

Evidence for Early Buddhist Architecture from Kanganhalli

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The following note was first prepared for a volume to be published in Andhra Pradesh, but the evidence for early Buddhist architecture found at Kanganhalli in Karnataka is of considerable importance to all those who study Buddhist culture in Gandhara as well. I should like to offer this information to *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. XV, in honour of Professor Farzand Ali Durrani, who has inspired so much archaeological work in the Northwest and also provided a home in the Department of Archaeology and the Museum at the University of Peshawar of appropriate stature to the importance of the archaeological materials collected.

According to the Archaeological Survey of India's Internet Web-page (http://asi.nic.in/vsasi/album_kanganhalli.html), excavations at the important Buddhist centre of Kanganhalli, located on the left bank of the river Bhima, are five kilometres northeast of Sannati in Gulbarga district, Karnataka.¹ Remains span "both Hinayana and Mahayana phases of Buddhism," according to the ASI. These excavations "have revealed remains of a stupa measuring 19m in diameter with preserved lower and upper drum up to a height of 3.1m. The sculptural embellishments of the stupa show close affinity with art traditions of Bharhut and Sanchi in Central India in the earlier Hinayana stage, and Amaravati and the Deccan school in the later Mahayana stage." They witness "the development of Buddhism ... between the 2nd century BC and the 4th century AD."

The large sculpted panels from this stupa are frequently inscribed with labels in Brahmi script, as at Bharhut. The most widely publicised of these inscriptions "referring to Asoka the Great (Rayo Asoka) is inscribed on a carved slab depicting king Asoka and his queen."²

To this observer, however, the settings of these scenes most extraordinarily provide new evidence for the actual impermanent architecture of ancient India. Louis Renou, in his article on "The Vedic House," provided us an exceptional window, using texts, to such temporary architecture built of wooden poles and beams, with thatch roofs and woven-mat or wattle walls (Renou, 1939: 481-504; 1998: 142-61). Ananda Coomaraswamy's pioneering essays on "Early Indian Architecture" documented stone representations of architecture at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati (Coomaraswamy, 1992). To a greater degree than many of those at Kanganhalli, however, those had begun a process of iconic transformation in their representation that moves away from built architecture (Meister, 1992: xvii-xxviii). Within the artistic idiom at Kanganhalli, what you see is what was built. While this is also more-or-less the case at Bharhut, the range, scale, complexity, and detail of real architecture represented at Kanganhalli is unprecedented.

One of Kanganhalli's reliefs shows the newly-born Buddha carried up in a palanquin consisting of four pillars, a wooden balustrade with woven in-fill, and a roof railed in by fencing with a cross-vaulted structure of rafters, thatch, cross-ties, and terra-cotta finials. This Coomaraswamy would call a "*divaka-garbha*"—defined in his "Indian Architectural Terms" as "an inner room" in a palace "shaped like a palankeen" (Coomaraswamy: 94). Coomaraswamy also illustrates two palanquins of a somewhat more elaborate design represented at Sanchi and Amaravati (Coomaraswamy: 11, fig. B; 46, fig. 25).

The pillars of this palanquin are represented as round wooden poles with pot capitals. Details are those of carpentry construction. Some palace scenes from Kanganhalli show plain chamfered octagonal pillars and addorsed animal capitals, much like the interior plain and ornamented

antechamber pillars of the earliest Western Ghat caves. Such pillars, whether wooden or stone is not certain, also are represented in palace scenes on Sanchi reliefs (Coomaraswamy: 42, 44).

A simple hemispherical stupa on a garlanded drum in one relief at Kanganhalli shows heavy garlands hanging from rings attached to the drum's railing; elaborate multi-headed cobras are entwined around the dome. The square railing of the *harmikā* box above encloses the just-visible central shaft for a large umbrella above; also in that enclosure, however, corner pillars with rounded capitals support a tiered roof from which a vast multitude of smaller umbrellas spring, surrounding the central umbrella like branches of a tree.

Both the metaphor—and realistic rendering of actual structure—is carried over in another sculpted representation, that of a circular tree-shrine with four storeys. The ground storey consists of an open ring of octagonal pillars with no capitals that frames the thick shaft of a large tree, its base encased by a square battered enclosure. On the two storeys above, "cow's-eye" vaulted dormers alternate with ventilating cages of the sort seen in more condensed form at Kondane, Bedsa, and Karle (Coomaraswamy: 39, 40). On the third storey, branches of the central tree grow through the encircling dormers, as also in a relief at Sanchi (Coomaraswamy: 21, fig. 27).

The simplicity of the architecture at Kanganhalli is belied by the complexity of its representation. It is not simplified *in* its representation and is made complex by the realism of the details that are represented. One relief shows an elliptical hut with a thatched roof. Its curving wall is rendered to represent in detail its construction of wattle with in-filled daub. The arched doorway shows an inner wooden frame with a tie-beam. The relic casket within sits on a carpentered bentwood stand. Such details remind one more of the Lomas Rishi and Sudama caves of the Mauryan period than of later condensed representations.

A relief of one three-storeyed building resembles the tree-shrine above in details, but shows a sloped stairway behind the ground-floor octagonal pillars, propped up underneath by a pillar as if not permanent, leading up to the next storey. The first is enclosed, with interlaced windows shown on the corners, and dormer balconies and ventilators between. The second storey has dormers also at the corners. The topmost third storey is an open terrace enclosed by fencing with a rectangular thatched structure at its centre. This has interlaced windows in its solid walls; a dormer entrance frames what seems to be a turban.

These represent structures built of simple materials, but complex as actual architecture beyond the Vedic buildings described in Renou's texts (Renou, 1939: 481-504; 1998: 142-61). That they are actual buildings used both as shelter and for ritual purposes seems clear from their narrative and iconic contexts. One relief especially fascinates by having a similar multi-storeyed "*vihāra*" at its centre, but represented surrounded by trees in a garden complex, one of them marked by a surrounding fence, and with three distinguishable round huts. In the upper left is an altar with footprints. To the right is a marked footpath.

What is represented in much greater detail than in other reliefs from Bharhut and Sanchi is the *vihāra* and "sweet-smelling" huts of the Jetavana garden (Renou, 1998: 142, fig. 3; Lüders, 1963: pl. XXXVIII). Neither Sanchi nor Bharhut shows the *vihāra*, only the huts, but Lüders reports that Huan-tsang found "a Vihāra nearly 60 feet high" at the "site of the old Jetavana" in the seventh century AD. and that Fa-hien had also seen it in the fourth century. Lüders goes on to suggest that the presence of the fenced tree signifies a second nearby event, the miracle of Śrāvastī. "The anachronism of which [the artist] made himself guilty ... may have scarcely disturbed him." Of the *vihāra* — not present in the relief from Bharhut he is discussing—he comments, "I fully agree

with the opinion of Foucher that the Vihāra marked the place of the victory of the Buddha on the occasion of the great miracle (Lüders: 106)."

This important Kanganhalli relief is broken off at the bottom, but the same theme is picked up in several other fragments, where an ox-cart is shown in great detail, loaded with square coins, in the court of the Jetavana compound. The coins are being unloaded and spread around a carefully detailed fenced compound. Lüders' description of the simpler Bharhut relief, which is labelled "Anāthapedika presents the Jetavana, having bought it for a layer of crores," cites the *Chullavaga*: Anāthapindika had the money brought out in carts and ordered the floor to be covered with pieces laid side by side. Only a small part close by the gateway remained uncovered, and here Jeta himself erected a *kotthaka*, while Anāthapindika built *vihāras* and all sorts of buildings required for the residence of the monks (Lüders: 105).

No other representation of this narrative is so detailed or convincing as these reliefs from Kanganhalli. As we can see the mats forming the sides of the ox-cart, we also can see the tiles of the rounded gatehouse roofs.

Several other reliefs represent a ritual structure I have not yet been able to identify. These show a series of vaulted structures with tiled roofs acting as an enclosure—like the cloisters around Angkor Wat—around a stepped structure consisting of double stairways leading from landing to landing, as in stepped tanks of a later period, to an upper platform. Busts of human figures are shown interspersed as if climbing up this sacred structure (one is somewhat reminded of the later monument at Borobudur). On this upper terrace, however, in the one complete relief, are shown two stupas, a tree, and a pedestal altar. The two stupas are differentiated; one has three pillars in front of a single drum, with a fence as coping, and three umbrellas over the *harmikā*; the second has a second lower drum with a *torāṇa*-shaped entry that leads to an interior chamber.

The forms of huts represented to this point have been those of the simple forest ascetic, although brought together into larger complexes that function as monastic establishments (Meister, 1990: 219-44). Nowhere else have such complexes been shown with such realism or detail. These form the pre-history of the iconic architecture of later India, but buildings here are still containers for emblems without becoming icons themselves (Meister, 1986: 33-50; Renou, 1998).

One Kanganhalli relief does show a dome-and-cornice structure, which Coomaraswamy saw as intermediate to the temple, with an arched entrance framing a reliquary (Meister, 1988: 5-26). The dome still seems to have been of thatch, but is covered in the relief with decoration of writhing garland forms and lotuses. One final smaller relief, however, perhaps near the end of the sequence at Kanganhalli, ca. first-second century AD, shows two devotees approaching a circular building; two pillars frame a porch in front of the reliquary enshrined. The dome of this dome-and-cornice structure has one fronting vaulted dormer and a terra-cotta finial. These two reliefs form a beginning at this site for temple-like shrines. Such architectural shelters, however, can be traced both back as far as Bharhut and forward to the simple stone temples of the Pallava period (Meister, 1988: figs. 6, 10, 23, 24).

Kanganhalli offers rich new evidence for links between North India and the South in the early centuries BC and AD; representations of an architectural world hardly documented by other means; and insights into the process by which ritual use could begin to give architectural form iconic depth. The *vihāra* structure depicted in the Jetavana garden, in particular, gives us a model for later temple conceptions not available from any other material so early. This alone is among Karnataka's most important contributions to South Asia and her history.

Notes

¹ A preliminary report on these excavations and the recovered sculptures was presented by the Director General of the Archaeological Survey at the Fifteenth Conference on South Asian Archaeology of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Leiden, Netherlands, in July 1999.

² Ibid.

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