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Death Rituals, Social Order and the Archaeology of Immortality in the
Ancient World

'Death Shall Have No Dominion'

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Chapter

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Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Mortuary Traditions in Ancient India: Stūpas, Relics, and the Archaeological Landscape

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From its beginnings ... Buddhism has been and continues to be a religion concerned with death and with the dead. Buddhist doctrines, practices, and institutions all bear some relation to this theme. Doctrinal teachings speak of death as occurring at each moment, as one causally dependent set of conditions passes away and another arises. In this sense, death is simply change, the way things are. ... Since actions in this life are said to affect one's condition in the next, in a broad sense, all forms of Buddhist practice might be said to include an element of death preparation.

(Cuevas & Stone 2007, 1–2)

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism and Death

The teachings of the Buddha, which recognise the omnipresence of suffering as a central pillar of the human condition, have a particular resonance for understandings of death, in that it is one of the most profound causes of suffering and despair. Buddha's Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path offer us a systematic method for the alleviation of suffering, be it psychological, spiritual, social, or environmental in nature. But how is the suffering of death dealt with by the Buddhist tradition, and how do its mortuary rituals relate to the wider history of death rites in ancient India? In particular, how does the archaeological evidence contribute to our understanding of Buddhist notions of death and the treatment of the deceased body, particularly that of the historical Buddha?

Death is central to the Buddhist perspective on life, as suggested by Cuevas and Stone's (2007, 1–2) earlier quote. The concepts of life and death are not mutually dichotomous, but rather life is seen as a preparation for death, as reflected in prescribed monastic meditations on impermanence and non-attachment to life aimed

at achieving 'death without fear'. Monks' meditational practice is intimately bound up with death as a focus for death preparation, but their involvement with death rites for the laity provides an additional means of ensuring freedom from death (Cuevas & Stone 2007, 2). The preoccupation with death is further illustrated by certain, albeit marginal, meditation practices that take place in cremation grounds, with corpses providing the central focus (Schopen 1996). Archaeological evidence from Buddhist sites datable to the late centuries BC shows that *stūpas* (Figure 23.1), repositories of the Buddhist relic, were situated so as to be visually prominent within the monastic complex, and in later periods were positioned within the central courtyard of monasteries themselves (Shaw 2000, 2007). This situation may be contrasted with the orthodox Brahmanical tradition in which cremation grounds are kept away from settlement zones because of the negative and polluting associations of the physical remains of the dead. An oft-cited exception to this rule within orthodox contexts is Varanasi, which despite being known as the sacred city of the Hindus, has the main cremation ground at the very heart of its sacred and commercial centre (Parry 1994). But the evidence suggests that Varanasi did not emerge as a pan-Indian Hindu centre until at least the mid-first



Figure 23.1. Stūpa at Andher, near Sanchi (second century BC).

millennium AD with the rise of the Pāśupata ascetical tradition (Bakker 1996; Bakker & Isaacson 2004), whose own inversion of orthodox concepts of purity and pollution may in itself have been influenced by Buddhist practices. The main aim of this paper is thus to explore how and why the relic and *stūpa* cult with their direct associations with mortuary remains became so central to the spread of Buddhism. In the second half of the paper these discussions are situated within a specific landscape context, drawing on the results of the Sanchi Survey Project in central India (Shaw 2007).

BUDDHIST HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Although the precise dating of the historical Buddha is subject to ongoing debate (Bechert 1991), his life and teachings are usually placed between the sixth and fifth centuries BC. He began life as Gautam Siddhartha, prince of the Sakya clan, based around the border of the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and the Nepalese Terai. After witnessing a corpse on display at a funeral procession, Siddhartha renounced his royal lifestyle for the

path of a mendicant. His eventual ‘enlightenment’, after which he became known as the Buddha, is intricately bound up with the recognition of the omnipresence of human suffering (*dukkha*), and the formulation of his own version of *dharma* based on, amongst other things, the ‘eightfold path’ aimed at the alleviation of *dukkha* through various modes of ‘corrected’ thought, attitude, and action. Although asceticism was already a recognised path within orthodox Brahmanism, the Buddha’s rejection of extreme renunciation for a more humanistic and measured response to the ills of the day, whether religious, social, economic, psychological, or environmental in origin, placed the Buddha’s version of *dharma* firmly within the heterodox camp.

For this early period of Buddhist history, we are dependent largely on the Pali Canon (notwithstanding problems in dating and interpretation common to oral traditions), which is purported to have been composed during the lifetime of the Buddha. In addition to providing the main framework of Buddhist theology, these texts contain incidental references to the geographical, social, and religious conditions of the time. Key urban

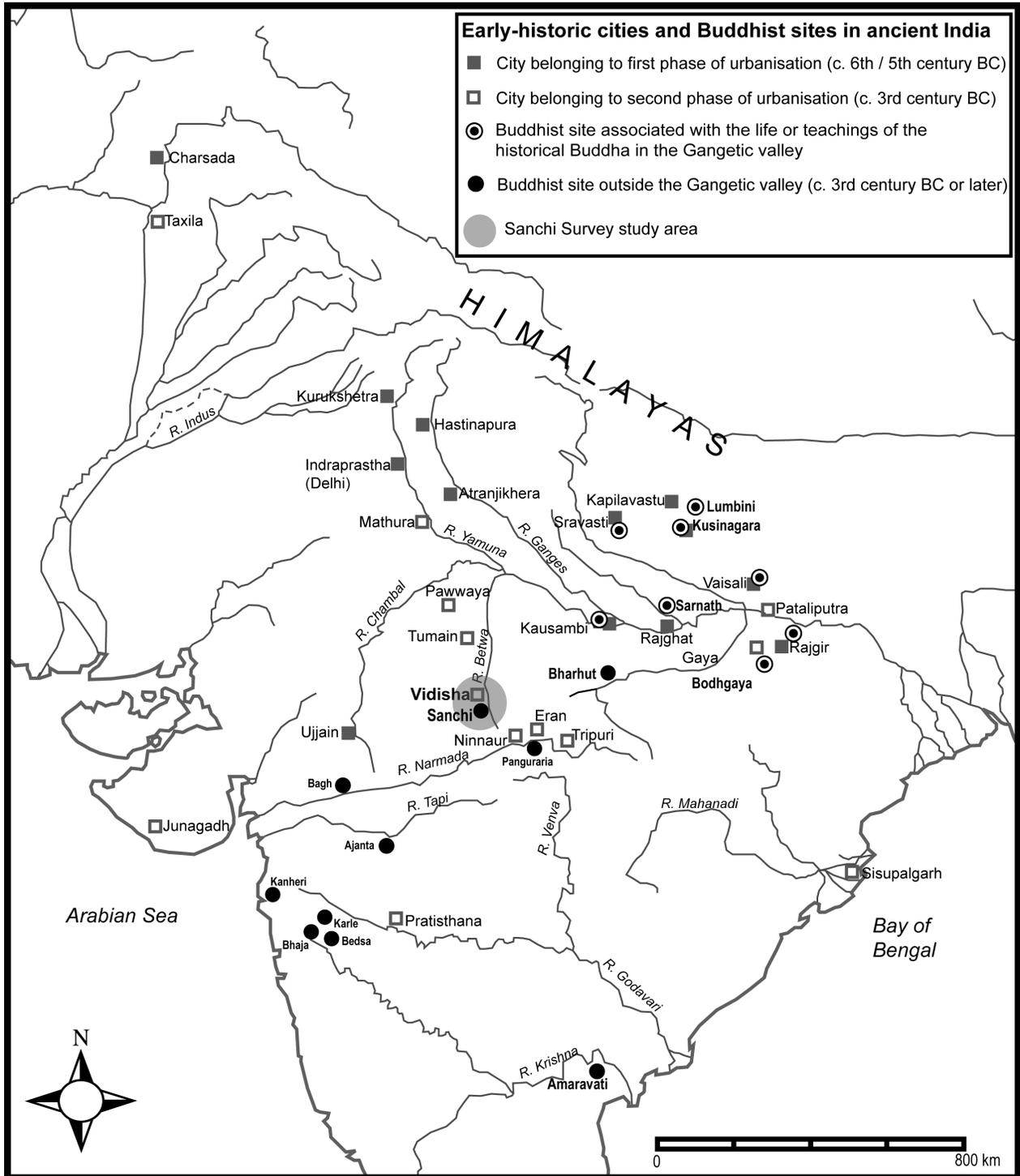


Figure 23.2. Distribution of urban centres and Buddhist sites in ancient India.

centres in the Gangetic valley such as Rajgir, Sravasti, Vaisali, and Kausambi figure as places frequented by the Buddha, or as locations for the earliest Buddhist monasteries, donated to the *saṅgha* by royalty or upstanding figures of society (Figure 23.2). Whilst monastery buildings

at the first three of these places have been identified archaeologically, they have yielded no material evidence datable with any reliability prior to the early centuries AD (Coningham 2001). The absence of archaeological correlates for earlier phases may, on the one hand,

reflect problems relating to excavation methodology in India (see especially Kennet 2004), but also point to the probable makeshift nature of monastic dwellings during the time of the Buddha, when the *saṅgha* consisted of a body of monks compelled to wander for most of the year apart from the monsoon months, when they were required to take up communal residence in temporary rain retreats (*vessana*). In time, these retreats grew into permanent monasteries, although the question of when the transition from peripatetic to sedentary monasticism took place is still debated. This transition is central to discussions regarding the ‘domestication’ of the *saṅgha* as it is seen as providing the basis for the formalisation of exchange networks between monastic and lay populations (Shaw 2011, 2013a).

It is not until the third century BC, that is, several centuries after the Buddha’s demise, that the *saṅgha*’s activities become manifest in the archaeological record both within and beyond the Buddhist heartland. For the first time we have Buddhist *stūpas*, spherical monuments, designed to house the relics of the Buddha and other saints and monks, as well as shrines (*ceṭiya*) and monasteries (*vihāra*) (the earliest archaeological evidence for monastic dwellings dates to the post-Mauryan [ca. second–first centuries BC]; before this, monks were most likely living in adapted rock-shelters and simple buildings made of impermanent materials: Shaw 2007, 2011). It is during the Mauryan period, largely because of the patronage of Emperor Aśoka, that Buddhism develops from a regional sect focussed on the Gangetic valley, to a pan-Indian, and subsequently pan-Asian phenomenon (Figure 23.2). The close link between Buddhist propagation and imperial expansion is illustrated through the distribution of Aśokan edicts, many of which occur within Buddhist monastic compounds (Allchin & Norman 1985; Falk 2006). However, it is not state patronage alone that enabled Buddhism to become the first religious tradition to propel itself within a pan-Indian world view. Indeed the second, and most prolific phase of Buddhist propagation occurred during the post-Mauryan period (second–first centuries BC), with funding principally in the form of collective patronage pooled together from a cross section of society, and with royalty playing a comparatively minor role; however, sites do continue to be funded by individual wealthy patrons during the post-Mauryan period (Shaw 2011). Other factors include the spread of pan-Indian modes for visually representing the Buddhist narrative and a range of missionary functions that catered to local needs and acted as instruments of lay patronage.

These ‘practical’ provisions included access to medical, banking, educational, and agricultural resources (Shaw 2007, 2011, 2013a, forthcoming; Shaw & Sutcliffe 2005; Sutcliffe et al. 2011). Moreover, many Buddhist monks were also funerary practitioners, ritual experts in the ‘business’ of death. Schopen (1996) refers to various historical instances in China, for example, of monasteries being disbanded, only to be reinstated after the rapid realisation of the consequent absence of a professional community for dealing with the dead. The other closely related factor, which forms the focus of this paper, was the spread of the *stūpa* and relic cult, whereby, it has been suggested, each relic came to be envisaged as a part of a larger Buddha-body or corpse that upheld the Buddhist world as a whole (Walters 2002). It would not be an overstatement to say that the establishment of Buddhism across South Asia (and later Asia as a whole) was a remarkable religious and cultural feat. This paper will concentrate on the role that the *stūpa* and relic cult played in the formation of a pan-Buddhist geography and how it related to wider conceptions (both orthodox and heterodox) of death, and mortuary traditions in ancient India.

THE BUDDHA’S DEATH

The starting point for assessing the treatment of the dead within Buddhism is provided by Buddha’s own death and funeral. Although the cause of his death was rather mundane (although not without its ambiguities) – prolonged dysentery followed by a final meal (a dish called *Sūkara maddava* whose precise identity is still contested, with interpretations ranging from pork to an ‘entheogenic’ fungus with possible links to Pūtika that figures in the late and post-Vedic Brahmanical literature as a substitute for the magical Soma of the Vedas, which seems to have aggravated further his existing condition and led ultimately to his death (*Digha Nikāya* 16: 4: 14–20; Rhys Davids 1910, 138–9; Wasson 1982) – the *process* of his death was by no means ordinary. He had for several months predicted the precise time and place of his death, and by finally reaching *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha escaped the endless cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) by which ordinary folk are bound. As argued by Strong (2007), the Buddha’s death is not a *transition* from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead in the recognised anthropological sense (Van Gennep 1960), but rather a *transcendence* of the very cycle of life and death. The Buddha’s attainment of *nirvāṇa* represents his conquest over desire and

attachment, the principal causes of suffering, but it also represents the conquest of death itself (Cuevas & Stone 2007, 2). In later, Mahayana, Buddhism, the concept of the Bodhisattva is introduced in order to deal with the theological problem caused by the Buddha's departure from this world. Bodhisattvas, unlike the Buddha, stay in this world in order to help humans in their quest to alleviate suffering. By contrast, the Buddha, having reached *nirvāṇa*, has left this world for good. However, we are presented with the fundamental contradiction that despite his apparent departure, the Buddha continues to be present in some way through his relics. This issue, which has continued to vex Buddhist theologians of the Theravada tradition, will be taken up in more detail later on, although it is important to note that problems with the definition of the term Theravada are central to recent Buddhist scholarship (Gethin 2012).

According to textual sources, after the Buddha's death, his cremated remains were distributed amongst eight polities of the Gangetic valley region, with each share deposited in its own *stūpa*. Several centuries later, the Mauryan emperor Aśoka is attributed with having had these remains disinterred and redistributed in eighty-four thousand newly built *stūpas*. Although there have been claims to the contrary, none of the original pre-Aśokan *stūpas* have been identified with any certainty, again, most probably because they were simple earthen mounds that either did not survive or were elaborated upon in later years; since the earliest *stūpa* excavation projects during the nineteenth century were aimed at the retrieval of relics, this is not a question that is easy to address from the available data. The first clearly datable *stūpas* belong to the Mauryan period, although still in limited numbers, and in most cases their original appearance has been obscured by embellishment during the post-Mauryan period (second–first centuries BC). This later period is when Buddhism truly takes root in the landscape, with *stūpas* appearing across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent in the kind of numbers suggested by the Aśokan legend.

With very few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of relic deposits are not those of the Buddha, but of saints, senior monks, and in some cases ordinary people. We know this because many reliquaries are inscribed with the name(s) of the person(s) whose relics they contain, some of whom can be related to a particular sect, time, and place (Willis 2000). The only evidence that has any valid claim for being associated with the relics of the Buddha himself is the Shinkot reliquary from Afghanistan, which

bears two similarly worded inscriptions referring to the relics of the 'blessed Sakyamuni which are endowed with life (*prāṇa*)'. Issued during the reign of the Indo-Greek king Menander (second century BC), it is one of the earliest known inscribed objects after Aśoka. The inscriptions are important for two reasons: they are the earliest datable references to the relics of the Buddha; and they support Schopen's (1991, 1997a) idea, discussed later, that relics were believed to contain the 'life-force' of the Buddha.

However, the vast majority of *stūpas* have either yielded no relic deposit or reliquary or else have no associated inscription. This is not to suggest that there were no other Buddha relic *stūpas*, just that we have not found any others 'labelled' as such. However, when we move away from looking at *stūpas* as isolated monuments to considering their placing in the wider landscape, one can make additional inferences about the identity of relic deposits. This is something I shall take up for discussion later in relation to the distribution of *stūpas* within the Sanchi Survey Project study area in central India (Shaw 2000, 2007). Further, at any one site there is usually a hierarchy of *stūpas* whereby the central *stūpa* acts as a magnet for smaller *stūpas*. In some cases the latter have been shown to contain actual burials rather than relic deposits. Moreover it has been argued that some of these smaller *stūpas* contained the mortuary remains of ordinary people, whether monks or laity, and placed in close proximity to revered *stūpas* through a form of 'burial ad sanctos', similar to that known in medieval Christian contexts (Schopen 1994a, 1997a).

STŪPA IN THE TEXTUAL SOURCES

The *stūpa* has received a significant amount of scholarly attention, with its architectural, artistic, and symbolic aspects having been discussed in detail (Hawkes & Shimada 2009; Dallapiccola 1980). A variety of associated inscriptions, both donative and connected with reliquaries, have shed important light on the history of patronage and the role of particular schools of monks in the propagation of Buddhism (Singh 1996; Willis 2000). Gregory Schopen (1997a–d) and Kevin Trainor (1997) have spearheaded a growing body of scholarship on the nature of the relics deposited in *stūpas* and the rituals that surrounded them. Their work has helped to dispel the idea, to some extent a product of Protestant-influenced historical analysis as well as conservative elements within the 'Theravada' tradition itself, that the veneration of

relics was the exclusive concern of the lay followers of Buddhism. Both scholars, focussing largely on textual sources of Buddhist scholarship, have broken ground by integrating archaeological evidence into their arguments. Their approach is not without problems, however, as the general lack of coordination between active archaeological research and text-based analysis, together with the uncritical use of nineteenth century archaeological reports has meant that many received models of Buddhist history have gone unchallenged. In recent years several landscape archaeology projects have enabled Schopen and Trainor's hypotheses to be assessed on the ground. These include the Sanchi Survey Project in Madhya Pradesh (Shaw 2007), which forms the focus of the second half of this paper, and Lars Fogelin's (2004, 2006) work at Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh.

So, where did the idea of the Buddhist *stūpa* originate? This is a question that has long interested text-based scholars of Buddhism. Lance Cousins (2003) has noted that there are very few occurrences of the Pali term *thūpa* in the Pali Canon, and then mostly in the context of its most literal meaning, 'something that is piled up'. Its earliest usage in this sense occurs in India's oldest Brahmanical text, the *R̥g Veda* (1.24, and 7.21), in which the Sanskrit term *stūpa* is used simply to describe a top-knot of hair, the upper part of the head, or the crest, top, summit.

The canonical warrant for the building of *stūpas* as repositories of the Buddhist relic is provided by the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* (v. 12), the Pali version of which deals with Ānanda's questioning of Buddha during his final weeks of life. Buddha explains that after his demise, his corpse should be treated like that of a Cakravartin ('World Emperor'). There then follows the earliest explicit reference to *stūpa* worship (however, there are problems with the dating of this passage): 'Those who offer a garland. ... that will be to their benefit'. Two closely related examples occur in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III.62; I.77), thought to have been composed during the Buddha's lifetime: the first describes the death of a queen who is about to be preserved in oil in a metal barrel by her inconsolable husband, who is then advised to cremate her instead and to have her ashes placed in a *thūpa*; and the second states that there are two categories of people worthy of being placed in a *thūpa* (*thūpārahā*): Buddha and a Cakravartin (Cousins 2003). On the basis of these examples, it appears that the particular way in which the Buddha's body was treated after death was inspired by royal mortuary rites, although it should be noted that the

term Cakravartin in its earliest usage had close Buddhist, rather than Brahmanical associations. To date, none of these royal *stūpas* has been identified archaeologically, but the fact that Jain *stūpas* are known (Flügel 2010), together with an inscription at Nigali Sagar in the Nepali terai that describes a *stūpa* of the past Buddha Kanakamuni, demonstrates that not all *stūpas* should be identified automatically with Buddha Sakyamuni. Further, not all Buddhist cremations were interred in reliquaries and *stūpas*. There are textual references to simple urn burials, as well as charnel grounds, as illustrated by later Tibetan examples of bones of the dead being left out in the open (Crosby 2003; Crosby & Skilton 1998, note 8.30).

BRAHMANICAL MORTUARY TRADITIONS

Although the Buddhist practice of preserving funerary remains is usually viewed in opposition to the orthodox Brahmanical practice of disposing of ashes in a river, ideally the Ganges, references to funerary monuments also figure in early Brahmanical texts (Tiwari 1979; Pant 1985; Sayers 2006). For example, the *Vedas* describe four stages in the disposal of the dead: i) cremation, ii) collection and interment underground of the charred bones in an urn, iii) expiatory rites, and iv) construction of an overground monument known as *citi*, although this final stage appears to be optional (Bakker 2007, 15). In the later *Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa* (13.8.1–4), we find instructions for the erection of burial mounds (*śmāśana*), which, it has been suggested, may correspond to megalithic remains in southern Uttar Pradesh (Duncan 1808; Singh 1970). The latter often contain urn burials, which may well be prototypes of the Buddhist reliquary, as discussed later. Burial or cremation grounds (*śmāśana*) in general are also known, such as the late-centuries-BC example excavated by Garde (1940, 16) at Ujjain (Bakker 2007, 34), but usually any overground monument, if there ever was one, is missing. There have been various claims over the years for the archaeological identification of Vedic burial mounds, most notably at Lauriya Nandangarh, Bihar (Singh 1970, 133; Bloch 1909), but subsequent excavations have in most cases revealed these to be Buddhist *stūpas*.

The main point is that there is a general paucity of archaeological correlates for Brahmanical mortuary monuments in any period. It appears that by the mid-first millennium BC, that is, the time of the historical Buddha, the monumentalisation of the dead within the Brahmanical tradition was being phased out and replaced largely by the practice, common today, of placing ashes in

sacred rivers (*tīrtha*). As stressed by Bakker (2007, 30), ‘the Buddhist cult of the *stūpa* developed out of more general south-Asian practices of mortuary ritual and disposal of the dead, and the [later] Brahmanical or Hindu tradition evolved from the same breeding ground.’ The construction of mortuary monuments was thus not restricted to heterodox traditions, but the evidence suggests that such practices remained on the ‘edges of orthodoxy’ (Bakker 2007, 30).

The general repugnance felt towards groups who continued to commemorate the physical remains of the dead is portrayed in an oft-cited passage from the *Mahābhārata* (3.188), whose composition is generally dated to the first or second century BC, if not later. This passage equates the end of the Kali Yuga (the current era) with the replacement of temples (*devakula*) by charnel-houses (*eḍūkas*) (Bakker 2007, 15), more on which later. It appears therefore that the kinds of mortuary traditions described in the earlier *Vedas* and *Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa* were not continued in Classical Hinduism of north India (although in the south there is quite a different picture, as represented by the southern megalithic tradition). The *Mahābhārata* makes no reference to the construction of monuments over the dead apart from the earlier quoted passage, which is presumably a critique of heterodox customs, and the indication is that by the time the epic was completed, earlier practices of inhumation and exposure had already been replaced by the practice of disposing of bodily remains in sacred rivers.

However, in later periods, although Brahmanical mortuary practice did not generally revolve around funerary monuments, the lack of commemoration of bodily ‘continuity’ after death is not entirely predictable, and Bakker (2007) warns against overstressing the distinction between orthodox and heterodox funerary customs. For example, we know that certain categories of people such as pregnant women, ascetics, or children continued to be buried according to the older tradition. Further, the Brahmanical *piṇḍa* ritual, which takes place after cremation, involves small balls containing, amongst other things, ash preserved from the cremation pyre, being fed to the ancestors by relatives of the deceased. Burials (*samādhis*) of Brahmanical ascetics (*saṃnyāsins*) or those who have committed heroic deeds (*bīr babas*) are common features of the north Indian landscape (Coccarri 1989), although these usually date to historical periods, the former most probably developing under the influence of Islam from the thirteenth century onwards (Bakker 2007, 35, note 79).

Despite these exceptions to the rule, however, by the mid-first millennium AD, the majority of the limited known examples of Brahmanical mortuary monuments are ‘cenotaphs’ or commemorative temples such as the Vākātaka-era Kevala Narasiṃha temple in Ramtek or the Gupta temple at Bhitari, whose inscriptions indicate that their construction was aimed at the transference of ‘merit’ to a particular deceased person rather than the housing of their physical remains (Bakker 2007, 42). Bakker (2007) lists four other types of mortuary tradition within the Brahmanical world, drawing on both literary and archaeological evidence: i) statue galleries (*pratimāgrha*) containing images or effigies of the deceased; ii) memorial stones, particularly hero stones, especially common in the Deccan, and commemorating the place of a heroic death; iii) funerary structures (*aīḍūka*), which do not contain ashes or bodily remains, as described in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (3.84.1015)¹, possible archaeological correlates of which include structures at Ahicchatra and Mansar, though their *aīḍūka* identification remains unconfirmed and neither example is older than the mid-first millennium AD (Bakker 2007); and, finally, iv) burial mounds or mortuary monuments that contain ashes or bones of the deceased, referred to in the Sanskrit literature as *eḍūka*, the best example being the *Mahābhārata* verse quoted earlier, which juxtaposes them with temples (*devakula*). The *eḍūka* as used therein refers not only to *stūpas*, but to any pan-Indian tradition ‘that involved the erection of monuments over mortuary remains’ and almost always has a disparaging connotation (Bakker 2007, 33, citing Allchin 1957, 1).

The term *eḍūka* appears to be related to the Dravidian *elūka*, whose etymology may be derived from the Tamil for ‘burial ground’ (Bakker 2007, 14; also Allchin 1957, 3). It has been suggested that the latter may refer to the charnel houses or megaliths of south India (Allchin 1957; Cousins 2003). Unfortunately little is known about the religious or social context in which the megaliths of south India were built, but they demonstrate that orthodox Brahmanical notions of the polluting influence of death were not overarching or universally applicable in the landscape. What is clear, however, is that ‘the author of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* calqued his Hindu *aīḍūka* on a Buddhist example [but with the mortuary remains of the latter removed], but by doing this he elaborated on what must have been a monumental tradition that was common to all Indian religions, most pronounced within Buddhism, less in Jainism and inconspicuous in the Hindu mainstream’ (Bakker 2007, 40; see also Roth 1980).

An interesting point here, however, is that in the *Mahābhārata* verse mentioned, the *eḍūka* is presented in opposition not to a less polluting mode for disposing of the dead, but to *devakula*, which in its literal sense means ‘family seat of god’ (Bakker 2007). Although the term and several of its variants occur in texts and inscriptions in the sense of ‘temple’, that is, with the assumption that it contains images of gods (Olivelle 2009),² one of the earliest known occurrences of the term is in some inscribed images of Kusana rulers at Māt, near Mathura. Together with a similar site at Nāṇeghāt in the Deccan it conforms with Bakker’s first category (‘statue gallery’) of later Brahmanical funerary monuments listed earlier. However, unlike the latter site, which is described in the associated inscription as *pratimāgrha* (literally ‘image hall’), the use of the term *devakula* at Māt has caused considerable confusion, the suggestion being that the royal images at Māt were actually being worshipped as gods (Bakker 2007, 23; see also Rosenfield 1993, 202). Others have argued that it was simply a royal family shrine for the worship of the family’s tutelary gods (Fussman 1989, 199). Whichever the case it is interesting that a distinction is being made by the authors of the *Mahābhārata* verse between a monument containing images, whether of actual gods, or in commemoration of deceased mortals with a god-like status, and a monument containing physical human remains, the latter being seen as beyond the orthodox pale. All the more interesting when we consider evidence, discussed later, that *stūpas* were themselves considered by Buddhists as actual images, and that *stūpa* worship was thus akin to actual image worship of a type that does not become fully manifest in the Hindu tradition until the early- to mid-first millennium AD with the development of temple and image worship (*pūjā*; Willis 2009).

Some discussion of Bakker’s second category, memorial stones, is also fitting here as it provides an example of how both Brahmanical and Buddhist mortuary traditions draw on a common pool of traditions although in ways that reflect their differing attitudes towards dead bodies. For example, the custom of erecting stone pillars (*yaṣṭi*) in memory of the deceased is unknown in the Vedic texts but appears to have been incorporated from the ancient Indian pillar cult into both Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. The key evidence is provided by an early-centuries-AD copper-plate inscription from a *stūpa* at Sui vihar, Bahawalpur, Pakistan. The inscription refers to the erection of a funerary *yaṣṭhi* and the deposition of a deceased monk’s ashes at its summit, thus transforming it

into an object of relic worship. Bakker (2007, 42–3) suggests that this pillar was later enclosed within a brick column whose upper portion protrudes from the summit of the surviving *stūpa*. The latter dates to a later period and appears to have incorporated the brick shaft as an axial element, a commonly found feature of early *stūpa* architecture³. According to Bakker the Sui Vihar monument presents an important clue to the evolution of the *stūpa* and its relationship to Indian funerary traditions that lack textual sanction: ‘The *yaṣṭi*, combined with bones or ashes and appropriating, as it would seem, the Vedic idea of the burial mound (*citi*), thus became the *stūpa* of the heterodox traditions; without mortuary deposits it evolved into the memorial stones of Indian folk religion. The former development is earlier than the latter’ (Bakker 2007, 42–3).

STŪPAS AND PROTO-HISTORICAL BURIAL SITES

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the limited archaeological correlates available for the funerary types listed by Bakker (2007) are all datable to periods later than the earliest Buddhist *stūpas*, and to some degree all appear to be influenced by heterodox traditions. When it comes to tracing the origins of the Buddhist *stūpa* during earlier periods we are similarly hampered by a paucity of archaeological correlates for the mortuary structures described in the Vedic texts. We have a different situation in the south, where there is a megalithic mortuary tradition from at least the mid-first millennium BC. The frequency with which Buddhist *stūpas* are situated on sites already occupied by megalithic burials has been commented upon for some time. For example, early excavations at Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh revealed urn burials adjacent to and beneath the smaller *stūpa* there (Rea 1912). Similar patterns have been noted at Buddhist sites throughout south India, whilst in north India observations have been made regarding the possible pre-Buddhist mortuary associations of key sites such as Kusinara (Cunningham 1871, 79) and Lumbini (Rijal 1977, 30; Schopen 1996, 218), although there are serious ambiguities in the original reports, and question marks over the excavation techniques and the relative chronology of supposed pre-Buddhist and ‘Buddhist’ phases at these sites. The morphological similarities between *stūpas* and some megalithic structures have also been remarked upon. For example, the main *stūpa* at Vaddamanu, ten kilometres east of Amaravati, was constructed from massive granite boulders, reminiscent

of a 'megalithic cairn circle' (Schopen 1997b, 194, note 6), while Raymond Allchin (1957, 1–4) comments that the Buddhist relic chambers inside *stūpas* 'were no more than stone cists and were often identical to the cists of the southern graves' (see also Piggott 1943; Schopen 1996; Bakker 2007). A similar level of continuity between proto-historical burial traditions and *stūpas* has been noted in Burma (Stargardt 1990, 346).

Whilst Rea (1912) had argued that incoming monastic communities had probably been unaware of the site's prior mortuary significance, Schopen's (1996, 237) position is that the overlap between *stūpas* and earlier burial remains is too consistent to be coincidental, and that the *saingha* purposefully sought out places with previous funerary associations, drawing largely on the Buddhist practice of meditating on the corpse as a symbol of the impermanence of life (and also as an instructive tool in the development of Buddhist medicinal knowledge: Zysk 1996; Shaw forthcoming). Further, the *saingha* chose these places so as to tap into a pre-existing sacred order, and to promote themselves as 'guardians of the native dead' as a means of legitimising their presence. These points are taken up later on in relation to the landscape patterns in the Sanchi Survey Project. The spatial and morphological patterns observed in the south may be instructive as far as assessing how and where Buddhism found a place for itself in the ritual as well as economic landscape into which it spread, although Schopen (1996) does not comment on the implications of these patterns beyond a strictly ritual sphere, and thus overlooks the possibility that the *saingha* was also relegated to periphery zones of the social and economic landscape. Some caution is also required when it comes to inferring historical linkages between the two funerary traditions: the fact that the *stūpa* grows out of northern, rather than southern Indian traditions, means that it is less likely to show a unilinear progression from local burial forms in the south.

THE RELIC CULT AND THE PRESENCE OF THE BUDDHA

As shown by the foregoing discussion there are several morphological parallels between the Buddhist *stūpa* and funerary monuments described in the *Vedas* and later Brahmanical literature, although archaeological correlates for the latter are few and far between. Furthermore, by the time of the historical Buddha it seems that cremation of the dead had become the norm within Brahmanical circles. However, although cremation as the first step in the

treatment of the dead was a common factor in both orthodox and heterodox circles, it is important to acknowledge that the basic rationale behind cremation differed enormously between the two traditions. As argued by Strong (2007, 44), Brahmanical cremation is primarily a 'sacrificial rite intended to ensure rebirth and generally results in the eradication of all bodily remains'. As mentioned earlier, one of the categories of persons that are exempt from such cremation is the Brahmanical renunciate (*saṃnyāsīn*), largely because he has already performed his own funerary ritual on becoming an ascetic in recognition of his abandonment of his former family and social responsibilities. Corpses of *saṃnyāsīns* are thus buried whole or left to float down the river (Parry 1994, 184). By contrast, the fact that the corpse of the Buddha, himself a renunciate, was cremated rather than buried not only reflects his stated wish to have his body treated like that of a Cakravartin, but is also an outward statement of his rejection of extreme forms of Brahmanical asceticism, advocating as he did the Middle Path between renunciation and social integration.

Moreover, what really sets the Buddhist use of cremation apart from its Brahmanical counterpart is that its primary function is not the *disposal* of bodily remains but rather the *creation* of relics. According to Buddhist tradition, relics are not 'just' ashes, but transformative substances akin to jewels or gemstones (Strong 2007, 45). Before being deposited in a *stūpa*, these substances are placed inside a reliquary, often together with other 'relics of use' such as fragments of cloth, coins, or precious stones. The reliquary itself is usually made of stone or ceramic, following forms that were already well known from contemporary pottery vessels (Willis 2000). However whilst the practice of placing funerary ashes in a pot may represent a continuation of simple urn burials, with or without an above-ground structure, the Buddhist relic cult represents a novel departure from older Indian traditions in a number of ways: first, the practice of dividing and distributing relics between more than one monument, thus spreading their perceived influence over extended geographical space; and, secondly, in the idea that relics represent somehow the 'essence' or 'life-force' of the deceased person. It has been suggested that such ideas may have originated from outside India, with a possible source being older Hellenistic and Near Eastern practices of venerating the remains of royalty, as illustrated by the Macedonian dispute over the treatment of Alexander the Great's bodily remains and the idea that these remains would be beneficial to the areas in which they were kept (Strong 2007, 32–3, citing Przyluski 1927 and Nilakanta Sastri 1940).

However, there are also Indian parallels: for example, similarities have been noted between the division of the Buddha's relics during the Mauryan period and the Brahmanical *navāśraddhā* ritual, which takes place over ten days after death and during which ten rice balls (*piṇḍa*) are created in order to create a new body for the deceased, and to prevent him from becoming a 'ghost' (*preta*). Strong (2007, 4) points to the fact that in some Gandhara friezes depicting the division of the Buddha's relics, the latter are shaped like balls of rice, as though being made into a 'new body' for the Buddha, as in the Brahmanical *navāśraddhā* rite. Further, Walters (2002) argues that relics constituted an ever-expanding Buddha corpse that spreads out over the Buddhist world as the *saṅgha* and *dharma* moved into new areas, an idea which is discussed in more detail in relation to the Sanchi Survey Project landscape patterns.

Precisely what role *stūpa* and relic worship played in early Buddhist monasticism, however, remains a rather controversial issue. Notwithstanding recent revisionist theories regarding the historicity of the 'Theravada' tradition (Gethin 2012), the canonical view is that relic worship had no legitimate place in monastic life. Ritual and devotion are viewed as belonging to the realm of the laity whilst meditation was the exclusive domain of monks: meditation leads to enlightenment irrespective of belief, and as such devotion is useless. Relic worship contradicts Buddhist ideals of non-attachment, the canonical position being that because Buddha reached *nirvāṇa* he is no longer here, and so he cannot continue to exist through his bodily relics (Crosby 2005). This view contrasts with later Mahayana Buddhism with its array of ever-present Buddhas, hence the canonical position that relic worship represents a late deterioration of 'true' Buddhist values. Some later texts describe the relic as a manifestation of Buddha's 'essence', and the Theravadin explanation for this is that relics do not contain the Buddha in a real sense, but rather are powerful because of Buddha's intention during his lifetime. Just as Buddha lives on through his teaching (*dharma*), so too relics have power (often miraculous) because he intended it that way: Buddha preached that the *dharma* should guide the monastic community after his death, within the context of the *triratna* ('the triple gem'): Buddha, *dharma*, and *saṅgha*. The latter two terms are represented by the Canon and monks, respectively, but according to some scholars, the apparent 'absence' of Buddha in art-historical terms prior to the early centuries AD can be explained by the mechanism of the relic cult (Trainor 1996). Prior to the

appearance of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha during the early centuries AD, the *stūpa* acts as the first 'image' for Buddhist worship. With a few exceptions (mainly relating to the *yakṣa* and *nāga* traditions) there appears to be a general lack of anthropomorphic representations of people and gods during this period, and for Buddhists the *stūpa* appears to fill this gap (later on, the relic contained within the *stūpa* is often replaced by the word of the Buddha in the form of inscribed tablets, or by actual images of the Buddha, the inference being that these non-bodily objects hold a similar power to that of their relic prototypes). In theological terms, thus, the Buddha may be gone, but his relics continue to represent his 'body', without which the *śāsana* (collective Buddhist teachings) could not spread. An oft quoted example (Trainor 1997, 173–4) is the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Aśoka's son, Mahinda, who was quick to recognise that without any accompanying relics his mission could never succeed: relics literally are the animate propellants for the spread of the Buddhist *dharma*, just as the relic altar provides the sanctifying force for the medieval Christian church.

Schopen (1991) argues that even in the earliest texts, the Buddha was seen as being 'present' in *stūpas*, and that references to *stūpa* worship were edited out of the Pali *Vinaya* because of the problematic position of devotion within Theravada scholarship. Since passages dealing with *stūpa*-ritual are scattered throughout later renditions of the *Vinaya*, it is unlikely that all such references could have been lost accidentally from the Pali version. Further, Schopen (1997c) argues that the traditional view that the relic cult was reserved for the laity is based on a mistranslation of the latter part of the conversation between Buddha and Ānanda in the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* (v.10–12), and in particular a misinterpretation of the term *śāṅṅra-pūjā*. Buddha instructs Ānanda that his body is to be treated in the same way as the body (*śāṅṅra*) of a Cakravartin, and that this is what the 'wise men ... among the nobles, among the brahmins, among the heads of houses' are to do, and with which Ānanda should not be too concerned. He goes on to describe how the body of a Cakravartin is cremated and placed in a *stūpa* at a crossroads. Only after the funeral does the word *śāṅṅra* come to be used in the plural (*śāṅṅre*). Thus *śāṅṅra pūjā* refers to the funerary rite alone, and specifically to the preparation of the body prior to the cremation and the construction of the *stūpa*. According to Schopen, the Buddha was simply advising Ānanda not to be overly concerned with the anointment of his dead body, rather than taking a

negative stance on monks' involvement in relic worship (*śāre*). But as stressed by Strong (2007, 50), the suggestion that *śāra-pūjā* may have had nothing to do with relics may have been taken too far; 'the *śāra-pūjā* may not be a "cult of relics", but it is certainly possible to think of it as a "cult productive and predictive of relics"', recognising as discussed earlier that cremation in the Buddhist context was aimed primarily at the production of relics.

Schopen (1997c) draws on two sets of material evidence to support his view based on his reading of the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* verse that monks and nuns were participating actively in *stūpa* and relic worship from early periods: a) post-Mauryan inscriptions recording donations of *stūpa* components by actual members of the *saṅgha* and b) evidence for a 'cult of the monastic dead' whereby junior monks' *stūpas* were being placed in close proximity to revered *stūpas* in order to maximise spiritual benefit in a manner similar to burial *ad sanctos* traditions in medieval Christian contexts. For the latter, he draws largely on nineteenth century archaeological reports of *stūpa* deposits containing 'large bones' rather than relics. The landscape data from the Sanchi Survey Project discussed below shed further light on this matter.

CASE STUDY: SANCHI SURVEY PROJECT

The Sanchi area of Madhya Pradesh, central India, occupies a key place in the archaeology of Buddhism (Figure 23.2). Sanchi itself is one of India's best preserved and most studied Buddhist sites, with a continuous constructional sequence from the third century BC to the twelfth century AD (Marshall et al. 1940). While the earliest monuments at Sanchi were connected with the patronage of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka during the third century BC, the most prolific construction took place during the ensuing two centuries. Donative inscriptions show that construction work during this period was funded not by state patronage but by extensive programmes of collective patronage pooled together from powerful families and guilds. The reliquary inscriptions from Sanchi *Stūpa* 2 and four neighbouring *stūpa* sites (Cunningham 1854) provide a useful starting point for assessing how these sites and the surrounding landscape were perceived in ancient times (Willis 2000; Shaw 2000, 2007, 2009, 2011). These inscriptions indicate that five *stūpa* sites were linked to a group of teachers known as the Hemavatas led by a monk named Gotiputa. The Hemavatas were one of the missions sent out to parts of Asia under Aśoka, in this case to the Himalayan region, and for some reason their relics

were taken to central India during the second century BC; they took over the older sites of Sanchi and Satdhara and established new centres at Sonari, Morel Khurd, and Andher. The reliquaries show that these sites were linked and were established (or renovated in the case of Sanchi and Satdhara) in a single campaign. Although no relics have ever been retrieved from the central *stūpa* at either Sanchi or Satdhara, there are strong suggestions that originally they contained, and perhaps still do, the relics of the Buddha himself. This may be inferred from the fact that at both sites, the *stūpa* containing the relics of Sāriputa and Mahāmogalāna, the Buddha's chief disciples, is situated beside the central *stūpa*. This arrangement conforms to rules in the *Vinaya* (*Mahāparinibbāna sutta* v. 95.2.7), which stipulate that a monk's *stūpa* should be positioned according to his rank in life and, more specifically, that the *stūpas* of Sāriputa and Mahāmogalāna should be situated accordingly beside that of the Buddha (Roth 1980, 184–5; Willis 2000; Shaw 2000, 30).

The Sanchi Survey Project (henceforth SSP) was initiated in 1998 in order to assess the factors behind the spread of Buddhism to central India from its base in the Gangetic valley (Shaw 2007). Survey work over an area of 750 square kilometres resulted in the documentation of thirty-five Buddhist sites, together with numerous habitational settlements, ancient water resource structures, and temple and sculpture fragments from Brahmanical, Jain, Buddhist, and other Indic traditions (Figure 23.3). In the following I will focus on the distribution of *stūpas*, arguing that maximising their visual presence was a major influencing factor in the positioning of monastic complexes, not only as a proselytising mechanism, but also as a means of projecting and protecting the relic as the sacred 'life-force' of the personage which they were built to house.

STŪPA TYPOLOGIES

Stūpas in the SSP area were divided into four main morphological and chronological groups: 1) Mauryan (Phase I), as represented by the brick core of *Stūpa* 1, and closely paralleled by *Stūpa* 1 at Satdhara (Agrawal 1997; Shaw 2007, 2009); 2) post-Mauryan (Phase II), as represented by *Stūpas* 2 and 3, and similar examples at Sonari, Satdhara, Morel khurd, and Andher (Figure 23.1): these *stūpas*, often enclosed by a carved balustrade, consist of a core of heavy stone blocks interspersed with chippings and faced with a single course of dressed stone blocks (Marshall et al. 1940, 41); 3) somewhat smaller *stūpas* of the Gupta (phase

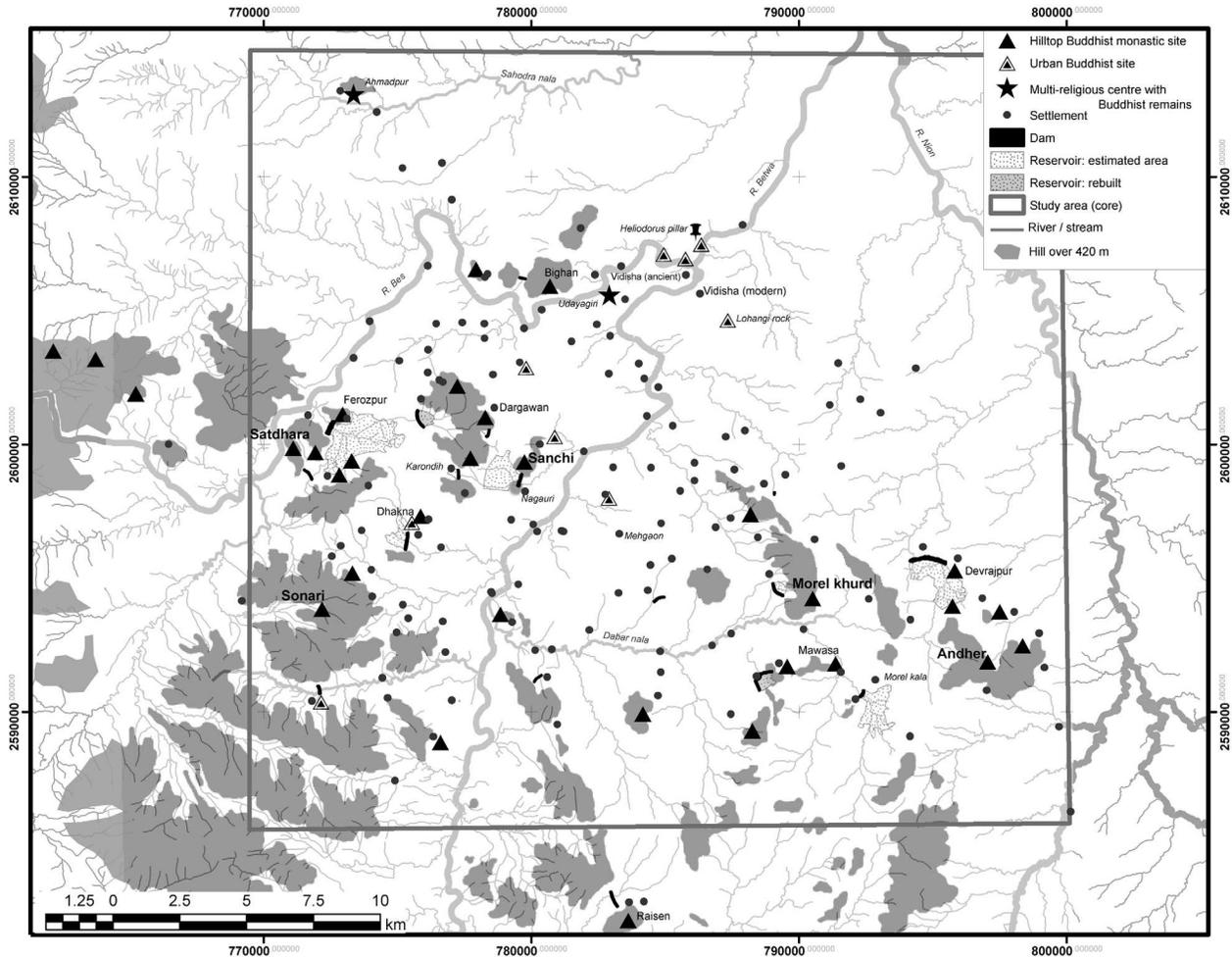


Figure 23.3. Sanchi Survey Project study area: site distribution.

IV: fourth–sixth centuries AD) and post-Gupta periods (phase V: seventh–eighth centuries) such as those clustered around Sanchi *Stūpa* I, all set on square or circular platforms, and without railings (Marshall et al. 1940: 46); 4) even smaller *stūpas*, with diameters of one metre or less, traditionally classified as ‘votive’, but now regarded widely as ‘burial *ad sanctos*’ *stūpas* (Schopen 1997a): built to contain the mortuary remains of ordinary monks and the laity, they are positioned at a removed distance from more important *stūpas* in deference to the hierarchical structure of the relic cult. Similar *stūpas* occur throughout the study area, either within larger monastic compounds, as at Sanchi, or comprising independent burial grounds, as on the small hillock immediately to the west of Sanchi (Shaw & Sutcliffe 2005, 8–12; Shaw 2007). Burial grounds consisting of similar *stūpas* have been noted around the Buddhist monastic site of Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh (Fogelin 2004, 2006).

HILLTOPS: PRACTICAL, ECONOMIC, AND RITUAL ASSOCIATIONS

The majority of *stūpas* in the SSP area are situated on hilltops and usually form part of larger complexes, comprising monasteries, shrines, and other structures (Shaw 2007), although they occasionally comprise single purpose *stūpa* and burial sites, as described earlier (Figure 23.4). However, although these sites are usually by virtue of their hilltop setting situated away from settlements, they are never more than a kilometre or two from the nearest settlement (Figure 23.3). Whilst this is in keeping with mainstream orthodox notions of purity and pollution regarding zones of the dead and the living, it also reflects the dialectical position of monks in relation to society. Monks are renunciates, and yet they are connected to society through patronage networks and the services that they provide.

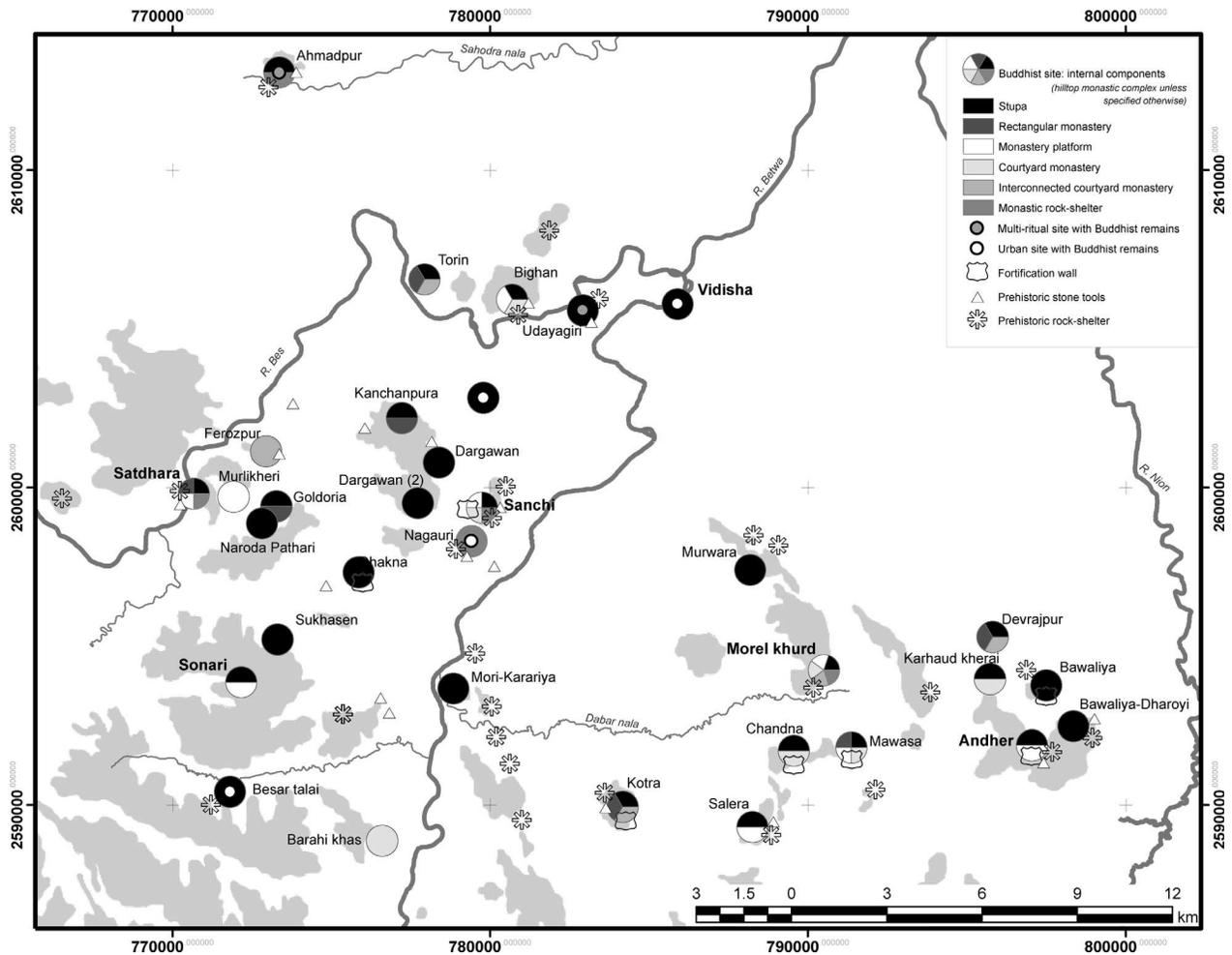


Figure 23.4. Sanchi Survey Project study area: Buddhist sites and rock-shelters.

The purpose of this section is to explore the possible practical, ritual, symbolic, and social reasons why these hilltop locations were so consistently sought out by the *saṅgha*. The most obvious advantage of hilltops is that they provided refuge from monsoon flooding. This is why so many habitation sites are situated on some form of raised ground, although very rarely on the summits of hills, possibly because of difficulties in accessibility. Hilltops also have low agricultural value and deficient water supplies and may have been considered too susceptible to siege. On the other hand, the forests which they support are a valuable natural resource for wild plants and animals. While utilised by agriculturalists too, hilly areas have, since ancient times, been closely associated with non-producing, hunter-gatherer groups. This is attested by the large number of prehistoric painted rock-shelters and microlithic scatters found throughout the hills of central India. Similar types of sites are closely associated with

other peripatetic, or ‘property-renouncing’, groups, such as Brahmanical *śaṃnyāsins* (Jacobson 1975, 81). Kautilya’s *Arthśāstra* (2.2.5), a state-craft manual traditionally attributed to the Mauryan period but now recognised as a composite text probably not reaching completion before the early to mid-first millennium AD (Trautmann 1971), also offers interesting insights into such sites. The text refers to the designation of non-agricultural land for the purposes of scholarly and ascetical activities. The level of correspondence between the kind of site chosen by prehistoric hunter-gatherers and later ascetic groups is attested in the Sanchi area by the frequency with which painted rock-shelters or microlithic tools occur at Buddhist sites. These kinds of prehistoric remains were found at fourteen of thirty-three hilltop sites that show evidence for Buddhist activity (Shaw 2007; Figure 23.4). It is possible therefore that as a ‘non-producing’ group, the incoming *saṅgha* had little choice when it came to

finding a place for itself in the landscape but to occupy areas that had little or no other economic value. A similar set of restricting factors may explain the tendency for Buddhist sites, particularly in the Deccan, to overlie older, 'protohistoric' burial grounds (Schopen 1996). Being unsuitable for agricultural purposes, such locations obviously suited the *saṅgha*'s 'non-producing' status, but because of their mortuary function, they may have had polluting associations for orthodox Brahmins. In both economic and spiritual terms, therefore, the Buddhists were relegated to peripheral zones of the landscape. Moreover, textual evidence suggests that certain, albeit marginal, sections of the Buddhist *saṅgha* actively sought out cremation grounds as foci for meditation on death and decay (Schopen 1996).

Although we are lacking such evidence regarding local mortuary practices in the SPP area, it is important to note that many of the rock-shelter sites that have been excavated, such as Bhimbetka, situated about seventy kilometres southwest of Sanchi, contain human burials (Misra & Sharma 2003, 40–3). Moreover, many of these rock-shelters were adapted for monastic use by Buddhist monks. The future excavation of such 'monastic rock-shelters' (Shaw 2007, 129–30, 135–6) offers much scope for filling gaps in our understanding of the history and chronology of monasteries and monasticism in central India, but in the light of the evidence at Bhimbetka, may also provide further insights into the degree to which the Buddhist landscape of *stūpas* and relics intersected with pre-existing zones of the dead.

Hilltops also hold particular symbolic and mythological associations, described in ancient texts as the abode of *yakṣas* and other place-bound spirits (Misra 1981, 50; e.g., *Dīgha Nikāya*, 41). These shrines, referred to as *ceṭiya* (Misra 1981, 42; Coomaraswamy 1980, 17; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II. 550), provided the focus of hilltop festivals (*gir-aggā-samajjan*) of the kind known to have been held annually at Rājagaha (Hardy 1903, 61–6). The same kind of hilltop festival is listed in Aśoka's edicts 1 and 9, as one of the events prohibited to monks and nuns (*Vimaya* II. 107, 150; III. 71; IV. 85, 267, 360; *Jātaka* III. 538). The suggestion that the configuration of the ritual landscape followed certain topographical conventions supports other archaeological and ethnographic accounts relating to the predominance of pre-Buddhist ritual practices at major monastic sites (Cunningham 1892, 40; Byrne 1995; Kosambi 1962). The fact that early *yakṣa* shrines were referred to as *ceṭiya* offers a gloss on the possible antecedents of the *stūpa* given that the *ceṭiya* and *stūpa* were

used interchangeably in later Pali literature (Cousins 2003; Law 1931; Misra 1981, 91–3; Irwin 1987; Van Kooij 1995). There are also suggestions that the carved panels on the *torāna* gateways of Sanchi *stūpa* 1 are based on the *charaṇa chītras*, the pictorial scrolls whose public display was, according to texts such as the *Samyutta Nikāya*, or *Arthaśāstra*, an integral component of the banned hilltop festivals (Ray 1945, 69). Whether the *saṅgha* actively sought out places already regarded as sacred is difficult to determine, especially since *yakṣa* or *nāga* worship rarely took on durable forms during the time in question: stone images of these deities do not appear in the Sanchi area until the first century BC, that is, long after the arrival of Buddhism (Shaw 2007). Further, their representation in sculptural form may say more about the Buddhist worldview than 'local' religious practices (Shaw 2004, 2007, 2013a). However, by simply occupying spaces in the landscape, which in the minds of the local populace were associated with revered local deities, the *saṅgha* was already making a statement about its position in the local religious hierarchy. This may have been an early attempt to 'localise' itself in the area; it may also have embodied an element of proselytisation, that is, by asserting the Buddha's supremacy over local deities whose precise identity remains obscure.

HILLTOP *STŪPAS*: 'SEEING' THE BUDDHA

Hilltops would have helped to further these proselytising aims by ensuring that *stūpas* were seen throughout the surrounding landscape. At Sanchi, the main *stūpa* can be seen for miles around, and at Andher, the principal *stūpa* perches dramatically on the edge of a cliff, creating a striking silhouette on the horizon (Figures 23.1, 23.5). Those living in neighbouring villages would have been very aware of the monks' presence above. This is illustrated clearly at Andher, where a Phase IV *stūpa* at the southern edge of the hill directly overlooks the village of Hakimkheri below. The other monastic sites all show a similar concern with maximising the *stūpas*' visual presence. This line of influence also works the other way round: standing on the southernmost edge of Andher hill, not only does one get a birds' eye view of the activity in the village below, but the sounds of the village are strikingly audible. Monks were apart from village life but in many instances were afforded a commanding view of its day-to-day activities; it is possible that not all people would have welcomed the feeling of being scrutinised by monks overlooking them from the hill



Figure 23.5. Andher *stūpa* from below.

above! A similar level of intervisibility is discernible in the relative positioning of the main *stūpas* at Andher and an early-first-centuryAD Brahmanical cult spot immediately below (Shaw 2004, 2007).

The visually aesthetic dimension of the landscape setting of monastic sites is also notable. Cunningham (1854, 342) periodically commented on what could be seen from principal spots in the landscape, including the element of intervisibility between *stūpa* sites, a point that is taken up further later. But he also made reference to the visually pleasing aspect of certain Buddhist sites including the view afforded from such places. The ‘picturesque’ aspects of Buddhist monastic complexes and their garden-like qualities (Ali 2003) are emphasised by the terms by which they are known in early inscriptions and texts: *Vihāra* and *ānāma* are translatable variously as ‘pleasure tour’ or ‘pleasure place’, whilst the former term embodies notions of leisure and play (Schopen 2006, 487). The obvious point here is that intellectual and spiritual pursuits are not possible without an abundance of time and a degree of comfort, and that an agreeable environment would be in keeping with such aims (Shaw forthcoming). As

argued by Schopen (2006), in contrast to the traditional notion of monasteries as places of austerity, and as polar opposites of urban courtly culture, the treatment of their landscape setting conformed to contemporary notions of the garden, as the epitome of urban sophistication and the manipulation of ‘nature’. Ali (2003) has argued that the sensuous, ornamental, and, in particular, ‘floral’ motifs in early Buddhist thought and art in fact represented an inversion of urban courtly values. Monastic grounds were highly decorated places full of ostentatious water features and other displays of the harnessed powers of nature (Ali 2003, 231), which Schopen (2006, 496) argues were intended to transport the monastic resident or lay visitor to a higher plane; in particular, he argues that the vista afforded from such places would have played a significant role in the siting of monastic complexes (Schopen 2006, 498–503). However, as discussed elsewhere (Shaw & Sutcliffe 2003; Shaw 2007), the ostentatious display of the *saṅgha*’s water harvesting skills at rock-cut monastic complexes in western India may also have been part of the *saṅgha*’s attempt to demonstrate its monopoly over the ‘business of water’, and its involvement in the

management of natural resources as an instrument of lay patronage (for further discussion see Shaw forthcoming). It should also be stressed that the predominantly nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeological reports on which Schopen's arguments regarding the role of picturesque vistas at Buddhist sites are based reflect a rather arbitrary understanding of the archaeological landscape, before systematic survey methods and an interest in less visible aspects of the archaeological landscape had been incorporated into archaeological thought (Shaw 2007). It is only when Buddhist sites are viewed in relation to systematically documented archaeological data, including ritual, habitational, and land-use sites as recorded during the SSP, for example (Shaw 2007), that the implications of what can be seen from monastic centres can be placed in a historical context. Whilst Cunningham may have been looking out onto a bucolic scene of 'nature', the settlement patterns from the Sanchi area attest to a greatly more populated and urban landscape than today's largely underpopulated countryside would suggest (Shaw 2007, 2013b).

Returning to the element of intervisibility between *stūpa* sites themselves, one may note that from Sanchi, it is possible to see the *stūpas* at Morel khurd; farther in the distance are the *stūpas* at Andher; and to the southwest is a line of hills, immediately behind which are the monasteries of Sonari and Satdhara; similar observations were made by Cunningham (1854, 342). The main *stūpa* at Sanchi is visible from as far away as Bighan in the north and appears to have provided the main orientation for the smaller *stūpas* and burials on Dargawan hills to the west of Sanchi (Figure 23.3).

This level of intervisibility may have been an important way of maintaining linkages between key ritual sites. This arrangement was far from a passive network. As discussed earlier, texts and inscriptions describe *stūpas* not simply as repositories of the Buddhist relic, but containers of a 'living presence' (Schopen 1997a) that projected the power of the Buddha, senior monks, and the *dharma* into and across the surrounding space. The highly visible setting of *stūpas* highlights the importance of 'seeing' (Pali: *dassana*; Sanskrit: *darśana*) at Buddhist sacred sites. Both Trainor (1997, 174–7) and Schopen (1997a, 117, note 9) have noted the analogy between 'seeing' or 'beholding' (particularly through direct visual contact) and worshipping within the Buddhist tradition. A similar analogy within the specific monastic context receives sanction in the Buddhist Canon: in the Mahāparinibbānasutta, the dying Buddha tells Ananda that the four main pilgrimage sites connected

with the Buddha's life are places that 'ought to be seen' (*dassaniya*) (*Dīgha Nikāya* 16: 5: 7–8; Rhys Davids 1910, 153–4). The objects of this 'seeing' are not merely sacred places, but 'relics of use' (*pāribhogika dhātu*); the places where the Buddha was born, gained enlightenment, taught, and died were transformed into 'relics' because they had been 'used' by the Buddha. Simply seeing these places, therefore, was equivalent to seeing the Buddha and paying appropriate homage to his dispensation. The concept of *darśana*, found in varying degrees in other Indian traditions, ensures that through the auspicious sight of the venerated object, a devotee gains spiritual merit (Eck 1981). These factors help to explain the importance of ritual circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*) as one of the main aspects of *stūpa* worship (Falk 1977, 290; the mirroring of the *pradakṣiṇa* of the *stūpa* and the worship of the Buddha is also discussed by Trainor: 1996).

A poignant indication of the 'life-force' of the relics and *stūpas* is provided by an inscription on the west gateway at Sanchi *Stūpa* 1. This warns that 'he who dismantles ... the stone work from this [*stūpa*], or causes it to be transferred to another house of the teacher, he shall go to the [same terrible] state as those who commit the five sins that have immediate retribution' (Marshall et al. 1940, I, 342, no. 404; Schopen 1997a, 129). Inscription 396 on the east gate is similarly worded, but actually spells out the five sins (murder of one's mother, murder of one's father, murder of an *arhat*, causing bloodshed, causing a schism in the *saṅgha*), which correspond to those defined in the *Vinaya*, the Buddhist rule book; the fact that four of these five sins involve the murder or injury of a living being suggests that the *stūpa* too was seen as a living being and can be taken therefore as one of the most obvious explanations for the need to protect it from dangerous forces, both ritual and political.

These points also add a powerful dimension to our understanding of the proselytising quality of *stūpa* architecture, whose trajectory of influence could transcend its material boundaries by the very fact of its visual dominance. For the Buddhist monks, this mechanism was a means of quite literally 'presencing' the *dharma* in new areas. Furthermore, the visual prominence of Sanchi *Stūpa* 1, which as discussed earlier most probably contained the Buddha's relic, allowed the Buddha to be 'seen' by monks residing at distant monasteries. By the same logic, the efficacy of the *dharma* was being cast over the local population, whether or not they knew or wished it. The additional aims of such an arrangement were no doubt multi-faceted, providing, on the one hand, an ever-present



Figure 23.6. Monastery platform at Morel Khurd.

reminder to monks of the proximity of death in keeping with the Buddhist recognition of life as a preparation for death, but also embodying the paradox of Buddha's attainment of *nirvāṇa* whilst enduring in the form of his relics.

A similar concern with maximising the visual presence of *stūpas* is discernible in the internal layout of monastic sites. As part of a body of evidence on the 'cult of the monastic dead', Schopen (1997d, 274–5; cf. Roth 1980, 186) has noted how the entrances to early monastic buildings tended to be orientated upon the principal *stūpa*, albeit at some distance, while later quadrangular monasteries were built around a *stūpa* in the central courtyard (Schopen 1997d); in other cases, small *stūpas* can be found distributed at various points within monastery compounds, as found, for example, in the courtyards of the post-Gupta period monasteries at Sanchi, as well as many of the outlying Buddhist sites in the study area (Shaw 2007). However, the spatial dynamics of early monastic complexes has not been fully understood, partly because

of the prevailing notion, perpetuated by text-based scholars such as Schopen (1994b, 548), that 'permanent' monastery architecture did not develop until at least the early centuries AD in keeping with the supposed 'late' institutionalisation of Buddhist monasticism. The identification during the SSP of monasteries that are datable to the late centuries BC and that survive in the form of towering platforms challenges this view (Shaw 2007, 2011; Figures 23.4, 23.6). In all cases, the monastery platforms are positioned in close proximity to, or in direct view of the central *stūpa*. Even without their superstructure, the platforms provide an all-encompassing panorama of the site as a whole. Going back to our discussion of 'seeing', this would have allowed the monks to keep the most important *stūpas* within their line of vision and therefore to contemplate the auspicious sight and presence of the Buddha and the *arhats*.

The positioning of the monuments not only allowed the *stūpas* to be admired but may also be explained as

part of the need to protect relics by regulating access to the *stūpas* and maintaining close surveillance of them. On account of its ritual status as a human being, the *stūpa* was open not only to the gaze of the devout, but also to more malevolent types of 'seeing'. The staggered gates (shaped like a *svastika*) at Sanchi *Stūpa* I may have been aimed at diverting the gaze of the 'evil eye', traditionally thought to travel only in straight lines. The ritual and political efficacy of the relic also called for protection against theft (Trainor 1997, 117–35). As the reliefs on the Sanchi gateways show, relics were sources of contention from the earliest days of Buddhism. This was because relics lent themselves to use as instruments of political legitimacy, the spread of the *dharma* being easily appropriated by kings who sought to draw on analogies between themselves and the Buddha as *dharmarāja* and *cakravartin*. Although the use of relics as instruments of polity received its fullest elaboration in Sri Lanka, Strong (1983) has put forward convincing arguments that this mode of kingship was first developed by Aśoka in the third century BC (see also Duncan 1990). The part of the *stūpa* upon which the monasteries are most consistently orientated is the staircase leading to the upper terrace. This part was singled out not only because it offered the possibility of ascending to a higher spiritual plane⁴, but also because it took one as close as it was possible to get to the relic chamber, where one could circumambulate the sacred 'traces' of the Buddha (Falk 1977, 288).

THE FORTIFIED HILLTOP: SURVEILLANCE AND DEFENCE

Stūpas were also open to the threat of 'mundane' human action, which may help to explain why so many hilltop Buddhist sites are equipped with strategic mechanisms in keeping with their fortress-like location. Many of the hills are defended naturally by sheer cliffs and jagged rocks, which, as at Andher, can set them apart from the surrounding landscape in a dramatic manner; more than half the Buddhist sites in the SSP study area also include some form of fortified structure.

At Morel khurd, the early platformed monastery has towers at each of its four corners (Fig 23.6). Even without towers, the height of this and other platforms creates a fortress-like aspect, which would have deterred prospective attackers or thieves, while the internal, covered staircases, enhanced at Satdhara by a bent entrance, would have enabled effective monitoring of movement in and out of the building (Shaw 2011)⁵. Finally, the towering

superstructures not only provide all-encompassing views of the *stūpas*, they are also highly 'visible' themselves: the Morel khurd platform, when seen from Andher or Sanchi, is even now the most conspicuous architectural feature at the site; in its complete form, it would have been double the present height and would have dominated the entire monastic complex. This would have increased the level of intervisibility between sites, thus enforcing the continuous presence of the *śāsana* (collective Buddhist teachings) across the landscape. Other elements of fortification include substantial boundary walls, often provided with towers and bastions, found at ten of the Buddhist sites in the area, including Sanchi and Andher. It is difficult to date these walls with certainty; the rubble-infill outer facing construction at most sites is suggestive of an early date, but the wall on the eastern edge of Sanchi hill was probably built during the tenth or eleventh century AD. Building 43, one of Sanchi's latest structures, dates to around the same time. With its four corner towers it has a distinctly military appearance, closely mirrored by the fortified *stūpa* enclosure at Bighan to the north of Vidisha (Shaw 2007). Similar military plans have been noted at medieval monasteries in eastern India (Verardi 1996). The reason for building these later defences in the Sanchi area may be related to the forces behind the eventual decline of central Indian Buddhism: there is little evidence for ongoing *construction* after the post-Gupta period at interior sites, and after the eleventh or twelfth century AD at Sanchi; however it should be stressed that the traditional model of a homogenous post-Gupta Buddhist decline in central India is no longer taken for granted (Willis 2013). In eastern India, new evidence relating to the relative distribution of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptural material in the Bodh-Gaya region is suggestive not of a passive community at the mercy of Brahmanical oppression, but rather an active *saṅgha* engaged in innovative strategies for resistance to and adaptation to developments within the Brahmanical order (Amar 2012).

However, the evidence discussed earlier suggests that some sites in the Sanchi area were subject to hostile threats during earlier periods also. The post-Mauryan king Puśyamitra 'Śuṅga' seems to have been inimical to heterodoxy, especially Buddhism. Traditions which associate him with the horse sacrifice and identify him as a staunch Brāhmaṇa lend support to his position as representative of the vigorously orthodox (*smārta*). This has led to suggestions that the main *stūpa* at Sanchi could have been damaged intentionally in the post-Mauryan era (Marshall et al. 1940, 23–4; Verardi 1996, 230–1). While there is no direct

proof that Sanchi was attacked by Puśyamitra Śūṅga, and indeed the post-Mauryan period witnesses a profound invigoration of Buddhist construction programmes in the area, the circumstances are sufficiently compelling to see such an injury to the *stūpa* there as an assault on the *śāsana* and, quite literally, the ‘body’ of Buddhism. However, it was not simply a question of heterodox versus orthodox views: relic theft took place within Buddhist circles from the earliest times, and schisms appeared frequently, from as early as the Aśokan period (Willis 2000).

CONCLUSION: STŪPAS AND BUDDHIST GEOGRAPHIES

Sanchi’s local Buddhist geography with its individual *stūpas* also formed part of a much larger Buddhist ‘world map’ conceived as an ever-expanding Buddha corpse (Walters 2002). *Stūpas* were not just mortuary monuments that doubled as images of the Buddha and senior monks, but were also media for extending the influence of the Buddhist *dharma* on a pan-Indian level. The creation of a pan-Indian Buddhist geography is not paralleled by developments within the Brahmanical world until at least seven hundred years after our earliest *stūpas*. For example, the rise of pan-Indian sacred cities such as Ayodhya, Mathura, or Varanasi did not occur until at least the mid-first millennium AD, culminating in the late eleventh century AD in resistance to increasing Muslim oppression (Bakker 1996, 2004). Varanasi, with its close associations with orthodox Brahmanical death rites, is of particular interest here by virtue of the fact that the Buddha’s first sermon took place at Sarnath on the city’s outskirts. Varanasi is now known throughout the Hindu world as the most desirable place to die and be cremated. However, it appears that during the Buddha’s lifetime it was simply an important commercial, rather than religious centre, and this is probably why he chose to deliver his sermon here. Furthermore, Varanasi had no special connection with Brahmanical death rites until the construction during the fifth century AD of the Avimukteśvara temple at the Manikarna cremation ground (Bakker 1996, 2004). At that time the site lay to the south of the ancient city (Rājghat), in keeping with the orthodox view of where cremation grounds should be placed in relation to human settlements. However, presumably because of the site’s close association with the Śaiva Pāśupatas, who preferred to assemble and worship on cremation grounds⁶, it eventually became a pivotal element of Varanasi’s ritual geography as the city shifted

southwards from Rājghat to its current location. Varanasi, together with two other Pāśupata centres, Ujjain and Pāśupatinatha in Nepal, thus became unique in the Hindu world for being sacred Hindu cities with otherwise polluting cremation grounds at their very heart.

Going back to Walter’s (2002) idea of the Buddhist ‘world map’ and viewing it through an economic prism, the ‘presencing’ of the body of Buddhism through the construction of *stūpas* and the absorption of landmass into a local and pan-Indian geography was also central to the process of achieving custodianship over land and natural resources. Elsewhere (Shaw 2007) I have argued that the Buddhist *saṅgha* played a pioneering role in the spread of new agricultural and water management regimes during the late centuries BC. It is very probable that the hill-tops on which *stūpas* and monasteries were constructed had first to be cleared of forest cover. Further, although monastic sites are generally situated on non-agricultural land, they are not completely disconnected from the forces of production, as illustrated by archaeologically, textually, and epigraphically attested examples of monastic landlordism across South Asia (Shaw & Sutcliffe 2005). By the late centuries BC, the *saṅgha* played a pivotal role in agrarian and economic change, coordinating the construction, management, and funding of water-resource systems which benefited local farmers and donors and increased ‘well-being’ on a number of levels (Shaw forthcoming), as well as enabling the *saṅgha* to pursue its ‘non-producing’ monastic lifestyle. The Buddhist system of monastic landlordism is appropriated in later years by competing Brahmanical institutions, specifically the Hindu temple, which by the mid-first millennium AD had acquired the legal power to own and manage land and water resources. This was effected not only through royal land-grants to Brahmins but by the newly emergent idea that images installed within temples are full embodiments (*mūrti*) of gods who not only can interact directly with devotees through worship (*pūjā*), but also have full-blown legal jurisdiction, amongst other things, to own property (Willis 2009), in ways that parallel our early developments discussed earlier in relation to the *stūpa* and relic cult.

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NOTES

- 1 This iconographic manual dates to about the twelfth century AD and originates from Kashmir, the inherent historical problems thus being obvious when it comes to discussing material in other regions and periods.
- 2 The earliest Brahmanical temples in India followed an apsidal or elliptical plan and survive only in outline form as attested by third-century BC archaeological evidence from Vidisha (Madhya Pradesh) and Nagari (Rajasthan) (Shaw 2007). Despite this evidence some scholars argue that the Hindu temple tradition did not develop fully until much later (Willis 2009; Olivelle 2009).
- 3 For more on this issue of axiality and the influence of the ancient Indian pillar cult on the development of stūpa architecture see Irwin 1987.
- 4 Adrian Snodgrass (1985, 282–5) discusses this connection with reference to the stairways of southeast Asian terrace stūpas, paying particular attention to their serpent-balustrades, as symbols of the ‘rainbow bridge’ that links heaven and earth, but whose role as guardians of the Buddhist relic should not be forgotten.
- 5 The guardian figures (*dvārapāla*) that frequently flank the doors of later temples also reinforce the idea that entrances needed to be protected and regulated. They appear in about the fifth century AD, but *yakṣa* figures on earlier Buddhist stūpas were, it seems, already serving the same purpose.
- 6 For the two-way relationship between Pāsupata and Buddhist esoteric practices especially as far as their association with cremation grounds goes, see Davidson 2002.

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