



Art and Performance in the Buddhist Visual Narratives at Bhārhut

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Abstract

The reliefs carved on the *vedikā* of the Bharhut *stūpa* in the Satna District of Madhya Pradesh are some of the earliest artworks extant in India to articulate the Buddha's life stories and the essence of his teaching in a complex visual form. This article proposes that the reliefs from Bharhut depicting episodes from Śākyamuni's life and *jātakas* were informed by narrative practices established in the traditions of Buddhist recitation and performance. The inscriptions engraved on the Bharhut *vedikā* that function as labels for scenes, characters, and places, point to the use of specific storytelling strategies attested in oral recitation and picture scrolls that likely existed as aide-memoire.

Literary and visual sources have been central to the transmission of Buddhist teachings across different communities. The reliefs carved on the *vedikā* of the Bharhut *stūpa* in Madhya Pradesh are the first extant artworks from India to articulate the Buddha's life stories and the essence of his teaching in a complex visual form. As such, these images offer valuable insight into how the Buddhist religious tradition was shaped and disseminated in the first century BCE. The goal of this article is to explore how the narratives depicted in the Bharhut reliefs are rooted in the tradition of oral recitation of Buddhist stories.

The presence of labels inscribed on the reliefs prompted scholars to single out specific texts on which the carvings were based – one could cite the early works by Barua, Coomaraswamy, Bajpai and Ghosh as prime examples of this type of interest.¹

¹ See Barua (1934-37), Coomaraswamy (1958), Bajpai (1967) and Ghosh (1978). For a complete review of the scholarship on Bhārhut see Hawkes (2008:1–3).

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Dehejia in her study on narrative discourse in early Buddhist art, when addressing the reliefs from Bharhut, also emphasizes the correlation between text and image. She cites the Pāli canon and the Lalitavistara as possible sources for many narratives and concedes that only two panels from the enclosure reveal traces of a possible oral tradition of storytelling.² The present work intends to break away from the binary model of interpretation of image and text and proposes that embodied practices of oral performances carried out by *bhānakas* or reciters formed the underpinning of the visual narratives.³

A review of the artistic and epigraphic evidence from Bharhut, even if only part of the monument is preserved, seems to challenge the very ‘idea of text’ as a fixed entity existing above audiences, narrators, and images, a notion outlined by Shulman in the context of Pāli literature.⁴ The narrative parameters developed at Bharhut invite us to reconsider how the embodied processes of popular transmission and reception of edifying stories were key in shaping the early narrative tradition; artistic practices seem to have been heavily informed by storytelling performances and were susceptible to regional variations. The hypothesis that a visual ‘biography’ of the Buddha emerged within a framework of performance and ‘spectatorship’ is outlined in the present study.

The analytical perspective developed by Fraser in her study of visual narratives from the later Buddhist caves at Dunhuang, China,⁵ can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the artistic milieu of the Bharhut *stūpa*. Fraser argues that the artists responsible for executing the visual narratives did not necessarily read the *sūtras* but instead used a variety of pictorial aids such as popular storytelling scrolls to formulate the visual structure of the images—something that would make great sense in the early context of Bharhut where written texts were not yet entirely codified. According to Fraser, the lack of a continuous visual discourse in narrative along with the fragmentation of the events represented, suggests that the roots of visual narrative art are to be sought in the world of popular storytelling.⁶ One is encouraged to think along the same lines of inquiry outlined by Fraser when confronted with the so-called Ajātaśatru pillar at the west gate at Bharhut depicting Śākyamuni’s visit to the Trāyastriṃśa heaven where the narrative flow is broken in three distinctive segments (Fig. 1). On the right side of the pillar, the top panel depicts an assembly of listeners gathered around the throne of the Buddha preaching in Trāyastriṃśa heaven, the central panel depicts the Buddha in the act of descending at Sankissa through the representation of a ladder with two wheeled footprint and the depiction of two *apsaras* on the top right plunging down from heaven. Viewers and listeners gather at the feet of the monumental ladder that seems to function almost as a theatrical prop. The lower relief depicts viewers and listeners gathered around the Buddha’s throne. In the case of the Ajātaśatru pillar panels, the depiction of seated devotees in the foreground giving their backs to the

² Dehejia 2007:106–107, and 55–72 for a broader discussion on the relationship between text and image.

³ A preliminary discussion on the relationship between oral traditions and Buddhist iconographies appears in Ray 1994:5.

⁴ Shulman 2021a and b.

⁵ Fraser 2004.

⁶ Fraser 2004: 179.

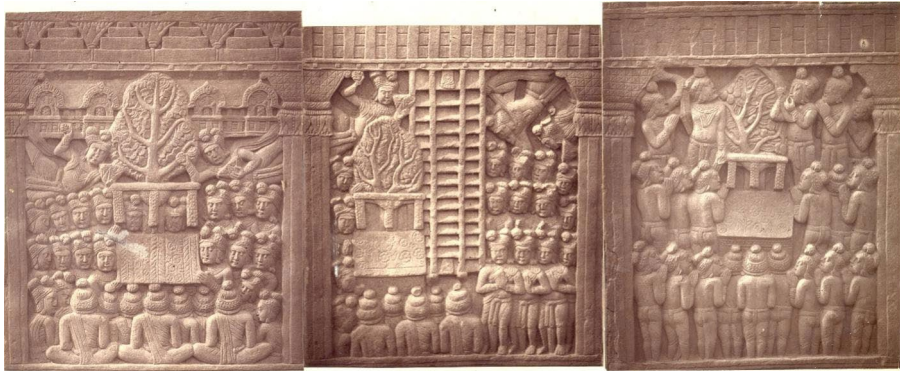


Fig. 1 Reliefs from the *corner pillar of the west toraṇa*. So-called Ajātaśatru pillar depicting Śākyamuni's visit to the *Trāyastriṃśa* heaven and his descent after having preached in the heavenly realm. After A. Cunningham, *The stūpa at Bharhut*, pl. XVII

viewers is a groundbreaking artistic device that not only makes the viewer a listener among the very audience witnessing the Buddha's preaching, but also highlights how performance and spectatorship where crucial elements in the articulation of visual narratives at the site.

In the reliefs of the series depicting Śākyamuni's visit to the *Trāyastriṃśa* heaven a plethora of listeners, both divine and human, crowd around the aniconic Buddha as he delivers a sermon in heaven. They also gather around as he descends the stairway at Sankisa and is apprised of his reincarnation by 'Arahaguto devaputo' or the angel Arahaguta, as indicated by an associated inscription (Luders 1963: B18).⁷ The viewer becomes an implicit bystander also in another relief from the same pillar (left side, upper panel) depicting the worship of the turban relic in heaven.⁸ Using the same visual strategy, the Bharhut viewer in this instance becomes a participant in the festival honoring the Buddha's relic in the palace of the gods. In Prasenajit pillar, viewers become spectators to the 'music of the gods accompanied by a mimic dance' (Luders 1963: B27).⁹ This design may have functioned also to transpose the viewer among the Buddha's original audience, as a witness to his preaching in the places and time where events happened. This is corroborated by the fact that the Bharhut viewer becomes a participant only in Śākyamuni's life events and never in the *jātakas*.

At Sanchi I, only a few reliefs seem to develop the notion of the viewer's 'implicit participation' by employing the artistic stratagem seen at Bharhut, while at Kanaganallī this feature seems to be absent. At Sanchi I, characters are represented with their back turned towards the viewer only in a handful of panels: in the conversion of the Kasyapa on the east gate, the worship of the relic with singing and dancing in the gods' palace on the west gate, scenes of preaching associated with the descent from

⁷ Cunningham 1879: Plate XVI, Left side, middle bas relief.

⁸ Cunningham 1879: Plate XVI, Left side, upper bas relief.

⁹ Cunningham 1879: Plate XV, Lower bas-relief, outer face.

Trāyastrimśa Heaven, and the worshipping of the stupa and the Buddha's beneath a tree on the western and northern gates.¹⁰

The *Vedikā* of the Bharhut *stūpa*: The First Steps of Buddhist Art

The remains of the great *stūpa* at Bharhut located about 120 miles to the southwest of the modern city of Allahabad have been dated by scholars between the end of the 2nd c.- beginning of the 1st c. BCE.¹¹ Alexander Cunningham first noticed the archaeological mound at Bharhut in 1873 and one year later he began to excavate the site, recovering the foundation of a *stūpa* that measured about twenty meters in diameter.¹² Today nothing survives at the site, and only about one-third of the Bharhut *vedikā* is on view in the galleries of the Indian Museum in Calcutta.¹³ The remaining sculptures uncovered by Cunningham were shipped to London on the SS Indus vessel but they never reached destination as the ship sank in 1885 on its way from Calcutta to London via Colombo.¹⁴

The Bharhut *torāṇa* now exhibited at the Indian Museum in Calcutta bears an inscription mentioning the royal Śuṅgas which provides a useful reference for the dating of the sculpture.¹⁵ Kharoṣṭhī letters are also engraved at the base of the miniature pillars separating the *torāṇa*'s crossbeams; they functioned as mason marks guiding the installation of this section of the gate.¹⁶ The presence of Kharoṣṭhī script at Bharhut suggests that master carvers from Gandhara worked on one of the earliest Buddhist stone monuments erected in North India. This should not come as a surprise since mobility among craftsmen was a common practice in antiquity, and by the first century CE, Gandharan sculptors had developed a solid experience in carving stone and were operating efficient ateliers with streamlined chains of production.¹⁷ The small pillars from the Bharhut *torāṇa* were themselves carved in an artistic style well established in the Northwest of the Indian Subcontinent with capitals of the so-called 'Gandharan Persepolitan' type.¹⁸ The exceptionality of the oeuvre in stone at Bhar-

¹⁰ Marshall and Foucher 1982: II, plates LI b, XVIII b, XXXVb, XLIXa.

¹¹ See Barua 1979, v. 1: 29 and Huntington 1993: 65.

¹² Cunningham 1998: vi–vii. More recently, research on Bhārhut has been carried out by Hawkes (2008 and 2009).

¹³ A few other reliefs from Bharhut are scattered in museums around the world. See Hawkes 2008: 8.

¹⁴ The Marine Archaeology Unit in Sri Lanka tentatively identified the remains of the SS Indus in Lankan waters off Mullaitivu in the Northeastern Province of Sri Lanka. In 2013 the shipwreck site was measured and mapped but no certainty remains about the identity of the ship; in 2017 work resumed but given the depth and condition of the wreck there was no significant progress done (Muthucumarana 2019).

¹⁵ Lüders 1963: 11–15.

¹⁶ Cunningham 1998: 8 and pl. VIII; Salomon (2006) discusses in detail the use of Kharoṣṭhī syllables as location markers in Gandharan stupa architecture.

¹⁷ On stone carving workshops in Gandhara see Brancaccio and Oliveri 2019.

¹⁸ An architectural relief from Kafir-Kot (Dera Ismail Khan District of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan), now in the holdings of the British Museum Acc. No.1899,0609.12, well exemplifies the Gandharan-Corinthian capital type.

hut was also highlighted in the Śuṅga period inscription carved on the portal which explicitly praised the ‘stone work’ at the site.

The visual program of the Bharhut *vedikā* appears surprisingly articulated for being one of the first of its kind. The *vedikā* pillars placed in proximity to the *stūpa*’s access points show standing figures of princely devotees and *yakṣas* all identified by labels. The coping stone is highly decorated on both sides: the outside is embellished with a continuous lotus scroll, while on the interior, the meandering scroll contains images of animals, garlands, fruits, and other motifs, along with small narrative vignettes, some of which are identified by inscriptions as being *jātakas*. Several of these previous life stories are identified by labels and are recognizable due to the depiction of few key iconographic features; they include the Ārāmadūsa(ka)-*jātaka*, Asadisa-*jātaka*, Bhisā-*jātaka*, Cammasātaka-*jātaka*, Dabbhapuppha-*jātaka*, Dūbhiyamakkaṭa-*jātaka*, possibly the Godha-*jātaka*, the Kapotaka-/Lola-/Kāka-*jātaka*, the Mahābodhi-*jātaka*, Mahājanaka-*jātaka*, Makhādeva-*jātaka*, Migapotaka-*jātaka*, the Nigrodha-*jātaka*, the Paṇḍara-*jātaka*, Sūci-*jātaka*, Sujāta-*jātaka*, Suvannakakkata-*jātaka*, Takkāriya-*jātaka*, and the Vessantara-*jātaka*.¹⁹

The surviving *vedikā*’s corner pillars mostly illustrate scenes linked to Śākyamuni’s life, many of which are characterized by depiction of places or shrines associated with his life.²⁰ Examples include the series of reliefs on the Ajātaśatru pillar depicting Śākyamuni’s visit to the Trāyastriṃśa heaven (Fig. 1), the series carved on the Prasenajit pillar where the king visits the *dharmacakra* shrine, as well the *nagarāja* Erapata worshipping the Buddha.²¹ Only three *jātaka* stories appear on corner pillars that are dominated by scenes associated with the Buddha’s life; they consist of the Mahākapi-*jātaka*, the Samugga-*jātaka* and the Vaṇṇupatha-*jātaka*.²² The carved medallions on the railing pillars showcase mostly *jātakas* with a few other unidentified stories punctuated by a wealth of ornamental motifs with no apparent Buddhist references, like *pūrṇaghaṭas* (pots overflowing with flowers), lotuses, imaginary creatures, animals, elephants, and a goddess holding lotus flowers. This repertoire of auspicious images is comparable to the decoration of the roughly contemporary railing of the small *stūpa* II at Sanchi (Taddei 1996). The Bharhut *vedikā* however, shows a visual program in which non-explicit Buddhist themes are woven within a plethora of *jātakas* and stories linked to Śākyamuni’s life. The grand architectural and artistic plan of the *vedikā* betrays the desire of the community to make this stone monument a landmark in the Buddhist tradition. The visual program is shaped by the intent to make the Buddha present in the world of the devotees who become witnesses of his teachings.

¹⁹ For an overview of these tales and associated images at Bharhut see Appleton, *Jataka stories*, University of Edinburgh, <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk>.

²⁰ It has been proposed that these panels positioned by the entrances may be slightly later than the *vedikā* however no studies have been carried out on this issue (Hawkes 2008).

²¹ Cunningham 1879: pplate LXV.

²² The Mahākapi-*jātaka* appears twice at Bhārhut in a roundel (Cunningham 1879: plate XXXIII) and in a corner pillar (Cunningham 1879: plate XXXIII), as well as on a corner pillar at Sanchi I as a testament to its popularity among early Buddhists (Marshall and Foucher 1982: II, plate LXIV a). The Samugga-*jātaka* is illustrated in Cunningham 1879: plate XV while the Vaṇṇupatha-*jātaka* in Coomaraswamy 1956: plate XXXI.

The ample selection and variety of *jātaka* tales carved on the pillars and coping stone of the stūpa suggests that these stories were relevant to the early Buddhist community at Bharhut. When comparing the decoration of the Bharhut stūpa with that of the stūpa II at Sanchi or that of Kanagahanalli,²³ we notice that there is an overwhelming number of *jātakas* stories depicted at Bharhut, many of which are not represented elsewhere in early India. From a visual standpoint, the *jātakas* at Bharhut appear as snapshots of popular Indian life, with villagers, ascetics, hunters, merchants, kings, animals, *yakṣas*, and *nāgas* interacting among huts or in forests. A great example is the medallion of the Mahākapi *jātaka* from a *vedikā* pillar (Fig. 2). This *jātaka* is represented twice at Bharhut, once on a railing pillar and once on a medallion and appears also in the decoration of the west gate of the stūpa at Sanchi I as a testament to its widespread popularity in the early Buddhist horizon.²⁴

Scholars agree that *jātaka* tales were deeply rooted in the oral, pre-Buddhist folk tradition. They appear like fables populated by heroes, animals, and local deities, illustrating the path to Buddhist perfection; they were incorporated at some point in the body of Buddhist canonical literature as birth stories.²⁵ The *jātakas* offered deep moral reflections on the essence of a Buddha and served social and didactic functions, while the biographical format functioned merely as a narrative expedient.²⁶ The structure of Pāli *jātakas* also suggests that these Buddhist stories were initially meant for oral recitation within the community, an uninterrupted practice in Theravāda Bud-

Fig. 2 Reliefs from the medallion of the *vedikā* pillar: Mahākapi *jātaka*
Photo © Michael D. Gunther



²³ For Sanchi see Marshall and Foucher 1983 volume III; for Kanagahanalli see Zin 2018.

²⁴ Cunningham 1879: plate XXXIII and Dehejia 1997: Fig. 65; Marshall and Foucher 1983: II, pl. XLIV.

²⁵ Appleton 2010.

²⁶ Shulman 2018.

dhism as exemplified by the modern *jātaka* performances by *bhāṇakas* in Sri Lanka.²⁷ The great diversity within the *jātaka* literary genre confirms that these moral tales did not constitute a uniform body of literature, but rather reflected the popular regional voices that animated the Buddhist tradition throughout the centuries.

In the macro-organization of Buddhist stories around the Bharhut *stūpa*, the *jātaka* scenes are scattered around the *vedikā* pillars and coping stone while Śākyamuni's life events are mainly clustered in prominent positions on the square pillars near the *vedikā*'s gates where they are depicted in larger panels.²⁸ Also the visual format adopted in most of the 'biographical' events appears remarkably different from that of the *jātaka* medallions. Śākyamuni's life scenes emphasize the presence of audiences, devotion, and *darśan* like experiences of the divine.²⁹ In these reliefs the 'aniconic' Buddha is always addressed in relation to the community of worshippers who sees the Teacher and listens to him.

Epigraphic Evidence from the Bharhut *stūpa*

Inscriptions from the site contribute to shed further light on the issues outlined above. The inscriptions engraved on the Bharhut *vedikā* function as labels for scenes, characters, and places, and point to the existence of specific storytelling strategies employed in this early, surprisingly sophisticated, body of narrative art. While suggesting the dominance of orality in the transmission of early Buddhism, these brief epigraphs also betray the wishes of the community to establish a permanent memory for stories, characters and places heard during recitations. The intention to crystallize the narrative tradition in art happened within the same chronological horizon that led to the written compilations of Buddhist texts. The names and terms recorded on the Bharhut reliefs, however, are remarkably different from those recurring in the written sources. The engraved captions have a material dimension, a public intent, and embody an evocative function. They exist in the physical space of the devotee, can be touched on the stone surfaces and bring to life the images they tag. They give unmistakable specificity to places and characters as if guiding the viewer to the very world of the Buddha.

²⁷ The subject of orality in the Pali tradition has been thoroughly explored by Collins 1991, Allon 1997, Anayalo 2007 and 2009, and most recently Shulman 2021. For *bhāṇakas* and their continuing practices in modern Sri Lanka see Deegalle 2006.

²⁸ Except for the Māyā's dream and the donation of the Jetavana vihāra. There might be reasons why the Bhārhut patrons chose to represent these two important moments of the Buddha's life on the *vedikā* among *jātakas*, as they do not necessarily imply the Buddha's presence. In the scene of Māyā's dream, Śākyamuni is not yet born; in the Jetavana *vihāra* the actual donation goes to the benefit of the saṅgha, and the Buddha's presence is not the focus of the event. Judging from their visual execution, these two life episodes were treated more as edifying *jātaka*. The prodigious conception scene, with its white elephant, fits well among the *jātaka* stories, having as protagonists animals engaged in extraordinary actions, as does the donation of the grove, an act of generosity that emphasizes the surreal incident of the layer of coins entirely covering the ground. See Brancaccio 2005.

²⁹ Brancaccio 2005.

There are two types of inscriptions on the Bharhut *vedikā*: donative epigraphs and labels identifying scenes and characters represented in the reliefs.³⁰ The donative inscriptions at Bharhut mention names of patrons, their places of origin, and the part of the *stūpa*'s enclosure donated. The epigraphic formula name+place conforms to the type found at other early Buddhist sites such as the roughly contemporary Sanchi *stūpa* II. The practice of identifying members of the community, whether monastics or lay, by their place of provenance validates the notion that a person's locality provided a form of identity among early Buddhist devotees. The emphasis on place also confirms what we observed in the reliefs from Bharhut depicting Śākyamuni's life, where locations always define the presence of the Tathāgata.

In fact, the Buddha at Bharhut is always referred to by the depiction of significant places associated with his life. It has been suggested that Śākyamuni's life scenes are grouped together on corner pillars in a way that emphasizes "the association of events in spatial or geographical terms"³¹ rather than in a chronological sequence. This seems to be a feature unique to Bharhut, as the order of narrative decorations on early stupas such as Sanchi I or Kanagahanalli does not seem to privilege the association of scenes by localities but rather emphasizes a topical sequencing, wherever a sequence can be detected.³²

At Bharhut the aniconic presence of the Buddha within each scene is framed by landmarks and places to which the Teacher was associated. Images of the *bodhi* tree within a shrine, the *dharmā cakra* within a shrine, the turban in the assembly hall of the *devas*, or the place of the descent at Sankissa all speak of a community who understood the Buddha and his teachings as being intertwined in the locality where they were revealed. These spots, whether heavenly or earthly, were meant to forge a sacred geography that made tangible the figure of the historical Buddha to the worshippers. The emphasis on place we find in these early artistic representations of the historic Buddha reflects what appears in early Pāli literary sources, among others, where *sūttas* consistently open with the definition of a particular location where the actions take place.³³ It has been proposed that such an emphasis on locality may have served in the literature as a mnemonic device for oral performances by *bhāṇakas* or reciters, whose key role in the transmission of the Buddhist tradition has been too often overlooked.³⁴ In fact, even in the Bharhut reliefs, the focus on place may have worked as an aide-memoire to connect visual representations to known narrative plots.

The donative inscriptions at Bharhut demonstrate an exceptional involvement of *bhāṇakas* or reciters as patrons at the site, and possibly also in the implementation of the artistic work. The term *bhāṇaka* in the Pāli canon denotes those in charge of the

³⁰ Of the 225 inscriptions documented on the Bhārhut *vedikā*, 77 record acts of donation while 84 are labels to the sculptural representations (Salomon, 1998: 141 n.77).

³¹ Brown 1997: 66.

³² See Zin 2019 and Dehejia 1997.

³³ From the study by Allon (1997) of approach formulas recurrent in the *Dīgha-Nikāya*, it seems that the various localities of the action were identified even before the protagonists of the story were introduced. The same is true also for Sanskrit *sūtras*.

³⁴ Shulman 2021.

transmission of the *sūttas*, their oral recitation, and possibly their redaction.³⁵ At no other early Buddhist site we have such a massive involvement of *bhāṇakas* as donors. *Bhāṇakas* are not mentioned at all in the Kanagahanalli inscriptions while they occur only in two donative inscriptions from Sanchi and in an inscription prominently positioned on a *ceṭiyaghāra* pillar at Karle in the Western Deccan caves.³⁶ At Bharhut instead, we have several *bhāṇakas* who commission beautiful reliefs in prominent spots on the *stūpa*'s enclosure. The exquisite sculpture of the yakṣiṇī Sudarśanā (Luders 1963: B10) was given by the 'reverend Kanaka (Kṛṣṇaka?) *bhāṇaka* from Chikulana' (Luders 1963: A39); a pillar on the South-Eastern quadrant was given by the reverend, venerable *bhāṇaka* Bhutarakita (Buddharakṣita) from Kujatiduka (Luders 1963: A38); a pillar on the South-Western quadrant was given by the *bhāṇaka* reverend Valaka (Luders 1963: A61); a pillar by the South gate was the gift of the venerable *bhāṇaka* Isidina (Rṣidatta) (Luders 1963: A62); a rail bar of the Southern gate was given by the *bhāṇaka* Kanhila (Kṛṣṇala?) (Luders 1963: A63), a pillar found at the nearby village of Batnmara was given by *bhāṇaka* Nadagin from Selapuraka (Luders 1963: A39). The Ajātaśatru pillar – or part of it - was also given by a *bhāṇaka* who seems to have been far more influential than others recorded at the site. The inscription identifies him as 'the reverend, the venerable Isipalita (Rṣipalita), the *bhāṇaka* and the *navakamika*' (Luders 1963: A59). Isipalita's inscription is carved vertically, at eye level, right next to the centrally placed scene of the conversion of the *nāga* Erapatta on the south face of the pillar and his place of provenance is omitted in the inscription. He held two very important roles simultaneously: that of reciter and superintendent of the construction works.³⁷ It is tempting to hypothesize that such an important monk-donor who knew and recited the narratives may have been responsible for the planning the design of the Bharhut *vedikā*, including the selection and configuration of the stories represented, and possibly also the redaction of labels.³⁸ The visual format employed to illustrate Śākyamuni's main biographical events at Bharhut seem to support this hypothesis: the Buddha's presence in the 'biographical' reliefs is addressed as one of a *bhāṇaka*, always surrounded by a multitude of listeners and devotees.

Bhāṇakas played a key role in shaping the Buddhist tradition and scholars have emphasized the importance of oral transmission even when *sūtras* were written down.³⁹ Texts were always memorized and recited; they were mastered, internalized, uttered in public, and explained by expert performers who became the living repositories of *dharma*. In the early horizon of Gandharan Buddhism, we have significant evidence of the relevance of oral transmission of Buddhist narratives even

³⁵ On the role of *bhāṇakas* see von Hinuber (1996: 25); Drewes (2011) and Gummer (2012) explore in detail the role of *dharmabhāṇakas* in the *Māhāyāna* tradition.

³⁶ For Kanagahanalli see von Hinuber and Nakanishi 2014; for Sanchi see Marshall and Foucher 1982, I: inscr. 529 pl.135.69 and inscr. 691 pl. 137.60; for Karle see Luders 1973: no. 1095; this inscription is redacted and illustrated in Brancaccio and Ollett forthcoming: Fig. 6.

³⁷ The role of *navakammika/navakarmika* is discussed in detail by Silk (2008:75–99).

³⁸ Shiri (2020: 62) suggests that the *navakarmika* at Kanahaganalli was the one who also conceived the labels inscribed on the narrative reliefs.

³⁹ Collins 1992.

when written texts circulated. The abridged structure of some Gandharī *avadānas* indicates that manuscripts could have also functioned as memory aids for oral narration and performance, and storytelling was a key monastic activity at early Buddhist centers on the Indian Subcontinent, with diverse regional bases.⁴⁰ A written notation preserved in one of the Gandharī manuscripts even spells out the goal of storytelling as the monk who redacted that text noted how the story was recited for ‘Understanding of impermanence. With regards to the characteristic of impermanence, all should be told.’⁴¹ If such monastic reciters were in fact narrative specialists in early Buddhist India, then the case recorded at Bharhut where *bhāṇaka* Isipalita performed the function of supervisor of the work at the *stūpa*, would make perfect sense. The visual plan of the *vedikā* had to be formulated by someone with profound knowledge of the content of the stories, narrative strategies and storytelling as each story was intended to build knowledge on specific tenets thus creating an encyclopedic world were Buddhist principles and morals materialized in front of the devotees.

Since *bhāṇakas* had a significant input in the sponsorship of the Bharhut *stūpa vedikā* and the *bhāṇaka* Isipalita himself played the important role of supervisor of the work, then it should not surprise us that the Buddha’s role in the reliefs depicting scenes from his life at Bharhut is often framed as one of a *bhāṇaka* - he is consistently surrounded by crowds who appear in awe at his revelations of the *dharma*.

The different nature of the brief inscriptions that are carved on the reliefs, consisting of labels for scenes, characters, and places, may have also been informed by the performative tradition of oral recitation attested at the site by the presence of so many *bhāṇakas* as donors. This type of inscriptions, rather uncommon in Indian art, provide unmistakable Buddhist specificity to otherwise generic images. Comparable examples dating from the beginning of the common era can be found on the *vedikās* of the Buddhist *stūpas* at Kanagahanalli in Karnataka and Pauni in Maharashtra, while later on, descriptive labels can be seen on a narrative stela from Amaravati⁴² and a few paintings in the caves dating to the end of the 5th century.⁴³ The inscribed reliefs from Kanagahanalli constitute an interesting point of reference for the Bharhut material, given the extensive documentation available at this southern site and the relatively early date of the artistic material. Much like at Bharhut, the labels inscribed on the Kanagahanalli reliefs identify figures and allude to stories by naming protagonists and places, and they do not correlate closely to what survives in the written Pāli and Sanskrit traditions.⁴⁴ In reviewing the artistic material from Kanagahanalli, Quintanilla (2017) completely disengaged labels from textual sources, pro-

⁴⁰ Lenz 2003.

⁴¹ Lenz 2004: 210.

⁴² See Sarma (1985: 19). This stela is also mentioned by Salomon (1998: 120). For a discussion of the Ajaṅṭā labels see Schlingloff (1987: 245–249).

⁴³ The labels in the Ajaṅṭā caves were certainly unreadable, lost in the densely painted wall surfaces of the dark caves. The inscriptions placed beneath jāṭaka scenes in cave 2 and cave 17 correspond precisely to Sanskrit verses found in Aryāśura’s *Jāṭakamāla*, while in caves 2, 16, and 17, there are only descriptive labels identifying the painted characters. They are addressed by Cohen 1995 appendix A, 328–330, inscription nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; 362–378, inscription nos. 68, 79, 83. See also Schlingloff (1997: 250), who examined Aryāśura’s verse and the visual narrative from cave 17.

⁴⁴ On this issue see also Shiri 2020.

posing that these brief inscriptions were added to the reliefs about a century after they were carved to give greater specificity and contemporary relevance to images. On the other hand, Zin (2019: 148) remained anchored to the binary paradigm image/text by explaining how the lack of correspondence between the Kanagahanalli inscriptions and the written stories in Pāli and Sanskrit was due to missing textual sources with local relevance that served as the bases for the formulation of the narratives. The hypothesis that a regional textual tradition existed at Kanagahanalli, which did not leave traces in later horizons, has been convincingly argued by Tournier (2020), and the same may have happened in the contexts of Bharhut. However, the existence of local corpora of texts tied to the presence of a specific *nikāya* at any given site did not necessarily imply that written sources informed the visual tradition – it is likely that oral storytelling and performance affected the formation of a visual language even when a strong local textual tradition was established. In Gandhara, for example, even though in recent years much textual materials has surfaced, there is a strikingly poor correlation between the narrative preserved in the written Gandharī sources and the narrative sculptures from the region, whereas the parameters employed in visual art seems to be strongly informed by a local tradition of Buddhist performance.⁴⁵

Outside India, the best example of visual narratives augmented by inscribed labels, can be found in the Ānanda temple at Pagan, where inscriptions painted high up on the walls correspond exactly to Pāli *jātaka* titles.⁴⁶ The Bharhut inscriptions, however, do not reveal an exact correspondence between the stories depicted and literary sources like at Ajanta or Pagan. Scholars who worked on the Bharhut records tried unsuccessfully to correlate the labels with expressions found in the Pāli sources.⁴⁷ The *jātaka* titles at Bharhut appear less codified and more descriptive than the Pāli ones, as they tend to summarize the action depicted, record the entire beginning verse of a tale, or mention places, such as the enigmatic Mount Naḍoda, which are absent from the literature and were probably linked to local sacred geographies and narratives. All this evidence points to the existence of oral narrative sources with possible regional specificity for the Bharhut reliefs.⁴⁸ It also suggests that significant freedom existed in the practice of storytelling during this early generative phase at a

⁴⁵ On the connections between Gandharan art and performance see Brancaccio (in press).

⁴⁶ Robert Brown discusses the labeled *jātaka* scenes painted high up on the walls of this structure, pointing out that the Mōn inscriptions accompanying the images, which correspond exactly to the Pāli *jātaka* titles, were not legible. He suggests that the inscriptions had some sort of emblematic, iconic value, much like a visual form of the Tripiṭaka. Brown (1997: 89).

⁴⁷ Cunningham 1998, Luders 1963, and Barua 1979.

⁴⁸ In the context of the Kanagahanalli epigraphs, Zin (2019: 148, n.23) suggests that references to unknown places may be considered proof of the existence of a lost written tradition, as the relief where based on texts that were redacted locally and are now lost. The existence of a lost canon associated with the *nikāyas* present at Kanagahanalli is also posited by Tournier (2020). While concurring with these scholars that Buddhist literature, regional in nature, surely existed in antiquity and is now irretrievably lost – and this may have been the case at Bharhut as well, my hypothesis would like to suggest that the visual material was disengaged from the written. A thriving oral tradition, concurring with the existence of written texts, was crucial in morphing the early artistic narratives. As shown in the case of the Gandharī *avadāna* analyzed by Lenz (2004), the presence of a written canon does not at all exclude the importance of oral storytelling. Observations put forth by Barua on the mixed-use of speech and lack of consistency under the linguistic profile of Bhārhut inscriptions confirm that we should envision regional traditions and unwritten sources behind the visual formulation of the Bhārhut *vedikā*. Barua (1979: v. 1, 48).

time when narratives were coming together, making plausible the hypothesis that a *bhāṇaka-navakarmika* may have been involved in the *vedikā*'s conception.

If the brief labels inscribed on the surface of the reliefs do not aim at linking explicitly the visual with the textual, one wonders why they would be included at all. Were the labels meant to be read to help the devotees navigate through the narratives of the Buddha represented at the site? The Bharhut inscriptions are certainly more visible than those from Ajanta or Pagan; however, it is still debatable whether they were any more legible to the audience.⁴⁹ They are incised on the surface of the reliefs and are hardly discernible among the figures depicted, some are written vertically and clearly inscribed while the pieces were laying on the ground before their installation; others are placed high up on the coping stone.⁵⁰ The roundel illustrating the donation of the Jetavana *vihāra* (Fig. 3) well exemplifies the combination of words and images at Bharhut. Below the sculpted medallion appears the inscription 'jetavana anadhapediko deti kotisamthatena keta' or 'Anadhapedika (Anāthapiṇḍaka) gives the Jetavana after buying (it) with a layer of crores'. The left rim of the medallion shows

Fig. 3 Medallion from the *vedikā* pillar depicting the gift of the Jetavana *vihāra*
After A. Cunningham, *The stūpa at Bharhut*, pl. XXVIII



⁴⁹ Dehejia (1998:22) has argued for the didactic experience of reading the narrative at Bhārhut, suggesting that visitors were taken around by monks explaining the scenes. The issue of literacy should also be considered when examining these inscriptions. While it is possible that some monks and middle-class patrons at Bhārhut were literate, certainly not all the worshippers were able to read the inscriptions. In a different context, labels on archaic Greek vases have raised similar issues. See Hurwit 1990.

⁵⁰ Snodgrass (2000: 33) remarks that labels appear on Greek vases only in the Archaic Period and mostly in association with “especially complex ‘synoptic’ pictures,” which is something that, *mutatis mutandis*, can be observed in India as well.

an inscription identifying one of the buildings represented as ‘ko[saba]k[u]ti’ or the ‘the hut of the Kosabas’ (Kauśāmbas) while on the upper rim of the medallion is written ‘gadhakuti’ or ‘the perfumed hut’ to identify the other building depicted.⁵¹

Picture Scrolls as Models for the Bharhut *Vedikā*

The practice of augmenting the visual with labels identifying stories, places, or characters recalls what is commonly found in picture scrolls for the performance of popular stories used by picture showmen.⁵² These types of visual documents are traditionally part of South Asian popular culture, and studies on this artistic genre might help understand how written labels functioned within a figural representation and how they related to visual narratives. Good examples of such visual supports employed in performative traditions are the leaves of a nineteenth-century Gujarati album illustrating a Naraki tale depicting tortures inflicted in hell,⁵³ the well-known Kalāmkārī scrolls from Andhra Pradesh,⁵⁴ or some of the Bengali *paṭas*.⁵⁵ In these pictorial representations made to accompany oral narratives, labels are placed on the scroll near the actual images to identify the characters or the scenes. The secondary literature does not address directly who would read these labels, but they seem to have worked as reminders in the transmission of the story to the apprentice.⁵⁶ Neither the learned storyteller nor the audience read them during the performances.⁵⁷ We should assume that the storyteller was well acquainted with the plot, unless he was in a training stage, and that the audience attending the show probably was illiterate.

Unfortunately, we do not have surviving evidence of picture scrolls from the time of the Bharhut *stūpa*, nor we do know whether the Buddhist reciters addressing lay audiences used such devices to facilitate access to the narratives.⁵⁸ However, the Bharhut reliefs, with their labels similar to those found on painted panels or scrolls in later storytelling traditions, would suggest the existence of such visual aids in ancient times. Scholars have been puzzled by the absence of a clear sequential or chronological thread linking the Bharhut reliefs; the same lack of chronological ordering of the episodes can be observed in many traditions of

⁵¹ Translation by Salomon (1991: Appendix, no. 3, 267–268). See also Luders 1963: 105–109, B32–34 and Cunningham (1998: 84–89).

⁵² Jyotindra Jain discusses the ancient tradition of picture showmen and illustrates some of the images that accompany the oral narrative (1998: 8–21). See also Chatterji (2020) and Kadekar and Chasley (2020).

⁵³ See Jain (1998: Figs. 5 and 6).

⁵⁴ See Mair (1988: 103).

⁵⁵ See Patua Art (1989: 5).

⁵⁶ De Selva (1996: 190).

⁵⁷ As pointed out by Chatterji (2016) in the context of the Chitrakar tradition, it is assumed that the stories told are known in advance and nothing is ever narrated for the first time.

⁵⁸ In 13th century Japan, Buddhist itinerant preachers would deliver teachings to the lay followers using picture scrolls to collect funding for the renovations of major Buddhist temples (Kaminishi, 2006: 103–118) - one wonders if a similar scenario could also be envisioned for the funding of the monumental stone enclosure at Bharhūt.

citra kathās. For instance, in the modern Garoḍa scrolls from Gujarat,⁵⁹ different events from various legends are packed together in the same scroll; many scenes, represented in rectangular compartments, illustrate only climactic episodes in abbreviated ways that reflect the conflated narrative modes singled out by Dehejia.⁶⁰

The narrator appears to be responsible for stringing the story together. In brief, the visual narrative thread is not intrinsic to the pictures but resides in the minds of the audience. “The pictures only serve to concretize and make physically present the characters in the tale,” as “seeing is knowing.”⁶¹ This characteristic might offer a clue for decoding the heterogeneous imagery at Bharhut, which unfolds on the *vedikā* just as on picture scrolls employed as visual aids in performances and may explain why different scenes are not arranged sequentially as a chronological biography but appear as episodic and unrelated vignettes.

At Bharhut, in a cultural horizon dominated by orality and regional traditions where *bhāṇakas* were heavily involved in the sponsorship and supervision of artistic works, it seems only natural that the reliefs, being perhaps the earliest corpus of Buddhist narratives in stone, would follow a format already established in performative traditions of storytelling. This does not necessarily mean that the *vedikā* reliefs were viewed with the aid of a monk reciter much like a *citra kathā* with a storyteller. Rather, it suggests that picture panels or scrolls might have served as models for the creation of some of the earliest extant stone narratives in Buddhist art. The degree of sophistication displayed in the Bharhut narratives indicates that these reliefs were not the product of extemporaneous creation, but rather reflected patterns consolidated in performance art.

Ancient picture scrolls executed in perishable materials have not survived in the archaeological record; however, sporadic references to the use of scrolls in different religious contexts appear in the ancient Buddhist, Brahmanical, and Jain texts.⁶² Picture showmen referred to as *maṅkhas* are mentioned in several Jain sources,⁶³ where they are described as traveling from village to village carrying a picture board in their hands. Secular literature, such as Viśākhadatta’s *Mudrārākṣasa*, also refers to *yamapaṭṭakas* as picture showmen displaying a *yamapaṭṭa* consisting of “pictures [probably on cloth scrolls or hangings, of the rewards and punishments to be experienced in the realm] of Yama.”⁶⁴

Oral recitation of stories was a widespread practice among ancient Buddhist communities considering the oral/aural dimension of early Buddhist literature,⁶⁵ and portable visual aids may have well been employed when preaching to lay members of the community. Later artistic evidence shows that picture scrolls were indeed used in the context of the narration of the life of the Buddha. In the so-called Māyā Höhle

⁵⁹ Patua Art (1989: 12). These picture scrolls in Gujarati are called *tipanu*, which means ‘recording’ or ‘remark’.

⁶⁰ Dehejia 1997: 25–28.

⁶¹ Singh (1998: 101).

⁶² See Singh (1998: 8) and Varadpande (1987: vol. 1, 86–88).

⁶³ See Coomaraswamy (1929).

⁶⁴ Coomaraswamy (1929: 25).

⁶⁵ Collins (1992: 123).

II at the Buddhist cave site of Kyzyl in the Tarim basin, a fragment of wall painting illustrates Varṣākāra, Ajātaśatru minister, showing to the king a *paṭa* with four main life events of the Buddha depicted on it (Fig. 4).⁶⁶ It's also possible that such scrolls were used in antiquity to illustrate *jātaka* tales, as the dynamics of *karma* and rebirth were among the favorite themes treated by picture showmen outside of the Buddhist tradition. The *jātaka* representational format on the Bharhut *vedikā* where stories are depicted within self-contained round medallions is reminiscent of the vignettes appearing on a picture scroll accompanied by labels.

Conclusions

After a careful re-examination of the *vedikā* reliefs decorating the Bharhut *stūpa*, the following observations can be made:

First, the devotees did not relate to the life of Śākyamuni only as an exemplary career leading to salvation. The images suggest that the Buddha was seen as a human achiever and as a sacred presence manifesting itself at different places to an audience of devotees and listeners. The lack of interest in a strictly sequential narrative account of Śākyamuni's life might also indicate that an univocal, canonized written version of the biography was probably not set at the time, or at least was not influential in the process of artistic creation at Bharhut, in a milieu dominated by oral transmission where *bhānakas* played a key role.

Second, the large number of *jātakas* represented at Bharhut indicates that at this time they were more popular than Śākyamuni's historic biography. Many of these tales, replete with ordinary and fabulous characters probably had a regional diffusion and were handed down orally even if potentially documented in literary forms now lost. This reinforces the notion that a direct correspondence between visual art and text cannot be drawn for this early artistic phase and that much of what appears

Fig. 4 Varṣākāra, Ajātaśatru minister, showing to the king a *paṭa* with four main life events of the Buddha's life. Kizil, Maya Cave, Site II. After A. Grünwedel (1920), *Buddhistische Kunst in Indien*, p. II, 104



⁶⁶ Mair (1998: 47).

at Bharhut reflects a fluid oral tradition. The Bharhut *jātakas* are depicted in ways very different from the epiphanic life events and were probably the main repositories of the Buddhist edifying message; they illustrated to the local audience the moral essence of the Buddha in a familiar manner.

Ultimately it is hard to imagine that the complex and sophisticated visual language adopted at Bharhut had no predecessors. The distinctive use of inscriptions labeling scenes, characters, and places, unique in the art of the time, seems to indicate that something similar to picture plates or storytelling scrolls might have served as a model for the body of imagery illustrated at the site. Modern visual aids used by picture showmen carry labels, and we have some evidence that the use of similar scrolls was common at the time when Bharhut was constructed. Furthermore, the regional and oral nature of many of the stories depicted on the Bharhut *vedikā* makes this a reasonable working hypothesis to explain the genesis of Buddhist narrative art. The fact that at Bharhut a *bhāṇaka* served both as a reciter and responsible for the architectural work, and was the mind behind the stone *vedikā*, confirms that Buddhist art and performance were intertwined in the early Buddhist horizon.

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