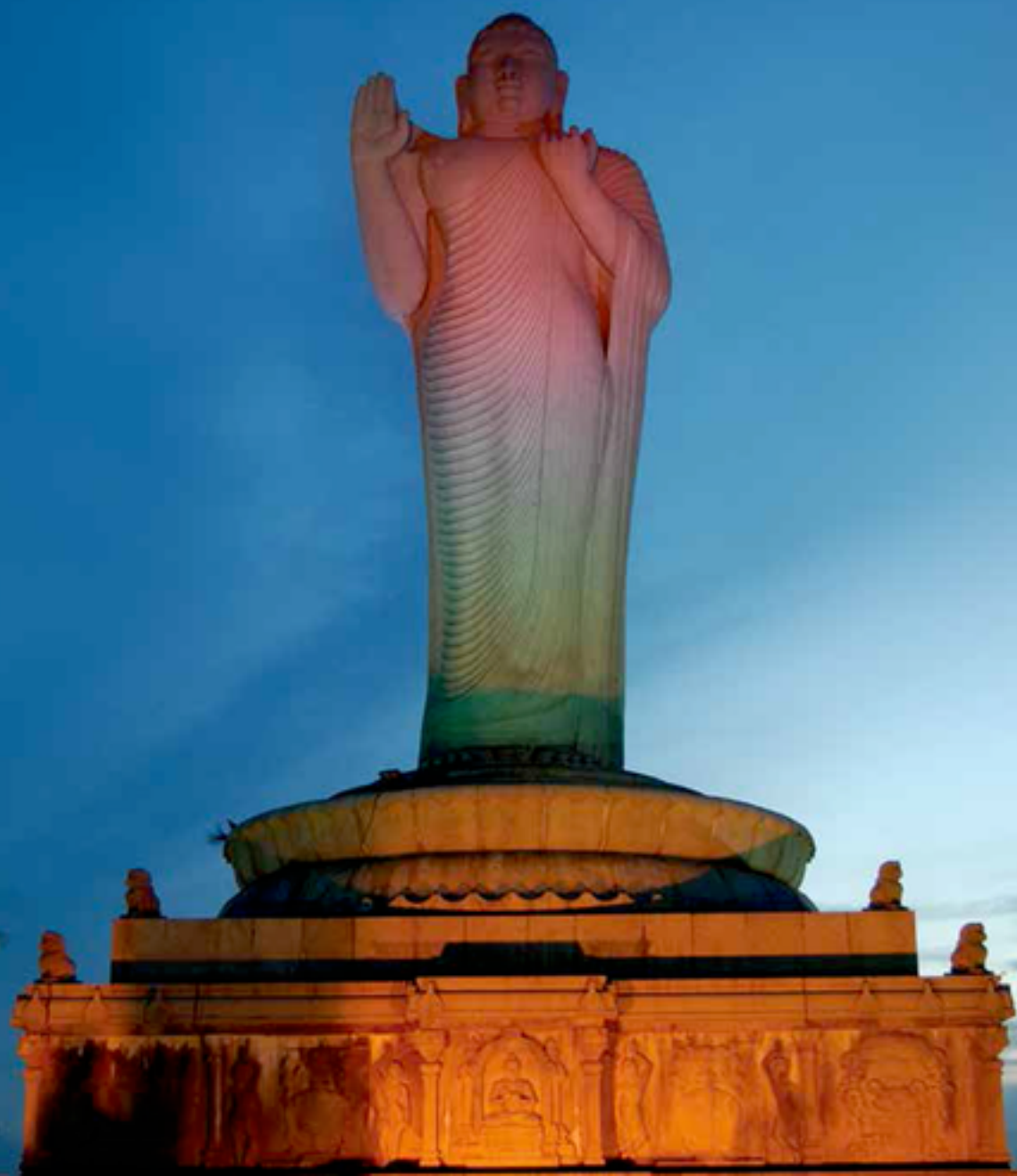CATHERINE BECKER

Shifting Stones, Shaping the Past

Sculpture from the Buddhist Stūpas
of Andhra Pradesh

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For my mother, Patricia Becker
And in memory of my father, John Becker

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Acknowledgments

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providing helpful signage and lodging at Andhra's Buddhist sites over the past decade, but also directly in the form of numerous brochures and publications, some of which they have kindly allowed me to reproduce here free of charge. In particular, I thank the special chief secretary of Andhra Pradesh Tourism, Smt. Chandana Khan, Indian Administrative Service, for granting me permission to reproduce the APTDC's photographs, and Professor E. Sivanagi Reddy, Officer on Special Duty (Art and Sculpture), APTDC, and director of the State Gallery of Art, for taking time to meet with me in 2009 and for expediting my request. I am also indebted to A. Velu Sthapati in Hyderabad's Endowments office for sharing with me his experiences as a sculptor working on the Hussain Sagar Buddha and his passion for artistic production of all kinds. I am grateful to S. M. Ganapati Sthapati and his family. When I turned up unannounced on their doorstep in Kanchipuram, they warmly welcomed me into their home and gave me a tour of their spectacular workshop of sculptors. The day I spent with S. M. Ganapati Sthapati and his family was truly one of the miracles of this book.

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Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents, John and Patricia Becker, who have supported my every harebrained scheme and have believed in me even when I might have lost faith in myself. My father did not live to see the completion of this book, and I continue to feel the sharp pain of his absence. However, his astounding work ethic, unconventional sense of humor, and unconditional love are always with me and provide the sturdy foundations of my work and my life. This is a book about powerful stones, but my mother is truly a rock. This book would not exist without her tremendous patience, quiet intelligence, and enduring love.

Note on Transliteration

FOLLOWING SCHOLARLY CONVENTION, this book employs Sanskrit and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit forms or their English equivalents for the majority of Buddhist terms. For example, karma (as opposed to the Pāli *kamma*) is employed consistently throughout the book. However, when variations in transliteration appear in specific textual materials, I have followed the conventions of individual translators. Whenever possible, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, edited by Joseph E. Schwartzberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) has provided the spelling for the names of archaeological sites. When multiple spellings of an archaeological site's name exist or when referring to modern states or cities, I have generally elected to omit diacritical marks.

Shifting Stones, Shaping the Past

Buddhist Sites in Andhra Pradesh Considered in this Study

Dantapuram
Salihundam
Thotlakonda
Bavikonda
Sankaram
Visakhapatnam

Godavari

Guntupalli
Alluru
Gummdidurru
Vijayawada
Ghantasala
Bhattiprolu

Karimnagar
Dhulikatta
Nelakondapalli
Phanigiri
Jaggayyapeta
Goli
Amaravati
Guntur
Chandavaram
Nagarjunakonda

Kondapur
Hyderabad

Krishna

ANDHRA
PRADESH

Bay
of
Bengal

INDIAN OCEAN

AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
CHINA
NEPAL
BHUTAN
BANGLADESH
BURMA
Delhi
Bharhut
Sanchi
Sarnath
Bodh Gaya
Kolkata
INDIA
Ajanta
Godavari
Mumbai
Krishna
Hyderabad
ANDHRA
PRADESH
Chennai
SRI
LANKA

Bay
of
Bengal

INDIAN OCEAN

Arabian
Sea

Arabian
Sea

0 km   100
0 miles   100

Introduction

IN ITS INVESTIGATION of Buddhist sculpture from the stūpas in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, this book develops three intertwined arguments about the nature of human experience across almost two millennia. First, this book seeks to understand the workings of faith, belief, hope, or, to use yet another word, optimism as a motivation for the production of images and the staging of ritual activities. My examination of the creation and use of monuments and objects associated with Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh reveals a fundamental faith that the conditions of this world as experienced by humans can be transformed. As the following chapters reveal, the nature of those transformations—how and why change is undertaken—has varied, but the belief that imagery plays a critical role in how humans attempt to transform themselves and others remains consistent.

Second, this book explores a recurring human curiosity about the past. Like faith, the conceptualization of the past and how it might be understood or harnessed has shifted, but, nevertheless, a profound and lasting interest in the events of the past has informed the use of Buddhist spaces, objects, and images. Curiosity, even anxiety, about the past is not solely a condition of modernity; it was also a driving force behind image production in the second and third centuries of the Common Era (CE).

Third, this study examines an underlying human tendency to attribute agency to sites and objects. Whether treated as social agents, as articulated in other contexts by Alfred Gell,[1] or understood to be repositories for a sacred presence, as in the case of the Buddha's relics interred within a stūpa, the numinous Buddhist monuments and sculptures of Andhra Pradesh interact in diverse ways with their human makers and subsequent audiences.

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1. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

Finally, as if triangulating around these three points, this book explores how oral and visual storytelling practices express faith, organize the past, and articulate the agency of objects and sites. In short, this book examines how the creation and use of Buddhist sculpture in Andhra Pradesh reveals fundamental human concerns about the nature of the world we inhabit and a steady belief that change is possible. To introduce the Buddhist sculpture of Andhra Pradesh and its long-standing role in engaging the human imagination, I begin with a stūpa, a stone, and a story.

A Stūpa

My first encounter with the Buddhist sites of Andhra Pradesh—specifically Amarāvatī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa—occurred in early July 2001. That summer I was the sole Telugu-language student at the American Institute of Indian Studies program in Visakhapatnam. During a weekend break from classes, I traveled south by train, leaving the balmy breezes of Vizag for the more sun-blasted climes of Vijayawada. On a sunny day with a bright blue sky and a few wispy clouds, I visited the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Amarāvatī Site Museum and the nearby remains of the stūpa. Revitalized by early monsoon rains, scrubby plants sprouted around the stūpa, and lacy red blossoms dangled from the branches of a Gulmohar tree (figure I.1). However, for an art history student familiar with the site's spectacular sculptural remains, the state of the stūpa was bleak indeed. A humble ring of bricks, part of the ASI's modern reconstruction of the site, functioned as a retaining wall for a low, sloping earthen mound, which provided a bed for grass. This brick base, evoking the drum of the ancient stūpa, included projecting platforms at the four cardinal directions. These structures, referred to as *āyaka* platforms, were once marked with pillars and adorned with relief sculpture, but now white limestone slabs sheathed only the brick surface of the eastern platform. The simple pilasters of these slabs reflected the decoration of the stūpa in the first century CE, before the stūpa's enlargement and redecoration program in the late second century CE.[2] The rough, unfinished surface visible on the

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2. As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, limestone slabs carved on both sides provide evidence of two distinct decorative programs at Amarāvatī. The early face of a double-sided drum slab from Amarāvatī, now in the Government Museum in Chennai is very similar in appearance to the limestone slabs that presently adorn the eastern āyaka platform at Amarāvatī. For a photograph of the slab's early face, see figure 129 in Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997).

FIGURE I.I Amarāvatī stūpa. July 2001. (Photograph by Catherine Becker.)

lower portions of these slabs was surely intended to be below the surface of the circumambulatory path when originally installed. Around the stūpa, granite stumps, the remnants of an earlier railing, punctuated the periphery of the stūpa's paved circumambulatory path.

Although the destruction of Amarāvatī's main stūpa is no secret and I certainly had little expectation of encountering a towering edifice, I must confess that some sadness marked my first encounter with the denuded Amarāvatī stūpa in 2001. How must this stūpa have appeared in its heyday? Once one of the most splendid of Andhra's Buddhist sites, the stūpa at Amarāvatī³ provides evidence of Buddhist activity as early as the third century BCE, with the site experiencing its peak patronage in the centuries before and after the Common Era. The second and third centuries CE in

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3. Amarāvatī is a relatively recent name for this site and its environs. The ancient name, Dhānyakaṭaka and its variant Dharanikoṭa, appears in numerous inscriptions. Perhaps the earliest reference to Dhānyakaṭaka appears on a pillar with several narratives, now in the Amarāvatī Site Museum. Along with several episodes from the life of the Buddha, the pillar in question, dated to the first century BCE, includes a depiction of a village scene and a river, which is labeled "Dhamnakada." See Dehejia, *Discourse*, 142–145. Perhaps the latest reference to active worship at the stūpa, the Buddhist monk Dharmmakīrtti's inscription at Gaḍalādeṇiya in Sri Lanka dates to the fourteenth century and refers to the restoration of an image house at Śri Dhānyakaṭaka. See S. Paranavitana, "Gaḍalādeṇiya Rock-inscription of Dharmmakīrtti Sthavira," *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 4.2 (1935): 90–110. By the time of Colin

particular witnessed a period of artistic efflorescence in this region. At this time, sculptors and their patrons, members of both the lay and monastic communities, produced an abundance of sculpture to adorn stūpas, particularly at sites along the Krishna River and some of its tributaries to the north.[4] Perhaps the best known of these Buddhist sites are Amarāvatī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, both of which were centers for sculptural production. Carved of a pale limestone that varies in hue from a lustrous white (as seen in figure I.2) to a green-tinged gray (see figure 1.24, for example), such relief sculptures depict scenes of veneration and lively narratives detailing the Buddha's past lives and the momentous events of his final life. Despite the abundance of Andhra's Buddhist sculptural remains, few slabs still decorate a stūpa. Rather, museums across the globe house the fragments of finely carved limestone from Andhra.

Without delving into the range of romantic notions regarding ruins,[5] it, nevertheless, seems fair to note that other scholars share something of my melancholy at the current state of the Amarāvatī stūpa in particular. In remarking on the current "low, artificial mound" at Amarāvatī and the attempts to recreate elements of the stūpa's railing in several museums, Robert Knox somewhat wistfully notes the lost "grandeur of the architecture of the monument which at its time was the glory of Indian Buddhism."[6] Upinder Singh similarly describes the ASI reconstruction of the stūpa at Amarāvatī as "a nondescript mound ringed by a few forlorn stones."[7] In charting the history of Amarāvatī during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Singh refers to the botched attempts by British

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Mackenzie's visit in 1792, the town was known as Amravutty, most likely after the nearby Amareśvara temple dedicated to Śiva. Mackenzie refers to the archaeological remains of an ancient town as Durnacotta and to the stūpa as Depauldina, "hill of lamps." See Colin Mackenzie, "Ruins of Amravutty, Depauldina and Durnacotta," *Asiatic Journal* 15 (January–June 1823): 464–478.

4. Andhra Pradesh also boasts Buddhist sites along the Godavari River and overlooking the Bay of Bengal. However, the sites along the Krishna River and its tributaries have yielded significantly more limestone sculptures.

5. In discussing ruins, Robert Harbison has remarked that "the perceiver's attitudes count so heavily that one is tempted to say that ruins are a way of seeing. Of course they actually exist, but since the eighteenth century they are never just problems of maintenance." See *The Built, the Unbuilt, and the Unbuildable: In Pursuit of Architectural Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 99.

6. Robert Knox, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 16.

7. Upinder Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 289.

colonial authorities to excavate and document the site and the resulting removal of many of the site's sculptures as the "dismembering of the Amaravati stupa."[8] Singh's vivid use of the word "dismember" conceptualizes the structure as the body of a living entity that has been subjected to a violent death, as if the stūpa met its demise by being torn apart, limb by limb.

If Singh charts the dismemberment of the Amarāvatī stūpa, this book explores how Andhra's Buddhist sites and their sculptural adornments might function as sites and objects of "remembering." This is a book about the past and how the traces of the past—stories, objects, images, sites, and even corporeal remains—are periodically engaged in the present. Each reuse of the traces of the past creates a new layer between the past and the present, a new past that awaits yet another reimagining in the future. More specifically, this book is about a series of case studies that examine the possibility of engaging with the past through visual and corporeal experiences with material objects.

As already noted, the Amarāvatī stūpa and many of Andhra's other Buddhist stūpas no longer preside over bustling centers of religious activity. While the Buddhist remains of Amarāvatī were haphazardly pilfered by British archaeologists, much of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, the modern name for a third-century complex of sites that included a royal palace, Hindu temples, and numerous Buddhist communities,[9] was submerged during the damming of the nearby Krishna River in the 1950s. Hurried excavations salvaged some sculptural and architectural remains, which are now displayed within a museum constructed on one of the reservoir's small islands. To visit these sculptures, fun-seekers and scholars alike must take a boat ride across the dam's reservoir. Other Buddhist stūpas in the region exist in various states of disrepair, such as the Bhattiprolu stūpa, which, as of 2003, was a grassy mound,[10] or the Ghantasala stūpa, which is partially

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8. Ibid., 249–289.

9. The name Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and its variant Nāgārjunikoṇḍa mean the "Hill of Nāgārjuna" and refer to the belief that the famed monk Nāgārjuna may have resided at one of the monastic establishments. Third-century CE inscriptions refer to the entire valley (roughly 23 square kilometers) as Vijayapurī, the "City of Victory" for the ruling Ikṣvāku family, although, as Elizabeth Rosen Stone points out, this city may have been named for the Satavāhana ruler Vijaya Satakarṇi. See *Epigraphia Indica* XX, 22–33, and Elizabeth Rosen Stone, *The Buddhist Art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa*, Buddhist Traditions Series, vol. 25 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 4.

10. Plans were announced in 2006 to expose the stūpa in the hopes of developing the site as a tourist attraction. See "ASI to Develop Bhattiprolu Stupa," *The Hindu*, September 8, 2006,

restored to reveal the wheel-shaped brick walls that provide structural support within the dome.

During my fieldwork in India, I also came to realize that the state's Buddhist past lingers on the borders of new social and cultural transformations. For example, Hyderabad, the state capital, is home to a towering seventeen-meter granite Buddha image. Although this Buddha adopts the garb and pose that characterize the Buddha images from ancient Andhra, this mighty monolith was quarried, crafted, and installed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly, the stūpa at Amarāvatī, although nearly destroyed and no longer a receptacle for the Buddha's relics, received the attentions of more than one hundred thousand Buddhist pilgrims in January 2006, when the Dalai Lama offered a Kālacakra Initiation near the stūpa. Over the course of the ten-day ceremony, the rural landscape around the Amarāvatī stūpa was reconfigured to accommodate the throngs of visitors. The humble Amarāvatī stūpa that I first encountered in 2001 was unexpectedly transformed into an active site of worship, receiving offerings and witnessing numerous devotional acts.

A Stone

This project has wrestled with not only the fact that Andhra's Buddhist sites are largely destroyed, but also the dispersal of the state's sculptural remains to museum collections around the world. Rather than attempt to reconstruct these slabs like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, I have mined individual stones for the rich information they provide about the creation and use of the stūpas they once adorned. As an example of one such dispersed fragment from Andhra's Buddhist past, a limestone slab (figures I.2 and I.3), recovered from the site of Amarāvatī and now on display in the British Museum, functions as a leitmotif for the larger book. The slab speaks to a series of transformations that my book seeks to explore and understand. Perhaps the most obvious change is the removal of the slab from its stūpa and its installation in the British Museum, testifying to the destruction of the Amarāvatī stūpa between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries. Although a number of local building projects employed the brick and limestone remains of the Amarāvatī stūpa even before the arrival of the British, Colonel Colin Mackenzie's visit to the site in 1797 certainly hastened the dismantling of the stūpa. In the century following

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http://www.hindu.com/2006/09/08/stories/2006090806120200.htm (accessed on June 18, 2012).
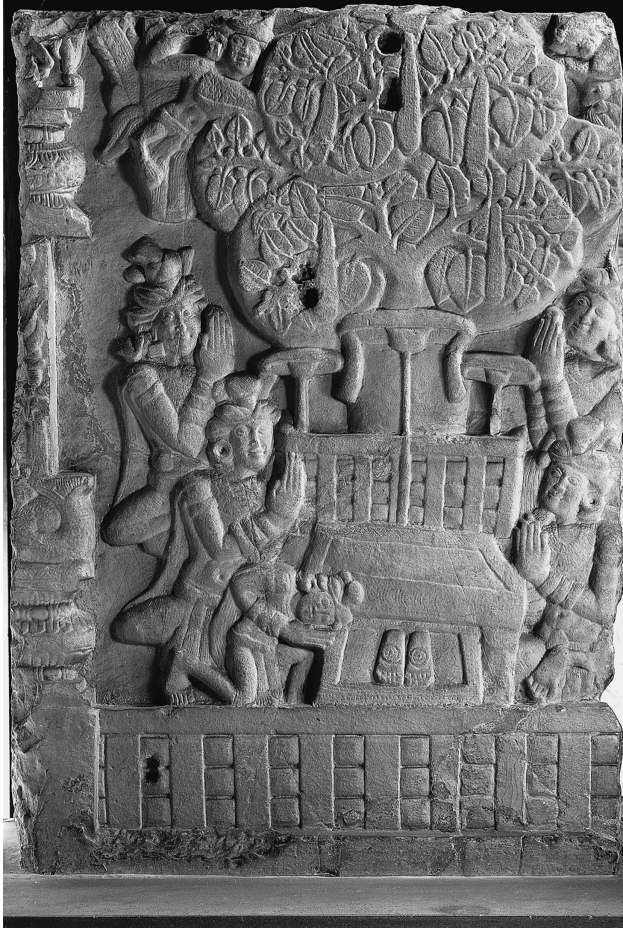
FIGURE I.2 Drum slab with a scene of veneration of an empty throne. Amarāvatī stūpa. British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

his visit, many of the stūpa's limestone slabs were shipped to London; other stone remains were sent by colonial officials to Madras.[11] This slab's eventual installation in the British Museum transformed it from an object of religious use to an exemplar of ancient Indian craftsmanship and British colonial connoisseurship. The object's installation in the British

11. For further discussion of the removal of stones from Amarāvatī, see Bernard S. Cohn, "The Transformation of Objects into Artifacts, Antiquities and Art in Nineteenth-Century India," in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 76–105; Upinder Singh, "The Dismembering of the Amaravati Stupa," in *The Discovery of Ancient India*, 249–289; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Museum in the Colony: Collecting, Conserving, Classifying," in *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 43–84; Jennifer Howes, "Colin Mackenzie and the Stupa at Amaravati," *South Asian Studies* 18 (2003): 53–65.

FIGURE I.3 The opposite side of the drum slab in figure I.2. Amarāvatī stūpa. British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Museum's Asahi Shimbun Gallery reveals the hand of corporate sponsorship, in this case a Japanese newspaper, in shaping museum displays. Moreover, the perception that Buddhist sculpture from ancient Andhra Pradesh can attract international investors, specifically from other Asian countries that share a Buddhist heritage, has raised hopes that Andhra's Buddhist past might lure potential international partners to invest in the state's plans for a modernizing future.

However, the slab, displayed so as to reveal that it is double-sided, speaks to another, much earlier, set of transformations that occurred at the site of Amarāvatī. In the first century before the Common Era, this limestone slab, which would have been affixed to the base of a stūpa, was

sculpted with a scene of figures venerating a tree, an empty throne, and a pair of footprints (figure I.2). When the main stūpa was enlarged during the second and third centuries of the Common Era, this earlier face was flipped over, a detailed scene of veneration to a stūpa was carved on the reverse (figure I.3), and the sculpture was reaffixed to the drum of a stūpa. Comparing the two sides of this double-sided slab reveals not only a shift in the object of veneration—from the tree, throne, and footprints to a massive stūpa—but also an elaboration of the ritual acts that signal veneration. The devotees in front of the stūpa engage in acquiring flowers from seated vendors and making offerings into bowls held aloft by dwarves. This double-sided slab also marks a shift in how the decoration of stūpas was conceptualized in ancient Andhra, and it records an idealized approximation of the appearance of just such an elaborately adorned stūpa. At the height of its splendor, the main stūpa at Amarāvatī consisted of a large dome rising from a circular drum. As the slab now in the British Museum relief suggests, this brick mound was bedecked with limestone panels intricately carved with Buddhist narratives and scenes of devotion. A limestone railing—the actual remains of which were also carved with lively narratives—surrounded the stūpa. Chapter 1 examines the relationship between such representations of stūpas and the transformative potential of stūpa veneration while Chapter 2 investigates the related devotional implications of the outpouring of visual narratives adorning stūpas in the second century CE.

A Story

The rich Buddhist tradition of both oral and visual storytelling employs engaging narratives to explore the karmic connections between the past and the present and to stimulate the minds of listeners and viewers. The Buddha himself is often portrayed as a master raconteur, whose audiences attained spiritual progress after listening to him recount his adventures and accomplishments during his many past lives. Writing in the second or third century CE, the poet Aśvaghoṣa further embroidered a number of the Buddha's tales with vivid language. In a passage from Aśvaghoṣa's *The Saundarananda* (*The Handsome Nanda*), which Linda Covill has translated with great finesse, the Buddha delivers an extended lesson, in which he cautions the monk Nanda:

> Though your head and clothes be on fire, direct your mind toward
> the comprehension of the Truths, for in its failure to perceive the

doctrine of the Truths, the world was burned, is burning now, and will burn in the future.[12]

The Buddha pleads with Nanda, and in turn the audience of this tale, to adopt his teachings in order to extinguish the flames of desire that have perpetually engulfed humanity. The passage conveys urgency and foreboding—a sense that the flames of the burning world will persist into the future without immediate intervention in the form of the Buddha's lessons regarding the Four Truths. Yet what if the listener—even though on fire—is unprepared to understand these lessons? This is one of the key questions that the *Saundarananda* answers. The verse cited above appears toward the end of a tale that traces how the Buddha Śākyamuni exploited the tremendous desire of one man, his own half-brother, the eponymous Nanda, in order to transform Nanda from a lusty husband into a celibate neophyte who is prepared to receive instruction. As they rely largely on visual experiences, the clever means by which the Buddha brings about Nanda's transformation are worth considering in some detail here.

One day the Buddha visits Nanda, who, deeply distracted by his wife's many charms, neglects his alms-seeking brother. Nanda realizes his error and prepares to race from the palace to offer the Buddha food. Before departing, Nanda promises his lovely and lustful wife that he will return to her before the makeup on her face has dried. The Buddha has other plans for Nanda, and a promise to a wife is no match for the honeyed words of an enlightened being. Nanda soon finds himself agreeing to become a monk, but he weeps as his head is shaved. Noticing that his brother still pines for his wife, the Buddha summons Nanda so that the two may visit Indra's gorgeous heavenly realm. En route, the pair encounters a gamboling troop of monkeys, including a one-eyed, red-faced female monkey. Drawing on Nanda's visual memory of his wife and the present sight of the ugly monkey, the Buddha asks his brother who is more beautiful, the monkey or Nanda's wife? Nanda wonders how there can be any comparison between "the most excellent of women, and this mischief-making monkey."[13]

Upon arrival in Indra's splendid heavenly gardens, Nanda, his "eyes intense with interest," is overcome with desire for the "eternally youthful"

12. Ashva-ghosha, *The Handsome Nanda*, trans. Linda Covill (New York: Clay Sanskrit Library, 2007), 295.

13. Ibid., 197.

celestial beauties dwelling there.[14] The Buddha instructs Nanda to "look at these heavenly women and after observing them" to consider whether he prefers these gorgeous heavenly women to his wife.[15] Nanda replies that, just as there was no comparison between the one-eyed monkey and his wife, he no longer thinks of his wife when he beholds these divine beauties. "Just as somebody warmed by a gentle heat would be burned by a huge fire, so previously I was warmed by a mild passion but am now scorched by this fiery passion."[16] The Buddha promises Nanda that these women can be his through the practice of dharma. Back on earth, Nanda, full of longing for the heavenly women, attempts to devote himself to monkish ways. When the Buddha's follower, Ānanda, learns of Nanda's plan to practice dharma in order to attain heavenly nymphs, the wiser monk is "moved to both laughter and compassion" as he explains the folly of practicing celibacy "for the sake of sex."[17] Now filled with shame, Nanda begins to reflect on the nature of desire and suffering and approaches the Buddha to request further teachings. Through the intervention of the Buddha and the prodding of Ānanda, Nanda has been transformed into "a fitting receptacle for instruction,"[18] which the Buddha delivers throughout the remainder of the text.

The tale of Nanda's conversion, as explicated by Aśvaghoṣa, exemplifies the Buddha's ability to harness humanity's natural lust as a powerful teaching tool. The Buddha recognizes that Nanda's desire for his wife prevents the new monk from practicing the dharma. By introducing Nanda to the splendid sight of celestial nymphs, the Buddha stokes Nanda's enflamed passions—a seemingly risky gambit, for as "the radiance of the rising thousand-rayed sun annihilates lamplight in the darkness, so does the glory of the *ápsaras*es obscure the shrine of women in the world of humankind."[19] The Buddha knows what he is doing, of course, so Nanda's ultimate conversion is never in doubt. Moreover, in this tale, sight is the Buddha's tool of choice for instigating Nanda's transformation. The vision of the celestial nymphs removes his infatuation with his wife, and—albeit

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14. Ibid., 203.

15. Ibid., 207.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 219.

18. Ibid., 243.

19. Ibid., 205.