



Great Stupa at Sanchi, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS BUILDING AND HOW DOES IT FUNCTION?

This is the Great Stupa at Sanchi, located on a hill in the countryside of central India just north of present-day Bhopal. It is the largest of several stupas at the site, which also includes the remains of several monastic buildings, including dining halls and pilgrim rooms.

Stupas are dome-like structures, originally mounds honoring the relics of great leaders or princes, which later became associated with the relics of the Buddha. When the historical Buddha died, his physical remains were said to have been distributed among ten burial mounds. Several centuries later, during the reign of the emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE), these remains were subdivided into even more sites, one of which was Sanchi.

Early Buddhist stupas were mounds surrounded by a fence—not unlike the sacred trees and other village shrines found throughout India—that became objects of worship. Devotees walked around the stupa in a clockwise fashion. As stupas became more elaborate, they were crowned with a platform and a series of disks derived from umbrellas (originally used to shade royalty). The dome itself was garlanded with flowers, and gateways were added at the cardinal points. Stupas were venerated as a symbol of the Buddha's final release. The presence of relics or texts rendered the site sacred, similar to the bishop's throne or reliquaries at the heart of European cathedrals. As Buddhism developed across Asia, the stupa evolved into a pagoda form, and as the image of the Buddha developed, it began to appear inside the stupa or in separate image halls.

WHEN AND HOW WAS IT MADE?

The original stupa at Sanchi was probably a modest burial mound of mud and clay. This stupa was repaired and doubled in size around 150 BCE. The dome was encased in masonry, and a walking terrace was constructed 16 feet off the ground. The elaborate stone fence was added on ground level. The Great Stupa

achieved its present state around 75–50 BCE, most notably with the addition of the four elaborately carved gateways, carved in a finer sandstone, perhaps by ivory carvers as indicated in an inscription on one of the panels. Between around 1100 and 1900, Sanchi lay deserted. Today, it remains the best-preserved example of an Indian stupa.

HOW DO ART IMAGES FUNCTION IN THIS TYPE OF BUILDING?

As stupas became more elaborate, their complexes developed narrative spaces in which to carve stories of the life of the Buddha, as well as to create images of the patrons who commissioned the work. The image of the Buddha in human form does not appear at Sanchi, but the Buddha's presence is honored symbolically with images of footprints, riderless horses, umbrellas, an empty seat, and so on, thus providing evidence for an aniconic phase in Buddhist art according to some scholars. His previous lives (*jatakas*) are told in rich narrative detail, and there are numerous scenes of people and animals worshiping the bodhi tree, the wheel, and other sacred sites associated with the Buddha. One explanation for the missing figure of the Buddha is that, having attained nirvana after so many previous lives, it would be inappropriate to show him in the physical form that he has left behind.

Almost all the carving on the Great Stupa appears on the four gateways, each facing one of the four cardinal directions. This photograph has been taken near the southern gateway (right) where the original entrance path would have been.

The two pillars on each gateway support three crossbeams. The images on these pillars and crossbeams give us great insight into ancient beliefs and customs. They also indicate Buddhism's readiness to incorporate indigenous, local beliefs into the Buddhist practice. Several gateways, for example, are adorned with female fertility spirits (*yakshis*) who bring auspiciousness to the site. A similar figure of a yakshi from a railing pillar can be found in the Indian galleries at the Asian Art Museum.