



Religious Sculpture of the Indian Subcontinent

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Sacred word, sacred image

At the heart of Indian religious practice is the recitation of the sacred word, distilled in its purest form to a simple syllable or *mantra*. The paramount significance attached to sound as the very source of creation is as old as Brahmanical ritual itself – certainly reaching into the second millennium BCE, and has its origins even further back in the Vedic past of Indian proto-history. This profound veneration for sacred sound was given expression in the concept of supreme knowledge (*śruti*) obtained through direct revelation. The divine form of the early gods was first given expression through ritual gesture. Only in the later periods, around the second century BCE, did these concepts of divinity find expression in the form of icons of the pantheons of gods, principally Brahmanical (later termed Hindu), and associated Buddhist and Jain deities.

The art of sculpture in India was, like most other expressions of early artistic activity, directly linked to the sacred realm. Its existence as an art form evolved from an ancient tradition of freestanding image-making associated with the veneration of nature spirits, represented by the myriad forces inhabiting trees, rocks, rivers and the earth itself, together with living creatures, most notably snakes and birds (pl.1). In all probability such images were installed beneath trees, in forest groves and by rivers, whose spirits they were seen to embody (pl.2); alternatively, the deified elements were worshipped in the form of natural phenomena, such as unusual rock formations, or even an anthill, the abode of snakes (pl.4).

These cult practices were widespread in the first millennium BCE, as both the inscriptional record and early religious literature testify. Early period inscriptions associate wells with *nāga* cults and so on,¹ although no temple remains are recognizable to us today. Buddhist texts are particularly informative, providing references to these personified force of nature, some of which carry over into the Brahmanical pantheon of gods. In one of the earliest surviving Buddhist texts, the *Culla Niddesa*, a commentary on *sūtras* traditionally attributed to the Buddha's disciple Sāriputta (fourth century BCE), the author recorded that outside Buddhism a number of cults were practised, devoted to the worship of the earth spirits (*yaḥṣas* and *yaḥṣis*), snakes (*nāgas*) and mythical birds (*garuḍas* and *suparṇas*), along with the sun (Sūrya), the moon (Chandra) and a number of Vedic gods, Agni (fire), Indra (weather god) and Brahmā (god of sacrifice), and the newly emerging cults of Vāsudeva and Baladeva.² Sāriputta's mention of the folk deities Vāsudeva and Baladeva is one of the earliest recorded references to these deities, whose cults persist today embodied in the worship of Viṣṇu and Balarāma.

There can be little doubt that these deities were worshipped in sculpted forms, of which stone sculptures of *yaḥṣas* and *yaḥṣis* from the early centuries BCE are among the oldest survivors. The second-century BCE Besnagar (ancient Vidisa) pillar inscription of Heliodorus, a convert to the cult of Vāsudeva, makes it clear

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◀ Pārśvanātha, the twenty-third Jain *tirthaṅkara* (detail, full view p.14). The meditating yogic, here a Jina protected by a *nāga*, an early iconographic form that merges anthropomorphised deities and animistic nature spirits. Gyāraspur, near Bhilsa, Madhya Pradesh. Early 7th century. Sandstone. Height 130.8 cm. V&A: IS.18–1956



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► Coping stone fragment with a frieze of bells. Bharhut *stūpa* enclosure railing. This fragment once formed part of the lower frieze of the massive coping stone on the stone railing at Bharhut *stūpa* (pl.25). Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh. Late 2nd–1st century BCE, Sunga period. Sandstone. Height 20 cm. V&A: IS.69–1986



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◀ Bharhut. Sections of the enclosure railing and a standard pillar (*stambha*) in situ at the eastern gate of the great Bharhut *stūpa*. On the corner post are depicted two noblemen, one riding an elephant and bearing a relic casket for internment, the other on horseback and carrying a *garuḍa* standard (*garuḍadhvaja*). Roundel decorations include a goddess being lustrated by elephants (Gaja-Lakṣmi) and a male and female devotee venerating a *bodhi*-tree shrine. Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh. Late 2nd–1st century BCE, Sunga period. Red sandstone. Railing height 2 m. Indian Museum, Kolkata

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▼ Railing pillar from the original shrine enclosure at Bodhgaya, Bihar. This railing belonged to an early structure marking the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, probably enclosing the *bodhi* tree. The upper roundels depict stories from the previous lives of the Buddha (*jātakas*). A Brahmi inscription records this pillar railing as 'the gift of the noble lady Kurangi'. 1st century CE, Sunga period. Sandstone. Height. 116 cm. V&A: IS.1065–1883. Given by F.A. Turton



conceived as a divinity with infinite potential. He was thus associated in the early historical period with Viśvarūpa, and thence with Viṣṇu. In Vaiṣṇava theology, *Puruṣa* is invoked as the origin of the ideal man, a role assumed by Viṣṇu in Hinduism. *Puruṣa* is also associated with verticality and the pillar (*stambha*), which denotes the interconnectivity of earth and heaven, the material and the transcendent. Again, this concept resonates with Vaiṣṇava theology and Viṣṇu's supreme responsibility as the provider of stability in the universe.

Animal sacrifice was an important dimension of Vedic worship, and the persistence of the pillar symbolism into the historical era may be linked to this. A Kushan-period stone post at Mathura bears an inscription in Sanskrit associating it with the reign of Vasishka and to the performance of a specific *yajña*, a twelve-day Vedic sacrifice (*dvādaśrātra yajña*).²⁴ It has knotted ropes carved in relief on its shaft, a clear reference to those used to bind the sacrificial animal. It has also been argued that the Śiva at Gudimallam holding a club or axe in one hand and the limp body of a deer by its hind legs in the other suggests animal sacrifice (pl.39).²⁵ This creature persists in later images of Śiva, although as a joyfully leaping deer and explained by Śiva's role as Lord of the Wild Animals (Paśupati). Animal sacrifice remains a feature of non-Brahmanical worship to this day, seen in goddess (especially Kālī) and spirit worship in the Indian countryside (see Chapter 6 and pls.193–4).²⁶

Freestanding pillars (*stambhas*) were a major element of early Jain and Buddhist *stūpa* sites. Pillars surmounted with a lion, bull or wheel were a regular feature of relief representations of Sunga, Kushan and Satavahana *stūpas*, typically flanking the offering platform or the ceremonial gateway (pl.25). This tradition owes a debt to the Parthian tradition of Iran, where the winged lion capital has an old ancestry. The bull is linked to west Asian virility cults and continues to convey such messages in Hindu India through his close association with Śiva as his sacred vehicle (*vāhana*), Nandi. The spoked wheel (*cakra*) emblem has its origins in early solar cult imagery, which can also be traced to the Persian world. It was absorbed into the Vasudeva-Viṣṇu cult of early Hinduism and linked to both early Buddhist and Jain imagery, as a symbol of the teachings (as the *dharmacakra*) and as an emblem of sovereignty (of the universal ruler or *cakravartin*). The *cakra-stambha* – the wheel symbol surmounted on a pillar – was used to embody both these concepts. They were employed only in the early period of Buddhism, as sculptural relief depictions testify at Bharhut and Sanchi, and most notably at Satavahana sites in Andhra Pradesh.²⁷ The legacy of this tradition is preserved today in Vaiṣṇava temples, where a *garuḍa-stambha* is an essential element of the temple scheme. Jain temples also continue the tradition of erecting memorial *stambha*, topped by an image of Brahmā

► *Stūpa* No.1, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh. Brick *stūpa* of 3rd–2nd century BCE construction, with the sandstone gateways (*torāṇas*) a 1st century CE addition. Maurya–Sunga periods. Photograph by Lala Deen Dayal, 1880s. V&A SSEA Archive



▲ Rock-cut Buddhist shrine, known as the 'Lomas Rṣi Cave', Barabar Hill, Bihar, probably dating from the reign of Emperor Aśoka, mid-3rd century BCE. This is among the oldest of Buddhist rock-cut shrines and it set the trend for larger scale rock-cut *caitya* halls, which was fully developed by the 1st century BCE, as seen at Kondane. The architectural form closely follows wooden prototypes; note the frieze of elephants worshipping the *stūpa*. Bihar. Mauryan period

► Reliquary recovered from the relic chamber of *Stūpa* No.2 at Sonari, south-west of Sanchi, during excavations conducted by Alexander Cunningham and F.C. Maisey in 1851. It is decorated with a frieze of parading animals. Sonari, Madhya Pradesh. 2nd century BCE. Steatite, lathe-turned and engraved. Height 16.83 cm. V&A: IM. 219–1921

(as seen at Ellora) or by four Jinas, orientated to the four directions.

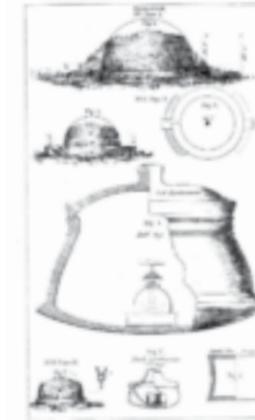
Central to Vedic worship was a recited liturgy, the Vedas ('knowledge', i.e., sacred knowledge), and paramount to its practice and preservation was the oral transmission of this vast body of verse. The recitation of the *R̥gveda*, the first of the four great Vedic books – consisting of hymns, poems and invocations – was an essential accompaniment to the performance of ritual. Other books, such as the *Sāmaveda*, were set to music and chanted, again during rituals. Appendices to the Vedas, known as Brahmanas, prescribed the accompanying rituals and sacrificial procedures to be followed. Those who composed the verses and enacted the rituals became known by the same name, and later as Brahmins.

These rites do not require structural temples, but rather only places to perform the rituals, preferably open ground, squared, levelled and marked out to form a sacred geometry (*yantra*), typically in stones or brick. Thus prepared, the Vedic ritual site is known as a *sthaṇḍila*, and by nature it is temporary and transient, rarely leaving any archaeological record.

Vedic knowledge is essentially concerned with the enactment of ritual. In response to the rising tide of criticism of the authority of the Brahman caste as the self-appointed keepers of ritual, led by the Buddha and Mahāvīra among others, a series of treatises known as the *Upanishads* was written. Their aim was to provide a more philosophical basis for Vedic practices. They represent the final phase of Vedic thought, and in turn served to provide the philosophical foundations of Hinduism. At the centre of Brahmanical thought is the belief in *samsara*, the cycle of endless rebirths and the determining role of actions or deeds (*karma*). The fifth- and fourth-century BCE reforming sects, most notably Jainism and Buddhism, sought to provide an alternative path to liberation (*mokṣa*) and so put an end to cyclical rebirth. Their founders, Mahāvīra and the Buddha, were the most successful of many reforming thinkers of this period.²⁸ Both were based in the kingdom of Magadha, in modern Bihar, the most prosperous kingdom of northern India of the day. It boasted a number of substantial cities, such as Rajgir and the newly created city of Pataliputra (modern Patna).

A ritual-based faith had little need of cult images; one based on devotion did. The gradual displacement of Vedic rituals and sacrifice by forms of Brahmanical worship was accompanied by rapid developments in the evolution of temples to both receive the new deities and perform prayers and rituals to venerate them and secure their grace. Simultaneously, the newly evolving temples provided a canvas onto which a rich iconographic and narrative tradition, largely literary, could now be given visual expression. The scene was set to irreversibly link religious sculpture to the temple, integrating it into the very fabric of the building, and making it intrinsic to the temple's meaning and function.

► Drawing of the context in which the rock-crystal *stūpa* was discovered at Bhojpur *Stūpa* No.2, Madhya Pradesh. Published A. Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes*, 1854



► Reliquary in the form of a *stūpa*. Recovered from an earthenware vessel deposited in the relic chamber of *Stūpa* No.2 at Bhojpur, south-east of Sanchi, during excavations conducted in 1851 by Alexander Cunningham and F.C. Maisey. Bhojpur, Madhya Pradesh. c.2nd century BCE. Rock crystal. Height 14.1 cm. V&A: IM.223–1921

