



The Visualization of Kingship in Ancient India: A Study of Royal Symbolism in the Sculptural Programme of the Great Stupa at Sanchi

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ABSTRACT *The sculptural programme of the Great Stupa at Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh, India) offers one of the richest surviving sources for understanding kingship in ancient India. Spanning the Mauryan, Shunga, and Satavahana dynasties (c. 3rd century BCE – 1st century CE), the gateway reliefs (toranas) encode a sophisticated visual language of royal authority that operates primarily through symbolic substitution rather than direct portraiture. Close analysis of royal processions, parasols (chhatra), thrones (asana), elephants, horses, fortified cities, and the Chakravartin ideal reveals that the Sanchi sculptures construct an ideological vision of Buddhist kingship — one that legitimizes royal power through religious association while sacralizing political authority through monumental form. These findings bear on wider questions of early Indian state formation, the Ashokan imperial legacy, and the reciprocal relationship between Buddhism and political power in the subcontinent.*

KEYWORDS: *Sanchi Stupa, ancient Indian kingship, Buddhist art, Chakravartin, Ashoka*

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem of Kingship in Early Indian Visual Culture

Among the monuments of the ancient world, the Great Stupa at Sanchi is remarkable not only as evidence of early Buddhism's vitality but as an extraordinarily dense repository of political and social history [1]. Built in its earliest phase under Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE) and substantially expanded during the Shunga (c. 185–73 BCE) and Satavahana (c. 1st century BCE – 1st century CE) periods, the stupa and its celebrated gateways form a visual archive encoding complex ideologies of power, legitimacy, and sovereignty. Scholarship has not always given this dimension its due: studies tend to privilege either Buddhist narrative content or formal art-historical questions, at the expense of asking how these images participated in the construction of royal ideology.

Anyone who approaches Sanchi expecting royal portraiture will encounter a central paradox: despite the monument's undeniable connections to royal patronage, identifiable kings are remarkably scarce in the reliefs. There is no triumphal arch here, no imagery of the kind familiar from Roman imperial art. Kingship at Sanchi is encoded instead through a system of symbolic displacement — the parasol, the throne, the elephant, the horse, the fortified palace gateway — objects and animals serving as metonymic stand-ins for the royal person, whose body remains either absent or symbolically transfigured into the aniconic forms of the Buddha [2, 3]. Recovering that visual grammar reveals Sanchi as one of the most important sources we have for understanding how kingship was conceptualized, represented, and legitimized in ancient India.

1.2 Research Questions and Methodology

Three questions drive the analysis. What symbols and narrative strategies does the Sanchi sculptural programme deploy to represent royal authority? How does the relationship between Buddhism and kingship at Sanchi reflect wider patterns of interaction between religious institutions and political power during early state formation? And what distinguishes the Sanchi model of royal representation from contemporaneous traditions? The approach draws on iconographic analysis in the tradition of Ananda Coomaraswamy, contextual art-historical analysis situating the images within the broader visual culture of the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, and insights from political anthropology — particularly Clifford Geertz on the theatre-state and Jan Assmann on cultural memory — in order to illuminate how the Sanchi reliefs functioned as instruments of ideological

production [4, 5].

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE GREAT STUPA AND ITS POLITICAL CONTEXT

2.1 From Ashoka to the Satavahanas: The Long History of Sanchi

Sanchi sits on a prominent hilltop in modern Madhya Pradesh, roughly forty kilometres northeast of Bhopal, a position chosen in the third century BCE for its strategic location along trade routes connecting the Mauryan heartland with the Deccan [6]. Ashoka was responsible for the earliest phase: he erected the original hemispherical mound (anda) over a deposit of the Buddha's relics and constructed the massive sandstone pillar that still stands on the site [7]. What survives today, however, is predominantly the product of subsequent centuries of elaboration. The mound was enlarged to approximately twice its original diameter, and the four elaborately carved gateways — the north, south, east, and west toranas — were added in stages during the first century BCE and the early centuries CE.

Shunga patronage of Sanchi, following the collapse of Mauryan authority after 185 BCE, is a politically revealing episode [8]. Despite having no genealogical connection to the Ashokan legacy, the Shungas clearly grasped the value of maintaining and embellishing monuments Ashoka had sponsored. Elaboration continued under the Satavahanas: an inscription on the south gateway records a donation by artisans of the Sri Satakani king, confirming royal involvement in the monument's expansion. Each ruling house, in turn, was willing to invest substantial resources in a site already saturated with the cultural memory of imperial legitimacy — a dynastic succession of patronage that is itself significant.

2.2 Buddhism, Patronage, and the Logic of Royal Benefaction

Any reading of the political dimensions of the Sanchi sculptures must begin with the structural logic of Buddhist patronage in ancient India [9]. Buddhism depended on lay gifts — the dana of wealthy donors — for its material sustenance, returning to donors merit (punya), spiritual protection, and the public recognition of social and political status that came from conspicuous religious generosity. Kings stood to gain especially from this exchange. Ashoka's inscriptions reveal his understanding that Buddhist patronage could serve as a technology of political integration: by positioning himself as the supreme dana-pati, he sought to transform dispersed patronage networks into channels of political loyalty across territories his administrative apparatus could reach only imperfectly.

Royal Buddhist patronage persisted long after the collapse of Mauryan power because it suited the needs of both the Buddhist institution and the emerging regional dynasties of the post-Mauryan period [10]. For the Shungas and Satavahanas, elaborating Buddhist monuments offered a relatively rapid and publicly legible route to political legitimacy in a cultural landscape where Ashoka's empire remained a powerful normative reference point. Patronage of Sanchi was therefore simultaneously a religious act and a political communication — an assertion of continuity with an

III. CASE STUDIES ON ROYAL SYMBOLISM AT SANCHI

3.1 Bimbisara Procession

Among the most significant royal panels at Sanchi is the procession traditionally identified as King Bimbisara travelling to meet the Buddha, located on the East Gateway (Fig. 1). Rather than depicting political authority through static enthronement, the relief organizes it through movement and ceremonial order.

Unfolding horizontally, the composition carries the viewer's eye along the procession's movement. At the center a royal vehicle is flanked by soldiers, attendants, elephants, horses, and standard-bearers. Visual hierarchy is established through spatial arrangement alone — royal authority dominates without any recourse to individualized portraiture.

Elephants and horses carry particular symbolic weight here. Elephants signify imperial power and military might; horses evoke mobility, conquest, and older Vedic royal traditions. But the procession's destination reframes these symbols: the king is moving toward sacred space, and in doing so, political authority is visually subordinated to the dharma.

Buddhist kingship, as this panel conceives it, is a synthesis of military capability, ritual order, and religious devotion.

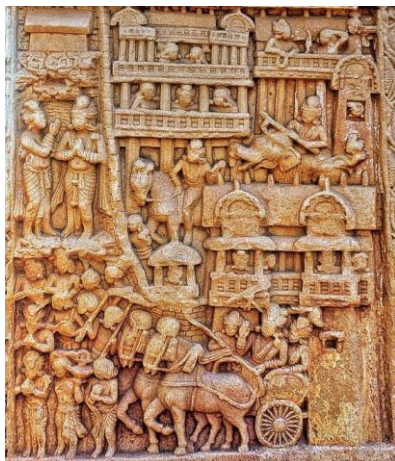


Fig. 1 Showing Bimbisara's Procession, East Gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1

3.2 Ashoka and the Bodhi Tree

A second major panel depicts Emperor Ashoka's pilgrimage to the Bodhi Tree at Bodhi Gaya [7]. Here the Buddha appears not in human form but through aniconic substitution [11], with the sacred tree occupying the compositional center (Fig. 2).

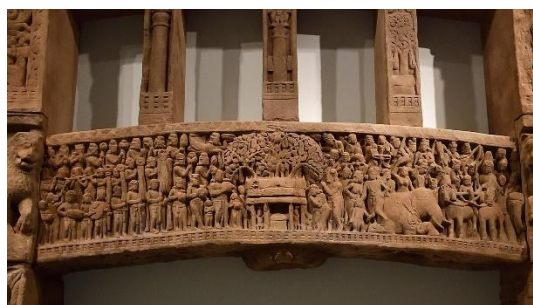


Fig. 2 Showing Ashoka and the Bodhi Tree, South Gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1

Politically, the arrangement is pointed: Ashoka, who once ruled the Mauryan Empire, appears visually secondary to a sacred tree. Authority is conveyed through attendants, parasols, and ceremonial structure rather than the kind of monumental portraiture we might expect for a ruler of his stature.

What the panel encodes is a specifically Buddhist transformation of kingship. Ashoka figures here not primarily as conqueror but as a righteous ruler who acknowledges the supremacy of the dharma, while the parasol above the sacred space deliberately blurs the line between political sovereignty and sacred authority.

No less important is the memorial dimension of the scene. Produced generations after Ashoka's reign, the relief contributes to the cultural memory of Ashoka as the enduring exemplar of Buddhist kingship.

3.3 The Empty Throne Panel

For aniconic sovereignty in early Buddhist art, few images are more instructive than the empty throne panels [2, 3]. Placed at the compositional center and elevated above surrounding figures, the throne asserts hierarchy and sacred centrality through absence rather than presence (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Showing Empty Throne, North Gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1

Attendants, worshippers, and ritual symbols all orient themselves toward the vacant seat, visually sustaining its authority despite — or rather through — the absence of any embodied ruler. That absence is politically significant in its own right: sovereignty here transcends the physical body of the king.

Architectural framing reinforces the political associations still further. Elevated platforms, parasols, and symmetrical composition evoke the ceremonial language of royal courts and coronation rituals, yet all of it is redirected toward a transcendent religious presence rather than an earthly monarch.

What results is a transformation of a conventional symbol of royal power into an image of universal spiritual kingship.

3.4 Fortified City Panel

Fortified city scenes at Sanchi show how political space was absorbed into Buddhist visual culture. Massive gateways, towers, walls, and urban structures carry the weight of organized sovereignty and state authority (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Showing fortified City, South Gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1

A deliberate symbolic relationship connects city gateways with the toranas of the stupa: both deploy the same architectural vocabulary, so that the stupa appropriates the visual authority of royal urban architecture while redefining it within a Buddhist cosmological framework.

Movement through gates and roads is consistently emphasized in these compositions, suggesting that kingship was publicly enacted through ceremonial visibility and spatial control. Far from serving as mere backdrop, the city appears as a theatre of political order.

Urban reliefs of this kind provide important evidence for understanding the intersection of monumental religion, political geography, and early state formation in ancient India.

3.5 Stupa Worship Scene

Among the most socially complex panels at Sanchi are the stupa worship scenes [12]. Large groups of devotees gather around the monument with banners, offerings, and musical instruments, participating in circumambulation rituals.

Not all such scenes are explicitly royal, but elite participation is frequently signaled through parasols, attendants, elephants, and the general character of ceremonial organization — political authority woven into the fabric of collective religious performance (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Showing Stupa Worship, North Gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1

Communal participation rather than isolated rulership is what these compositions emphasize. Kingship is shown as embedded within a wider moral and ritual community organized around the stupa, and public worship accordingly functions as both religious devotion and political communication.

Pilgrimage networks had real political weight [13]. Major Buddhist monuments drew visitors from across regional boundaries, and rulers whose names were associated with such sites effectively extended their symbolic legitimacy over a far wider geographical reach.

Taken together, the stupa worship scenes demonstrate how sacred ritual, public space, and political authority were visually unified within the ideological world of early Buddhism.

IV. BUDDHISM AND KINGSHIP: IDEOLOGY, LEGITIMATION, AND RECIPROCITY

4.1 The Political Functions of Buddhist Monumental Art

Buddhism and political power in ancient India were not related simply through patronage — kings providing money while monasteries offered prayers — but through a complex, mutually constitutive relationship in which each party shaped and was shaped by the other. For the Buddhist institution, building and embellishing stupas demonstrated the sangha's power and prestige by making its religious structures among the most impressive in the ancient landscape. Carved narratives on the gateways depicting princes and kings paying homage to the Buddha's relics reinforced this claim by showing that the world's most powerful men acknowledged the supremacy of the dharma. For kings and their courts, the patronage of Buddhist monuments offered a route to political authority in a landscape of considerable instability: associating themselves with both the legacy of Ashoka and the prestige of the sangha, post-Mauryan rulers could claim cultural continuity with an imperial past to which they had no genealogical title.

4.2 Sacred Space, Pilgrimage, and the Ashokan Legacy

Sanchi's political significance was not confined to its visual programme alone. As a pilgrimage destination, the site had a geographical reach far beyond its immediate locality: pilgrimage routes are also economic and political arteries, and a king whose name was attached to a major pilgrimage site effectively extended his political presence into the consciousness of every visitor who passed through [1]. Donation inscriptions recording gifts from individuals scattered across a wide geographical range confirm the monument's role as a node in broader systems of cultural communication — an instance of what Tambiah calls the 'galactic polity,' in which power radiates outward from a sacred centre and retains significance across centuries of political change [14].

No account of Sanchi's political significance can avoid the Ashokan legacy. By the Shunga period, Ashoka's reign had passed from communicative into cultural memory — in Jan Assmann's terms, he was no longer a living political reality but a founding figure, a standard of dharmic kingship against which subsequent rulers would inevitably be measured. Post-Mauryan kings who elaborated a monument Ashoka had founded and filled it with imagery encoding the Chakravartin ideal positioned themselves as his inheritors without needing to claim descent: the cultural memory of the site made the argument for them.

4.3 The Ashokan Legacy and the Construction of Imperial Memory

No subsequent patron of Sanchi could escape the overwhelming presence of Ashoka's legacy. His pillar, his association with the stupa's original foundation, and the inscriptions recording his religious activities in the region ensure that his memory permeates every engagement with the monument. For the Shunga and Satavahana kings who expanded the site after Mauryan power collapsed, this legacy was at once a resource to be exploited and a burden requiring careful management.

Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory is instructive at this point. Communicative memory is living memory — events within the lifetime of the present generation; cultural memory is the more formalized, institutionalized memory of a more distant past, maintained through texts, rituals, and monuments. By the Shunga period, Ashoka's reign had made exactly this transition: no longer a living political reality, he had become a founding figure whose model of dharmic kingship set the standard against which his successors were measured.

The Sanchi reliefs participated actively in constructing and perpetuating this cultural memory. Elaborating a monument Ashoka had founded, filling it with imagery encoding the Chakravartin ideal he had embodied — at least in the idealized memory preserved by the Buddhist tradition — the post-Mauryan kings who patronized the site positioned themselves as his inheritors without needing to claim descent. Association with the monument was sufficient: its cultural memory made the argument for them.

V. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE SANCHI MODEL

5.1 Brahmanical Kingship and Buddhist Alternatives

The model of kingship encoded at Sanchi makes most sense when read against the competing models that coexisted with it in ancient India [5]. Brahmanical tradition offered a quite different account of royal legitimacy — one rooted in the king's ritual relationship to the priestly class, his performance of Vedic sacrifice, and his hereditary connection to the solar and lunar dynasties of mythological history. Buddhist kingship, as Sanchi encodes it, is a conscious alternative: where Brahmanical legitimacy rests on ritual sacrifice, Buddhist legitimacy rests on *dana*; where Brahmanical kingship is grounded in hereditary purity of lineage, Buddhist kingship is grounded in the moral quality of the king's own conduct — his adherence to the ten royal virtues (*dasa-rajadhamma*) [15]. The Sanchi reliefs offer not a sectarian rejection of Brahmanical symbols — elephants and horses are common currency across both traditions — but a Buddhist reframing of the shared stock of Indian political imagery, placing the *dharma* rather than the ritual order at the centre of the political universe.

5.2 Gandharan Comparison: Hellenism and the Anthropomorphic Turn

Comparison with Gandharan art sharpens what is distinctive about the Sanchi model. In the Gandharan tradition of northwestern India (Kushan period, c. 1st–3rd centuries CE), shaped by Hellenistic influence, the Buddha appears in fully anthropomorphic form, and Kushan kings on coins and in sculptural programmes display individualized facial features that identify them as specific historical persons. Sanchi, by contrast, represents the Buddha through symbolic absence and depicts kings as types rather than individuals. The contrast reflects different theories of political and religious authority: at Sanchi, power is signified through symbolic objects rather than the royal body, so the emphasis falls on the office and its associated *dharma* rather than the individual who holds it; in Gandhara, the emphasis falls on the personal charisma and divine election of the individual monarch.

5.3 Interpretation and Its Limits

Iconographic analysis of the Sanchi reliefs faces significant interpretive challenges that must be acknowledged. No explanatory texts accompany the monuments that would confirm with certainty what a given scene was meant to depict, or how a contemporary viewer was expected to respond. Identifications of specific Jataka tales and historical events rest on scholarly inference and comparison with textual sources rather than any direct testimony from the sculptors themselves. The reliefs were also produced over more than two centuries by multiple workshops, each with potentially different artistic conventions and ideological agendas — it is therefore important to resist reading the sculptural programme as a single, coherent ideological statement. Political meanings were not fixed at the moment of production; they continued to be constructed and reconstructed by successive generations of viewers, patrons, and interpreters, each adding new layers to an already complex visual palimpsest.

VI. CONCLUSION

The sculptural programme of the Great Stupa at Sanchi constitutes one of the most important sources we have for understanding the conceptualization and visual representation of kingship in ancient India. What emerges from close analysis is a sophisticated and coherent vision of Buddhist kingship organized around three principles: the symbolic displacement of royal authority through the aniconic representation of the Buddha as supreme

Chakravartin; the reciprocal legitimation of political and religious power through the visual language of patronage, procession, and devotion; and the construction of a cultural memory of Ashokan dharmic empire that provided post-Mauryan kings with a powerful framework for asserting their own legitimacy.

Several broader implications follow from these findings. Most fundamentally, visual sources — and in particular the sculptural programmes of Buddhist monuments — must be treated as primary historical sources of the first importance, not merely as illustrations of ideas derived from texts [4]. Beyond this, the Sanchi reliefs illuminate the genuinely dialectical relationship between Buddhism and kingship in ancient India: the Buddhist theory of the Chakravartin gave kings an ideological framework for representing their power as both cosmically sanctioned and ethically grounded, while royal patronage gave the sangha the material resources and public legitimation that enabled it to become one of the most powerful and enduring institutions in the history of Asia.

The Sanchi model of royal representation — its insistence on symbolic objects over the royal body, on office over individual, on dharma over dynasty — stands in instructive contrast to models of kingship that emerged elsewhere, both within India (the Gandharan tradition, the later Hindu-tantric model of the divine king) and beyond (the Roman imperial cult, the Egyptian pharaonic tradition). Future research might extend this analysis through systematic comparison with the Bharhut stupa rail [13], the Amaravati stupa, and the Gandharan complexes, and digital methods of iconographic analysis offer promising tools for large-scale comparative study. In the end, the Great Stupa endures not only as one of the world's great monuments of religious architecture but as a uniquely rich document of ancient Indian political thought — in its stones, we can still read a vision of the just king and the righteous state that shaped the political cultures of South and Southeast Asia for more than two millennia.

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