern movements from India to the British Museum have strengthened its reputation as a keystone in Buddhist art history, and the associations the object has gathered throughout its life continue to mold and shape Buddhist iconographic research. The Amaravati marbles are not only defined by its movement but also by how it has reflected the advancement in Buddhist Art History studies in academia. In this chapter, I have sought to trace the path of the Amaravati from creation to excavation, and its continued movements through London before settling at British Museum. Instrumental to the object biography has been the coinciding academic narrative. However, even with its illustrious career, little is conveyed about the Amaravati through the display at the British Museum: this is due mainly to the amount of space the sculptures are given. However, even if afforded more space, the Amaravati structure is a complex mix of histories that is nearly impossible to transmit in any amount of space. As the narrative around the Amaravati sculpture continues to advance, the display for the object continues to change by adding new display techniques and updated text labels in order to convey as much information as possible to the visitor.

Before the 2017 renovations, in the center of the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery was a small case focused on relics. Included in this case were such well-known pieces as the recreation of the Kanishka casket which may have held a relic of the Buddha. A picture of a crumbling stupa was placed above relics with the title: *The Cult of Relics*. The label read: ‘The stupa at Manikyala, Punjab, (?) 1st c. CE, from which some of the reliquaries

shown had been recovered.’ This display contained relics that had been ‘recovered’ from the centers of stupas. In the next chapters, I will trace two of these object biographies, starting with the Kanishka casket and its place inside the British Museum.

## CHAPTER 2: THE KANISHKA RELIQUARY

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The focus of this chapter is an item that may have held the relics of the Shakyamuni Buddha interred: the Kanishka casket as seen in Figure 2-1. By tracing the biography of the reliquary and its academic biography, this study will examine the context and history that led to the Kanishka casket's placement in the British Museum today.

The discovery of the Kanishka casket begins with the pilgrimage of Hiuen Tsang



Fig. 2-1. A replica of the so-called Kanishka reliquary, electroformed.

(Xuanzang) to India in 627 C.E.

Born in 602 C.E. he dedicated his life to Buddhism as a monk and to discovering the origins of Buddhism by tracing the religion to its roots. He spent 17 years journeying around India and dutifully documented his travels in *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (646 C.E.).

When he eventually returned to China in 645 C.E. Tsang brought a large number of relics and

Buddhist texts which he translated to Chinese with the help of other

scholars before his death in 664 C.E.

He dictated his journey from memory while other monks recorded it, and over the years this comprehensive account was passed down. It tells of Tsang's interactions with King

Harshavardhana (590-647 C.E.), whose kingdom encompassed northern India at the time. It is through crucial passages of his travels that we get our first information of the Kanishka casket.

Kanishka the Great had controlled an area spanning northern India from Iran, into parts of China, and down into the Indo-Gangetic plains. The fifth ruler of the Kushan empire, dated to the first century C.E., he ruled his kingdom as a Buddhist emperor. Under his reign, Buddhism flourished and spread via the silk road. Hiuen Tsang visited the area many years after Kanishka the Great's death, yet legends of him persisted. One tale recounts of how King Kanishka had heard of a prophecy of a great Buddhist ruler and believed it was he who was destined to fulfill it. Hiuen Tsang recounts the prophecy:

Sakya Tathâgat sat beneath this tree [pipala] with his face to the south and addressed Ananda thus: — 'Four hundred years after my departure from the world, there will be a king who shall rule it called Kanishka; not far to the south of this spot he will raise a stupa which will contain many various relics of my bones and flesh.'<sup>90</sup>

King Kanishka tried to self-fulfill this prophecy, and, inspired to secure his legacy, began creating Buddhist monuments. This could have been motivated by the legend of Ashoka who had built up Buddhist relics across India several centuries earlier. Kanishka began to build a stupa to show his devotion to Buddha, building on top of preexisting stupas. Hiuen Tsang described it as follows:

Surrounding the site of the little stupa he built a stone stupa, wishing to surpass it in height, to prove the power of this religious merit. But in proportion as his stupa increased the other always exceeded it by three feet, and so he went on till his reached 400 feet, and the circumference of the base was a li<sup>91</sup> and half. The storeys having reached to five, each 150 feet in height, then he succeeded in covering the other.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Beal, S. (1884). *Si-yu-ki, Buddhist records of the Western World*. London: Turbner & Co., p. 99.

<sup>91</sup> Approximately 500 meters

<sup>92</sup> Beal, S. (1884). p. 100.

When Hiuen Tsang passed through the area, the stupas had already deteriorated but their grandeur and scale still profoundly impressed him. He noticed that the two stupas were still visible and visited by devotees seeking divine blessings to cure sickness. Hiuen Tsang mentions two full-sized figures of Buddha, one on the south side, and one on the east side of the stupa. It was these records that led later European archaeologists to seek out the area and find the structures that he had described. Over the centuries the stupa had become abandoned as Buddhism left the area. The stupas were eventually covered with dirt and resembled mounds of earth on the outskirts of modern-day Peshawar, Pakistan. It was not until the excavation by D. B. Spooner that the Kanishka stupa was uncovered.

# THE EXCAVATOR

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David Brainerd Spooner (February 7th, 1879- January 30th, 1925) was born in South Vernon, Vermont. He obtained a PhD in Sanskrit under Charles Rockwell Lanman (1850-1941). It was here where he met his wife Elizabeth Colton Spooner (1851-1927) who studied alongside him under Lanman.<sup>93</sup> An accomplished scholar and linguist in her own right, she was at his side for the rest of his life after their marriage in Calcutta, India on January 14th, 1912.<sup>94</sup> At the time she was 61, and he was 33. E. A. Horne wrote in his obituary notice of Spooner: ‘It is thought by some that a scholar’s life is lacking in romance. Spooner’s was full of it; but the greatest romance in his life, and the most enduring, was his marriage.’<sup>95</sup> His wife was a continuous source of inspiration in his work and life, and many would theorize that many of Spooner’s accomplishments were her ideas. It was she who drew his attention to the connection between Kumrahar and Persepolis that came to define his research.<sup>96</sup>

After Spooner graduating from Harvard he was given a post with Archaeological Survey of India in 1906. His first position was as Superintendent of the Frontier Circle in India. It was not long after his appointment that he started excavating the Kanishka stupa site.

The Kanishka stupa, otherwise known as the Shahji-ki-Dheri stupa, lies in the Peshawar Valley in modern-day Pakistan. It came into European colonists’ awareness through the publications of Stanislas Julien’s French translation of Hiuen Tsang’s *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*. Hiuen Tsang’s tale was later translated

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93 Elizabeth Colton Spooner published works:

Spooner, E. (1916). The Fravashi of Gautama. In *Journal Of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 48(3), p. 497-504.

94 *India, Marriages, 1792-1948*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Family Search, 2013.

95 Horne, E. A. (1926). D. B. Spooner (1879-1925). In *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. p. clxiii.

96 Stewart, M. (1993). D. B. Spooner at Kumrahar: The Persepolitan Legacy. In *Bulletin Of The Asia Institute*, 7. p. 193-201. p. 197.

to English by Samuel Beal in 1884 and renamed *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*. The travels of Chinese pilgrims through India recorded the history and monuments of India that had been lost over time. European explorers were very interested in these legendary lost monuments as a means of shedding light on the past. Through these accounts a basic guideline of landmarks was used to start the search for missing sites of interest, especially if they involved the history of Shakyamuni Buddha. However, the landscape had changed vastly since the time of Hiuen Tsang and the markers he used to note the locations had all but disappeared. Alexander Cunningham (1814 - 1893) an accomplished explorer from London, used these translations to search for the location of the Pigeon Monastery but was unsuccessful.<sup>97</sup> He also attempted to find the location of the Kanishka stupa but Hiuen Tsang's use of a *pippala* tree as a marker was unreliable, and it had been noted in the text that the stupa had fallen into disrepair when Hiuen Tsang had visited it, giving little hope that the stupa had remained intact. Cunningham soon gave up his search for the Kanishka stupa and noted, 'No remains of this great stupa now exist'.<sup>98</sup> However, M. Foucher (1865-1952), who studied Gandharan art and the Buddha image, tentatively believed the Shahji-ki-Dheri mound to be the sought after Kanishka stupa in 1901 but could not confirm.<sup>99</sup> It was not until 1908, after Spooner had been assigned to the position of Superintendent of the Frontier Circle in India, that excavation on the Kanishka stupa began. As Spooner was an accomplished linguist, fluent in Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, French, and Spanish, he was able to translate the text himself and cross-examine it against the translations in Samuel Beal's book.<sup>100</sup> From there he was able to deduce the exact location of the stupa. Foucher, who believed he had identified the stupa, wrote to Spooner advising him of what he believed to be the location and to initiate the excavations. On the 12th of July, 1909, D. B. Spooner sent an Annual Report to the Chief Commissioner of the North-

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97 Asher, Frederick M. (2012). Travels of a Reliquary, Its Contents Separated at Birth. *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 28 No. 2. September 2012. p. 147.

98 Cunningham, A. (1871). *The Ancient Geography of India. I. The Buddhist Period, including the campaigns of Alexander, and the travels of Hwen-Thsang ... With thirteen maps*. London: Trubner & Co. p. 80.

99 Marshall, J. (1909). Notes on Archaeological Exploration in India, 1908-9. (Section on: The stupa of Kanishka and relics of the Buddha). In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. p. 1056.

100 Stewart, M. (1993). p. 197.

West Frontier Province detailing their theory. At first, excavations yielded very little.

Spooner wrote:

As was evident from my last year's Report, the results of the work during the first season's operations were decidedly disappointing. Save in a very minor degree, almost no difference in levels was found, and this, coupled with the fact that we had not found any continuous stupa wall, or any mass of little stupas in the position assigned them by the Chinese pilgrims, or indeed, anything definitely harmonizing with their account, made it impossible to claim that the work done so far had tended in any way to confirm M. Foucher's theory that these mounds marked the site of King Kanishka's great stupa and monastery.<sup>101</sup>

Though they were still uncertain the location they were investigating was the infamous Kanishka stupa, progress continued. While digging, they found what appeared to be a wall which may have been an interior or strengthening wall. A trench was dug leading from east to west along the wall of the stupa, as seen in Figure 2-2. Uncovering a parallel wall covered in stucco, they realized it was decorated with seated Buddha figures separated by Corinthian pilasters, suggesting Gandharan influences. Though



Fig. 2-2. West face of northern projection of Kanishka's Stupa showing stucco ornamentation and platform above the same. (1911). Photo, engraved & printed at the offices of the Survey of India, Calcutta.

the Buddhas have deteriorated and are nearly unrecognizable, the pillars on the outside of the stupa suggest Hellenistic roots, similar to what we see in the designs of the Bimaran casket. To uncover the shape and

<sup>101</sup> Spooner, D.B. (1909). Excavations of Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri. In *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report*, 1908-09, p. 14.

layout of the monument, excavation was begun to the north. Explorations of the stucco wall showed more of horizontal bands of seated Buddha figures, but it was heavily damaged. At this point, Spooner and his colleagues were able to tell that this was an unusually large stupa: they measured one side of the stupa to be around 285 feet. This size supported Spooner and Foucher's original theory that this was the location of the Kanishka stupa. Hiuen Tsang estimated the stupa to be 500 feet in height when he saw it; it is larger than stupas from similar time periods. Amaravati stupa is approximated to be 240 feet in height, while the Sanchi stupa is merely 55 feet. From the evidence, Spooner believed this to be one of the largest known monuments uncovered in India. The Shahji-ki-Dheri mounds were now considered to be the Kanishka stupas. The next step in the investigation would be looking to see if any relics were indeed enshrined in this location. Spooner describes the condition of the stupa when they began looking for relics:

It was of course, doubtful whether they [the relics] were still in position, and indeed it seemed almost improbable in view of the frequent tunneling and quarrying to which the mound had been subjected. But Hiuen Thsang tells us definitely that Kanishka erected his 'wonder of the world' to enshrine relics of Gautama Buddha himself, and so long as there was the remotest possibility of recovering authentic relics of such sanctity the attempt seemed justified.<sup>102</sup>

John Marshall (1876-1958), the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India at the time, visited the site on one occasion, but the search for relics was still ongoing. He urged Spooner to begin digging down into the center of the stupa as soon as possible before he had to leave.<sup>103</sup> Spooner started with a pit dug into the top of the stupa going straight down to the length of 24 feet; as it deepened, the team started losing faith they would find anything over time, yet digging went ahead. Finally, two feet below ground level, they found the relic chamber, not in the exact center but slightly to the east. The square alcove was constructed out of smooth slabs of slate on four out of the six sides.

<sup>102</sup> Spooner, D. B. (1909). p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Marshall, John H. (1909). p. 1057.

The chamber was not decorated in any way, except for a coin situated under the casket and a piece of limestone (*chuna*) that the casket was set on. Spooner described the relic as found:

This lid originally supported three metal figures in the round, a seated Buddha figure in the centre (which was still in position), with a standing Bodhisattva figure on either side. These two figures, as well as the halo from behind the Buddha's head, had become detached (probably at the time when the covering of the chamber collapsed, for the casket had evidently been subjected to some sudden shock from above as is proven by the way the Buddha figure has been forced downwards, deeply denting the lid of the casket and even breaking the metal at one side), but all three fragments were recovered, one Bodhisattva and the Buddha's halo close to the foot of the casket, and the second Bodhisattva about 2 feet to the north. And these formed the entire contents of the chamber. . . . [The sacred relics inside the casket] consist of three small fragments of bone, and are undoubtedly the original relics deposited in the stupa by Kanishka which Hiuen Tshang tells us were relics of Gautama Buddha.<sup>104</sup>

In 1909, the Kanishka casket, now classified as a reliquary, was recovered. It was a cylindrical box made of a bronze alloy, five inches in diameter and seven inches tall, including the three-inch figures on top. The decorations on the top are that of a blooming lotus. The lid has three free-standing figures carved in the round on the curved top. The center figure is that of a Buddha with the two attendant Bodhisattvas. These two attendants could be interpreted as Indra and Brahma, though no defining characteristics are apparent. The side lip of the lid has a band of geese (*hamsa*) in low relief flying around the edge holding wreaths in their beaks. The bottom frieze on the side has a continuous garland held by naked figure attendants. These cherubs could suggest a closer connection to a Hellenistic influence. The garland supports a series of seated Buddhas with the figures of Bodhisattvas facing towards the Buddhas. This is

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<sup>104</sup> Spooner, D.B. (1909). p. 19.

interrupted on one side by a king in Kushan attire that would suggest it is the Emperor Kanishka, based on the inscription discussed in the next section.

Spooner surmises that ‘the casket shows manifest proof of artistic decadence, and thus enables us to affirm with certainty that the theory held by some writers that the Buddhist art of Gandhara owed its origin to, or at least reached its prime under, Kanishka is no longer tenable.’<sup>105</sup> This statement would incite the enduring debate of the dating and origin of Gandharan art in India that will be discussed later in this chapter.

The inscription mentioned above was punched into the casket by a series of tiny dots on the top, underneath the string of geese, and in-between the figures in two lines. Spooner, who was well versed in Sanskrit succeeded in translating the cursive Kharoshthi script. Spooner’s translation reads as follows:<sup>106</sup>

1. On the Lid: *Acaryana (m) Sarvastivadina (m) prarigrahe* [sic]: ‘For the acceptance (or, as the property) of the doctors of the school of Sarvastivadins.’
2. Lower Lid: Spooner was unable to read successfully except to extract the name *Kanishka*.
3. First line bottom frieze: *Deyadharmā sarvasattvāna (m) hidasuhartham bhavatu*: ‘May this pious gift tend to the welfare and happiness of all beings.’
4. Second line bottom frieze: *Dasa Agisala navakarmi Kanashkasa vihare Mahasenasa sangharame*: ‘The slave Agisalaos, the superintending engineer at the Vihara of Kanishka in the monastery of Mahasena.’

Later, in 1929, Sten Konow (1867-1948) examined the reliquary while at the Peshawar Museum and was able to retranslate the following:

In the year 1 of [the Mahārāja] Kanishka, town. ima, connected with the . . . mansion, this religious gift—may it be for the welfare and happiness of all beings,—the slave Afisala was the architect,—in Kanishka’s Vihāra, in Mahāsena’s Samghārāma, in the acceptance of

<sup>105</sup> Spooner, D.B. (1909). p. 19.

<sup>106</sup> Spooner, D.B. (1909). p. 20.

the Sarvāstivādin teacher.<sup>107</sup>

The mention of Kanishka's name, also noted in Sten Konow's later translation, confirmed to Spooner that this was the stupa mentioned in Hiuen Tshang's travels. This proved to many that the Chinese pilgrim's accounts could be used as a guide for archaeologists to start looking for remains. After Spooner had been transferred from the Frontier Circle to Calcutta, H. Hargreaves continued the excavations of the site from 1910-11.

The Kanishka casket was brought by Spooner back to the Peshawar Museum, of which he served as curator from 1908 - 1910. Though he was there for a short period before being transferred, he had a lasting impact on the institution. Spooner had been the first curator of the location and had been in charge of the objects, their displays, and creating an arrangement for the collection. There would have been considerable pressure to create a well-organized space to create some income for the region and continued excavation projects. The museum was filling up quickly with items excavated and donated from the area, but they were not being utilized. Spooner describes the situation in the museum in the Annual Report for the year 1909-1910:

As mentioned last year, the two upper galleries originally set apart for Museum purposes in the Victoria Memorial Hall are now quite full; and although sanction has been accorded to the use of the lower galleries also, funds have not yet been made available for the purchase of new cases and pedestals, so that the many recent additions that have been made to our collections are still awaiting exhibition. These include the varied collection of antiquities from Shahji-ki-Dheri.<sup>108</sup>

Before he left the museum, Spooner wrote the *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum* in 1909. In the preface he thanks Mr. John Marshall, who had visited and advised Spooner during his excavations, Reverend Samuel Beal who was responsible for the Chinese pilgrim translations, and Foucher who had directed him

107 Konow, Sten. (1929). *Kharosthī Inscriptions* (Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, II, pt. 1) Calcutta. p. 135-37.

Cited by: Prudence R., M. (1966). Again the Kanishka Casket. In *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 3/4, p. 396-403. p. 396.

108 Spooner, D.B. (1910). *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report: Frontier Circle, 1909-1910*. p. 3.

to the location of the Kanishka stupa.<sup>109</sup> In the handbook itself, he gave a general introduction to the Peshawar area, the history of the art of Gandhara, the foundations of Buddhism, before then describing the objects in the museum. Spooner was very modest about his discovery of the Kanishka reliquary: though he was aware of the significance of the object uncovered, he would instead acknowledge others instead of himself. When referencing the Kanishka reliquary in the Handbook, the only mentions he makes of the excavation is as follows:

It may be added that no one of these eight original deposits [Buddha's crematory remains] has ever been found, nor is it known where they were placed. . . . It was probably from one of these later deposits of Aśoka that King Kanishka, in the first century of our era, obtained those fragments which he enshrined in Peshawar, and which were recovered by excavation in March, 1909.<sup>110</sup>

Spooner refers very little to his accomplishments, instead focusing on the collection. The *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum* was sold for one rupee per copy and contributed to the growth in visitors. Though the cost was minimal, the income from the handbook contributed significantly to the museum and its popularity. Noted by Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943), the British archaeologist who discovered the Diamond Sutra, 'Dr. Spooner's *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum* has done a great deal to make the collections known among students of India and in particular Graeco-Buddhist art, and to arouse interest for the latter among visitor.'<sup>111</sup> The number of visitors grew from 25,960 in 1912 to 43,050 in 1914.<sup>112</sup> Copies of the handbook give us an exciting insight into museum curatorship of the time. For instance, Spooner took a great deal of care in cataloging items into collections. The items were numbered and put into order. The guidebook is divided into sections: 'History and Art of Gandhāra',

'Introduction to the Buddha Legend', and 'The Sculptures'. Starting with the 'History

109 Spooner, D.B. (1909). *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum*. Bombay: Thacker & Company, Limited. p. iii.

110 Spooner, D.B. (1910). p. 29.

111 Stein, Aurel. Sir. (1912). *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report: Frontier Circle, 1911-12*. p. vi.

112 Aiyar, Pandit V. Natesa. (1915). *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report: Frontier Circle, For 1914-15*. Peshawar: D. C. Anand & Sons. p. 3.

and Art of Gandhāra’, the guidebook is less of a walk-through guide and more of a history lesson, making reference to specific item numbers to support statements in the book. Sculptures and friezes were used to demonstrate narratives such as the Buddha Legend. ‘The Sculptures’ section of the book goes through each display case and identifies and discusses each item in detail. Particular attention is directed toward teaching iconography to the reader so they may properly identify figures. Spooner had converted the Peshawar Museum into a lesson by guidebook rather than producing the traditional guidebook outline of listing the item, date, and benefactor. It was no wonder that the museum and guidebook received increased attention due to Spooner’s efforts.

Though Spooner was only associated with the Peshawar Museum for two years, he left a lasting impression on the area over which he was superintendent. In 1910, he was transferred to the region of Bihar where he became curator of the Patna Museum and assigned the post of Superintendent of the Eastern Circle of Archaeological Survey until 1920. The Kanishka casket stayed in the Peshawar Museum. We know this because Sten Konow examined it in 1929. Though the casket is of great importance because it is a reliquary, the display was slightly hidden from view, obscured by other stone sculptures taken from the excavation site. In the 1930s it was replaced by a cast to keep it safe until it was transferred to the British Museum in the early 1960s.<sup>113</sup> However, the relics inside the Kanishka casket, the supposed bones of the Buddha, were removed from the casket in 1910. The bones were potentially of great worth to the existing Buddhist community, and meant very little to British colonialists as they offered no historical value to the artifact. In a letter from John Marshall to Sir Harold Stuart (1860-1923), Home Secretary to the Government of India, Marshall suggests ‘that the bones found in the reliquary were probably worth nothing at all.’<sup>114</sup> The reliquary, on the other hand, offered a glimpse into the history of Gandharan art in the opinion of British Buddhist art historians. Asher summarizes their opinion of the relics:

The Europeans, after all, distinguished themselves as rational, quite

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113 Asher, F. (2012). p. 149.

114 Letter from J. H. Marshall to Sir Harold Stuart dated 25 August 1909. NAI, Simla Records 2, 1909, Government of India Home Department. Archaeology and Epigraphy - A. Proceedings, December 1909, Nos. 13-16.

Cited by: Asher, F. (2012). p. 150.

different from the Indians they ruled, the people for whom they created a history. The relics themselves, even if they were actual bones of the Buddha, did little to unveil a shrouded past.<sup>115</sup>

Since the relics meant very little to the British archaeologist in the area, it was decided they would be separated from the reliquary. As a gift from the British government, the relics were moved to the Mandala Hill Shrine in 1910, in British-controlled Burma, which is predominately Buddhist, unlike the Peshawar Valley area which continues to be chiefly a Muslim community. They were not there long, unfortunately, as the open design of the jeweled encased holder made them liable to theft. The sacred objects then found a new home in the Ukhan Ti Museum, which was specifically created to house them. A travel guide notes:

On request the monk will bring out the little reliquary, place it in a hexagonal light stand and offer the pilgrim a magnifying glass with which to examine in suitable awe the crystal phial within which the bones are almost invisibly housed.<sup>116</sup>

Though the reliquary was separated from its sacred contents that it was created to house, the gesture of goodwill by the British Government to transfer the relics to the surviving practicing Buddhists does indicate that there was some consideration taken for the religious importance of the relics. In 1964 the casket left the Peshawar Museum and traveled to the British Museum for a careful cleaning and restoration. There, two electrotype copies were made, one of which stayed in the British Museum and is displayed today, and one that accompanied the original back to the Peshawar Museum. Fredrick Asher, who wrote a comprehensive history of the relics titled, 'Travels of a Reliquary, Its Contents Separated at Birth', finishes his chronology of the Kanishka casket by noting that the original is not on display, but locked away in the Museum Director's office. In this article, he describes how he visited the museum in 1985, hoping to see the reliquary, but was told that it was on tour with the exhibition

*Gandhara -- The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan*. The exhibition organizers stated

<sup>115</sup> Asher, F. (2012). P. 150.

<sup>116</sup> I would note that other guides state that the relics are no longer on display or available to view. Richmond, S. (2012). Lonely Planet Country Guide Myanmar (Burma). In *Lonely Planet*. Peshawar Relics guide, P. 6, C2.

that they did not have the original, but a copy. Asher raises the question: where is the original?<sup>117</sup> Though the whereabouts of the original Kanishka casket may be unknown, the legacy of it and Spooner continue through the Peshawar museum and the British Museum's copy. If Spooner had not built such a strong foundation for the Peshawar Museum, it might not have grown and evolved to the renowned museum it is today.

Though David Brainerd Spooner's work at the Peshawar museum and the Kanishka excavation were a significant contribution to the Indian art scholarship, this monumental work was overshadowed by controversy later in his life. Spooner continued excavations around India, but the most important to his mind was Kumhrar where the remains of the ancient city of Pataliputra were discovered. In 1912-1913, Spooner uncovered a pillar as part of what he believed to be a pillared hall, possibly a throne room. Spooner believed he had uncovered proof that the Maurya Capital was of Persian origins. This phase of the excavation had been funded by Mr. Ratan Tata, the Indian industrialist, who had 'entrusted to D. B. Spooner to discover the foundation of Tata's ancestry in architectural and sculptural remains.'<sup>118</sup> Spooner's findings were published in 1915, entitled 'The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History', which was largely discounted and snubbed as academics believed Mr. Ratan Tata was bribing Spooner to credit his ancestry claims. In Bishnupriya Basak's paper, 'D. B. Spooner's Vision of Persepolis and the Excavation of Pataliputra, 1912-13, 1913-14',<sup>119</sup> she argues that Spooner's excavation was fueled by an imagining that led to premature associations and jumps that led to a trend in the development of historical archaeology. Though it can be argued that the unsupported deduction of monumental discoveries fuel many archaeologist's reasoning behind excavations, it was assumed that Spooner, a credited historian in his field, sought to find a link between Pataliputra and Persia merely to please the benefactor of the excavation. This must have been a popular judgment of Spooner, as Horne notes in his obituary that the theory Spooner had accepted money to change the

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117 Asher, F. (2012). p. 154.

118 Basak, B. (2017). *D.B. Spooner's Vision of Persepolis and the Excavation of Pataliputra, 1912-13, 1913-14*. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/27752497/D.B. Spooners\\_vision\\_of\\_Persepolis\\_and\\_the\\_excavations\\_of\\_Pataliputra.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/27752497/D.B._Spooners_vision_of_Persepolis_and_the_excavations_of_Pataliputra.pdf). p. 304.

119 Basak, B. (2017).

history of India deeply hurt the archaeologist and ‘embittered his later years’.<sup>120</sup> Spooner died at the age of 46 of unknown causes in Agra, India. His wife passed two years later in Massachusetts. In Horne’s obituary, later read by Dr. Sten Konow at the Monthly Meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he describes Spooner’s character:

His talk revealed the very best of him—the warmth of his interests, the distinction and the limpid clearness of his thought, and above all a gay and unquenchable humor, a humor that was never happier than when it was poking fun at himself. One felt that, as he talked, he warmed both hands before the fire of life; and one put out one’s own hands to be warmed, too. He had a great sense for and love of style, in talk as in the written word. He made phrase-books for his own use, in a number of his favorite languages, on the backs of countless visiting-cards.<sup>121</sup>

In the second printing of the *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum*, revised by H. Hargreaves in 1930 to compensate for the ever-expanding collection, he dedicated the volume to Spooner:

These to his memory since he held them dear. . . . My obligations to previous writers on this subject are those enumerated in the Bibliography and the Preface to the First Edition, but to the list of these names I would add that of the late Dr. Spooner himself, the first Curator of the Peshawar Museum, to whose memory this volume is dedicated as a debt of gratitude by his friend, colleague and successor.<sup>122</sup>

The Kanishka casket was an important discovery, creating a new path of academic scholarship for which to discuss the Gandharan artistic style in relation to the Buddha’s image. It also proved that one could use ancient texts that describe monuments to find and link these locations and objects to their history. The Shahji-ki-Dheri mound was

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120 Horne, E. A. (1926). p. clxiii.

121 Horne, E. A. (1926). p. clxiii.

122 Hargreaves, H. (1930). *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum*. Revised Edition. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch. p. ii.

linked to the Kanishka stupa by referencing Hiuen Tsang's narrative. Once discovered, the Kanishka casket was then removed from its religious function of an interred item and placed in the Peshwara Museum by David Brainerd Spooner.

# ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

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The academic biography of the Kanishka casket started with Spooner's first-hand account of the excavation in the *Archaeological Survey of India* in 1908-1909. There he states his belief that the casket was created in the decline of Gandharan art style. He does this without presuming a date and proceeds to create the first translation from the casket mentioning the 'slave Agisalaos'.

Marshall gives details of the excavation in 'Notes on Archaeological Exploration in India, 1908-9' in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. He also mentions additional details, some of which differentiate from Dr. Spooner's accounts, including a band of tiles on the outside of the stupa that was covered with a pale blue vitreous enamel, not mentioned by Spooner. Marshall urged Spooner to recover the central relics, confirming the excavation notes. Though he was not there for the discovery of the object chamber, Marshall publishes the translation of the phrases from the casket, of which the first three lines are identical. The fourth line as translated by Spooner reads: 'The slave Agisalaos, the superintending engineer at the Vihara of Kanishka in the monastery of Mahasena.' Marshall has published it as: 'Agiśalaos, the overseer of works at Kanishka's Vihāra, in the Sangharama of Mahasena.'<sup>123</sup> This simple cutting of the word 'slave' completely changes the connotation of the phrase. In the footnotes, Marshall justifies his change by stating: 'The name of Agiśala is certainly non-Indian, and there is a good reason to suppose that it represents a corruption of the Greek name Agesilaos, the i vowel of śa being omitted, as it seems to be in Kanishka's name.'<sup>124</sup> Thus, Marshall concludes that the overseer of the Kanishka stupa may have been of Greek origin, which would support

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<sup>123</sup> Marshall, John H. (1909). p. 1058.

<sup>124</sup> Marshall, John H. (1909). p. 1058.

the theory of the Hellenistic influence from the Western world. Marshall writes that he and Dr. Jean Philippe Vogel (1871-1958), a Sanskritist expert, would not attribute the Kanishka casket to the Gandharan school of art: they found the craftsmanship of the object inferior to both Gandharan and Mathura style, and instead concluded that the Kanishka art style must be an evolution singular from the Hellenistic styles of Gandhara.

Foucher published a series known as 'The Greco-Buddhist Art of Gandhara', published in 1905, 1918, and 1951, to try and make a consistent chronology of the Gandharan style. In these, Foucher tries to fit the Kanishka casket into the chronology of the Gandharan style. He was opposed to the view that it was made at the height of Gandharan art. Instead, he attributes the casket to the middle period of the Gandharan school style, based on its poor craftsmanship.<sup>125</sup>

In 1913, Frederick William Thomas (1867-1956) of the India Office published 'The Date of Kanishka' in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*.<sup>126</sup> Thomas attributes the Kanishka casket to the Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhara. He uses various pieces of evidence to try and place Kanishka's reign in correspondence to the reign of known kings and the records of Chinese pilgrims. He also uses the theories proposed by Mr. J. Kennedy in 1912 who suggested that the alphabets on the Kanishka casket and the coin found in the reliquary chamber were an adaption of ancient Greek cursive, comparing the coin to similar ones in the British Museum (as seen in Figure 2-3).<sup>127</sup> Because of this data, Thomas sides with Kennedy in placing the date of Kanishka to the Vikrama era in 58 BCE, or the era of King Vikramaditya of India.

In 1914, Marshall again returned to the discussion to reexamine the proposed date of 58 BCE of the supposed Vikrama era. An inscription inside a reliquary at the Dharmarajika Stupa, found the year before, was translated to read: 'In the year 136

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125 Foucher, Alfred. (1918). *L'Art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhara*, II, E. Leroux, Paris.

126 Thomas, F. (1913). The Date of Kanishka. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, p. 627-650.

127 Kennedy, J. (1912). The Secret of Kanishka. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, p. 665-688 and p. 981-1019.

Kennedy, J. (1913). Kanishka's Greek. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, p. 121-124.



Fig. 2-3. *Coin* [Copper coin (Kanishka I) of the same type as the one found at Kanishka stupa].

of Azes on the 15th day of the month of Ashadha—on this day relics of the Holy One (Buddha) were enshrined by Dhurasakes, son of Dhitaphria, a Bactrian, resident at the town of Noacha.<sup>128</sup> Upon discovering this inscription, Marshall suggests the Kanishka's era was different than predicted, to fit in the era of Azes I and Azes II. The original proposed date of 58 BCE is for the rule of Kanishka, but then subsequent eras were based on this dating and were therefore misdated. Numismatics uses the study of coins to confirm dates and the chronology of the reign of monarchs. By knowing that the coin in the Kanishka stupa was created later than the reign of Azes I, Marshall placed the date of the item in correlation with other coins and objects. Marshall mentions 'we have seen that [Kanishka] was not the founder of the era commencing in 58 BCE or thereabouts, and that there is no place for him and his immediate successors among the Saka and Pahlava kings, who were ruling at Taxila in the first centuries before and after Christ.'<sup>129</sup> Marshall thus concluded that 'the identity of the era of Azes and the Vikrama era can hardly be regarded as fully established, and, to my mind, it is quite possible that the era of Azes will be found to have commenced a few years earlier or later than 58 BCE.'<sup>130</sup>

In his paper, 'The Indian Origin of the Buddha' (1926), well-respected historian of Indian art Ananda Coomaraswamy rejected the theory that the Greek or Hellenistic

<sup>128</sup> Marshall J. (1914). The Date of Kanishka. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 2, 1914. p. 973-986. p. 976.

<sup>129</sup> Marshall J. (1914). p. 982.

<sup>130</sup> Marshall J. (1914). p. 977.

influence was the origin of the Buddha image.<sup>131</sup> Instead, he suggested that the image of the Buddha was created through a mixture of both Mathura and Gandhara styles, but specifically that both styles were created locally in India and were not a direct result of interactions with the West. Instead, the development of the image of the Buddha was a result of stylistic development following the growth of Buddhism. Coomaraswamy supports his argument by pointing out statements in other scholars' papers backing his theory; even when these papers oppose his view, he chooses passages that call into doubt the idea that Gandhara's sole influence was outside of India.

In 1936, Benjamin Rowland Jr. published 'A Revised Chronology of Gandharan Sculpture.'<sup>132</sup> By examining 'all the most important specimens in India and in European and Japanese collections,' Rowland created a chronology based on style evolution instead of dates. He managed this strictly by examination of the style, and ignored preexisting aesthetic opinions of sculpture. It was thought that Gandharan sculpture had been the earliest sculptural art of Buddhism before it evolved into a more 'Indian' style. By assigning the sculpture to the reign of kings, a chronology emerges of existing sculptures from dated stupas. Rowland writes that the date of the Kanishka casket could be assigned to the year 128-129 C.E, contrary to the previously assumed 58 B.C.E. He asks, 'how are we to account for the fact that these statues, and, by the same token, all of the Gandhara Buddhas of the more Hellenistic type, are to be dated as much as fifty to a hundred years later than the "debased" type represented by the reliefs on the Kanishka casket?'<sup>133</sup> Instead, Rowland attributes the Kanishka casket to the early phase of the Gandharan school. The inferred conclusion would be that the Gandharan Hellenistic style did not simply arrive in India, but was rather developed over many years. This does not mean that foreign influence was not there, but rather that it contributed to a style that already existed. By creating the chronology, he surmises it is easier to see the development of the Gandharan style from a mix of Graeco-Roman and Indian style, to the Classical Hellenistic style, before evolving into the Graeco-Buddhist

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131 Coomaraswamy, A. (1926).

132 Rowland, B. (1936). A Revised Chronology of Gandhara Sculpture. In *The Art Bulletin*, Vol 18 (No. 3 (Sep. 1936), p. 387-400.

133 Rowland, B. (1936). p. 391.

art in the Gupta period. Rowland's theory of dating argues that identifying sculpture by style instead of by the era of kings could be more accurate. This is a step away from a traditional dating system and towards a comparison of features in order to attribute sculpture to a time period.

Mirella Levi D'Ancona (1919-2014), an art historian at the University of New York, published the paper 'Is the Kaniska Reliquary a Work from Mathura?', in which she points out stylistic similarities between the casket and art from Mathura.<sup>134</sup> D'Ancona went on to suggest that the small casket could have traveled to the region instead of being created in the area. The seated figure with the oval face and protruding almond eyes with a radiating patterned halo shows similar stylistic similarities to early Mathura school style, an example of which is seen in Figure 2-4. Other comparisons he describes between the casket and the Mathura are the drapery over both shoulders, the swelled chest of the seated Buddha, and the lack of jewelry which made it unlikely to be Gandharan

Bodhisattvas.

D'Ancona also notes that the wild geese are very rarely seen in Gandhara style but rather in the Gupta period. She also focuses on the movement of the piece compared to the stiffness that is more evident in Graeco-Buddhist

art. D'Ancona

suggests that this has



Fig. 2-4. *Figure*. (Tirthankara). (3rd c. CE). Mathura School, Made of Sandstone. H: 34 cm. Uttar Pradesh: India.

<sup>134</sup> D'Ancona, Mirella Levi. (1949). Is the Kanishka Reliquary a Work from Mathura? In *The American Bulletin*, 31(4), p. 321-323.

been evident to scholars for a while, since the Kanishka casket is frequently left out of Gandharan art discussions.

After the Kanishka casket had arrived at the British Museum, Douglas Barrett (1917-1992), Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, published a paper titled 'Gandhara Bronzes' in 1960.<sup>135</sup> In this thesis, he compares Gandharan Bronzes by style and period to create a chronology of development. After the cleaning and restoration of the casket, the inscriptions on the second line became clearer. Though there was still not a date on the second line, the casket contains the name of Kanishka that has been used as a clue to date the item further. Barrett notes that even though Kanishka is mentioned on the relic and the relic was found with a Kanishka bronze coin, these facts did not necessarily indicate that it was interred during his reign. The coin merely helped scholars to date the artifacts by allowing them a definite earliest possible date of origin. The paper also briefly notes the style of Gandharan bronzes available at the time, and it signals the start of academic scholarship after the reliquary had arrived in London.

The restoration of the Kanishka casket took place at the British Museum in 1964. Before this, the last person to officially clean the piece had been Spooner after his excavation in 1908. *The British Museum Quarterly* described and published the restoration process.<sup>136</sup> The reliquary was in poor condition when it arrived because of untold damage when it was still in the stupa. Spooner had noted that the central Buddha figure on the lid had been struck from above, breaking the lid and forcing the figure to lean to the side. The Buddha's halo had become detached and broken in the stupa but was retrieved by Spooner with the reliquary. It is also noted that the two figures to either side of the central Buddha had been fixed to the base recently with steel screws, most likely during its stay at the Peshawar Museum. The base plate of the casket had become detached, leaving a slightly open bottom. It had been apparent this had been attached with a type of solder that had deteriorated over time. No gilding was apparent on the outside, though Spooner had suspected it had been gilded at one time. It took the British

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<sup>135</sup> Barrett, D. (1960). Gandhara Bronzes. In *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 102 (No. 689), p. 360-365.

<sup>136</sup> Organ, R., & Werner, A. (1964). The Restoration of the Relic Casket from Shah-ji-ki-dheri. In *The British Museum Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1/2 (Summer, 1964), p. 46-51.

Museum two months to clean the casket enough to open the lid. The central Buddha figure was slowly pushed back into place while the cracks and two other figures were securely attached to the lid.

The second line of the inscription had never been readable up until this point because of corrosion on the side. However, with the cleaning, the inscription became clearer. It was then that the small punch holes making up the translation were marked with white water-color to make them apparent to the eye.

In 1966, *The British Museum Quarterly* published the article ‘Observations on the Shah-ji-dheri Casket Inscription’.<sup>137</sup> B. N. Mukherjee reread the casket and translated the inscription:

In the acceptance [i.e. For the acceptance] of the Saravastivadin teachers, this perfume box is the meritorious gift of Maharaja Kanishka in the city of Kanishkapura. May [it] be for the welfare and happiness of all beings . . . śa, the superintendent of construction of the refectory in Kanishka’s vihara, in Mahasena’s samgharama.<sup>138</sup>

The translation of *agisala* which had previously been assumed to be the name of a Greek artisan was now translated instead to mean the ‘supervisor of construction’. A Greek namesake was assumed, since the name ended with *śāla*, a typical family name at the time, but names in India have been known to have the same ending. Before, Konow, Spooner, and Marshall had interpreted the *sa* in *śāla* to mean slave or servant. This simple clarification of the translation removes the Greek influence thus discrediting previous theories that this was one of the first examples of Gandharan art.

Prudence R. Myer published ‘Again the Kanishka Casket’ the same year (1966). This article includes all the relevant data known at the time about the Kanishka casket, starting with the translation, the Mathura and Gandhara debate, and its restoration. First, Myer agrees with the Mukherjee’s reading of the translation and concludes that this results in even less certainty about the date and the artist. The only clue remaining is the name Kanishka which marks the earliest date it could have been created. Myer

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<sup>137</sup> Mirashi, V. (1966). A Note on the Shah-ji-ki-Dheri Casket Inscription. In *The British Museum Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4 (Spring, 1966), p. 109-110.

<sup>138</sup> Prudence R., M. (1966). p. 396

then looks at the stylistic comparison with the Gandharan and Mathura schools. She disagrees with D'Ancona's conclusion that this a creation of the Mathura school which then traveled north to the area.<sup>139</sup> Instead, she argues that the Kanishka casket may be an early prototype of Buddhist bronzes and therefore not necessarily as polished in creating the Hellenistic details that the Gandharan school would later be known for. The details in early bronzes might have lost the distinctive style that is apparent in large stone sculpture. Thus, she concludes, that the Kanishka casket cannot be removed from the Gandharan chronology, but may have been influenced by the Mathura school as an artistic exchange, which at the time was feasible. In conclusion, Myer writes:

In any event, the Shāh-ji-ki-Dheri casket, with its uncanonical Buddha images and its inscriptions, stands as a major document of the developing Gandhāran style and a reminder of the historic existence of a monarch [Kanishka] whose very name has been all but lost in the greater fame of his predecessor.<sup>140</sup>

In 1968, K. Walton Dobbins did a comparison study of the Bimaran reliquary, an item that will be discussed in the next chapter, and the Kanishka casket in his paper 'Two Gandharan Reliquaries'.<sup>141</sup> He gives an encompassing summary of academic research up until this point done on the Kanishka casket. The accuracy of the translation, which had been supported by the recent restoration at the British Museum, does not need to be further contended, argues Dobbins. However, he goes on to say that 'the problem offered by the Kanishka reliquary is not its proper date, but features of its iconography and style of art that have caused some critics to favor a later epoch for its creation.'<sup>142</sup> Instead of focusing on the stylistic differences of the Buddha figure, Dobbins focuses on some of the smaller figures, including the naked flying cherub figures that hold the garland, the monarch, and the attendants, in hopes of shifting the style to one of the art schools. Though there is no definite conclusion on the origin of the Kanishka casket, he does argue that the Bimaran reliquary must have been created

<sup>139</sup> D'Ancona, Mirella Levi. (1949).

<sup>140</sup> Prudence R., M. (1966). p. 403.

<sup>141</sup> Dobbins, K. (1968). Two Gandharan Reliquaries. In *East And West*, Vol. 18, No.s 1/2 (March-June 1968). p. 281-288.

<sup>142</sup> Dobbins, K. (1968). p. 156.

later. He does this by presuming that the Kanishka casket must have been the best quality available at the time only to be surpassed in the future by the Bimaran artistry. Though these two pieces have been stylistically criticized as the highs and lows of the Gandharan period, Dobbins reminds us to consider that there is a difference in materials between the two that can describe the unwieldy style in the Kanishka casket.

In 1993, Mary Stewart wrote 'D. B. Spooner at Kumrahar: The Persepolitae' which focuses on the academic anthropology of Spooner's search for Pataliputra. In my research, I have found minimal history on D. B. Spooner's life and contributions to the field except for his involvement with the Kanishka casket. The cultural context surrounding his excavations and Spooner's life have barely been considered in an academic light. However, Stewart focuses more on Spooner's contributions to the field than any other articles before it. One thing she asserts is that Spooner's archaeological offerings to the academic field had been largely ignored. He was one of the first people to suggest that there was a connection between the Mauryan and the Persian craftsman based on his excavation at Kumrahar. Stewart writes that though this theory was initially theorized by him, 'Spooner vanishes from the western archaeological and art historical record.'<sup>143</sup> It is thanks to Stewart that we are finally able to see a rigorous analysis of what Spooner was able to accomplish during his career and the relationship between his Zoroastrian article and other research at the time. Additionally Stewart looks at how research in western academics has developed parallel to Spooner's ideas about the Kumrahar excavation without acknowledging his contributions.

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<sup>143</sup> Stewart, M. (1993). p. 199,

# CURRENT DISPLAY

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In the British Museum, before the 2017 renovations, there was a glass case with some small items that were religiously significant to the Buddhism. This case contained relics from stupas that had been excavated and acquired by the British Museum. After the original Kanishka reliquary was cleaned in 1964, an electrotype of the casket had been on display in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, in a glass case as part of the 'Buddhism' collection. This item sat next to the Bimaran casket as an introduction to the Shakyamuni Buddha's life as depicted in Gandharan sculpture. Surrounded by other reliquaries and Gandharan artifacts, the label read:

Replica of the 'Kanishka Casket'  
Gandhara, Peshawar District  
NWFP, Pakistan, 2nd century AD  
Found in the Shah-ji-ki-Dheri stupa built by the Kushan king,  
Kanishka I, this casket may once have contained relics of the Buddha.  
On the lid are the Buddha flanked by Indra (right) and Brahma.

The Kanishka Casket was located on the second shelf down amid other relics. It was easy to see, yet not the central image of the case. The main text of the case was located on a plaque on the top shelf, it read:

Indian religions: Buddhism  
The cult of relics  
From at least the last centuries B.C., relics of the Buddha and his successors were held to be sacred. These were enshrined in stupas which, because of their sanctified contents, became the focus of Buddhist ritual. The examples shown here from Gandhara in present day Pakistan and Afghanistan are of precious materials including gold,

silver and crystal.

Some relic caskets were made in the shape of miniature stupas and include features seen on contemporary architecture. These features are of particular interest because they sometimes represent elements that do not survive on ruined stupas today. The parasols surmounting these reliquaries illustrate the protective and regal qualities of the architectural stupas. Sculpted representations of stupas being worshipped are similarly informative.

Before the recent renovations to the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (November 2017), the Kanishka casket was used as an introduction piece to Buddhism and the concept of relics. Since the renovations, the item has been relocated in the gallery to a new display. Here it is no longer in a single glass pillar display, but is featured in a display of relics in Edwardian wood cases as a central feature of the exhibit, as seen in Figure 2-5. The relics are still grouped in the Edwardian case with a more extensive section dedicated to the Bimaran casket. Dr. Sushma Jansari discussed her dissatisfaction that the both items could not be displayed in the round, but because of the constraints of the display, there is little she could do. She said, ‘in terms of display, unless an object levitates, it’s not going to happen. So, you do your best within those constraints.’<sup>144</sup> The new displays reads:

4. ‘Kanishka’ reliquary (modern replica)

The original reliquary was excavated from a stupa said to be founded by the Kushan king Kanishka I (AD 127-150). An unidentified Kushan king (probably Kanishka) is depicted on the side, and the Buddha is flanked by the gods Brahma and Indra on the lid. The reliquary was deposited when the stupa was enlarged during Huvishka’s reign (about AD 150-190). According to the inscriptions, it was donated by two architects.

Modern replica made in mid-1900s

Shah-ji-ki-Dheri, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. 1880.270.

The new label is extended and does not verify that the king referenced is Kanishka, but implies that it is ‘probably’ him. The label and the item are unfortunately mismatched.

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<sup>144</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

The label reads number 4 when the item was number 3.<sup>145</sup> This is most likely due to a simple typo when the display was first created. I do not feel this is a reflection of the British Museum's attitude towards Buddhist objects but rather a common mistake when items are moved or shifted for various



Fig. 2-5. Kanishka Display. *Relics Display*. (January, 25, 2019).

reasons. However, the gallery has been given a much need renovation, including an update to the color scheme and display orientation to make the gallery more aesthetically pleasing to visitors. When asked 'How do these items accurately represent their cultural identity while offering information to larger audiences?' Dr. Jansari said:

The key part is to impart this information to visitors who may not be able to 'decode' this information. The way we do this is through grouping the material together in a coherent way which immediately provides it with some context - geographical, historical, religious - and then to expand on this through the labels. I try to ensure that information builds from one label to the next.<sup>146</sup>

The new display highlights Jansari's goal of creating a cohesive introduction into Buddhism and the cult of relics. She noted that the reliquary items on display here are the most visited in the collection and will always be found on permanent display in their entirety.

<sup>145</sup> As of January 2019, the label numbers have been corrected.

<sup>146</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

# CONCLUSION

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This object biography has discussed the movement and academic contributions of the Kanishka casket, and the shifts in identity it has undergone throughout its modern movements from where it was interred to the British Museum and back to the Peshawar Museum. It has become a vital piece of the debate in how the Gandhara school of art contributed to the further development of Buddhist art. The associations the object has gathered throughout its life continue to mold and shape Buddhist iconographic research. This study has explored the relations between anthropology, object biography, and academic studies about one object. It also traces how the relics have been separated from the reliquary casket.

The casket is deeply tied to the biography of the excavator D. B. Spooner, who has received scant acknowledgment except as the excavator of this one item. His accomplishments live on through the Peshawar Museum today, which he had a significant impact on. Until recently, little was conveyed through the display at the British Museum: the artifact was a piece of a more prominent reliquary display. It was placed near the Gandhara art as a credit to the academic contributions it made to the study of the origin of the Buddha. However, the fact that this piece may have held a relic of the Buddha's body is not stated in the new display. This could possibly be because this detail can not be proven or that this item didn't actually hold a relic since it is a replica. Museums do not usually advertise that an item is a replica if possible, since many visitors would prefer to see the real item. In this case, the original object had been borrowed for the purpose of conservation and to reproduce this item. In the next chapter, I will be discussing the object biography of the Bimaran casket that shares its display space with the Kanishka casket.

## CHAPTER 3: THE BIMARAN CASKET

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One of the most magnificent unearthed Buddhist objects today remains the Bimaran casket and the coins found alongside it.<sup>147</sup> The casket is 6.50 cm tall by 6.60 cm wide at the base. It is an excellent example of a gold repoussé technique. This delicate technique, which involves hammering the motif through the opposite side, was used to create the miniature figures' details around the side as seen in Figure 3-1. The frieze is bordered on the top and bottom by a row of twelve garnet stones. Each garnet is set between a four-lobed floral motif composed of four figures that are repeated once around the side. The eight figures are all depicted standing individually in eight arches between columns. The archways bare a similar appearance to the Chaitya Arch or a horseshoe arch used in very early Buddhist rock-cut caves. Examples of this type of architecture are also displayed in reliefs at Sanchi stupa.

In the spandrels of each arch is a bird with its wings spread. It has been suggested that the bird could be interpreted as the goddess Hamsa, who has been



Fig. 3-1. *The Bimaran Reliquary*. (1st - 2nd c CE). Gold, Garnet, Repoussé, 6.5 x 6 x 6.6 cm.

<sup>147</sup> Errington, Elizabeth. Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853): The Masson Project at the British Museum. In *IIAS-Newsletter* 27, p. 8 - 9.



Fig. 3-2. *Reliquary/Casket*. (1st c. CE.)

known to take the form of a swan, but there is little iconography on the casket to support this. The Buddha is standing in Abhayamudrā, ‘gesture of fearlessness’ with one hand raised flat to dispel fear while his other hand is holding his robes. The Hellenistic features that infer that this is a product of the Gandharan Buddhist art are the very detailed features even in the small, gold carving. The Gandharan appearance is characterized by almond eyes that look downcast. The hair has

detailed curls swept up into a topknot, though these specifics are harder to discern in such a small character. The intricate robes are draped over both shoulders of the standing figure, with a halo behind the head. The central figure is the Buddha flanked by two deities. The two figures on either side are facing towards him: Brahma on the left, creator of the universe; Indra on the right, god of war; and one Bodhisattva, a kingly figure which has nearly reached enlightenment. The Bodhisattva has no features but is merely in the act of worshipping; possibly an early example of Maitreya, the future Buddha. The base of the object is carved into a lotus, possibly in the suggestion of a lotus throne. Though the Bimaran is a small composition, the amount of detailed hammered into the frieze could suggest that it was produced by the Gandharan school.

This object was found in steatite box (Figure 3-2). Inscriptions on the lid and the base of the box read:

Lid: Śīvarakṣītaśa Muṃja[v]aṃdapuṭrasa daṇamuhe bhagavaṭa śārirehi

Base: Śīvarakṣītaśa Mu[ṃ]javāṃdapuṭ[r]asa daṇamuhe ṇiyaṭide bhagavaṭa śārirehi sarvabudha[ṇa] puyae<sup>148</sup>

148 Baums, Stefan. (2012). Catalog and Revised Texts and Translations of Gandharan Reliquary Inscriptions. In: David Jongeward, Elizabeth Errington, Richard Salomon and Stefan Baums, *Gandharan* 93

Translation:

Lid: Gift of Shivaraksita, son of Munjavamda; presented for Lord's relics

Base: Donation of Śivaraksita, son of Mujavada, given in place of relics of the Lord in honor of all Buddhas.<sup>149</sup>

Since the translation uses the phrase, 'presented for Lord's relics' it has been hypothesized that this casket was used to contain relics of the Buddha. When the casket was excavated by Charles Masson, the British explorer, there was no lid and no bones found inside. Elizabeth Errington describes the inside the casket as having traces of ribs, verifying that it was initially split into four compartments with a fifth circular one in the center.<sup>150</sup> Could the relics have been rediscovered before Masson? It is hard to judge, as the stupa was already disturbed and in disrepair when Masson started digging.

Along with the casket and the steatite box, there were burnt pearls, sapphires, crystal beads, and four coins. For Charles Masson, the coins were the most essential part of the deposit, one example of which is seen in Figure 3-3. From these, he could get an approximate age of the stupa. They were dated during the rule of Azes II; it is presumed that they were interred during or after his reign. Masson described the coins as 'excellent preservation, having been inserted new.'<sup>151</sup> Joe Cribb, the former Keeper of

the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, has identified these coins as created by a local empire named Mujatria, which was located in the



Fig. 3-3. *Coin*. (1st c. CE.)

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*Buddhist Reliquaries*, Seattle: Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project (Gandharan studies, volume 1), p. 200–251.

149 Errington, E. (2012). *Reliquaries in the British Museum*. In D. Jongeward, E. Errington, R. Salomon & S. Baums, *Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries* (p. 111-163). Seattle: Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project. p. 143.

150 Errington, E. (2012). p. 142.

151 Wilson, H.H. (1841). p. 70-71.

Jalalabad region. Thus they were not created by Azes but were imitation coins cast during the late first century.<sup>152</sup> This would make the casket the earliest datable example of Gandharan art as well as one of the earliest Buddha images in Afghanistan. Though Charles Masson was unaware of the importance of the casket to the Buddhist art history chronology, he knew the coins were crucial in the dating of the stupa. The next chapter will examine the biography of Charles Masson and how he became the excavator of the Bimaran Casket.

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<sup>152</sup> Cribb, J. (2015). Dating the Bimaran Casket – its Conflicted Role in the Chronology of Gandharan Art. In *Gandharan Studies*, 10, p. 57 - 91. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/32505266/Dating\\_the\\_Bimaran\\_Casket\\_its\\_Conflicted\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Chronology\\_of\\_Gandharan\\_Art](https://www.academia.edu/32505266/Dating_the_Bimaran_Casket_its_Conflicted_Role_in_the_Chronology_of_Gandharan_Art). p. 61.

# CHARLES MASSON

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The biography of the Bimaran casket begins with the enigmatic Charles Masson. Masson was an archaeologist, numismatic, an intelligence agent for the East India Company, but primarily an explorer. Once when traveling, when he was asked by a tribesman the reason for his journey, he replied, 'for amusement'.<sup>153</sup> His adventurous nature led to the excavation of some 80,000 coins and many artifacts including the Bimaran casket. Masson started life in London as James Lewis. He was born on the 16th of February, 1800 and was baptized at the church of St. Mary the Virgin, Aldermanbury, London 23 March, 1800.<sup>154</sup> His father was George Lewis of the Needle Makers Company and his mother, Mary Hopcraft, was from a family of brewers.<sup>155</sup> There is very little known of his childhood, other than his propensity for languages which helped him to hide his identity during his travels. He departed from London for unknown reasons. A letter was recently discovered in an original copy of Masson's journals that stated he had been educated at Walthamstow before working as a clerk in the offices of Durant & Co.<sup>156</sup> Perhaps it was his adventurous nature, but this occupation did not last long. According to the letter, James Lewis had a fight with his father that led to him enlisting with the armed forces of the East India Company on the 5th of October 1821, and sailing to India on the 17th of January 1822 on the *Duchess of Atholl*. Still going by the name James Lewis, he served in the 3rd troop of the 1st Brigade of the Bengal European artillery from the 6th of July 1822, participating in the siege of Bharatpur from 1825 to

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<sup>153</sup> Omrani, B. (2008). Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Deserter, Scholar, Spy. In *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 39, Number 2, July. p. 199-216. p. 207.

<sup>154</sup> Whitteridge, G. (1986). *Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Explorer, Archaeologist, Numismatist and Intelligence Agent*. 1st ed. Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd. Guildhall Library Ms. 3572/2.

<sup>155</sup> Whitteridge, G. (1986). p. 2.

<sup>156</sup> Omrani, B. (2008). p. 201.

1826.<sup>157</sup> At the time he enrolled, becoming a member of the East India Company forces was a lifetime commitment. Perhaps it was his dislike of British politics in foreign lands, or the prospect of a lifetime in the army, but it was almost exactly five years before Masson's adventurous nature led him to desert his brigade. Leaving the 4th of July 1827 with his friend Richard Potter, he adopted the persona of Charles Masson and fled for Afghanistan. George Whitteridge, who wrote a thorough biography on Masson, theorizes that he was following in the footsteps of his hero, Colonel Francis Wilford (1761-1822).<sup>158</sup> Wilford, who had also served with the East India Company's armed forces and worked as an assistant to the Surveyor General, had explored India a great deal, tracing the route of Alexander the Great. Wilford theorized that there was an interconnection of the Bible and Hinduism, a link between the religions, and that the Bible was based on Hindu origins. However, Wilford later admitted to forging manuscripts to support his argument and was discredited. This was the man who may have inspired Masson to join the East India Company in the first place and eventually influence him to leave his post for exploration.

Penniless and unequipped, Masson and Potter ran from their posts. Desertion was not unheard of at the time, but carried the possible penalty of death. Here is where the ingenuity and brilliance of Masson's character became apparent. Living as a nomad, he endeared himself to others to survive. Using his propensity for languages Masson's origin story changed from person to person. As an expert in French and Italian, he could easily pass himself off as a national to a number of countries. For a time, he passed as an American citizen from Kentucky, having picked up an American accent from the explorer, Josiah Harlan (1799-1871). Harlan's memoirs contain a passage describing his encounter with Masson:

'I address him without hesitation as a European deserter from the Horse Artillery. . . . Of whom I had already read a description at Loodiana.' Masson attempted some sort of bluff, claiming that he was an officer of the Bombay Army, proceeding, for amusement, back home over that land. That was however, to little avail. Masson

<sup>157</sup> Bengal Army Muster Rolls and Casualty Returns. As cited by: Whitteridge, G. (1986). p. 2.

<sup>158</sup> Whitteridge, G. (1986). p. 4.

was visibly horrified, thinking that Harlan was on the verge of arresting him on behalf of the East India Company. . . . 'Perceiving his extremely uncomfortable position by the tremor of his voice and personal demonstrations of alarm, I quieted his terror with assurance that I was not an Englishman and had no connection with the British Government, and neither interest or duty could induce me to betray him.' On this assurance, Masson dropped the presence. He admitted his status, told Harlan about his traveling companion, Richard Potter; both agreed to march with his private army to Kabul in return for medicines and sustenance.<sup>159</sup>

Masson stayed with Harlan's company for a time before leaving him and Richard Potter. As time went on, he became even more brazen, keeping company with many British officials. It can be theorized that this is why there is little to no information about his origins, as any slip of information could have given away his identity and consequently his desertion.

He continued this nomadic lifestyle, acting as either a beggar or a doctor, and charmed his way across Afghanistan. His memoirs, which he must have recorded as he traveled, is a fascinating mix of first-hand accounts of being robbed and encountering merchants, and describing the landscape around him. Though it is a personal account, it seems to be less of a journal and more of a ledger, with very little personal inflection. However, in one narrative when describing one of his encounters, he gives us a deeper understanding of his character than that of the subject. Masson wrote:

Khan Mahomed of Bahawalpur was very anxious to know my business, and could hardly believe I had none, or that I had not brought some message. . . . I had frequently before been suspected to be an . . . Ambassador, and it was in vain I appealed to the negative evidences of my poverty, and trudging alone, on foot.<sup>160</sup>

There is very little information about Masson the person, except what he articulated in his narrative. He gives the impression of being a very private person, not keeping the

<sup>159</sup> Omrani, B. (2008). p. 204-205.

<sup>160</sup> Omrani, B. (2008). P. 203

company of any one person long, and choosing to write about his daily encounters, the landscape, and the history rather than himself. Whether it was because his concern of the notes falling into the wrong hands, or because he had just become too accustomed to separating himself from his encounters, fearing the worst could happen, Masson's writings appear quite guarded on that front. The mystery of why Masson was so private may be out there, but it was not included when he published his journals in three parts after his return to London in 1843. With a wanderlust and a curiosity of the history of the region relating back to his fascination with Colonel Wilford and Alexander the Great, he continued his journey towards Afghanistan.

In 1828 Masson decided to head towards the Jalalabad-Kabul region. He settled in Kabul, declaring 'it was one of the most tolerant cities in the world'.<sup>161</sup> He saw a city where people of different religions and backgrounds could live in peace and compared it to cities of the West. With Kabul as his home, he was free to explore the history of the area. While there, he had made friends with Táj Máhomed Khân and was invited to accompany him to the Buddhas of Bamiyan. He became one of the few Europeans at the time to set eyes on the giant carved Buddhas there.

The Bamiyan cliffs are a series of caves created by Buddhist monks as a monastery. The caves are a maze of statuary and beautiful frescoes carved and etched into the walls. The biggest features at the time, however, were the two standing Buddhas, Vairocana, and Sakyamuni, carved into the side of the cliff, the largest of which is 53 meters tall with the second being 38 meters. Built along the Silk Road, the large structures would have attracted travelers and pilgrims from miles to the monastery. Hiuen Tsang's (Xuanzang) visited the monasteries in 629 CE and described a bustling center of activity with thousands of monks who charged travelers to see the gold and jeweled covered Buddhas. They had stood centuries through wars and various shifts in religious powers, been attacked by various military campaigns, and it was not until March 2001 that the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban using

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<sup>161</sup> In Kabul, between 1 January - 30 of June 2017, there were 1048 casualties due to recent attacks in the area.

'Herat mosque blast kills dozens in Afghanistan - BBC News'. August 1st, 2017. BBC News. Retrieved 1 August 2017, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40797016>

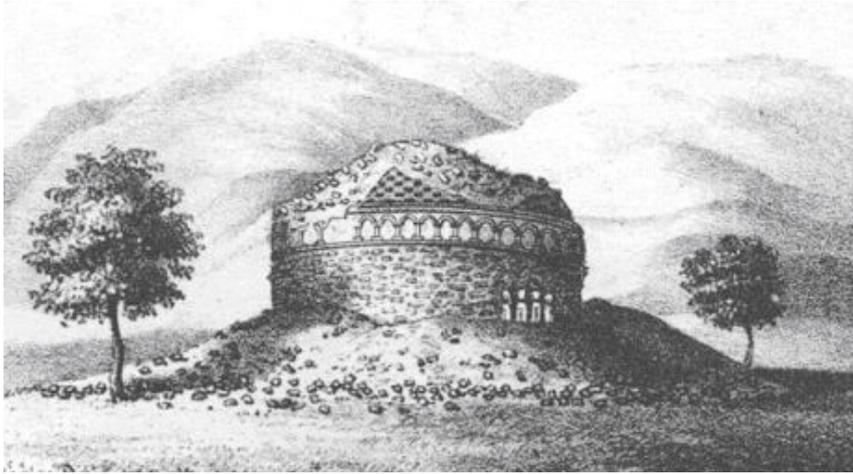


Fig. 3-4. Masson, Charles. *Drawing of Bimaran Stupa no. 2.* (1841).

explosives.<sup>162</sup>

Masson's sketches remain of the caves and landscape that he visited. The grandeur of the ancient city must have impressed

him, for he returned

to Kabul with even more determination to understand the history of the region. In July of 1833, he discovered what he believed to be Alexandria in the Caucasus, one of the colonies founded by Alexander the Great.<sup>163</sup> He wanted to continue this life of exploration through excavation but had been relying on selling pieces he 'excavated' and living on the charities of friends. To continue his research, he would need to find aid to conduct larger scale excavations. He reached out to the East India Company under his alias Charles Masson where he found funding as a retainer and collector. He was paid 1,500 Rs., starting in 1833 as an antiquarian, to research and turn over any coins and objects he found to the East India Company.<sup>164</sup> This could be seen as an unfair contract considering how much he was paid per year compared to the vast amounts of artifacts he returned to the company, but money was not his goal in excavating. He was interested in tracing the history of the area; no longer restricted by his budget, he had the time to explore the Kabul-Jalalabad area. It was during this period that he discovered the Bimaran casket.

He found the relic eleven kilometers outside of Jalalabad in a district known as the Darúnta Plain, where he happened upon four large stupas and some smaller ones. In the second stupa, he unearthed the object that would come to define his career. A

162 Shah, Amir. (2001). Taliban Destroy Ancient Buddhist Relics. In *The Independent*. N.p., 3 Mar. 2001. Web. 16 June 2018.

163 Richardson, E. (2013). Mr. Masson and the lost Cities: a Victorian journey to the edges of remembrance. In *Classical Reception Journal*, Vol. 5 (1). p. 84-105. See p. 14.

164 Masson, C. (1974). *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab* (2nd ed.). Delhi: Oxford University Press. Introduction by Gavin Hambly. p. xviii-xix.

drawing of this stupa can be seen in Figure 3-4. We can see how little interest he had in the artifact by looking at his description of the matter in his journey notes, printed as *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab* by Charles Masson in 1842. Here he describes the event:

After remaining two or three days at the castle of Mírza Agâ Jân, I proceeded to Darúnta, and rushed operations upon the topes, and other sepulchral monuments in that vicinity, and was for some time occupied in perfecting the examination of objects, which my journey to Pesháwer had suspended.<sup>165</sup>

As shown, there is very little information in this passage that relates to unearthing a reliquary of such great importance that it would influence the timeline of Buddhist art. Because of the lack of information in his accounts on any of the material acquired by the East India Company, Horace Hayman Wilson (1786 - 1860), who acted as the Company's librarian, asked Masson personally if he would write a description for some of the items in their possession. This remains the only comprehensive first-hand description we have of the excavation of the Bimaran stupas published in 1841:

I continued his [Honigberger] pursuit, and in the center of the tope discovered a small apartment formed as usual by squares of slate, from which were procured some valuable and satisfactory relics. They consisted of a good-sized globular vase, of all or steatite, with a carved cover or lid, both of which were encircled with lines of inscriptions scripted with a stylet or other sharp-instrument. The characters were Bactro-Pali. On removing the cover, the vase was found to contain a small quantity of fine mould, in which mingled a number of small burnt pearls, beads of sapphire, crystal, &c. In the centre was a standing casket of pure gold; it had no cover: its exterior was embellished with eight figures, in separate compartments, formed by a series of flat columns, supporting finely turned arches, the spaces between which were filled by eagles hovering with extended wings.

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<sup>165</sup> Masson, C. (1974), p. 254 of Vol. III.

The circumference of the casket at top and bottom was adorned by two lines of láls or rubies of Badakshán, twelve in each, and inserted at intervals; the casket was coated internally with hardened clay. . . . Without the steatite vase were also deposited four copper coins, in excellent preservation, having been inserted new. They were the most useful portion of the discovery, as enabling us with some certainty to assign the monument and its era; they were of the horseman type, and bearing Greek legends on the obverse, corrupt indeed, but allowing the titles ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ to be distinguished on them. The characters of the legends on the reverse are Bactro-Pali: they are fortunately distinct, and point out the commemorated monarch as one of the Azes dynasty. In this tope, it may be observed, there was no interior cupola, and the deposit was found on the line where the cylindrical mass of the structure rested on its basement.<sup>166</sup>

Masson described the stupa here as a second class stupa, meaning it was not even the most significant structure at the location. It was 126 feet in circumference (38.40 meters) and was not as imposing as the ones nearby or the stupa that sat in the center of the village not far off. The stupa had already been cracked open at the top by Johann Martin Honigberger (1795-1869) and was dilapidated. The discovery could have easily been Honigberger's, but he had abandoned digging halfway through for unknown reasons. In this passage, we can infer that the most critical part of this find to Masson was the coins that accompanied the reliquary. These aided in the dating of the structure, since they were deposited in the stupa in what can be assumed as newly pressed because of their quality and preservation. Giving over the artifacts to the East India Company must have been of no difficulty to Masson, as it appears the purpose in excavating was to create an archaeological record of the area. Thus the discovery of the Bimaran casket does not make a discernible impact with Masson at the time. It was not until after the casket had returned to London that its importance in chronicling the history of Buddhist

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<sup>166</sup> Wilson, H.H. (1841). *Ariana Antiqua: A descriptive account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan: with a memoir on the buildings called Topes*, by C. Masson, Esq. London: East India Company. p. 70-71.

art became apparent.

Masson continued working as a retainer for the East India Company until 1838, showing great proficiency in locating artifacts and coins, and excavating more than fifty Buddhist stupas in the area.<sup>167</sup> In 1834, Masson had become locally known as an expert in antiquities. This also had the adverse effect of making him vulnerable to British attention. Colonel Claude Martine Wade (1794 - 1861), the British Agent in Ludhiana, became aware of Masson in Kabul thanks to his spies in the area.<sup>168</sup> It did not take much to link Masson and his description to James Lewis, deserter of the East India Company army. When confronting Masson, Wade gave him two options: work for the British as a spy and gain a pardon for his actions, or resist and be imprisoned with the possibility of execution. Masson reluctantly agreed to the former. As Wade related to his supervisors, Masson had an excellent knowledge of the country, its people, and the territory. His eight years traversing the expanse of Afghanistan had helped him gain a familiarity needed for this particular assignment. Masson's job was described as follows:

At that time the East India Company employed a network of agents known as 'news-writers', who were often local Hindu traders, to supply intelligence on political and economic developments from some of the remoter areas where there was no European representative.<sup>169</sup>

Masson did his job as a 'news-writer' with great reluctance, but continued to collect items for the East India Company and enhance his knowledge of the area through excavation. In 1835, he was granted a pardon for his desertion, but he continued on as an intelligence agent. Though Masson did not know it at the time, he had been pulled into what would later be termed 'The Great Game': a political war between the British Empire and the Russian Empire over who would take control of Central Asia. The political environment of Kabul when Masson joined was particularly volatile and led

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<sup>167</sup> Elizabeth Errington: Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853): The Masson Project at the British Museum. In *IIAS-Newsletter* 27, p. 8 - 9.

<sup>168</sup> Meyer, K., & Brysac, S. (2009). *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia*. London: Little, Brown and Company. p. 74.

<sup>169</sup> Hopkirk, P. (1990). *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*. Oxford University Press. p. 169.

to the First Afghan War (1838-1842). With the Sikh Empire to the west, control of Kabul was not guaranteed, and the British feared Russia would advance on them and take over the power vacuum in Central Asia. A small compromise was created with the British and Dost Mohammad Khan, who was in control of Kabul, to protect against an invasion by Russia. However, this was done on the provision that the British would assist Dost Mohammad Khan in retaking control from the Sikh Empire. The British were not willing to help with this, but it was rumored that Russia would be. Sir Captain Alexander Burnes, (1805-1841), the British explorer and diplomat, who was trying to meet some compromise with Khan, negotiated with the American, Josiah Harlan on behalf of his friend, Dost Mohammad Khan. When negotiations broke down because Dost Mohammad Khan refused to give in to British demands, they advanced on Kabul in 1838. The British deposed Dost Mohammad Khan and gave control of the city to Shuja Shah Durrani Khan. Josiah Harlan who had previously worked in his services writes about how Shuja Shah Durrani Khan was surrounded by an ‘earless assemblage of mutes and eunuchs’ that he had deformed for the smallest slight he felt against him.<sup>170</sup> Kabul was never the same for both Harlan and Masson, who left the city as Shuja Shah started his bloody reign. Masson, who had been against the negotiations from the start, resigned in disgust over their actions.

Over the years, the British had ignored his advice on how to confer with the inhabitants of the area. Indeed, a good portion of the last volume of his *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab* is dedicated to his animosity and criticism of Alexander Burnes and the politics used by the British in Afghanistan. This led to broad criticism of Masson as being jealous of Burnes, who was later appointed a knighthood for his efforts in Afghanistan. Burnes’ book, *Travels into Bokhara*, was published in three volumes and was a best seller, as compared to Masson’s volumes which did not receive as much attention.<sup>171</sup> Elizabeth Errington

writes in her paper that this critique of Masson may have been because the British

170 Macintyre, B. (2004). *Josiah the Great: The True Story of the Man Who Would Be King*. London: HarperCollins. p. 22.

171 Burnes, A. (1834). *Travels into Bokhara; being the account of a journey from India to Cabool, Tartary, and Persia; also, narrative of a voyage on the Indus, from the sea to Lahore, with presents from the king of Great Britain; performed under the orders of the supreme government of India, in the years 1831, 1832 and 1833*. In three volumes. London: John Murry.



Fig. 3-5. Masson, Charles. *Drawing of Bimaran Stupa no. 2.* (1841).

public ‘could not forgive him for being proven right in his criticism of the British East India company’s disastrous involvement in Afghanistan that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War.’<sup>172</sup> This also may have been a result of his involvement in the Revolt of Kalat. Though he resigned from the East India Company and as a ‘news-writer’, he spent another three years in what is now Pakistan. Unfortunately, he made a poor choice in settling in Quetta and was asked by rebels to negotiate with the British on their behalf over a treaty for the area. He was arrested and held as a traitor and a spy until his release in 1841. Meanwhile, Burnes who had marched on Kabul in 1839, had set up a comfortable lifestyle in the capital. He was known in the area as a womanizer, which Masson highlighted in his book. The same year that Masson was released from prison, the British lost control of Kabul, leading to a retreat that disturbed the British public. Burnes, who had been the star in British popular opinion, was caught by a mob while trying to flee with his brother, and publicly executed.

Masson returned to England in 1842, shortly after the publication of Wilson’s book, *Ariana Antiqua: A descriptive account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan: with a memoir on the buildings called Topes*, by C. Masson, Esq., in 1841. He drew a few illustrations for the book including Figure 3-4 and 3-5. Fellow collectors in London were aware of him, but he had not been awarded a similar level of respect as other explorers because of his desertion, subsequent pardoning, arrest as a suspected traitor, and public disapproval of British-Afghanistan relations and the war that followed. He continued to work on his collection, manuscripts, and drawings, and lived a very private life, divulging little of himself or his personality to others.

<sup>172</sup> Elizabeth Errington: Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853): The Masson Project at the British Museum. In *IIAS-Newsletter* 27, p. 8 - 9.

His mother lived with him until her death in 1848, one of the only remaining pieces of his old life as James Lewis. He married Mary Anne Kilby at St. Mary's Church in Stoke Newton in 1844; she was a farmer's daughter, twenty-six years his junior at eighteen years old, from Watford who bore him two children: a son, Charles Lewis Robert Masson, born 13 October 1850, and a daughter, Isabella Adelaide Masson, born 4 March 1853.<sup>173</sup> Masson moved the household frequently throughout London, to Stoke Newington, Kentish Town, Upper Mitcham, and Lower Edmonton. Whitteridge infers that the frequent movement of house 'suggests the last flickering of his old restlessness and wanderlust.'<sup>174</sup> His changing houses could also be because of his meager stipend paid by the East India Company. Masson, who had been penniless for most of his life, must have managed enough to provide for his family. He died on November 5th, 1853, shortly after the birth of his daughter, of an 'uncertain disease of the brain', and was buried at All Saints Church in London.<sup>175</sup> His wife died of pneumonia two years later in 1855. His children received 100 pounds from the East India Company for his drawings, papers, and the coin collection that became the only inheritance Masson left to his children. Masson was an unappreciated scholar, explorer, and historian during his time. Today the words located in the caves of Bamiyan are the most fitting legacy to his life's work:

If any fool should the high smooch [cave] explore,  
Know that Charles Masson has been here before.<sup>176</sup>

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173 Errington, E. (2017). *MASSON, Charles*. *Iranicaonline.org*. Retrieved 20 August 2017, from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/masson-charles>

174 Whitteridge, G. (1986). P. 160.

175 125. Errington, E. (2017).

176 Whitteridge, G. (1986). p. ix.

# JOURNEY TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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Similar to the Amaravati Marbles, the Bimaran casket was transported to central London by the East India Company to its Museum on Leadenhall Street. The India Office Museum contained a plethora of objects that had been obtained by the Company and stored in a near warehouse-like setting. The items were divided into sections based on item type, such as metal work, fabric, sculptures, Indian Arms, and lacquer. Major Henry Hardy Cole wrote a section in his book, *Catalogue of the objects of the Indian Art Exhibited in the South Kensington Museum*, entitled Principal Objects at the Indian Office Museum where he describes the Indian Office Museum as thus:

At the India Office Museum are a vast quantity of objects of Indian art, but so closely packed that it is difficult to observe the artistic merits of the various specimens, and impossible to derive any instruction from them. Until of late years the wonderfully wrought trophies and specimens of oriental workmanship contributed through the Government or private sources have not received even the ordinary attention attaching to outlandish curiosities; but now that the objects have been approximately classified under the various heads of metal work, carving in wood, ivories, etc., a new interest is awakened which will probably have more effect than anything else in exciting the public to wish to know more about the country.<sup>177</sup>

This was the place that the Bimaran casket would have been sent with any other objects that Charles Masson had acquired. Unlike the Amaravati sculptures, we have no statement from visitors who might have observed it at the Museum. As a small item, it could easily have gone unnoticed. Until the Museum closed in 1878, the casket might

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<sup>177</sup>Cole, H. (1874). *Catalogue of the Objects of Indian Art Exhibited in the South Kensington Museum*. 1st ed. London: G. E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode. p. 320.

have been just another object in a vast collection. Again Cole describes how the general cluttered state of the museum would have made it nearly impossible to navigate: ‘It is deeply to be regretted that this unexampled collection of incalculable value—should be so inaccessible and so unworthily treated, for in truth the Indian Museum is but a Durbar store room.’<sup>178</sup>

However, with the museum closing this system was not permanent, and on November 11th, 1879, the House of Commons decided to split the India Museum between South Kensington Museum (now known as the Victoria & Albert Museum) and the Natural History Museum. Though the Indian objects stayed a short time in South Kensington, A. W. Franks, Keeper of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnology at the British Museum, fought to have part of the Indian collection moved to the British Museum, focusing specifically on the Amaravati sculptures. Through the museum rotations, the Bimaran casket must have been kept safe. The first detailed account of the Bimaran casket in England, from *The Industrial Arts of India. Vol. I* by George Birdwood (1880), describes it as ‘belonging to the India Office library, which have been lent to the Science and Art Department for exhibition in the India Museum at South Kensington’.<sup>179</sup> The Bimaran casket was displayed in the South Kensington Museum as part of an exhibition alongside two other collections, those of Dr. Leitner and Colonel Johnstone.

Dr. Leitner’s Graeco-Buddhistic pieces were displayed first in the Royal Albert Hall before being transferring to the South Kensington Museum. Dr. Leitner had been to India and collected a vast number of Gandharan pieces, hoping to prove his theory that this style of art was a direct influence from the invasion of Alexander the Great. Many other historians believed in a similar theory, including George Birdwood, who mentions in his description that the item was ‘also directly influenced by Greek art.’<sup>180</sup> He further states that ‘Dr. Leitner was the first to insist on describing them as Graeco-Buddhist sculptures.’<sup>181</sup> So it is apparent that Bimaran casket was on display as early as 1880 and

178 Cole, H. (1874). p. 324.

179 Birdwood, George Christopher Molesworth. (1880). *The Industrial Arts of India*, Vol I, London: Chapman & Hall. p. 144.

180 Birdwood, George Christopher Molesworth. (1880). p. 146.

181 Birdwood, George Christopher Molesworth. (1880). p. 146.

that historians of Indian art were aware of its possible importance to the chronology of Buddhist art history. By being displayed alongside Dr. Leitner's pieces, the South Kensington Museum would have used the Bimaran casket's decorative features as an example of Grecian influence in Buddhist art history. In 1887, 4,700 pieces of Masson's coin collection went up for auction, spreading the items between museums and private collections.<sup>182</sup> A portion of the collection was donated 'to the Royal Asiatic Society, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.'<sup>183</sup> In 1900, the Bimaran casket was transferred to the British Museum by the Secretary of State for India, where it was displayed alongside other Gandharan pieces. The only information readily available about this transfer was a brief mention in the British Museum Trustees Minutes, which reads:

Letter to the India Office expressing the trustee's appreciation of the action taken to further their works in regard to India antiquities and conveying their thanks for the transfer of the gold cup.<sup>184</sup>

The 'gold cup' was transferred to the British Museum to become a part of the Buddhism section. When searching through British Museum guidebooks from the time, no mention was found of these items in the Ethnographical Gallery. However, I believe the Bimaran casket was displayed in a special section known as 'Collections Illustrating Religions'. In Room III there was a special section labeled 'Buddhism'. The guidebook reads:

The collections in this room illustrate fairly the various phases of the Buddhist Religion as it has existed in times past, or still exists, in various countries. . . . The oldest Buddhist remains in the collection are chiefly from Northern India, and are in Wall-Cases 59-76 and Standard cases A and B. Many of the sculptures show traces of classical art, derived probably from the Greek kingdom of Bactria, founded by the successors of Alexander the Great, but also probably from Roman captives. Their date is about the first century of our era.

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<sup>182</sup> Elizabeth Errington: *Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853): The Masson Project at the British Museum* in: *IIAS-Newsletter* 27, p. 8 - 9.

<sup>183</sup> Desmond, Ray. (1982).

<sup>184</sup> British Museum, (Central Archive) *Standing Committee Minutes*, 10th February, 1900 (n.d.): P. 1044. Microform.

. . . There are also a number of *dagobas* or reliquaries in the four of domed buildings, intended to hold sacred relics.<sup>185</sup>

The reliquaries section is where I deduce the Bimaran casket was placed. At the time, Graeco-Buddhist sculptures were a sought-after topic by academics such as George Birdwood and Dr. Leitner. Though the item is not explicitly referenced, it can be inferred that pieces that suggested a link between Gandharan art and Grecian art would have been on display in this section. It would have stayed on display until ‘in 1933 in another shuffle the Department of Ceramics and Ethnography was abolished and a Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography was created’.<sup>186</sup> The reliquaries would have eventually been moved to the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery. In 1995, a portion of Charles Masson’s writings and coins were transferred to the British Library, before moving to the British Museum, while the majority of his drawings, maps, manuscripts, and writing remains with the India Office Collections at the British Library.<sup>187</sup> Here the coins initially found with the casket were eventually reunited and displayed alongside each other as they were initially found by Charles Masson.

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185 British Museum Trustees. (1900). *A Guide to the Exhibition Gallery of the British Museum (Bloomsbury) with Maps and Plans*. 2nd ed. Revised. p. 55.

186 Wilson, D. (2002). *The British Museum: A History*. London: The British Museum Press. p. 228.

187 Errington, E. (2017).

# CURRENT DISPLAY

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Before the recent renovations to the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (November 2017), the Bimaran casket was situated next to the Kanishka casket in the wood-framed Edwardian square display case that marks the introduction to the Shakyamuni Buddha's life depicted in Gandharan sculpture. Surrounded by other reliquaries and Gandharan artifacts, the label read:

Gold reliquary (the so-called "Bimaran Casket"), bronze seal ring, circular gold ornaments, small stones, beads, burnt pearls, and four base silver coins, issued circa A.D. 60 in the name of the Indo-Scythian king, Azes (circa 57-'10 B.C.). Part of the relic deposit from Bimaran stupa 2, Darunta district, Southeast Afghanistan, OA 1900.2-9, 1 Masson Collection.

Coins: C&M India Office Loan Collection

Steatite Box: The Bimaran casket was found in a form-fitting steatite box. The inscription on the main body of the container reads: 'Sacred gift of Shivaraksita, son of Munjavamda; presented for Lord's relics, in honor of all Buddhas'. The Indo-Scythian coins found inside the casket were in pristine condition, apparently uncirculated. Collection: British Museum, London.

The casket was located on the top shelf facing south towards the Gandharan art. The main text of the case read:

Indian religions: Buddhism

The cult of relics:

From at least the last centuries B.C., relics of the Buddha and his successors were held to be sacred. These were enshrined in stupas

which, because of their sanctified contents, became the focus of Buddhist ritual. The examples shown here from Gandhara in present day Pakistan and Afghanistan are of precious materials including gold, silver and crystal.

Some relic caskets were made in the shape of miniature stupas and include features seen on contemporary architecture. These features are of particular interest because they sometimes represent elements that do not survive on ruined stupas today. The parasols surmounting these reliquaries illustrate the protective and regal qualities of the architectural stupas. Sculpted representations of stupas being worshipped are similarly informative.

The display conveyed very little of the item's recent biography through the display at the British Museum, though the amount of room afforded for an item would cut down on information. The artifact could not transmit the history accordingly in the space constructed, but merely situated it as a piece of a more prominent reliquary display. The item is also so small that it was likely to be overlooked. The fact that this item may be one of the earliest images of the Buddha was also not indicated, however this fact can not be ascertained.

Since the recent renovations, the Bimaran casket has now been granted an entire display case to itself, along with the stone box, coins, and artifacts found alongside it as seen in Figure 3-6. The wood of the display cases has now been dyed a deeper brown, and lighting has been added along the inside of the cases to give more current display aesthetic. The



Fig. 3-6. Relics Display in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery. *Overview of the Relics Display.* (January, 25, 2019).

backdrop of the case is a dark gray with the design of the Bimaran casket enlarged and displayed behind the item so it is easier to see the design, shown in Figure 3-7. The small gold casket hovers in the center of the display to draw the eye, as opposed to its position on a shelf from the previous display. Above the item it reads:

Representing the Buddha in human form

Early portrayals of the Buddha took the form of symbols, including an empty throne shaded by a parasol, a dharma wheel and footprints. He was first depicted in human form - probably at about the same time - in both Gandhara and Mathura.

This Gold reliquary casket (1) shows early portraits of the Buddha. He is flanked by the gods Brahma and Indra, and a fourth figure (probably a bodhisattva). The casket may once have function as a display reliquary before it was encased in a stone reliquary (2) inscribed with the donor's name, Shivarakshita. It contained gold fragments and many beads of different materials (3). Coins (4) issued by the India-Sythian ('Sakia' from Central Asia) governor Mujatria (about AD 80-90) were placed in the cell containing the relic deposit.

Dr. Jansari describes why this information was included with the item: ,  
'For 'Gateway' objects - e.g., the Bimaran casket - the two paragraphs serve different purposes: the top one contextualizes the whole case (central section with the Gateway object, plus the two sections to either side), and the bottom one focuses more closely on the gateway object.'<sup>188</sup>  
Underneath this are the item numbers, as well as:

The Bimaran gold and stone reliquary caskets and deposit



Fig. 3-7. Bimaran Casket Display. Close View of Bimaran Casket Display. (January, 25, 2019).

<sup>188</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

About AD 50-100, Bimaran Stupa 2, Afghanistan, 1. 1900,0209.1,  
donated by the India Office.

The tone between the two displays has significantly changed. The label is less clinically descriptive and more educational in tone. The statement, 'He was first depicted in human form - probably at about the same time - in both Gandhara and Mathura,' suggests that the Iconic depiction of the Buddha was not a result of Western influences that were suggested by Foucher but that the iconic Buddha developed simultaneously in Northern India rather than only in Gandhara, present-day Afghanistan/Pakistan region. This display suggests an academic move away from a Eurocentric view of Buddhist art history that has previously dominated the study in Great Britain. Dr. Jansari said about the theme of this display:

For Bimaran - this is the story of the development of the image of the Buddha. So, to the right of the casket, I have used Gandhara sculpture to tell the story of the Buddha's life, including the division of the Buddha relics and their internment in stupas. Then, once the visitor has seen that, hopefully they will better understand the importance of relics and reliquaries in Buddhism. To the left of the Bimaran casket, I have included the majority of the Gandhara reliquaries in our collection. This is not only because it's an important collection showcasing a wide variety of shapes and materials, plus the contents, but also because we have a lot of scholars who come to the BM specifically to research reliquaries. So, you'll find that I've displayed pretty much our entire collection from across South Asia.<sup>189</sup>

Since the British Museum acquired the Bimaran casket in 1900, the appeal of Buddhist art and Gandharan sculpture has not dimmed. Looking through guidebooks, it can be inferred that this item, though never explicitly referenced, has been on display as a vital part of the Buddhist art section since it has come to the museum and will continue to be as an essential item to the collection.

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<sup>189</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

# ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

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More information was available on the artifacts recovered by Masson after H. H. Wilson's book, *Ariana Antiqua*, was published in 1841, because Wilson was able to provide additional comments from Masson in order to expand and build on what scholars already knew. Sir Alexander Cunningham wrote 'Coins of Indian Buddhist Satraps with Greek inscriptions' in 1854, the same year as his well-received book *The Bhilsa Topes*.<sup>190</sup> In this paper, Cunningham used the coins uncovered to date the stupa and the relic. The coins have a king riding a horse, with the reverse side showing a goddess. Both sides have the name of the King of Azes. Naturally, Cunningham assigned the casket's date to that of his reign in the first century BCE. He believed that the stupa had gone unopened. This casket proved that Buddhism had reached this area of Afghanistan and had a Buddhist King under Azes. In *The Industrial Arts of India. Vol. I* (1880), George Birdwood wrote that the casket's Buddhist sculpture had a striking 'European character'. He dated the piece to between 250 B.C.E. - 700 C.E. with a direct Greek influence.

Foucher's first book, *The Beginning of Buddhist Art: and other essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology* (1917), theorizes about a Greek origin for the Buddhist artistic style. However, it never mentions the Bimaran casket as an example, but instead uses the Kanishka casket as proof of Hellenistic influence and the 'decadence' of the Gandhara era. It is unknown why the Bimaran casket was omitted at this time, but five years later in his article 'L'art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhara' Foucher introduces a broader study of Gandharan art that does include the Bimaran casket. He believes, as did Cunningham, that the casket can be assigned to the date of the coins found alongside it, between the first century BCE to, possibly, the first century CE. Foucher starts

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<sup>190</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854). Coins of Indian Buddhist Satraps with Greek inscriptions. In *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 23: p. 679–714.

to suggest that perhaps the casket was created after the reign of Azes but before the creation of the Kanishka casket. He proposes this because of the sophistication of the image, and what he believes to have more Hellenistic features than those found on the Kanishka casket.

Coomaraswamy published his well-known article '*The Origin of the Buddha Image*' in 1927 which refuted the idea that the image of the Buddha came from Western influences.<sup>191</sup> He looks at the Bimaran reliquary, excavated by Masson, and assigns it to the reign of Azes because of the coins, but reminds the readers that coins 'merely provide a *terminus post quem*,' suggesting the earliest possible date for the item but not the latest. He then does a chronology of the academic references for the item citing Marshall who theorized that the Bimaran casket was made before the Kanishka reliquary.<sup>192</sup> He and Foucher both concluded that the Bimaran was earlier because of the finer craftsmanship. Coomaraswamy refutes this, as Bodhisattva carved images were created in Mathura near the same date as Kanishka's reign. The locations of the Kanishka stupa and Mathura are nearly 1000 km apart and could not have had an easy exchange of style. Coomaraswamy argues that though the Kanishka and Bimaran items have been dated and cited to the Gandharan school of art, this evidence alone is not enough. It does not mean that the Buddha image came from interactions with the West as there is evidence that simultaneously Buddhist imagery was being created in Mathura. He also suggests that the dating for the items should be questioned because it is based on a coin. In finishing, he writes:

In view of the considerations and facts brought forward above, it becomes impossible to treat the phrase "Greek origin of the Buddha image" as representing anything more than a rhetorical misuse of language; if art of the Gandhara school, as its students admit, is half Indian, art of the Kusana and Gupta periods in the Ganges valley is altogether Indian, for it deals with the same ideas, and uses a plastic language that is in direct continuity with that of the preceding

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191 Coomaraswamy, A. (1927). *The Origin of the Buddha Image*. In *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 9, No. 4: p. 287–329.

192 Marshall, J. (1918). p. 60.

centuries.<sup>193</sup>

Coomaraswamy essentially says that we have been too straightforward in our interpretations of Buddhist art from a Western influence. These objects were created by Indian sculptors in India, and theorizing it came from an outside force is simplifying the chronology of the Buddha image.

In 1936, Benjamin Rowland Jr. wrote '*A Revised Chronology for Gandhara Sculpture*' looking at 'Graeco-Buddhist sculpture of the northwestern India'.<sup>194</sup> Rowland suggests that predetermined chronology of Buddhist art as proposed by Foucher and other academics is 'unreasonable'. The chronology he suggests is that the Graeco-Buddhist art is the earliest of the Gandharan art and that in 'later phases of the school we are witnesses to a gradual process of "Indianization" of the Hellenistic features.'<sup>195</sup> As an example of his theory, he uses the Bimaran casket as the earliest 'monument'. This has been dated to the Azes reign, which could be 58 BCE and thus, in the first century BCE. However, based on the drapery of the figures on the Bimaran casket, he would stylistically place it to in-between the second and third centuries CE. He suggests that dating the Bimaran casket by the coins is a mistake as coins might still be in circulation centuries after their creation. Thus, researchers should not settle on a date during the reign of Azes, but instead be open to the possibility of a later period.

In 1943, Reginald Le May wrote a rebuttal to Rowland's article, suggesting that the coins should be used in the dating of the Bimaran casket. By using the stylistic features of the casket, Le May dates it to the early period of the Gandharan art school, or the early half of the first century CE; he argues that dating it any later is ignoring the artistic style. He also reanalyzes Masson's statement that the coins were most likely not from the Azes reign, but from that of one of his successors who continued to use his name. Thus, though there is the evidence on the coins, the process of assigning coins to the era of a king is not always a precise science. The Kharoshthi inscriptions on the side of the steatite casket and the type of stone used also suggest that it is from the first century CE. This was the start of the debate between Le May, Rowland, and

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193 Coomaraswamy, A.K. (1927). p. 324.

194 Rowland, B. (1936). See p. 387.

195 Rowland, B. (1936). p. 387.

Buchthal, questioning the significance of the coins, the iconography, and all of this in a relationship with the casket and the inscriptions. The debate, whatever the conclusion, will always be theoretical, as without any new data there is no way to find a precise date for the Bimaran casket. In Le May's conclusion, he writes, 'I do not think it wise, at this time, to propose a more precise date, as, in my opinion, a great deal depends upon an accurate ascription to a particular period of the paleography of the inscription on the vase.'<sup>196</sup>

The historian Hugo Buchthal also prompted historians to be careful using the coins for dating purposes. In '*The Haughton Collection of Gandharan Sculpture*' (1945), Buchthal looked at the steatite container and the text to try and create a date for the object. He was the first to propose that the container was not necessarily made for the Bimaran casket but could have been reused and a new inscription added to the outside. This could explain why the Bimaran reliquary is missing a lid if both items were repurposed and not created specifically for the use of a relic. These questions about the origin and purpose of the casket led to academics reexamining all aspects of the Bimaran's origin.

K. Walton Dobbins released his comprehensive article, '*Two Gandharan Reliquaries*' in 1968, and argues that since the Bimaran and Kanishka reliquaries are so fundamental to the discussion of the chronology of Gandharan art, it is essential for us to get the date 'as precisely as possible.'<sup>197</sup> Dobbins' analysis of the evidence marked the beginnings of a consensus to disregard Rowland's dating by comparison with Roman prototypes, starting with the current consensus of the time that the Kanishka casket was dated no earlier than the second or third centuries CE. Rowland had suggested the same era for the Bimaran casket because of similarities with Roman sculptures. Dobbins rejects this idea, as it does not examine the iconography of the item itself. He writes that 'we can identify no feature of iconography on the casket which prevents its being dated.'<sup>198</sup> Many scholars have suggested that the Kanishka is of a later date because

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<sup>196</sup> Le May, R. (1943). The Bimaran casket. In *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 82, No. 482: p. 116–123. p. 121.

<sup>197</sup> Dobbins, K. (1968). p. 151.

<sup>198</sup> Dobbins, K. (1968). p. 153.

of deterioration in style from the earlier Bimaran. Dobbins reminds the reader that the two relics are made of entirely different material which may have affected the style and sculpting of the item.

Joe Cribb, the Keeper of Department of Coins and Medals from 2003 - 2010, published the paper '*Dating the Bimaran Casket – its Conflicted Role in the Chronology of Gandharan Art*' in 2016, which looks at how the Bimaran casket has shaped the research of Buddhist art in Gandhara by investigating the archaeological and numismatic evidence unearthed at the Bimaran stupa 2. Although there was not enough evidence to give a certain conclusion for the date of the find, the coins found with the casket have helped significantly: they were dated to the era of Indo-Saka King Azes II and give a starting point for dating the Bimaran casket as possibly the earliest example of the Buddha image from Gandhara, as does the Kharoshthi inscription on the steatite casket. Azes II ruled in the second half of the first century BCE. Cribbs does not believe the reliquary is dated any later than 30-50 CE, based on the evidence from the 1960s that the coins from the Bimaran stupa are not from the era of Azes II but still held the name of Azes. Cribbs has identified the coins instead to be pressed during the reign 'of a local satrap [municipality] named Mujatria, who ruled in the Jalalabad region during the late first century AD.'<sup>199</sup> This agrees with the view expressed by MacDowal that the coins were not issued by a king called Azes, but were imitation of Azes coins issued at a date after the reigns of Azes I and II. Cribbs then creates a chronology for the authors who have tried to date the Bimaran casket. He argues that the numismatic evidence is a much more reliable reference for dating than the artistic style. Additional to this, Cribbs closes his article by stating that Charles Masson was an expert 'in the archaeology and the numismatics of ancient Afghanistan [...] and had already laid the foundation of the structure of Afghanistan's ancient history almost two hundred years ago.'<sup>200</sup> Masson was excellent in his scholarship, and his contributions to the field continue to influence researchers on the subject.

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<sup>199</sup> Cribb, J. (2015). p. 61.

<sup>200</sup> Cribb, J. (2015). p. 81.

# CONCLUSION

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This object biography has discussed the movement and academic contributions of the Bimaran reliquary and the history of Charles Masson. ‘Object biographies’ refers to the Kopytoff’s definition of an object that has various biographies and several sets of identities, depending on the item’s current use and the assignment of status.<sup>201</sup> The Bimaran casket shifts in identity and status several times throughout its ‘life’, from once being a Buddhist reliquary that possibly held the remains of the living Buddha when first placed in the stupa, to the item used by Masson to date the stupa, to the moment it was shipped to London and considered a piece of evidence to support the Graeco-Buddhist art theory. Though scholars can get a reasonably accurate date using numismatics and artistic style, without further evidence, there will never be a for specific date assigned to the item. The dating of this item has continued to influence how we view the chronology of the Gandharan school, especially concerning the Kanishka casket. This study has explored the relations between anthropology, object biography, and academic studies about one object. The interesting history surrounding Charles Masson gives a new level of identity to the object, as we can now combine the two biographies. Masson has a very well researched biography, but little is known of his wife, children, the people who assisted him in his excavations, or people he encountered around his travels. The people surrounding this item have also significantly been affected, but there is little to no knowledge of them remaining.

The casket’s object biography is deeply tied to the biography of Masson, and it has also made us aware of Masson’s three narrative volumes and his nomadic travels around Indian, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Masson had little to no use for the Bimaran casket, except as a bargaining chip with the British East India Company before it

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<sup>201</sup> Kopytoff, Igor. (1986).

became evidence for the origin of the Buddha image.

Today the Bimaran holds a significant place in the British Museum as a critical feature of early Buddhist and Gandharan art. There has been a significant move away from the scholarship built around the object since it was displayed in 1880 as an example of Greco-Buddhist art. In the next chapter, I will be discussing the object biography of the Shalabhanjika Yakshi from the Sanchi stupa.

# CHAPTER 4: THE SHALABHANJIKA YAKSHI

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The Great Stupa at Sanchi is the best-preserved stupa out of four monuments that have been discussed so far. In this chapter, I will discuss how the Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue was taken from the Great Sanchi stupa and how it came to the British Museum. Sanchi is a cluster of Buddhist stupas located in the state of Madhya Pradesh in Raisen District, as seen in Figure 4-1. The central and oldest stupa at the location is the Great Stupa at Sanchi. Similar

to the Amaravati stupa, this one was built because of the edict of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (273 - 232 BCE).

During the 3rd century BCE, according to legend, Buddhism had spread to central India as a result of actions of the Emperor. In a famous series of epigraphic texts and oral tradition, Ashoka claimed that, being repentant of the bloodshed he had caused to overtake the Kalingas in the Southeast, he devoted the rest of his life to the 'study, love, and

propagation of Dharma.'<sup>202</sup> Dharma

can be defined as righteousness but

has been interpreted as Buddhism. The legends around Ashoka tie him to the growth



Fig. 4-1. *Figure.* (1st c. CE) Sandstone, 65 x 47 x 18 cm.

<sup>202</sup> Strong, John. (1989). *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna*. Delhi, Princeton University Press. p. 3.

of Buddhism. This history recorded by Hsüan-Tsang (629-645) and Fa-Hsien (399-414) during their travels recorded the edicts they saw and preserved the legends told by locals and their traditions. It is questionable whether these tales are accurate, but these traditions continue and shape the narrative told today.

According to legend, Emperor Ashoka built a stupa at Sanchi and erected one of his pillars etched with the principles of Buddhism. Then Ashoka used the monastery at this location to spread Buddhism along trading routes. He also built the complex because the area was of significance to his first wife, Devī, the daughter of a merchant of Vedisagiri and a member of the clan Śākya, who was possibly related to the Buddha's clan. She had tried to convert him to Buddhism before he left her to fulfill his role as Emperor.<sup>203</sup> Though Devī did not remain his wife for long, she gave him two children and is said to have influenced Ashoka to construct the Great Vihāra of Vedisagiri, or the beginning projects in the area that led to the Sanchi stupa complex in later years.

The Sanchi monastic complex started with simple brick buildings but grew over the fourteen centuries that Buddhism flourished in this area. The stupa built by Ashoka is assumed to have entombed one of the original eight relics taken from the bodily remains of the Buddha, although evidence to support this claim was never found. Ashoka built this stupa very strategically. On a major trade route to Pataliputra, the Sanchi stupa would have been an accessible pilgrimage site for travelers and merchants. The monastic community there, which would have relied on the donations of travelers, had enough profit to continue the construction of the site and promote the proselytizing of Buddhism. The brick stupas were eventually surrounded by a round dome of stone over the original brick building. The space between the brick and stone dome was then filled with rubble and stone. At the Great Stupa, circumambulatory paths were added around the stupa. These pathways are replete with carvings to remind the walker of the Buddhist principles as they traversed the stupa. Railings were built around the outside of the stupa similar to the Bharhut stupa, built in Madhya Pradesh by Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. Upon the railings were inscribed the names of the donors who had

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<sup>203</sup> Mookerji, Radhakumud, (1928) *Ashoka*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. p. 16.

contributed to the building. At the four cardinal points, elaborate archways that gave access to the path around the stupa were built during the Satavahana dynasty (1st c. BCE - 2nd c. CE). During the Gupta period (260-600 CE) the site received a spike of activity thanks to the peak of sculptural art during that era. Vidya Dehejia, Professor of Indian and South Asian Art at Columbia University, describes how ‘four seated images of the Buddha were placed at the four entranceways to stupa 1, they rested against the drum of the main stupa to face the worshipper entering the circumambulatory path.’<sup>204</sup> In the 7th century CE a few new stupas, *caityas*, and viharas were built in the surrounding complex, yet there was a decrease in activity compared to previous eras due to a decline in patronage before the Muslim invasions of 1000 CE. These aggressions would eventually lead to the deterioration of Buddhism in this area up until the disappearance of the ministry in the 13th century.

The complex remained familiar to natives of that area and was known as *Saas baht ka bitha*.<sup>205</sup> It had been deserted until it regained attention in 1818, nearly five centuries later.

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<sup>204</sup> Dehejia, V., & Agrawala, K. (1996). *Unseen Presence*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.. p. xviii.

<sup>205</sup> Lahiri, Nayaniot. (1834). *Sanchi: Destruction, Restoration, Restitution*. p. 52.

Fell. E, (1819). Description of an Ancient and Remarkable Monument. In *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 3, July, 1834. p. 490-494.

J.D. Cunningham. (1847). ‘Note on the Antiquities of the Districts Within the Bhopal Agency’, & c., *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XVI. p. 746.

# THE STUPA

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In the next section, I will discuss the layout of the Sanchi gateways and the origin of the Yakshi figure as an introduction into the iconography at the Sanchi stupa. My primary source for this section was the book *Sanchi* by Dhavalikar, who has written one of the most comprehensive guides to the iconography of the gateways.

The four gateways at the Great Stupa, also known as *toranas*, were built around the first century BCE under the reign of the Satavahanas.<sup>206</sup> They are the masterpiece of the monument and have lasted at least twenty centuries. They have become the iconic architectural feature associated with Sanchi. The inscriptions on the sides of the gateways indicate they were built with the donations of various people. The markings on the Southern Gateway indicate that it was a gift from the architect for the king Satakarni, dating it to the latter half of the 1st century BCE.<sup>207</sup>

The four gateways are all of a similar construction, facing the cardinal points. Each gateway starts with two square columns that reach up about fifteen feet with three architraves, or lintels, across the top of an entrance. The architraves bring the gateway to a total of about twenty-eight feet. Underneath the architraves, at the top of the two base pillars, there is a capital composed of four lions, elephants, or pot-bellied dwarfs.<sup>208</sup> The capitals connect to three architraves that are separated from each other by square blocks. Each of the architraves goes out horizontally past the pillars and ends with volute ends in a very tight swirl. The gateways are covered with Buddhist symbols instead of his figure. When the gateways were produced, the Buddha was still an aniconic image. Dhavalikar writes, ‘As Buddha was not worshipped in human form by the adherents of

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<sup>206</sup> Dhavalikar, M. (2003). *Sanchi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 19.

<sup>207</sup> Dhavalikar, M. (2003). p. 19.

<sup>208</sup> Mitra, Debala. (1978). *Sanchi*, 4th edition, Director General Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi. p. 19.

the Hinayana father, his worship was symbolical,' such as in images of the Bodhi tree, lotuses, empty thrones, footprints, and the Wheel of the Law.<sup>209</sup>

The large motifs at Sanchi and on the gateway architraves are assemblies of people, similar to processions, interwoven with dwarf-like figures. These narrative panels are depicting moments from the Buddha's life (*Jataka* stories), but it could be argued that few of these scenes could represent ritualistic worship of images or places after the death of the Buddha. These portrayals and narratives of the Buddha's life would have been visible to worshippers committing circumambulation around the stupa. Walking clockwise around the inner dome could be seen as a form of prayer, gaining merit through the act of movement. By doing so, a worshipper would pass by each of the four gateways. If the worshipper walked up the interior stairs to the higher platform around the center of the dome, they would be at eye level of the architraves and the narratives portrayed there. As each gateway is so intricately carved, it would take a great deal of time to discuss each, but a summary of their most prominent features will give a feeling of the motifs and patterns used on the stupa.

The Southern Gateway that was in ruins when first discovered in 1818 has now been rebuilt. Each of its pillars has lion capitals instead of elephants relating to the Ashoka capital found there. On the same pillar, there is an image of the grief-stricken Ashoka worshipping the relics of the Buddha. This gateway also tells the story of Chaddanta-Jataka, the Queen Mara's entourage, as she is accompanied by a procession in the panel above her, dwarves in garlands, the Naga Mucalinda, the worship of the Dharmachakra, and other Buddhist symbolic images. It also has detailed carvings of building with horse-shoe arched roofs similar to Buddhist cave temples. Carvings such as these give us a look into architectural features from the time. This gateway was damaged by earthquakes and has pieces missing; no Yakshi images are still attached. When Major Cole started rebuilding the site in 1882, he made a mistake and faced the architraves on this pillar in the wrong direction; the narrative scenes on this gateway are facing outward instead of inward for the viewer.

The Western Gateway is topped by a large Dharma-Chakra (Wheel of the Law)

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<sup>209</sup> Dhavalikar, M. (2003). p. 19.

on the uppermost architraves. Chubby little dwarfs make up the capitals that hold up the architraves instead of the lions on the Southern Gateway. This gateway also contains the sermon at the Deer Park with an assembly. Each of the inner blocks between the architraves contains the image of a stupa, while on the bottom of the pillar is the image of Ashoka in a chariot riding to worship. Though the panels are all separate with different imagery, they are interconnecting as if Ashoka is riding up the pillar to view the Deer Park assembly. Also on this gateway is an empty throne, usually representing the aniconic Buddha, who was not shown in human form upon the stone at Sanchi.

The Northern Gateway is the best preserved out of the four and still retains the gorgeous images of the Yakshi which are suspended from the beams above. It also contains four Yakshi between the cross lintels that are similar to one held at the British Museum. Here we can see that each gateway would have originally had six images of the Yakshi. The capitals are elephants, topped by the architraves. In between the three cross lintels, the spaces are still filled with small figures riding elephants and horses. These small carvings no longer exist on the other gateways. In one scene a procession comes to worship at a stupa while winged figures watch over. Other scenes include the Miracle of the Mango Tree, the story of Anathapindaka, the Great Departure, the Temptation of Buddha by Mara, the Miracle of Sankasya, and many others.

The Eastern Gateway still retains one hanging Yakshi, and one lintel Yakshi. It has other narrative scenes from the life of the Buddha, but one fantastic carving is on the front face of the right pillar. This depicts the six stories of a building. Each level shows various heavenly realms of Buddhism. On the back of each pillar is a large scale gate guardian.

The overall theme of the gateways is to depict the life and death of the Buddha along with the efforts and life of Emperor Ashoka. The gateways were built over a period of years and showed a repetition of themes and narratives to preach Buddhism through representation. The iconography and place of the Yakshi at the monument plays a part in these representations.

# YAKSHI

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The Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue is a mythical tree spirit associated with the Vedic religion of ancient India as a symbol of fertility. Ananda Coomaraswamy lists a number of their known titles such as the ‘woman and tree’, a ‘Dyads’, a Yakshi or Yakkhini, Vrksakās, or tree maidens.<sup>210</sup> The Yakshi spirits are female fertility spirits; their counterparts, the Yakshas, are male earth warriors. Both of these spirits grew from ancient existing religious ideas based in animism-based cults and the Vedic religion. Early figures of Yakshas statuary show very distinct similarities to kingly figures that may have taken the iconography already known and applied it to statuary of leaders.

The Yakshi statue in question is in the pose of Shalabhanjika, meaning ‘breaking the branch’ as seen in Figure 4-1. The female figure stands in a dancerly pose with one hand above her head in the mango tree branches, while the right arm and leg are wrapped around the tree. The Shalabhanjika Yakshi is originally shown as ‘beautiful young maidens [who] were said to usher in spring by kicking a tree trunk while breaking off a branch, so as to arouse it into blossoming.’<sup>211</sup> Though this pose was initially a Vedic religious emblem, it was integrated and used in Buddhist imagery as a symbol of fertility. Gautama Buddha’s mother, Queen Maya, is identified in the nativity scene by her figure in Shalabhanjika pose with her hand in the tree and a foot against the trunk. In this pose, she births the Buddha from her side while her hand is entwined in the tree as a traditional sign of fertility. An example of this is seen on a drum-slab from the Amaravati stupa on display at the British Museum.<sup>212</sup>

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210 Coomaraswamy, A. (1926). Early Indian Sculptures: Six Reliefs from Mathura. In *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, vol. 24, no. 144, Aug. 1926, pp. 54–60. [JSTOR]. p. 60.

211 British Museum. Sandstone Figure of Shalabhanjika Yakshi. *British Museum Images*, 2018, [www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=00030458001](http://www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=00030458001).

212 British Museum Item Number: 1880,0709.44.

The Yakshi figure from Sanchi at the British Museum is entirely made in the round. The mango tree frames the Yakshi, who is entwined within its branches. She stands almost naked with long flowing hair in braids, wearing only earrings, bracelets, a belt holding up a diaphanous lower garment, and ankle bangles. The voluptuous woman has a strand of beads draped over her chest, another indication of her fertility. She is a beautifully carved example of a Yakshi figure, but this raises the question, why would a female spirit of fertility be carved on the entrances of a Buddhist monastic monument? Buddhism was fundamentally against the Brahman system of religious ranks and elitist priests, so why would a tree spirit connected with a fertility cult be included at Sanchi? Richard Blurton theorizes that Buddhism did not want to ‘supplant the popular cults, especially those connected with the fertility cult of the forest spirits’.<sup>213</sup> By intertwining references to Vedic religious principles into Buddhism, it becomes easier to convert the multitudes who already worship the religious cults. It also gives familiarity to passing travelers and merchants who may have been unfamiliar with Buddhism in this region in order to coax them into donating to the monastery.

The Yakshi figures are placed in-between the beams of the gateway and the supporting corners. Here it looks to serve some supporting beam in between narrative friezes and images in the gateway. Blurton sees their positioning as an iconic image choice:

The idea behind these images of sensuous fluidity seems to be that they not only physically support the structure, but that they also, metaphorically, support the teachings of the creed. . . . However, in their very perfection of physical form in a world of imperfection, they act as charms and as the embodiment of auspiciousness. Their placement at entrances -- again as seen at Sanchi -- ensures the fortunate character of the space they encircle.<sup>214</sup>

These fertility goddesses grace the gateways of Sanchi with a fluid beauty. Their elegant figures must have beguiled the explorers who first saw them; so much so that they absconded with the image back to London. Though little is known of the item’s

<sup>213</sup> Blurton, T. (1993). *Hindu Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 161.

<sup>214</sup> Blurton, T. (1993). p. 163.

journey, her figure in Buddhist statuary symbolizes the merging of the nature cults and Buddhism.

# REDISCOVERY

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The ‘discovery’ of the stupas was made by General, then Major, Henry Taylor of the Bengal Cavalry who had camped in the nearby hills. His party had come upon Sanchi in a nearly perfect state: overgrown, but well preserved. Captain Edward Fell of the 10th Native Infantry later returned, accompanied by Lieutenant John Bagnold and Ensign George Roebuck, to examine the area.<sup>215</sup> Fell described what he encountered at the area in ‘Description of an Ancient and Remarkable Monument, near Bhilsa’ in an article he originally published in the *Calcutta Journal* in 1819 and later republished in the *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, which serves as the only description of the structure before it was damaged.<sup>216</sup> Fell wrote:

On the table-land of a detached hill, distanced from Bhilsa.  
. . . Is an ancient fabric, of a hemispherical form but of thin layers of free-stone, in the nature of steps, without any cement, and to all appearances solid. . . . Indeed when you view so large a mass of stone, placed in such neat order, without any cement in the interstices, it must forcibly strike the most superficial observer. . . . As dilapidation has commenced, the ravages of a few years, most probably, will cause the whole to fall into a mass ruin, destroying the inner apartments and images, if any, and thus for ever depriving the curious from knowing what so wonderful a monument of human genius.

It is surrounded by colonnade of garnet pillars, 10 feet high, distant from each other a foot and a half, connected by parallels also of granite, of an elliptical form, united by tenons, leaving an area of 12 feet clear of the base of the monument, to which it strictly conforms.

At the east, west and north points, are gate-ways, plain

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<sup>215</sup> Allen, C. (2002). *The Buddha and the Sahibs*. London: John Murray. p. 124.

<sup>216</sup> Fell, E. (1819).

parallelograms, the extreme height of each is 40 feet, and the breadth within the perpendiculars, 9 feet. They all measure 20 feet to the lintels, which are slightly carved and sculptured, with circlets of flowers. In the northern gate-way, which is the principal one, the lintel rests on elephants, four feet in height, richly caparisoned, borne by a projecting cornice, 16 feet from the case. . . .

Any antiquary, skilled in research, would here find employment and amusement, for some time; even the taking facsimiles of the numerous old Sanskrit inscriptions that I observed, (and more would perhaps be found if sought for,) would occupy some days. I lament exceedingly my want of sufficient ability in the art of drawing, to do justice to the highly finished style of the sculptures; and also my deficiency in technical knowledge, and in experience in the power of description, for which these monuments afford ample scope.

These defects, together with the very limited time I possessed for inspection, will, I fear, render my account less satisfactory than I could wish: indeed I am fully aware my description can convey but a very faint idea of the magnificence of such stupendous structures, and exquisitely finished sculpture,—but as I know of no previous description of them that has been given to the world, I have been emboldened to send it [to] you with all its imperfections on its head.<sup>217</sup>

In Fell's description, three of the four gateways were still intact. A photograph of the fallen gateway can be seen in Figure 4-2. As the Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue this thesis discusses was taken from one of the gateways, it could have been taken from the southern gateway as early as 1818. The unspoilt Sanchi Stupa as seen by Fell did not last long, as explorers hoping to find hidden treasures inside the stupas proceeded to damage many of the structures.

Fell's publication in the *Journal of Asiatic Society* incited others who had already heard of treasures buried in the center of topes, and encouraged treasure hunters

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<sup>217</sup> Fell. E, (1819).

to find the area. This was disastrous to the monuments which had until then survived for centuries. In early 1822, T. H. Maddock, the Political Agent in Bhopal, and his assistant, Captain Johnson, were part of the amateur group of archaeologists believed to have caused the most damage to Stupa 1. Dr. Spilsbury who had visited the site in late 1822 wrote of what he saw:

With regard to apartments within, none exist. When Mr. Maddock was Political Agent at Bhopal, he obtained leave from that Government to dig into it, and I visited it soon after. . . . When Captain Johnson, his Assistant, had completely opened it from the top to I think about 30 feet below the level and to what he considered, the bottom of the foundations, and found the whole solid brick-work, without any appearance of recess or open space of any kind. Fell should have stated that the gate-ways are four, three of which are standing, the fourth having been thrown down by an earthquake, the whole of which is strewed on the ground, and that in no long time, another will follow: it would be well worth an amateur's while to take copies of the compartments, the sculpture of which is like nothing you see in India.<sup>218</sup>

Maddock and Captain Johnson opened the stupa from the top to the very bottom on one side, trying to dig down to the center. They had been attempting to find any relics or treasures buried in the center of the stupa but, finding none, eventually gave it up as a loss. Maddock and Johnson



Fig. 4-2. No. 3 Tope. (1880s) Photograph, 18.6 x 23.4 cm. A detail of sculptural fragments and the gateway in front of the ruined third stupa at Sanchi.

<sup>218</sup> Spilsbury. (1835). Note Regarding the Bhilsa Monument. In *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. IV, XVII. January to December 1835. Edited by James Prinsep, F. R. S. p. 712.

made no documentation of their excavations. Nayanjot Lahiri notes in her paper that this was a common practice of early explorers when there was nothing significant found to document.<sup>219</sup> By pulling out the rubble used to fill the center of the stupa, the western gateway and part of the border balusters eventually collapsed from the surge of debris. This expedition also damaged Stupa 2 in Maddock's attempt to find treasures.

In the 1830s, General Jean-Baptiste Ventura, working on behalf of the rajah of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, dug into the ruin. Ventura dug down from the top of the dome and found coins, relics and jewelry.<sup>220</sup> In 1846, Captain J. D. Cunningham, brother to Alexander Cunningham, visited Sanchi in 1847 and published '*Notes on the Antiquities of the Districts within the Bhopal Agency*'.<sup>221</sup> His describes the destruction the complex had suffered over the years:

The two Topes at Satcheh were visited in 1819 by Captain Fell, when they were in better preservation than they are now, for an opinion confidently expressed by that officer, that they contained chambers or were not solid, led to two attempts to excavate them on the part of amateurs or antiquaries. Instead however of driving small galleries at nearly the level of the ground into the interior, the explorers began digging pits as it were into the buildings, from the top or at about half way down the side, and as the stones used in the construction of the hemispheres were not cemented with lime, a third of one monument and a fifth portion of the other have been destroyed. Falling rubbish has upset or buried stone colonnades and the searches for coins or inner chambers do not appear ever to have reached the bottom of either Tope.<sup>222</sup>

Captain Cunningham's description was written during his tour of the Bhopal districts after reading of the descriptions in the Asiatic Society's Journal. By the time his journal had been published in 1847, our object had already reached London and been donated

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219 Lahiri, Nayanjot. (2004). p. 54

220 Dhavalikar, M. (2003). p. 69.

221 Cunningham, J.D. (1847). p. 745-46.

222 Cunningham, J.D. (1847). p. 746.

to the British Museum, so it must have been one of the explorers we have discussed, or similar treasure hunters, who had removed the Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue from the Great Sanchi stupa. Further 'exploration' of the Sanchi Stupa led to the expansion of Sanchi's academic biography and assisted in re-identifying the Yakshi statue and its origin once it reached the British Museum in 1842.

Lieutenant Frederick Charles Maisey (1825-92 of the Bengal Native Infantry) who first visited the site in 1849 then again in 1850, went to create an illustrated report of the location for the British East India Company. The company was especially interested in the gateways at Sanchi, as they were considered one of the greatest creations of early Indian art at the time and were praised in every description of the stupa. In early 1851, Lieutenant Maisey invited along Alexander Cunningham, who had no doubt heard of the monument from his younger brother. Cunningham describes the Great Stupa as being,

situated on the western edge of the hill. The ground had been carefully leveled, but cutting away the surface rock on the east, and by building up a retaining wall on the west. The court (as it now exists) averages one hundred and fifty yards in length, and is exactly one hundred yards in breadth. In the midst stands the Great Chaitya, No. 1, surrounded by a massive colonnade. The bald appearance of the solid dome is relieved by the lightness and elegance of the highly picturesque gateways. On all sides are ruined temples, fallen columns, and broken sculptures: and even the Tope itself, which had withstood the destruction and rancor of the fiery Saivas and the bigoted Musalmans, has been half-ruined by the blundering excavations of amateur antiquaries. . . Many of the pillars of this colonnade are now lying at the base of the monument; and several portions of the coping or architrave prove that the enclosure was a circular one.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854). *The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist Monuments of Central India: comprising a brief sketch of the rise, progress, and decline of Buddhism; with an account of the opening and examination of the various groups of topes around Bhilsa*. By Brev.-Major Alexander Cunningham, Bengal Engineers. Illustrated with thirty-three Plates. London: Smith, Elder and co., 65, Cornhill ; Bombay: Smith, Taylor and Co. p. 117-118.

Like his brother in 1847, Alexander Cunningham shows disdain for ‘amateur antiquaries’ who had destroyed much of the site. Though Cunningham did not approve of the destruction to the



Fig. 4-3. *Box/Block*. (2nd c. BCE) Sandstone, 28.5 x 13.5 x 4.5 cm. The inscription states that the box contains the relics of all teachers including Kasapagata and Vachi Suvijayata.

monument, this did not dampen his intention to reach the center of the stupa. In the same chapter Cunningham explains how he and Lieutenant Maisey had dug into a stupa on the first day:

I arrived at Sanchi on the 23rd of January, 1851, and the same morning, after only a few hours’ work, we [Lieutenant Maisey & Alexander Cunningham] found the relics of Sariputa and Mogalana, the two chief disciples of Buddha, in the ruins of No. 3 Stupa.<sup>224</sup>

Cunningham hoped to preserve the outside decorations of the stupa by creating a five-foot-wide shaft in the top of the stupa down forty-eight feet to the bottom of the structure. Through measurements, Cunningham was able to strike the center of Stupa 1 and discover old spiral shells. In Stupa 2 he ‘discovered a small chamber, where four small steatite caskets containing the relics of ten Buddhist monks were found enclosed in a box.’<sup>225</sup> In Stupa 3 were found two stone boxes underneath a large 5-foot slab of stone. On each slab were written the names ‘*Sáriputasa*’ and ‘*Mogalánasa*’, identifying them as relics of Sariputasa and Maha-Mogalansa, the disciples of Buddha.<sup>226</sup> One of these slabs can be seen in Figure 4-3. All of this excavation was done in one

<sup>224</sup> Maisey, F., & Cunningham, A. (1892). *Sánchi and its remains; a full description of the ancient buildings, sculptures, and inscriptions at Sánchi, near Bhilsa, in Central India, with remarks on the evidence they supply as to the comparatively modern date of the Buddhism of Gotama, or Sákyá Muni*. Delhi: Indological Book House. p. xi.

<sup>225</sup> Lahiri, Nayaniot. (1834). p. 55

<sup>226</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854). p. 297.

day; no time was taken to repair any of the shafts they had created. Though it was a momentous find that Maddock and Captain Johnson had missed, Lieutenant Maisey and Cunningham continued where they had left off on the excavation of Stupa 2 and 3 which had been in excellent condition before British tampering. Cunningham recounts how they removed the relics:

On looking at this Tope, which Captain Fell had seen perfect in 1819, I must confess that I felt a secret satisfaction that the labours of the bungling amateurs, who had half ruined it in 1822, had ended in nothing. But at the same time I had some misgivings, from the large size of the breach, whether their workmen had not reached the center. After several careful measurements, however, both Lieutenant Maisey and myself felt satisfied that the actual center had not quite been attained, although the excavators must have been within a single foot of it. After a few hours of labour in clearing away the loose stones from the middle of the breach, we began carefully to sink a shaft down the centre of the tope. In three hours more the removal of a single stone from the western side of the shaft disclosed a small chamber containing a stone box.<sup>227</sup>

The relics of Stupa 2 and 3 were removed to England and placed in the British Museum before being transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum, then known as the South Kensington Museum.<sup>228</sup> They were eventually returned to India in 1947 and enshrined in 1952. No relics were ever known to have been recovered from the Great Stupa.

Cunningham published his book, *Bhilsa Topes: A Buddhist Monument of Central India*, in 1866 while his friend Lieutenant Maisey delayed publication of his own to produce a very detailed, illustrated book in 1892, *Sanchi and its Remains*. One of these illustrations is seen in Figure 4-4. Both gentlemen's books enticed the British public with ideas of hidden temples and treasures in India. Sanchi, which had already been the casualty of British treasure seeking, now was subject to antiquarians who came and stole pieces of the broken sculptures. Alexander Cunningham had expressed a great

<sup>227</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854). p. 275.

<sup>228</sup> Lahiri, Nayanjot. (2004). p. 56.

interest in the gateway arches, writing, ‘these four gateways are the most picturesque and valuable objects at Sanchi, as they covered with bas-reliefs representing various domestic scenes and religious ceremonies.’ He was so impressed by them that he even suggested bringing one of the gateways back to England:

I would also venture to recommend that the two fallen gateways of the Sanchi Tope should be removed to the British Museum, where they would form the most striking objects in a Hall of Indian Antiquities. The value of these sculpted gateways will, I feel confident, be highly appreciated after the perusal of the brief account of them contained in this work; while their removal to England would ensure their preservation.<sup>229</sup>

It is from one of these arches that our item, the Shalabhanjika Yakshi, originated. In response to Cunningham’s request to move the gateway, he was met with disapproval; ‘The scheme carries with it a certain aroma of vandalism’, wrote one of Cunningham’s correspondents; ‘fancy carting away Stonehenge.’<sup>230</sup> Though it could not possibly have come from Cunningham himself as he did not visit the stupa until 1851, this piece of the gateway made it back to London and the British Museum by donation of a Mrs. Tucker in 1842.

Sanchi had become well

<sup>229</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854). p. xi.

<sup>230</sup> Dhavalikar, M. (2003). *Sanchi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 84.

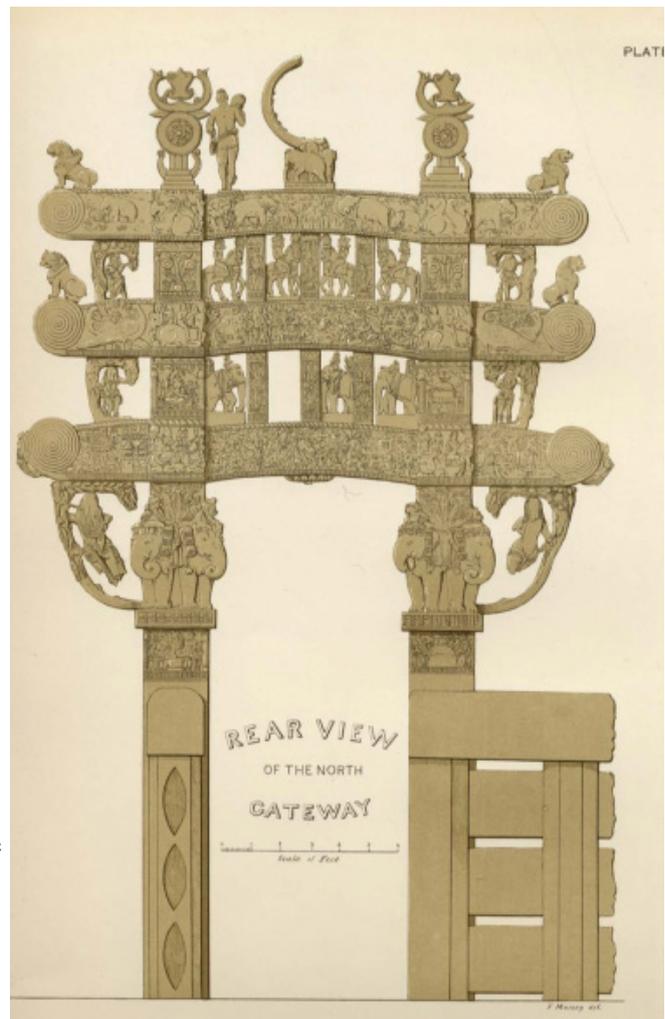


Fig. 4-4. Frederick Charles Maisey. (1892). *Rear view of the Northern Gateway*. Colored lithographs.

known to those in the Indian art scholarly circles thanks to Cunningham, Lieutenant Maisey, and Fergusson's publications. In 1881, Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole (1843-1916), a member of the corps of Royal Engineers, took it upon himself to restore the monument to its former glory as then Curator of Ancient Monuments. On behalf of the British government, he started rebuilding pieces of the original complex *in situ*, including the gateways on the south and west side. For two years he fixed the domes of the stupas broken by Maddock, Johnson, and Cunningham, and cleared away the ever-encroaching jungle that had climbed over some of the structures. However, 1881 was not the first time Cole had first visited the monument: the history of Sanchi portrayed in books often leaves out the fact that Cole had visited the stupa sometime in the 1860s to create a cast of one of the gateways for his father, Sir Henry Cole.

Sir Henry Cole (1808 - 1882) was the first director of the South Kensington Museum. Without the efforts of Sir Henry Cole, the Albertopolis area of South Kensington may not have existed. In 1847, Cole applied for a charter to create the first Exhibition of Art Manufactures. This led to later exhibitions in the following years. In 1851, with the backing of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was held in the newly built Crystal Palace in Hyde Park.

The Great Exhibition was a huge success, introducing people to international products and ideas; including new farming techniques, engines, and a myriad of art not previously seen in the area. Some objects at the exhibition were purchased by the government with the idea of creating a museum that became the Museum of Manufactures in 1852. Eventually, this museum merged with the Government School of Design, acquiring a significant amount of furniture, ceramics, and metalworks, where it continued to grow. Thanks to the patronage of Prince Albert, who had acquired a large acreage of land in what is now South Kensington, a plan was created to build a large museum to educate the public in the area. This was one of the first steps to create what was later nicknamed Albertopolis. This site is composed of such buildings as Imperial College London, Natural History Museum, Royal Albert Hall, Royal College of Art, Science Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, the Albert Memorial, and other



Fig. 4-5. Waterhouse, James John. *Sanchi*. (1861-1862). Photograph.

institutional buildings focused on arts and music. Unfortunately, Prince Albert never lived to see the final result of his patronage and tragically died in 1861. Sir Henry Cole acted as the First Director of the South Kensington Museum from 1857 to 1873 and continued with the principles of public education that Prince Albert stood for.

In comparison to his father Sir Henry Cole, Major Henry Hardy Cole rarely receives much attention for

his work beside that of Sanchi. In the 1860s, he had visited Sanchi to make a cast of the gateway. A photo at the V&A, Figure 4-5, taken in 1861-62, shows the view Major Cole would have seen. By then, the Indian art community in London was aware of the entryways through the publications of Cunningham and Fell. In 112 pieces, H. H. Cole made casts of the Eastern gateway. He did so with ‘three sappers trained in making elastic moulds with gelatin.’<sup>231</sup> Altogether the relic weighed twenty-eight tons, and was completed in February 1870. It then proceeded to go on tour to London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Paris, and Berlin.<sup>232</sup> The piece was ready for the Annual International Exhibition in 1871 per his father’s request. The great stone gateway of Sanchi marked the entrance of the first gallery where it astounded audiences. It did have a separate place at the South Kensington Museum in the architectural Courts where it loomed over other

<sup>231</sup> Desmond, R. (1982). p. 105.

<sup>232</sup> Mathur, S. (2007). *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*. University of California Press. p. 146.

sculptures for some time, before it was replaced by a carved wooden model of the North Gateway created by Kalidas Dulabhram of Disa.

After doing the cast works at the bequest of his father, Major Cole sought to fulfill his role as Curator of Ancient Monuments and repair the gateways of Sanchi. Though Major Cole worked to restore parts of the Great Stupa, the rest of the complex was still deteriorating and vulnerable to thieves looking for loose sculptural pieces to sell. In 1912, Sir John Hubert Marshall (1876 - 1958), Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, sought to restore the rest of the buildings in the complex. He describes his actions as such:

The buildings which were at that time visible on the hill-top were the Great Stupa, Temple 31, and parts of Buildings 43, 45 and 46. For the rest, the whole site was buried beneath such deep accumulations of debris and so overgrown with jungle, that the very existence of the majority of the monuments had not ever been suspected. The first step, therefore, was to clear the whole enclave of the thick jungle growth in which it was enveloped. . . The third task was to put one and all of the monuments into as thorough and lasting a state of repair as was practicable. Most important and most difficult of achievement among the many measures which this task entailed have been: first, the dismantling and reconstruction of the whole south-west quadrant of the Great Stupa, which was threatening to collapse, and the restoration of the stairway, *berm* and *harmika* balustrades.<sup>233</sup>

Though Cole hoped to restore the complex, he was only able to maintain the site. Restorations at the time would have been extraordinarily complex and challenging. In 1882, with a grant from the government under the British Crown, restorations on Sanchi continued under the guidance of Major J. B. Keith. Keith had been Cole's assistant in Central India and took steps to reconstruct the fallen gateways. Though the structures were reassembled with care, it became apparent that it was assembled incorrectly. Portions of the lintels were reversed in the process, but by the time it was noticed it was

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<sup>233</sup> Marshall, J. (1955). *A Guide to Sanchi* (3rd ed.). Delhi: Government of India Press. p. 25 - 30.

too late to fix. There was a greater fear that the gateways would be further damaged. In 1904, H. B. Cook, the state engineer of Bhopal, began further repairs to the structure. He attached an iron band around the dome of the structure to keep it in place. Instead of preserving pieces of the sculpture, particularly the railings, Cook chose to remove them and replace them with new stones. When information of the repairs reached Marshall, he ordered Cook to stop immediately. Again, as with Keith's work, these changes could not be undone without causing further damage.

After the attempts to restore the monument, Marshall, through a new modern approach to archaeology, incorporated a strict program of cataloging, classification, and conservation of monuments and artifact and restarted the conservation from 1916 to 1917.<sup>234</sup> He was also responsible for the excavation of Harappa in 1921 and Mohenjo-Daro in 1922, both of which were initially discovered by Charles Masson nearly a century earlier. Marshall continued to find many items and sculptures at Sanchi. When he first began repairs, the dome on Stupa 1 was slowly collapsing inwards. Douglas Barrett described his work at Sanchi in Marshall's obituary:

The stupas and temples on the lovely hill were restored with the greatest care and taste, and Marshall's publication on it (1940) in three volumes with the help of his friends Foucher and N. G. Majumdar remains the only definitive description of any great Indian historical site.<sup>235</sup>

In 1936, Mohammad Hamid excavated the area of the Great Stupa and stupa 2 to unearth the original monastic stone foundation.<sup>236</sup> He was the last in this era of excavations at Sanchi. To supply a safe place for the sculptures, a museum was built to house extra items in 1919. Today the Sanchi Museum continues to keep artifacts from the area safe including Ashoka's lion pillar. However, one piece that did not make it into the museum is the Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue at the British Museum.

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234 Sir John Hubert Marshall (Biographical details). (n.d.). Retrieved August 20, 2017. From [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/term\\_details.aspx?bioId=138912](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioId=138912)

235 Barrett, D. (1959). Sir John Marshall. *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 1/2 (Apr., 1959), Cambridge University Press. p. 92-93.

236 Mitra, Debala. (1978). p. 13.

# THE TUCKER FAMILY

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The Yakshi statue at the British Museum is one of the few pieces of Sanchi to have left India. Many of the pieces that survive outside of India must have been stolen from the site, such as the Sanchi torso at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was bought from a British political agent who had once lived in the state of Bhopal. He said it was given to him by a Begum of Bhopal before he brought it back to England.<sup>237</sup> Records of the Shalabhanjika Yakshi statue at the British Museum say merely that it was donated by Mrs. Tucker in 1842. A thorough search of meeting minutes has unearthed more information: on the 10th of December 1842, it was recorded: ‘To Mrs. Tucker, Widow of the Rev. James Justus Tucker, for a small marble Hindoo statue of a female, and a few fragments of other objects’.<sup>238</sup>

This ‘small marble Hindoo statue’ is probably the first piece of the Great Stupa at Sanchi to have left the country. The widow of Reverend James Justus Tucker was otherwise known as Harriet Athanae Debnam Tucker. Miss Harriet Debnam had arrived in Calcutta from London in September 1822 at the age of eleven with her sister Charlotte and her father Major Robert Debnam of the 65th Regiment and the 13th Light Infantry.<sup>239</sup> Her family eventually became very wealthy thanks to Indigo trading in India. Four years later, her future husband, James Justus Tucker arrived on September 16th,

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<sup>237</sup> Irwin, John. (2006). *The Sanchi Torso*. From: [Http://www.vam.ac.uk/Content/Articles/t/the-Sanchi-Torso/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/Content/Articles/t/the-Sanchi-Torso/), *Victoria and Albert Museum*, 2006, [www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-sanchi-torso/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-sanchi-torso/). Published in the V&A Masterpieces series.

<sup>238</sup> British Museum, (Central Archive) *Standing Committee Minutes*, 10th December 1842 (n.d.): P. 6088. Microform. C, 5, *Dec 1839-Apr 1847*, Vol 18-22.

<sup>239</sup> Sept 1822. Miss Harriet Debnam Arrived in Calcutta from London on the ship Thalia, captained by I. Haig.

Bengal Directory. Arrivals from The Bengal Almanac, Bengal Directory, Calcutta Annual Register, Calcutta Directory, 1817- 1822. FIBIS. Web. 1823. <[https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps\\_detail.php?id=523444](https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps_detail.php?id=523444)>.

1826.<sup>240</sup> Few records remain of the Reverend's early life, except he attended St. John's College in Cambridge and graduated 1821, before leaving for India in May, 1826.<sup>241</sup> Soon after reaching India, he was assigned as a Reverend in Chunar. Two years later he was positioned in Dinapore where he met and married Harriet on the 17th of August in 1829. Harriet was 18 and James was 30. In 1838, Reverend Tucker, then the Chaplain of Saugor, took a twelve-month leave to the 'hills' on medical certificate. By 1841, Reverend Tucker's health had continued to decline, and in January 1842, he applied for a two month leave to Europe after being assigned to be the chaplain of Chunar, on the Bengal establishment. He and his wife departed Calcutta on March 17th, 1842, on the ship *Scotia* headed for London.<sup>242</sup> Unfortunately, Reverend J. J. Tucker never reached London. He died July 1st aboard the ship.<sup>243</sup> When Harriet arrived in London, she was a widow. In December of that year she donated the item, along with a few smaller items, to the British Museum. Though it is described as 'small', the sculpture is 65 centimeters by 47 centimeters of solid stone that would have been incredibly awkward to transport. As the daughter of a very wealthy Indigo trader, she had no use financially for the statue and may have donated the statue to the Museum to honor her late husband. Harriet never remarried and lived in Blandford-Square, Kensington, for many years before she died in Brighton, July 31st 1870, at the age of 59.<sup>244</sup> The burning question here is how could a Chaplain and his wife come into possession of one of the rarest pieces of Indian art?

Captain Fell first came upon the Sanchi Stupa in 1818. Then in 1822, Capt.

<sup>240</sup> Sept. 16, 1826, arrived on the ship *Rose* captained by T. Marquis. Rev. J. J. Tucker, a Chaplain, left London May 27 and arrived in Calcutta. Madras Almanac. Arrivals from Madras Almanac 1825 -1827,

<sup>241</sup> Urban, Sylvanus. (1842) *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Volume 17, July to December. London: William Pickering; John Bowyer Nichols and Son. p. 669.

<sup>242</sup> March 17th, 1842. Rev. J. J. Tucker and his wife departed Calcutta on the Ship *Scotia*, captained by J. Campbell. Headed to London.

Madras Almanac. Arrivals from Madras Almanac 1842 -1844, Madras Almanac. FIBIS. Web. 1843. <[https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps\\_detail.php?id=456091](https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps_detail.php?id=456091)> <[https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps\\_detail.php?id=456097](https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps_detail.php?id=456097)>.

<sup>243</sup> September - December 1842. In *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China, and Australia*. Vol. 39, 1842. London: Wm. H. Allen And Co. p. 260.

<sup>244</sup> Harriet A. Tucker. Died in Brighton, July 31st. 1870. Widow of the Rev. James J. Tucker, H.E.I.C.S. Allens Indian Mail. *Home Deaths 1870*. 9th of August 1870. P. 761. FIBIS. Web. 1870. <[https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps\\_detail.php?id=1445986](https://search.fibis.org/frontis/bin/aps_detail.php?id=1445986)>.

Maddock and Capt. Johnson began their crude excavations of the stupa looking for relics, in the process destroying one of the gateways. Three of the four gateways were damaged, and it could have been lifted from any three of these between 1818 to 1842.

# CURRENT DISPLAY

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Thus far I have discussed the history of the Sanchi Stupa, the excavation of the stupa by British explorers, and the transition of the Yakshi figure to the British Museum via the Tucker Family. The Yakshi statue of Sanchi was first recorded as being displayed in the *Synopsis of Contents of the British Museum* in 1844, where it makes reference to the ‘Hindu female figure holding a tree. Presented by Mrs. Tucker, 1843’.<sup>245</sup> It is reported to have been on display in ‘the passage leading from Room XII to the Grand Central Saloon.’ In 1848, that same passage was labeled the Temporary Passage.<sup>246</sup> However, by 1851, the ‘Hindu female figure’ statue had been removed from display, and the Temporary Passage had been removed from guidebooks. This was probably due to some factors including the continued building projects of the Reading Room and the quadrangular building. A rearrangement of rooms took place, including merging Indian art into the Ethnographic section; the Yakshi statue appears to have been moved to storage where it stayed for some time. In 1895, listed in Room III under the section head Buddhism, the British Museum guide reads: ‘In Case 60 is a figure from the celebrated Sanchi Tope as well as several casts of bas-reliefs’.<sup>247</sup> It is unknown who made the connection with the ‘Hindu female figure holding a tree’ and the Sanchi stupa, but it had now been moved back into the galleries and specifically noted in the guide. It must have been an incredible boon to find a piece already in the archives of the now-important monument. It is possible the writer related the item back to the temporary copy of

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<sup>245</sup> British Museum. (1844). p. 94.  
See fn. 99 regarding the date.

<sup>246</sup> British Museum. (1848). *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*. Vol. 53, G. Woodfall and Son. p. 113.

<sup>247</sup> British Museum Trustees. *A Guide to the Exhibition Gallery of the British Museum (Bloomsbury) with Maps and Plans* (Revised to February 1895.) p. 149.

the Eastern Gateway at the South Kensington Museum in 1871 made by H. H. Cole. Another possibility is an album, now in possession of the British Museum, containing forty-five photographs of India, including detailed pictures of the Sanchi stupa and details of the Eastern gateway. The photographs date to between 1883-1886 and may have been used for a reference to rebuilding the gateway at the South Kensington Museum. It is conceivable that Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks had seen this album and made the connection before his retirement in 1896. Franks had been in contact with Alexander Cunningham and would have known about the Sanchi Tope through association. Only one letter of their correspondence survives from 12 January 1887 in which he mentions some items he wishes to offer or sell to the Museum, including his Bhilsa Tope Relics.<sup>248</sup> The Sanchi figure is only referenced in the guidebooks from 1895, 1896, and 1897. In the next guidebook published in 1899, the Sanchi figure is no longer mentioned directly, as the format of the book has changed to no longer indicate specific items directly, possibly to shorten the guide, though it can be inferred that since its origin has been discovered it has consistently been on display.

After the opening of the Oriental Gallery in the King Edward Building in 1914, the Yakshi was moved to that section where it has remained through the renaming of the gallery to the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery. The following were the case labels before the renovation in 2016/2017 :

Case Label: Sandstone figure of Shalabhanjika Yakshi, from Stupa 1 at Sanchi, 1st century C.E.

Stupas and reliquaries: The earliest surviving monuments of Buddhism are stupas, which in their first form were probably only earth mounds in which the ashes of the Buddha were interred. From these simple forms eventually evolved brick and stone structure with elaborate decoration. Stupas remain the most distinctive architectural feature of Buddhist worship. Any holy relic could be placed in a sacred container or reliquary and deposited inside a stupa. From an early period, the act of processing around a stupa and its holy contents was considered a means of honoring the Buddha and his message.

One of the earliest and greatest surviving stupas is at Sanchi in

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<sup>248</sup> Caygill, Marjorie, et al. (1997). Franks and the Oxus Treasure. In A. W. Franks: *Nineteenth-Century Collecting and the British Museum*, British Museum Press, 1997, p. 231–249. p. 242.

Central India. It is associated with Ashoka, the king whose espousal of Buddhism in the third century BC ensured the religion's national survival and international growth. From Sanchi, it is believed, missionaries left to take Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

In 2015, the item was part of a free-standing case labeled 'Indian religions: Buddhism. Stupas and reliquaries'. Here it was displayed next to a number of reliquary items at the entrance to the alcove that centers around the life of the Buddha, portrayed by relief scenes in Gandhara style.

Today, following the refurbishment, the Shalabhanjika Yakshi is displayed in the round on a plinth under a glass case as seen in Figure 4-6. The label reads:

### 1. Sanchi Yakshi

Emperor Ashoka probably founded the Great Stupa at Sanchi. This sandstone architectural bracket in the form of shalabhanjika Yakshi adorned one of the four gateways built during the later Satavahana dynasty. The back of the sculpture is especially well preserved. Shalabhanjika are auspicious female tree spirits who grasp the branch and kick the tree trunk to bring it into flower. In this period, they were often found at stupa entrances. [About 1-100 AD, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. 1842.1210.1. Donated by Mrs. Tucker]



Fig. 4-6. Shalabhanjika Yakshi. *The Shalabhanjika Yakshi Display*. (January, 25, 2019).

Similar to the previous display plaques, it mentions Mrs. Tucker and defines *Shalabhanjika*. Dr. Sushma Jansari said that when framing the Sanchi Yakshi she ‘used a case that had glass on all sides so that it can be viewed from all sides.’<sup>249</sup> When asked if the item’s colonial history contribute to the current display plan, she said, ‘I’ve included three photographs from an album we hold which dates to the late 19th c. when the site was rediscovered and work began to reconstruct the stupa. It’s a key part of the overall story.’<sup>250</sup> These are most likely the album of forty-five pictures from Sanchi dated to 1883-1886. Though the mahogany cases in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery are somewhat restrictive, Jansari has created a free-standing pillar for the Sanchi figure and renovated the gallery.

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<sup>249</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

<sup>250</sup> Jansari, Sushma. Personal interview by email. 23 April 2018.

# ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

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Alexander Cunningham's book, *The Bhilsa Topes* (1854) was the first large volume to discuss Sanchi.<sup>251</sup> In it, Cunningham attempts to trace Buddhist art history through the architectural monuments he had seen on his travels. He discusses his first journey to the monument and his 'excavation' of the two relics from Stupa 2 and 3. Through his description of the stupa, Cunningham interprets the aniconic Buddha as the worship of trees, similar to Fergusson's interpretation. He dates the site to the first half of the 1st c. CE. In the introduction, we also see Cunningham's assertion that the fallen gateways of Sanchi should be recovered and brought back to London. Following this is a very detailed description of every aspect of the stupa, from its position, architectural features, and pillars to his interpretations of the narrative reliefs.

James Fergusson's book, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, published in 1868, not only looks at Amaravati but also contains a description of the architectural points of Sanchi.<sup>252</sup> When Fergusson mentions the gateways, he dates them to between 2nd c. BCE and the first half of the first century CE. The narrative scenes from the gateways would suggest the aniconic worship of the Buddha throne beneath a Bodhi tree. However, Fergusson assumes that this is the worship of either tree, serpents, and other emblems. He assumes that Sanchi was created before Amaravati since the image of the Buddha is not portrayed here. The exciting aspect of Fergusson's book is not his descriptions of the sculptures but rather his interesting theories about race that is telling of his personality. He sees the original 'Hindoo' people to be of the 'original Aryan race' who existed before such artistic feats as Sanchi. The later costumes and manner of dress that are portrayed in the narrative panels suggest that the 'races' eventually mixed. This

<sup>251</sup> Cunningham, A. (1854).

<sup>252</sup> Fergusson, James. (1868).

commentary seems to be aimed at tracing the origin of ethnic groups and giving credit for Sanchi to anyone other than the Indian inhabitants. Though his theories of cultural origin are rather ambiguous, Fergusson's book alerted Indian historians and architectural researchers to the wonders of Indian stupa architecture and carving.

Foucher published a book known as *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art: and other essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*, published in 1917.<sup>253</sup> He dedicates a whole chapter of his book, particularly to the Eastern Gate of Sanchi, as that was the one available for him to observe. He notes that if one were so inclined, you could view the replica gateway at the Indian Museum in London. The chapter reviews the known facts about the history of the stupa followed by an in-depth description. However, Foucher understands unlike some of his predecessors that the Buddha in these narratives is aniconic:

‘In all these illustrations of the biography of Buddha we shall find everything that the author desires, except Buddha himself. . . . From these latter we already knew that the ancient schools of Central India had not at its disposal a type of the perfect Buddha.’<sup>254</sup>

Though Foucher understands that there is no conventional representation of the Buddha, he attributes this to some unknown law that prohibits the artist. He sees this as a restriction that they have put upon themselves that narrows their possibilities.

In ‘The Origin of the Buddha Image’, Coomaraswamy uses Yakshis as an example to prove that the Buddha image originated in India. He discusses Yakshis and Yakshas as representations of early Vedic ‘native’ iconolatriy in the creation of images. These early icons, representing Goddesses, became prevalent examples of iconography used for centuries after. So why were these images represented when Buddha, whose image was created after the Yakshis, was not symbolically shown? He argues that these images of the artistic vocabulary of the time had become symbols instead of icons. Thus, like the aniconic Buddhist symbols, they can be interpreted and repurposed to represent the presence of the Buddha. The Yakshi and fertility cults that existed during

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<sup>253</sup> Foucher, Alfred. (1918). *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art: and other essays in Indian and Central-Asian Archaeology*. London: Humphrey Milford.

<sup>254</sup> Foucher, Alfred. (1918). p. 73.

the time of the Vedas were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Coomaraswamy describes the significance of cults:

In the Mahabhdrata, a Yakshi is referred to as receiving a daily service and cult at Rajagrha, and another Yakshi shrine was “world renowned.” . . . The significance for us of these cults so widely diffused and so popular will be apparent when, in the first place, we observe that the nature of the worship offered was in many respects similar to that offered in a Buddhist temple, including particularly the erection of statues and the offering of flowers, garlands, incense, and music; in the second place that Buddhism, like other religions in similar circumstances inherited the prestige of sites already sacred, as at Bodhgaya and Nalanda and finally, and most important, that the designation *Bhagavata* is applied not Vasudeva (Visnu), to Siva, and to Buddha, but also to the Four Great King Regents, the Maharajas, Regents of the Quarters, of whom some are Yaksas and some Nagas, and also to various Yaksas and Nagas specifically.<sup>255</sup>

Coomaraswamy argues that Buddhism did not have a problem with existing cults as they essentially merged with them, adopting many of their ritualistic practices of worship. These became sources of image iconography which further aids his theory that the image of the Buddha is of Indian origin and not thanks to outside western influence.

In 1929, Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote ‘A Yaksi Torso from Sanchi’ to honor the artifact gifted to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He describes the rare gift and theorizes about which gateway the torso could have come from. He then discusses why they would place a Yakshi statue on the gateways to a Buddhist stupa. He describes the Yakshi as ‘anything but Buddhist in nature’ which symbolically represents the Buddhist morals.<sup>256</sup> Coomaraswamy also argues that the Yakshi’s position at the gateways illustrates the aspects of early Buddhism. He describes it as ‘normally a strict intellectual discipline, but actually surrounded by and already affected by a great

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<sup>255</sup> Coomaraswamy, A.K. (1927). p. 298-299.

<sup>256</sup> Coomaraswamy, A. (1929). A Yaksi Torso from Sanchi. In *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Vol. 27, No. 164 (Dec., 1929). Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. p. 90-94. See p. 91.

complex of older indigenous theistic, animistic cults, altogether alien to its motifs and far too deeply rooted in human attachments ever to be ousted.<sup>257</sup> The blend of local cults, such as the fertility cult, with Buddhism, led to the more significant development of the 'Buddhist pantheon'. This would lead to the evolution of later Buddhist art mixing themes between Buddhism and Hinduism, especially seen in the Gupta school of art. The Yakshi, as tree spirits are,

guardians of the vital sap (*rasa*) in trees, which is identified with *amrla*, the water of life, and with *soma*, the drink of the gods; and because this water of life is diffused in the cosmic waters, the origin of all life, the Yakshas, and Yakshis are often represented as provided with animal vehicles . . . symbolic of the waters.<sup>258</sup>

Though the Yakshis could be classified as purely decorative motifs, they are associated with early Indian and Buddhist art and represent the fusing of the old with the new.

Hugo Buchthal wrote 'The Monuments of Sanchi' in 1942 to review Sir John Marshall's article under the same name, which explains the history of the monument. He summarizes the known history of Sanchi as a religious masterpiece 'dominated by foreign influences', using the example of the Lion Capital put there by Ashoka, and the influence of the Hellenistic school of art. Buchthal defines the 'indigenous stone reliefs' as 'heavy and archaic' while foreign influences show a 'high standard of workmanship'. From this description, we can deduce that Buchthal assumes that the greater impact on Indian art came from western influences. Here he argues the point:

The history of Indian sculpture in general reveals the constant interrelation between the indigenous and alien elements. The sculptures of the Gateway of the Great Stupa do not show any great increase of foreign influence. Some can however be discovered in places of minor importance. Small objects may have disseminated a knowledge of Hellenistic relief and may have assisted a general technical advance. But as a whole, the reliefs are Indian in inspiration

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257 Coomaraswamy, A. (1929). p. 91.

258 Coomaraswamy, A. (1929). p. 92.

and substance.<sup>259</sup>

This assimilation between the two styles led to, in his opinion, a culmination in the gateways. He, however, does not entirely credit Hellenistic influences for the development of the Gandharan school but infers that more evidence is needed to create a solid theory.

In the article 'Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism' published in 1990, Huntington uses narrative panels from Sanchi to support her theory of anti-aniconism.<sup>260</sup> She suggests that instead of an emblem being used to replace the figure of the Buddha, these scenes depict rituals performed at these real-life emblems, such as that of the worship of a Buddhist Wheel of the Law. Two figures kneel in worship on either side of the Wheel that is adorned with garlands. In the background, two heavenly figures look on. This image would generally be associated with the Buddha's first sermon. Since the wheel would figuratively represent the Buddha in aniconic form, this would represent a scene from the life of the Buddha. However, Huntington argues that this is not the worship of an aniconic figure but rather a scene depicting the worship of a place. She implores the audience to think differently about the symbolism in early Buddhist art and to consider the plethora of connotations available instead of merely assigning 'aniconism' to everything.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes a chapter in her book, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, entitled 'For the Greater Glory of Indian Art'. In this chapter, Guha-Thakurta tracks the biography of the Didarganj Yakshi as well as the modern museum practices of exhibiting, in her opinion, one of the greatest and earliest pieces of Indian art. The statue is a life-size Yakshi carved completely in the round made of 'burnished Chunar sandstone'. While it has similar features of the Shalabhanjika Yakshi—such as large breasts with a string of beads lying in between, wide hips with bangles on the arms and legs, plaited hair, and a girdle draped over her hips—it stands six feet tall and has been carved out of a single block of sandstone that has then been polished till it shines. The polish, the style, and the figures

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259 Buchthal, Hugo. (1942). The Monuments of Sanchi. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 81, No. 476 (Nov., 1942), p. 278 - 281. See p. 279.

260 Huntington, S. (1990). p. 401-408.

all date this Yakshi to the early Mauryan dynasty during the 3rd c. BCE.

The Didarganj Yakshi was found on the banks of the Ganga river buried in the mud on October 18, 1917. Locals found it buried in the earth and dug it up to be used in 'domestic or building purposes as the stone is habitually repurposed. Guha-Thakurta writes:

Such "native" ravages and misuse of archaeological relics called for frequent complaints among colonial officials, excavators, and scholars.' As I describe in the first two chapters, ever since its inception in the 1860s, the colonial Archaeological Survey saw as its main task the protection of India's monuments and antiquities from its own people—from their indifference, neglect, and mutilations.<sup>261</sup>

Unfortunately, this item was not only seized from people and reused, but was taken from ritual worship by the local people. Now there is a question of whether an artifact is entitled to 'live' its life as a ritual item, or must its identity shift to that of a museum item. D. B. Spooner, superintendent of the Archaeological Survey and the excavator of the Kanishka reliquary, and E. H. C. Walsh, president of the Patna Museum committee, seized the statue for the Patna Museum. Spooner convinced the locals that since the figure carried a fly whisk, she was most likely an attendant and not made for worship. Thus the figure was gained for the museum. The case of the Didarganj Yakshi is not an isolated case, as many figures have been seized throughout India to 'save' them, such as the Shalabhanjika Yakshi. Guha-Thakurta writes that a 'main consideration of the colonial administration was to protect these antiquities not only from native vandalism but equally from the appropriation of British traveling officials who either sold them on the open market or used them to adorn private homes and public sites.'<sup>262</sup> This is what we can infer happened to the Shalabhanjika Yakshi. It must have come to London where Tucker later donated it to the British Museum in 1842. This raises the moral question of whether both Yakshi figures should have been left with the Indian locals whose culture

these statuarys represent, or if they should be seized by a museum. Either possibility

<sup>261</sup> Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. (2004). For the Greater Glory of Indian Art. In *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, Columbia University Press. p. 205-234. See p. 207.

<sup>262</sup> Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. (2004). p. 210.

makes the item vulnerable to many factors, such as destruction, looting, or repurposing as building equipment. Guha-Thakurta concludes by saying that the museum setting figuratively drains the life from the Yakshi statue. These statues have now been repurposed and will most likely not be available for the same type of religious use they were originally created.

In 2004, Nayanjot Lahiri contributed a chapter entitled 'Sanchi: Destruction, Restoration, Restitution' to the book *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*. This paper documents the modern history of the Sanchi stupa starting in 1818 and moving through 1949. It begins with a chronology of early explorers and their destruction of the monument for the sake of what they termed archaeology and exploration. The paper follows the restoration of the stupa starting in 1881 till 1919 starting with Major Cole and finishing with Sir John Marshall, the Director-General of Archaeology. The chapter ends with the restoration of the relics taken from the stupa by Alexander Cunningham. It was a long process, but by 1939 the Victoria and Albert Museum acquiesced to the return of the relics. This chapter is the most detailed account of the present history of the Sanchi stupa that could be found with the complete biography available. Nayanjot Lahiri is Professor of History at Ashoka University and recently authored *Ashoka in Ancient India*.

# CONCLUSION

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In this chapter we have discussed the legend of Ashoka, how the Sanchi stupa complex developed, and how the area was abandoned before it was ‘rediscovered’ by colonial explorers. The publications describing the location led to a spike in interest from amateur archaeologists and renowned Indian art specialists. The most puzzling part of this history is how a seemingly normal Reverend came into possession of a rare and historical piece of the Sanchi Stupa 1. Little is known about Reverend James Justus Tucker except for his dedication to the church in India. After his death, his widow donated this piece to the British Museum, where it was on display for a short time before it was seemingly forgotten during a period of shuffling and reconstruction. Someone in the museum must have rediscovered this rare piece in the storerooms because it was displayed again, but this time as ‘a figure from the celebrated Sanchi Tope’. This item has been lost and forgotten then re-identified several times throughout its lifetime, shifting its biography. However, the lack of research into this item’s history is what first interested me in the piece. For many years the only history known about this particular item is that it was donated by Mrs. Tucker; nothing more. Researching this item has been incredibly frustrating but also fulfilling, to ascertain the history and people surrounding this piece that might otherwise be forgotten. Hopefully, future research will uncover the blank portions of this narrative. This item demonstrates how the objects in museums are not static but contain a long history of people and separate identities and experiences that are not necessarily accessible or displayable in these institutions.

# FINAL CONCLUSION

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This thesis examined the history, acquisition and exhibition history of the Amaravati Marbles, the Bimaran Reliquary, the Kanishka Reliquary, and the Shalabhanjika Yakshi, all currently held by the British Museum. I started by analyzing the history of these objects, their discovery and identification, their entry into the Western epistemological structures, and how formative they have been to Buddhist Art History.

Since the development of Buddhism in the first century CE, the image of the Buddha has developed stylistically in South Asia. The four objects I have discussed have been fundamental in the understanding of the evolution of the Buddha's image. In both the Amaravati Marbles and the Sanchi Stupa we view what we assume to be the aniconic Buddha, or objects lacking the Buddha himself in figurative form. The term was used initially by Alfred Foucher in (1911). It was applied to scenes of the Buddha's life from Amaravati and Sanchi in which his form was deliberately excluded. However, we need to be tentative when assigning the term 'aniconic' to images. Susan L. Huntington has suggested that not all scenes missing the figural Buddha are necessarily aniconic. There is not a clearly defined reason for the aversion to the image of the Buddha but rather a number of theories. However, this leads to the question of why and how there was a movement toward the figural Buddha. Foucher suggests that it was ultimately thanks to Indo-Roman interactions, implying that the advancement of Buddhist figural art is because of outside interactions. This scholarship is ignoring the existing early figural art of kings and figures such as the Yakshi and Yaksha. Figural art had existed in the area before the growth of Buddhist art dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization of Harappa (2600 - 1300 BCE). So then, why was the image of the Buddha excluded from some early figural art? Robert DeCaroli in his book, *Image Problems*

(2015), writes:

The perceived scarcity of figural imagery as a conspicuous absence and this supposed shortcoming has occasionally served as a magnet for broad cultural generalizations. Colonial-era scholars from the West alternately addressed this absence as one stemming from a deficiency in the 'Indian mind,' which had not even conceived of the idea of a portraiture or, conversely, saw the eventual move toward religious imagery as the regrettable embrace of 'idolatry.'<sup>263</sup>

The development of the iconic Buddha is seen in its early stages of Buddhist Art such as in the Bimaran Reliquary and the Kanishka Reliquary. Though many would equate this to interactions with the Western empires, we need to only look at pre-Buddhist religious figural art such as the Yakshi and Yaksha to see that is not necessarily true. However, we are basing these theories on a deficient percentage of art obtained through colonial means. The objects I have discussed in this paper were formative to the development of Buddhist Art History. They have become the subject matter for what they based anionic and iconic theories and have been the foundation through which Buddhist Art History academia has risen. The fact that they happened into the sphere of the British Museum was because of arbitrary means. They were not chosen in particular but instead found by white male explorers who went looking for either treasure, a link to the past, or the beginnings of Buddhism. If it was not for colonial forces finding these particular items, the development of Buddhist Art History may not have followed this route. It is based on these pieces that we see the focus by collectors on this category of Buddhist Art over another.

Today Gandharan art is very sought after by museums and private collectors. The British Museum has an excellent collection showing the various life stories of the Buddha in Greco-Buddhism art style. This is because of 20th-century collectors inspired by Foucher and others to find the connection between early interpretations of the Buddha and Greco-Roman art. Some links have been found, such as between the Pompeii Lakshmi ivory figure and the Yakshi figures both dating to the first century

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<sup>263</sup> DeCaroli, R. (2015). *Image Problems*. University of Washington Press.

CE. However, it was 20th-century collectors and academics that were focused on these pieces that made them sought after, and as such, the focus of many academic papers. This leads to the avoidance of other stylistic types of Buddhist art. It is because they have happened to reside in the British Museum and become subject to academic attention that a small number of items have framed Buddhist Art History academics, and such, theories based on these objects are the result of a few examples that were near and available. These pieces are essential and were found because of the importance of the monuments they formerly rested in but were not selected for their historical or artistic value.

Though this thesis has discussed the biography of the four items and how they relate to Buddhist art history it has not thoroughly examined their original devotional use. By taking them from their original monuments, we are also removing the practice of worship. These items were pieces of religious practice and tradition that have now been disconnected. Today the British Museum stores them as critical objects in the development of Buddhist art history. In recent years the museum has worked to recontextualize regarding their original religious use. It is difficult to reconnect items such as these to their religious past. I have found through research that the best place to begin is by analyzing the history of these objects, their discovery, and their identification. This thesis has worked to enhance the biographies of each of these items through these means to create a biography to dig deeper into their meaning.

In chapter one, I began by examining the Amaravati Stupa. People in the area around the Stupa were aware of the ancient monument, but it was not until Mackenzie in 1816 that work began to excavate it. Pieces of the stupa were shipped to Machilipatnam before being sent to London in 1859, where they were stored and became part of the Indian Museum. James Fergusson noticed the pieces sent ahead of the others in 1867 at the Fife House and commented on them in his book *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868). It was through publications such as this that A. W. Franks of the British Museum became aware of them. When the Indian Museum was dissolved and the future of its collection unknown, Franks campaigned for the Amaravati Sculptures to become part of the British Museum's permanent collection. Once they had joined the British Museum,

Franks worked to create an accurate representation of the original stupa with the little space and pieces he had at his disposal. Since then the sculptures have continued to be on display, except for two periods of time from 1941 - 1951 due to the threat of war, and 1959 - 1992 to create a climatized gallery so the items would not continue to deteriorate due to environmental factors. During their years at the British Museum, they have been the source of many academic studies and debates. The story of the Amaravati was initially one of British Colonization over India and the power of the East India Company. However, the identity of this object has shifted from belonging to a Buddhist Monastery, to an explorer's treasure, to a colonial show of power, to the center of an academic debate. It has dramatically shaped the British Buddhist art academia and became an essential artifact at the British Museum. The display has changed over time and there has been progress at the British Museum to recontextualize the objects according to their cultural and religious identity.

In chapter two I looked at the story of the Kanishka casket, which begins with the writings of Hiuen Tsang (602 - 664), a Chinese pilgrim looking to find the origins of Buddhism. His journey was published in French and English, inspiring explorers to look for the great monuments he had recorded. Hiuen Tsang recounted a great stupa that reached up to 150 feet in height. The American scholar David Brainer Spooner, an accomplished Sanskrit scholar, had been assigned as Archaeological Surveyor of Indian in the Frontier Circle of India in 1906 and had the opportunity to look for the great monument. There he was encouraged by his peers (John Marshall, Sir Alexander Cunningham, and Alfred Charles Auguste Foucher) to continue the search for relics in the area. With the help of Foucher's theory of the location, Spooner identified the Shahij-ki-Dheri mounds as the location of the Kanishka stupa that Hiuen Tsang had mentioned. When he dug down to the center of the stupa, he found the Kanishka casket. It had been damaged, as the top of its confine had fallen, but the inscriptions on the side contained the name 'Kanishka' and confirmed Spooner and Foucher's theory. This item was one that did not immediately go to England, but instead found a place in the Peshawar Museum. Spooner had spent a great deal of time and energy to reorganize and categorize the museum into a system that taught its visitors about its contents. In

1964 the Peshawar Museum loaned the item to the British Museum to have the object cleaned, analyzed, and copied. The replica is still displayed in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery today. This piece has been the center of much debate regarding its date of creation, because of the rugged quality of the figures: is it late or early Gandharan style? Moreover, how would we assign this to the development of Greco-Buddhist Art debate? These are the questions that have raised by analyzing the artistic style of the piece. The British Museum requested this item as it is an essential piece in the debate as either support or opposition to the evolvement of Gandharan art and has contributed substantially to Buddhist art academia.

In chapter three I discussed the Bimaran casket and the enigma that is Charles Masson, a historian and explorer of India and Afghanistan. The Bimaran casket was interred in the stupa during the rule of Azes II, where it stayed until it was excavated by Masson in 1841. Little is known of Masson's origins, as he did all he could to hide his past. He enlisted in the East India Company infantry as James Lewis in 1821. In 1827 deserted the company and wandered the area using his new identity as Charles Masson. He had a propensity for languages and dialects that helped him hide his past and pass as American, French or Italian. In 1828 he settled in Kabul and became friends with Táj Máhomed Khân and started excavating nearby locations for the East India Company, who paid him as a collector and antiquarian. He was extremely interested in finding out the history of the area, but had little use for the objects he uncovered except as evidence. It was through this process of excavating that he uncovered one of the most historical finds for Buddhist art history. The Bimaran casket is of excellent quality and shows a link to Gandharan art and Buddhism during the time of Azes I. However, Masson was more interested in the coins found alongside it and the dating of the stupa. He turned these items over to the East India Company as he was contracted to do. It was in 1834 that he was pulled in to the politics surrounding the area at the time known as 'The Great Game': the race between the British and Russian Empires to gain control of Central Asia and the roads leading through it, as this would establish who gained overall dominion over Asia. Masson had been recognized as a military deserter and was recruited as a spy in Kabul since he was friends with influential people of the city.

Masson was appalled at the diplomacy used by the British Empire and in particular that of Sir Captain Alexander Burnes. The rule of Kabul was eventually given to Shuja Shah Durrain Khan, and Masson moved out of the city. When Masson returned to England in 1842, he published a series of volumes telling of the disgraceful politics used that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War and his scorn for Alexander Burnes. His unpopular views led to his fellow antiquarians discrediting much of his work, and he died in relative poverty in London.

Masson's most significant discovery was the Bimaran casket and a vast collection of coins that he had amassed from the region. The Casket went onto be displayed in the South Kensington Museum in 1880 before being acquired by the British Museum where it has been on display since as a part of the Buddhist art section. Graeco-Buddhist art was a great fascination to art historians of the time, and this particular item was used as evidence to link Grecian influences to Gandharan art. This debate continues today, and as such, the item continues to be an essential item on display in the British Museum.

In chapter four I discussed the earliest piece donated out of the four. The Yakshi figure from the Great Stupa at Sanchi has a confusing history that ended with the enigmatic Mrs. Tucker. The Sanchi Stupa Monastery complex was abandoned in the 13th century and was 'found' in 1818 by General Henry Taylor and the Bengal Cavalry during one of their campaigns. Later Captain Edward Fell visited the area and published an article entitled 'Description of an Ancient and Remarkable Monument, near Bhilsa', that described this abandoned monument and beautiful sculptures he encountered there. This captivated other explorers, such as Alexander Cunningham, who later made the journey to the site to see for themselves and excavate what they could. This led to a great deal of damage to the original stupa until the site was eventually restored thanks to the efforts of Major Henry Hardy Cole and Sir John Hubert Marshall. However, one piece of the stupa somehow made its way to the British Museum. James Justus Tucker was an Episcopal missionary for the East India Company married to Harriet Athanae Debnam. After his death at sea, his widow, Mrs. Tucker, donated a piece of Sanchi to the British Museum. Today the image of a Yakshi stands as the cross merging

of cultures between Buddhism and the Vedic religion. It was a recognizable feminine feature of the traditional religion that was used as a means of appealing to other cultures while preaching Buddhism. Today this item stands on an independent pedestal in the British Museum and continues to mark a merging of cultures, religion, and colonization.

This paper focused on four items: the Amaravati Marbles, the Bimaran Reliquary, and the Kanishka Reliquary. By discussing these items, their history, acquisition, academia, exhibition history, and their influence on the Buddhist art history; I concentrated on this subject because over the course of my art history education I have heard about and studied these items a great deal in regards to their contributions to the Buddhist art history field, yet I had learned very little about the ‘biography’ of the items. I would argue there should be a shift in how these items are presented in the museum and academic context. Once these items are recontextualized according to their past, their interactions, and their current and past surroundings, only then can we understand and analyze them as complete items. Though we can study the items from an art historical point of view, there is a difference between studying and understanding an item.

By examining these four objects together we can identify how problems with colonial excavations have led to the loss of information that may have been critical to dating the objects and monuments. Especially in the case of Sanchi, repeated attempts to ‘excavate’ the stupas led to further destruction of the location though archaeologists argued to preserve the site. These four items have been important to Buddhist art history, yet their extraction and movement could be described as crude. With the exception of the Kanishka casket, these items have been exported to England and coveted for their artistic detail and their ability to support theories of the development of Buddhist art history. Yet each of these item’s movement and story is unique in its own way. The personal biographies of the individuals involved with these items have changed the way the items were collected. The Amaravati’s excavation and movement to England were overlooked and potentially forgotten if not for the attention and publication of James Fergusson. If D. B. Spooner had not been involved with the improvement of the Peshawar Museum, the Kanishka reliquary might have been sent to England like

the other three items. If Charles Masson had not been so interested in the history of Central Asia and had his life not led him to be a retainer for the East India Company, the Bimaran Casket may not have been set on the trajectory to reach the British Museum. It is still unknown how the Shalabhanjika Yakshi came into the hands of the Tucker family and what particulars led Mrs. Tucker to donate the item to the British Museum after her husband's death. It is because of the impact of these individual people that the biographies of these items differ so much. Only by researching and exploring the history of these items can we understand these subtle influences considering museums and curators do not necessarily have the time, space, or capability to portray an elaborate history to a visitor. Through my research, I have aimed to recount the lives of these objects which are not conceivable to display to the viewer through the museum setting.

There is further debate about whether specific pieces of art should be taken outside of their original cultural context. Can conserving an item can be seen as destroying it instead of preserving? Should an item of worship then be used in a public sphere of interest, even if it is for public education? These questions are part of the ongoing debate that we must apply to our investigation of museums.

The limitations of this work are due to a lack of primary sources that do not exist or have yet to be identified. Only future research and study will help us find these sources. Research in the British Museum has been a great support. The recent renovations unveiled in November 2017 show a change towards a focus on the items biography even with the limitations of display and space. I look forward to seeing this develop and change in the British Museum's arrangement.



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Fig. 1-10. Dome-slab carved with the Great Departure, Prince Siddhartha's horse with empty saddle leaving the palace. Amaravati. *Dome-Slab*. (2nd c. CE.) [Carved limestone] Museum number: 1880,0709.51. London; British Museum. ©Trustees of the British Museum. Retrieved September 13, 2018, from: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=179490&partId=1&searchText=dome-slab&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=179490&partId=1&searchText=dome-slab&page=1)

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Fig. 1-12. Amaravati Display. *Photography of Amaravati Section Label*. (January, 25, 2019). Parker, D. [photograph, edited] (London: The Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, British Museum).

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Fig. 3-7. Bimaran Casket Display. *Close View of Bimaran Casket Display*. (January, 25, 2019).. Parker, D. [photograph, edited] (London: The Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, British Museum).

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