

ELOQUENT SPACES

Meaning and Community in Early
Indian Architecture

Edited by Shonaleeka Kaul

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3

BREATHING LIFE INTO MONUMENTS OF DEATH

The *stupa* and the ‘Buddha body’ in Sanchi’s socio-ecological landscape¹

Julia Shaw

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the *stupa* and the associated relic cult as a complex architectural manifestation of the Buddha body (Walters 2002), its potency enhanced by a range of older, intersecting Indic mortuary traditions and religio-cosmogonic symbologies. Drawing on epigraphical and textual evidence for corporeal relics as retainers of ‘vital breath’ (*prana*), it will examine the relevance of this material and related scholarship on *stupas* as monuments that are ‘infused with life’ or as repositories of the Buddha’s ‘essence’ (Schopen 1997a, 126–128) for understanding the dynamics of the *stupa* cult in central India.

Death is central to, and indivisible from, Buddhist ontologies of life (Cuevas and Stone 2007, 1–2), and this seeming contradiction is mirrored fittingly by the *stupa* whose associated relic deposit acts as the force that literally breathes life into landscapes marked by structures which on the face of things appear to be inert monuments of death. Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and non-attachment to life fit with the ideal of life as preparation for a death ‘without fear’. This preoccupation with death preparation is reflected in certain esoteric meditational practices (Schopen 1996), the *sangha*’s involvement with lay mortuary rites, and the practice of placing *stupas* containing corporeal relics of the Buddha and important monks directly within residential monastic compounds (Shaw 2015). 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. The key questions here, therefore, are how and why did a mortuary-oriented *stupa* cult become so central to the early spread of Buddhism, and how did it relate to wider mortuary traditions, and underlying multi-religious ontologies of life and death in ancient India?

The key case study in this respect is the Sanchi Survey Project (henceforth SSP), a multiphase landscape-based assessment of the socio-ecological basis of

religious and economic change in the late centuries BC, as urbanism and related phenomena spread westwards from the Gangetic valley (Shaw 2007, 2013b, 2016, 2017) (Figure 3.1). The study covers approximately 750 km² around the UNESCO World Heritage, Buddhist site of Sanchi, and the ancient city of Vidisha several kilometres further north, with site types documented throughout the hinterland ranging from *stupas* and monasteries to habitational settlements, land-use and ‘non-site’ data such as rock-shelters and important ‘locales’ (Shaw 2017; Figure 3.2). Research themes include the history of patronage and religious change, monastic governmentality, land and water management, and the development of new forms of food production and environmental control as responses to socio-ecological environmental stress on the one hand, and as agents of new cultural attitudes towards food, ‘nature’ and the body on the other (Shaw 2016).

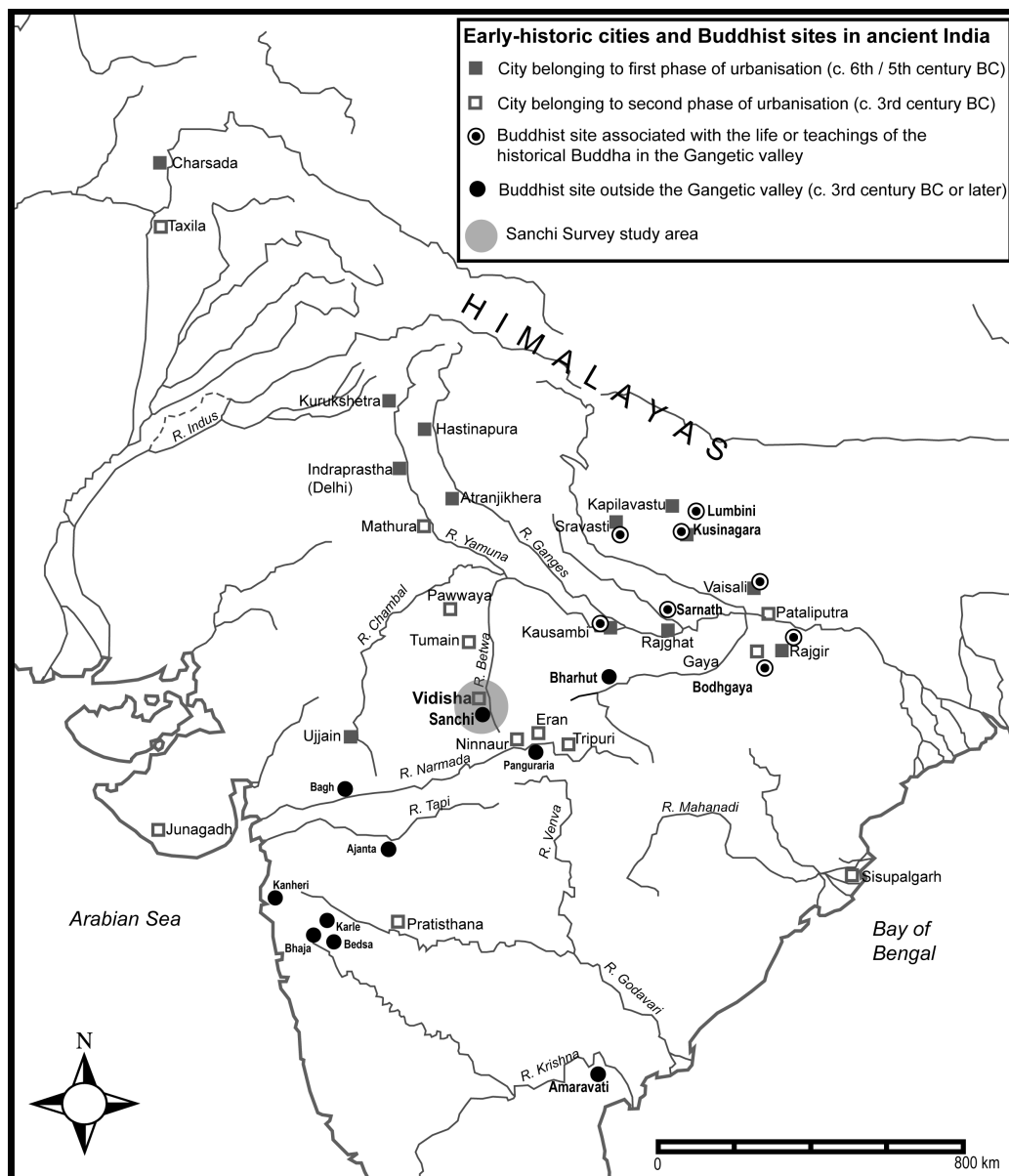


FIGURE 3.1 Map of urban and Buddhist sites in early historic India

Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.

This chapter will focus primarily on the development of *stupa* networks as indicators for Buddhist attitudes towards death and associated ontologies, and the dynamics of the relic cult which, in turn, provide a starting point for examining elements of the broader socio-ecological setting of Buddhist propagation in the late centuries BC. It will describe the main monuments at Sanchi from 3rd century BC to 12th century AD and then, focussing on the dynamics of seeing (Pali: *dassana*), assess the impact of *stupa* construction and the establishment of relic networks across central India on the localisation of early Buddhism. In addition to the ritual dynamics of the Buddhist relic cult, the economic implications of *stupa* construction in relation to early formulations of ‘monastic governmentality’ (Chatterjee 2015; Shaw 2016) are also considered, against a broader appraisal of scholarly discourse on the entwined histories of monasticism, urbanisation and emerging courtly urban ideologies (Ali 1998).

In doing so, I will draw on broader landscape patterns relating to monastery, habitational settlement and land-use data in the Sanchi-Vidisha hinterland, as well as less well-known datasets relating to monastic rock-shelters whose associations with hunter-gatherer, forest populations and economies help to paint a more heterogeneous, and less urban-oriented picture of the social context in which the earliest monastic communities grew up. Here I focus on the gradual and long-term process of monumentalisation and human entanglement between monks and their socio-natural environment, arguing that the *sangha*’s involvement with environmental control was central to the eventual development of sedentary monasticism (Shaw 2016).

The *stupa*

The *stupa* has been the subject of much scholarly discussion, ranging from its architectural, artistic and symbolic aspects (Hawkes and Shimada 2009; Dal-lapiccola 1980) to epigraphical analyses of patronage networks (Singh 1996) and monastic lineages (Willis 2001; Hinüber and Skilling 2013; Salomon and Marino 2014). Insights into its historical origins have drawn on morphological parallels with protohistorical funerary monuments in the south and northern traditions described in the *Vedas* and later Brahmanical literature (Bakker 2007; Shaw 2015). However, there are enduring uncertainties as to how early Buddhist mortuary traditions related on the one hand to orthodox practices known from Brahmanical texts but which lack convincing archaeological correlates in North India, and on the other, to various regional traditions such as the Southern Megaliths whose accompanying epistemologies remain poorly understood due to a lack of textual sanction (Bakker 2007; Shaw 2015; Schopen 1997b). Further, the question as to how the Buddhist *stupa* as repository of corporeal relics was received by local communities who may have, through the influence of orthodox principles of purity and pollution, been offended by the widespread monumentalisation of the dead, requires focussed interdisciplinary research of the kind promoted in several recent landscape projects discussed later (Shaw 2007; Fogelin 2004, 2006; Coningham and Gunawardhana 2013).

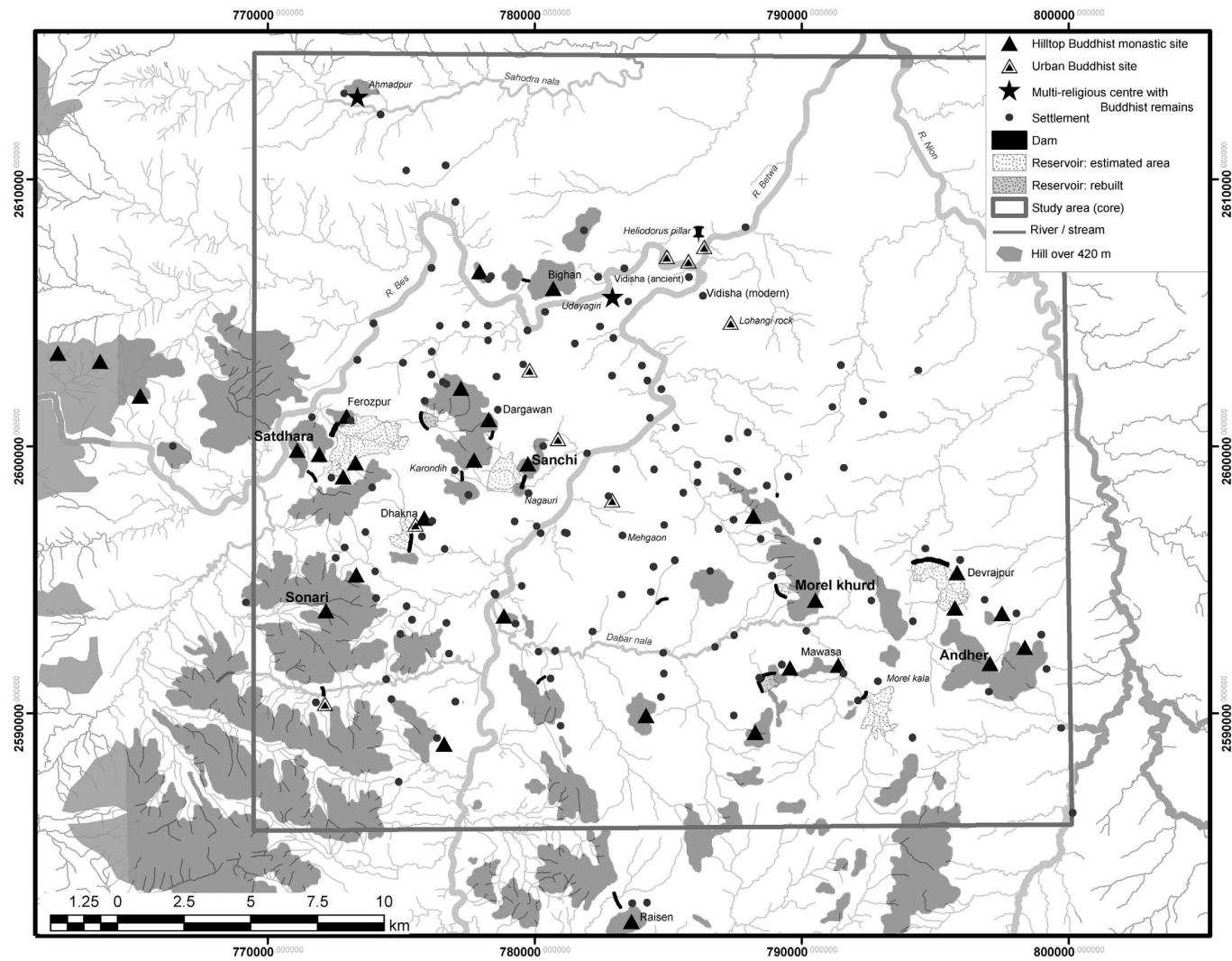


FIGURE 3.2 Sanchi Survey Project study area with main type sites

Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.

With regards etymology, infrequent occurrences of the term *thupa* in the Pali canon all embody the mundane meaning of ‘something that is piled up’ (Cousins 2018). Similarly, earlier occurrences of the Sanskrit *stupa* in the *Rig Veda* (1.24, and 7.21) refer literally to a topknot of hair, the upper part of the head, or to crest, top, summit. The canonical warrant for the construction of *stupas* specifically to house the Buddhist relic is provided by the *Mahaparinibbana sutta* (v. 12), the Pali version of which deals with Ananda’s questioning of the Buddha during his final weeks of life. The Buddha gives instructions as to how his body should be treated after death, specifying that the funeral of a *cakravartin* (‘World Emperor’) should provide the guiding model. Notwithstanding disagreements over the dating of this passage, there then follows the earliest explicit reference to *stupa* worship within the Buddhist tradition: ‘Those who offer a garland [. . .] that will be to their benefit’. Two closely related examples occur in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (III.62; I.77) a text purported to have been composed during the Buddha’s lifetime: the first describes how a king, who is about to preserve his recently deceased queen’s body in a barrel of oil, is advised to cremate her instead and have her ashes placed in a *thupa*, and the second states that there are two categories of people worthy of being placed in a *thupa* (*thuparaha*): the Buddha and a *cakravartin* (Cousins 2018; see also Bronkhorst 2011, 200). We may infer from these examples that the Buddha’s funeral was modelled on existing royal mortuary rites, while acknowledging also the strong Buddhist underpinnings of the *cakravartin* model of kingship in its earliest usage.

To date, none of these inferred prototypical royal *stupas* have been identified archaeologically, despite various claims to the contrary (Bakker 2007; Shaw 2015, 387). Further, as illustrated by Jain *stupa* research (Flügel 2010) and an inscription from Nigali Sagar in Nepal that describes the past Buddha Kanakamuni’s *stupa*, not all early *stupas* were connected with Buddha Sakyamuni (Bakker 2007). Further, not all Buddhist cremations were interred in reliquaries and *stupas*, as illustrated by textual and archaeological evidence for urn burials and charnel grounds (Bakker 2007; Shaw 2015), which may have influenced later Tibetan traditions involving the deposition of relics directly in the ground (Mayer 2007), or the deposition of bones in the open air (Crosby 2003; Crosby and Skilton 1998, footnote 8.30).

The relic cult

Although Buddhist commemorative practices are traditionally contrasted with orthodox Brahmanical funerals based around the disposal of ashes in a river, references to funerary monuments do occur in early Brahmanical texts (Tiwari 1979; Pant 1985; Sayers 2006). And despite the revulsion expressed within later Hinduism towards Buddhist funerary practices, by the mid first millennium BC, cremation, with exceptions (Shaw 2015; Bakker 2007), has become a common denominator of both Buddhist and Brahmanical funerals. Bakker (2007) thus cautions against overstressing the differences, while also highlighting the

fundamental contrasts between the two traditions' *ritual* aims and objectives. While Brahmanical cremation is geared towards the *disposal* and destruction of the corporeal body, the principal aim of the same act within Buddhist contexts is the *creation* of relics: the by-products of cremation are not 'just' ashes, but rather transformative substances akin to jewels or gemstones (Strong 2007).

Before being deposited in a *stupa*, these substances are placed inside a reliquary, often together with other 'relics of use' such as fragments of cloth, coins, precious stones or pearls (see Rienjang *et al.* 2017). The inclusion of precious objects may reflect their role as currency within lay-monastic exchange networks, as well as the prominence of jewel terminology (as in, for example, *triratna* – 'the triple gem') in early monastic thought, possibly as an inversion of aspects of urban courtly culture (Ali 1998). Gemstones may also have referred symbolically to the corporeal relic's transformative power; the strong medical associations of later underground 'treasures' in Tibet, for example, where buried substances reputedly act on the surrounding soil in ways akin to agricultural fertiliser (Mayer 2007), are also of potential relevance here (Shaw 2019).

As for reliquaries, these are usually made of stone or ceramic, following forms already known from contemporary pottery vessels (Willis 2000b). While the practice of placing funerary ashes in a pot may represent a continuation of ancient urn burials, with or without an above-ground structure (Shaw 2015), the Buddhist relic cult represents a novel departure from older Indian traditions, on the one hand, through the idea that relics represent the 'essence' or 'life-force' (*prana*) of the deceased (Schopen 1997a, 126–128), and on the other, through their division and distribution between more than one monument, which allowed for their perceived influence to be propelled over extensive areas. Possible external influences for the latter idea have been suggested, including the older Hellenistic and Near Eastern practices of venerating the corporeal remains of royalty so as to benefit the places in which they were buried, as illustrated by the cities associated with Alexander the Great's various burial sites (Strong 2007, 32–33, cit. Przulski 1927; Nilakanta Sastri 1940).

However, possible Indian antecedents include the Brahmanical *navasaddha* ritual, a ten-day event following death, during which ten rice balls (*pinda*) are created in order to provide a new body for the deceased who might otherwise be in danger of becoming a 'ghost' (*preta*). Possible parallels with the division of the Buddha's relics during the Mauryan period have been drawn, especially in relation to later Gandharan depictions of this scene, wherein the relics are almost indistinguishable to the *pinda* rice balls of the *navasaddha* ritual, as though being fashioned into a 'new body' for the Buddha (Strong 2007, 4). Further Walters' (2002) model of relics comprising an ever-expanding Buddha corpse that spread out over the Buddhist world as the *sangha* and *dharma* moved into new areas is not dissimilar to later conceptualisations of Hindu sacred space, with pan-Indian pilgrimage networks arranged according to the distribution of specific deities' body parts, as in the case of the *sakti pitha* and *jyotirlinga* site-networks (Fleming 2009). However, important questions remain regarding the precise chronological relationship

between Buddhist and Hindu dispensations of sacred geography and need to be assessed through concerted collaborative archaeological and historical research (Shaw 2016).

Notwithstanding the multivariant sectarian influences behind the development of the Buddhist relic cult, the rather instinctive human desire to respond to the death of loved ones through the preservation of tangible mementos whether corporeal or associative embodiments of personhood, can transcend formal religious affiliation and sanction. The contradiction, for example, posed by the fact that the Buddha, having reached *nirvana* has left this world for good and yet continues to be present in some way through his relics continues to vex Theravada theologians, and challenges fundamental Buddhist ideals of non-attachment (Crosby 2005). However, similar uncertainties as to how the dead body relates to its former 'personhood' once the biological indicators of life have expired, are central to the universal human conundrum. Although modern science has little to add to such ontological mysteries, potentially interesting new perspectives on the efficacy, relevance and identity of relic deposits at a comparative religious level are offered by DNA and genome analysis (Busby 2017).

Returning to the role of *stupa* and relic worship within early Buddhist monastic circles, 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 reflect lay concerns whereas meditation, as the exclusive domain of monks, leads to enlightenment irrespective of belief, thus rendering devotion useless. 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 Gennepe 1960), but rather a *transcendence* of the very cycle of life and death. This view contrasts with later Mahayana Buddhism with its array of ever-present Buddhas; hence, the canonical position that relic worship, like the development of institutionalised and socially engaged monasticism, discussed later, represents a late deterioration of 'true' or 'original' Buddhist values based on peripatetic mendicancy.

Gregory Schopen (1997a, 1997b, 1997c) and Kevin Trainor (1997) have helped to dispel this idea of an exclusively laity-oriented relic cult, to some extent a product of Protestant-influenced scholarly discourse as well as conservative elements within the 'Theravada' tradition itself. Both scholars have broken ground by integrating archaeological evidence into their critical textual analyses. Their approach is not without problems, however, as the general lack of direct coordination between active archaeological research and textual scholarship, coupled with a generally uncritical use of 19th-century archaeological reports, and lack of engagement with more recent datasets and changing methodological and theoretical paradigms within archaeology, has meant that many received models of Buddhist history have gone unchallenged. This applies particularly to received theories, discussed later, regarding the history and chronology of

institutionalised monasticism, with recent landscape-based analyses having allowed for more integrated models regarding the economic background of early monasticism (e.g. Shaw 2007, 2011, 2016; Fogelin 2004, 2006; Coningham *et al.* 2007; Coningham and Gunawardhana 2013; Gilliland *et al.* 2013; Olivieri *et al.* 2006).

Schopen's (1991) oft-cited argument is that the apparent lack of references to *stupa* worship in the Pali *Vinaya* is because they were edited out due to the problematic issue of devotion within Theravada scholarship. That this was unlikely to have been accidental, is supported by the liberal scattering of passages dealing with *stupa*-ritual throughout later renditions of the *Vinaya*. Schopen (1991) argues that even in the earliest texts the Buddha was seen as being 'present' in *stupas*, and that the traditional idea of a laity-dominated relic cult reflects largely the mistranslation of the term '*sharira-puja*' that dominates the latter part of the conversation between Buddha and Ananda in the *Mahaparinibbana sutta* (v.10–12) (Schopen 1997c). Ananda here is instructed to treat the Buddha's corpse in the same way as the body (*sharira*) of a *cakravartin*, on the basis that this is what the 'wise men . . . among the nobles, among the brahmins, among the heads of houses' are to do, and with which Ananda should not be 'overly concerned'. He then describes how the body of a *cakravartin* is cremated and placed in a *stupa* at a crossroads. Only after the funeral, does the word *sharira* come to be used in the plural (*sharire*). Schopen argues that *sharira-puja* refers to the funerary rite alone, and specifically to the preparation of the body prior to the cremation and the construction of the *stupa*. The argument, therefore, is that the Buddha was simply advising Ananda not to be overly concerned with the anointment of his dead body, rather than prohibiting monks from participating in relic worship (*sharire*). Strong (2007, 50), however, urges caution over assuming that *sharira-puja* was completely divorced from relics; 'the *sharira-puja* may not be a "cult of relics", but it is certainly possible to think of it as a "cult productive and predictive of relics"', in a situation which, as discussed earlier, contrasts with Brahmanical funerary rites aimed predominantly at the disposal and annihilation of the body.

Schopen's idea that the *Mahaparinibbana sutta* verse provides evidence for monks and nuns' active participation in *stupa* and relic worship from early periods, however, is strengthened by two sets of material evidence that are of key relevance here: i) epigraphical records from post-Mauryan *stupa* sites in north and central India that record donations of individual architectural components by actual members of the *sangha*; and b) largely 19th-century archaeological evidence for a 'cult of the monastic dead' comprising burials of 'large bones' rather than relic deposits, and mediated through the siting of junior monks' *stupas* close to those of revered, more senior personages, in order to maximise spiritual benefit in a manner similar to burial *ad sanctos* traditions in medieval Christian contexts (Schopen 1997c). As discussed later, the SSP dataset suggests that similar inter and intra-site dynamics were being played out through both visual and material interconnections across the monastic landscape (Shaw 2000, 2009).

Stupa as 'image'

Some later texts describe the relic as a manifestation of Buddha's 'essence' (*prana*) (Schopen 1997a), 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 (often miraculous) power because he intended it that way: Buddha taught that the *dharma* should guide the monastic community after his death, within the context of the *triratna* ('the triple gem'): Buddha, *dharma* and *sangha*. The latter two terms are represented by the Canon and the monastic community respectively, but for some scholars (Trainor 1996), the apparent 'absence' of the Buddha image prior to the early centuries AD can be explained through the mechanism of the relic cult. Some scholars (Bronkhorst 2011, 200, cit. Lancaster 1974) maintain that the earliest Buddha images were viewed as manifestations of the Buddha's physical body rather than symbols of his personhood, an association which persists into the 'afterlife' of sculptures whereby 'dead' or damaged images become relic deposits themselves (Bronkhorst 2011, 200, citing Schopen 1990, 276). Thus for later periods, Buddha images arguably replicate the role hitherto played by his physical relics but without the negative connotations of the relic cult (*ibid.*). The *stupa* as repository for the relic may thus be viewed as the first 'image' for Buddhist worship. With a few exceptions, mainly within the *yaksha* and *naga* traditions (Shaw 2004; De Caroli 2004), anthropomorphic representations of any deity during the late centuries BC are few and far between (Thompson 2011); the *stupa* possibly fills this gap; later on, many *stupas* contain actual Buddha images or inscribed tablets representing the Buddha's teachings (*dharma*), reinforcing the aforementioned argument that such objects embody similar power as that of their corporeal prototypes. Theologically, the Buddha has gone, but his relics continue to represent his body, without which the *shasana* (collective Buddhist teachings) cannot spread. Relics act thus as dynamic agents for propelling the transmission of the Buddhist *dharma*, just as the relic altar provided the legitimising focus for the spread of medieval Christianity. An oft-quoted example relates to Ashoka's son, Mahinda's introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, and his realisation that without relics his mission was unlikely to succeed (Trainor 1997, 173–174).

The idea of *stupa*-as-image is reinforced by the history and chronology of the Indian temple, the earliest known examples of the Mauryan period all following an apsidal or elliptical form. The earliest levels of a 3rd-century-BC temple at Vidisha, dedicated to the Bhagavata, proto-Vaishnava deity, Vasudeva, follow this plan (Shaw 2007, 53–55; Khare 1967), as did the earliest levels of Temples 18 and 40 at Sanchi, and a recently excavated example at Satdhara (Shaw 2007, 112). Recent excavations on the western slope between *Stupas* 1 and 2 have revealed two additional apsidal temples (IAR 1995–1996 (2002): 47–48), with similar evidence at Mawasa (Shaw 2011) and several other newly documented SSP sites (Shaw 2007, 110–130). This temple plan transcends sectarian boundaries, with the cult object installed in the apse, instead of the innermost sanctum (*garbha*

griha) of later square-oriented temples such as Temple 17 at Sanchi, datable to the Gupta period. It is difficult to identify the cult object housed within the earliest Buddhist temples, but the post-Mauryan rock-cut shrine type (*caitya*) of the Deccan which usually houses a monolithic *stupa* as the focus for worship and circumambulation, may be instructive in this regard (Mitra 1971).

By the late centuries BC, Brahmanical literature distinguishes between buildings that house ‘images’ and those that contain mortuary remains. An oft-cited example from the *Mahabharata* (3.188), whose composition is generally dated to the 1st or 2nd century BC, equates the end of the *Kali Yuga* (the current era) with the replacement of temples (*devakula*) by charnel houses (*eduka*) (Bakker 2007, 15; Allchin 1957, 1). The term *devakula* means literally ‘family seat of god’ (Bakker 2007), and as used in early texts and inscriptions is taken to imply the idea of a ‘temple’ containing images of gods (Olivelle 2009). There is some uncertainty, however, as to whether this was always the intended meaning, and at Mat, near Mathura, where one of the earliest epigraphical instances of the term occurs (early centuries AD), a closer approximation may be a kind of statue gallery (*pratimagriha*), a term which figures in a contemporary inscription at Naneghat in the Deccan. Such galleries formed one of several categories of symbolic Brahmanical funerary monuments that housed commemorative images of the dead rather than of gods (Bakker 2007; Shaw 2015). Whichever the case, the *Mahabharata* verse makes quite explicit the distinction between those monuments that contain images of gods or deceased mortals with a possible god-like status (Fussman 1989, 199) and charnel houses whose corporeal remains placed them beyond the orthodox pale. All the more interesting in light of suggestions that *stupa* worship was akin to 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 the temple *puja* cult (Willis 2009a), more on which later.

The Buddha’s death and the materiality of the relic cult

According to textual sources, the Buddha’s cremated remains were distributed amongst eight polities of the Gangetic valley region, with each share deposited in its own *stupa*. Several centuries later, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka is attributed with having had these remains disinterred and redistributed in 84,000 newly built *stupas*. Although there are claims to the contrary (Singh 1970), none of the original pre-Ashokan *stupas* have been identified with any certainty, possibly because they were simple earthen mounds that either did not survive or were elaborated upon in later years (Shaw 2015). Identification is further hampered by destructive excavations in the 19th century, aimed primarily at relic retrieval (Cunningham 1854). The first clearly datable *stupas* belong to the Mauryan period, albeit in limited numbers. In most cases, as at Sanchi, their original appearance is obscured by post-Mauryan embellishment (2nd to 1st centuries BC), although recent excavations of *Stupa* 1 at nearby Satdhara provide crucial insights into the architectural

manifestations of this transition (Shaw 2007, 112–113, fig. 63). Known as the ‘second propagation’ of Buddhism (Willis 2000a), the post-Mauryan period is when the tradition truly takes root in the landscape, with *stupas* (and monasteries) appearing throughout the Indian subcontinent in the kind of numbers suggested by the Ashokan legend.

With very few exceptions, the majority of relic deposits are not those of the Buddha, but of saints, senior monks (and occasionally, ordinary people), whose inscribed reliquaries can only sometimes be linked to a particular school, time and place. Examples of such instances include the inscribed reliquaries of the Hemavata school in the Sanchi area (Willis 2000a, 2001, 2009b), and the more recently documented evidence from Deokothar, connected to the Bahushrutiya school (Hinüber and Skilling 2013; Salomon and Marino 2014). The earliest and strongest datable reference to a relic of the historical Buddha comes in the form of two similarly worded inscriptions on the Shinkot reliquary from Bajaur, Afghanistan (Schopen 1997a, 126–127). Both inscriptions, issued during the reign of the Indo-Greek king Menander (2nd century BC), refer to the relics of the ‘blessed Sakyamuni which are endowed with life (*prana*)’. The term *prana* is well-known from established Vedic ontologies of life and death, central to which is the crucial notion, adapted in later Yogic and Ayurvedic dispensations, of *prana* as universal organic energy or ‘vital breath’, cessation of which is the defining feature of death (Zysk 1993, 200). Its particular usage in the Shinkot reliquary represents, therefore, a rather radical departure from longer-term Brahmanical norms, and supports Schopen’s (1991, 1997a) arguments, discussed later, that relics were regarded as manifestations of the Buddha’s essence or ‘life-force’.

However, most surviving *stupas* have yielded neither relic, reliquary, or associated inscription. In such cases, historical identifications can sometimes be inferred from aspects of landscape data such as inter- or intra-site relationships, or individual *stupas*’ placing within broader interlinked networks (Shaw 2000, 2007, 2011). As argued in relation to the SSP discussed next, *stupas* often form part of discernible hierarchies whereby the central monument or site acts as a magnet for *stupas* whose lower or peripheral ritual status mirrors the relative rank during the life of the person with which they are associated. Some such ‘burial ad sanctos’ *stupas* (Schopen 1997a, 1994a) contain not formal relic deposits but rather ‘large bones’ (Cunningham 1854) that are more similar to ‘burials’ than relic deposits. Such *stupas* may be associated with what Schopen (*ibid*) refers to as a ‘cult of the monastic dead’, whereby the burials of junior monks or laypersons are placed in deference to revered relic *stupas* in ways that mirror the saintly traditions of medieval Christian Europe.

Case study: Sanchi Survey Project

The Sanchi area of Madhya Pradesh, occupies a key place in the archaeology of Buddhism (Figure 3.2). Sanchi itself is one of India’s best-preserved, and most studied Buddhist sites, with a continuous constructional sequence from the 3rd

century BC to the 12th century AD (Marshall *et al.* 1940; Shaw 2007, Table 10.1, 2013b). Four other well-preserved Buddhist sites, Sonari, Satdhara, Morel khurd, and Andher, all situated within ten kilometres of Sanchi, were first documented by Cunningham (1854), with a sixth site Bighan, three km northwest of Vidisha, published some years later (Lake 1910b). Apart from Satdhara (Agrawal 1997; IAR 1995–1996, 1996–1997, 1997–1998, 1999–2000), these sites have received limited archaeological or conservational attention since Cunningham's time. The city mounds of Vidisha, situated 8 km to the north of Sanchi, represent the earliest phase of urbanism in central India (IAR 1963–1964, 16–17; 1964–1965, 18; 1965–1966, 23; 1975–1976, 30–1; 1976–1977, 33–34). While fortified state capitals in the Gangetic valley formed the backdrop to the Buddha's life and teachings between the 6th and 5th centuries BC, similar developments, with limited exceptions, in central and south India are not attested archaeologically until at least the 3rd century BC. Vidisha is also home to some of the earliest archaeological evidence for the Pancaratra system of the Bhagavata cult, a prototypical form of Vaishnavism which became prominent during the late centuries BC (Lake 1910a; Bhandarkar 1914, 1915; Khare 1967; IAR 1963–1964, 17, 1964–1965, 19–20; Shaw 2004, 2007, 53–55). The importance of orthodox Brahmanism continued throughout Vidisha's history, as illustrated by the mid first millennium-AD-rock-cut temples at Udayagiri (Willis 2009a), while the distribution of sculptural and architectural fragments across Vidisha's hinterland has enabled a diachronic analysis of inter-cult dynamics at a landscape level (Shaw 2007, fig. 12.1, 2013b).

Until recently, little was known about how these sites related to each other or to areas beyond their formal boundaries, and many questions remained regarding the entwined histories of religious change, urbanisation and socio-ecology in central India. The SSP was initiated in 1998 with the aim of filling some of these gaps, particularly with regard the factors that fuelled the transmission of Buddhism from its base in the Gangetic valley (Shaw 2007; See Hawkes 2008; Skilling 2014, 2015, for comparative studies elsewhere in central India; and Fogelin 2004, 2006 further south). The survey, covering 750 km² around Sanchi (Figure 3.2), resulted in the systematic documentation of 35 Buddhist sites (Shaw 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013b), 145 habitational settlements (Shaw 2007, 2013b), 17 irrigation dams (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001, 2003, 2005; Shaw *et al.* 2007; Sutcliffe *et al.* 2011); over 1,000 temple and sculpture fragments associated with Brahmanical, Jain, Buddhist, and 'local' traditions (Shaw 2004, 2007, 2013b), and various 'non-site' data including rock-shelters, 'natural' cult spots and 'memory' sites (Shaw 2017). Before considering these wider patterns, I will first describe the distribution of *stupas*, arguing that maximising their visual presence was a major influencing factor in their spatial positioning, both as a proselytising mechanism, as well as a means of projecting and protecting the relic as the sacred 'life-force' (*prana*) of the personage which they were built to house.

The project was informed in part by theoretical shifts in archaeology which, amongst other things, have led to the recognition of entire landscapes as foci of archaeological enquiry. Accordingly, sites or monuments are viewed not in

isolation but as components of larger and often continuous site groupings (Shaw 2017). Thus, clusters of interrelated ‘Site Groups’, containing sites at varying scales and resolutions, constitute what I describe as archaeological or early historic ‘complexes’ (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001; Shaw 2007, 2017). The Sanchi complex, for example, provides a ‘microcosmic’ model for delineating similar patterns throughout the study area, including as it does, the hilltop Buddhist monuments, as well as habitational settlements at Kanakhera and Nagauri, the reservoir to the south and various rock-shelters and non-Buddhist cult spots (Figure 3.5).

By treating these individual elements as interrelated parts of dynamic but spatially bounded complexes we were able on the basis of the broader SSP data to situate Buddhist monuments and associated ritual practices within their wider ritual and socio-ecological landscape. Despite residing within apparently dislocated monastic centres, textual and epigraphical evidence from Sri Lanka and South-East Asia demonstrates that by the late centuries BC, the *sangha* was part of an interdependent economy mediated through a system of ‘monastic landlordism’ (Gunawardana 1971). In considering the applicability of such models to the Sanchi dataset, our principal argument is that while lay support of the *sangha* was essential to the latter’s survival, practical services provided by the monastery, in particular water for domestic and agricultural use, formed the backbone to changing social and economic conditions including urbanisation and agricultural ‘involution’ (Shaw 2007, 2013a, 2016; Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001, 2003, 2005; Sutcliffe *et al.* 2011). More recently, survey and excavation-based evidence for devolved centres of monastic power in Sri Lanka has supported the idea of a ‘theocratic’ hydraulic landscape in Anuradhapura’s hinterland (Coningham *et al.* 2007; Coningham and Gunawardhana 2013; Gilliland *et al.* 2013), with similar conclusions being drawn for eastern India (Sen 2014, 67), Bihar (Rajani 2016), and the Northwest (Olivieri *et al.* 2006, 131–133). Fogelin’s (2006, 152–153, 165) ceramics-based study at Thotlakonda and nearby settlements in Andhra Pradesh also attests to a high level of localised exchange between monks and local populations, while an abundance of storage jars within the monastic zone supports the view that food was stored and prepared on site (by non-monastic staff), rather than acquired through begging rounds.

A key argument developed elsewhere (Shaw 2013a, 2016) is that the *sangha*’s close relationship with environmental control was an important instrument of lay patronage in the Sanchi area, but was also closely related to Buddhism’s deeper preoccupation with human suffering (*dukkha*) and the means of its alleviation. One of the key messages that arose from the Buddha’s Enlightenment was that we suffer if we do not live correctly. While the SSP landscape data have helped to build a socially engaged model of Buddhism in relation to the *sangha*’s involvement with water and land management as a practical means of tackling such erroneous living and consequent suffering, similar approaches can also illuminate how Buddhist perspectives on death and its impact on human well-being and suffering are played out at a landscape level.

Stupa typologies

The typological framework for assessing newly documented *stupas* was informed by excavation data from Sanchi (Marshall 1940) and the four outlying sites (Cunningham 1854; Willis 2000a). Sanchi's *stupas* can be divided into four main morphological and chronological groups: i) Mauryan (Phase I), as represented by the brick core of *Stupa 1* at both Sanchi and Satdhara (Agrawal 1997; Shaw 2007; 2009) (Figure 3.3); ii) post-Mauryan (Phase II), as represented by *Stupas 2* and *3* at Sanchi, and similar examples at Sonari, Satdhara, Morel khurd and Andher (Figure 3.4): these *stupas*, 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). Recent excavations of *Stupa 1* at Satdhara are useful for revealing the relationship between the Mauryan and post-Mauryan construction methods and materials (Shaw 2007, 112–113, fig. 63); iii) somewhat smaller *stupas* of the Gupta (phase IV: 4th–6th centuries AD) and post-Gupta periods (phase V: 7th–8th centuries) such as those clustered around Sanchi *Stupa 1*, all set on square or circular platforms, and without railings (Marshall *et al.* 1940: 46); iv) even smaller *stupas*, with diameters of <1m, as represented by a recently revealed cluster on the lower southern slopes of Sanchi hill (Willis 2000a; IAR 1995–1996 (2002): 47–48, pl. XIII; Shaw 2007: 21, pl. 20). Traditionally classified as 'votive', such *stupas* are now, following Schopen (1997a), generally viewed as 'burial *ad sanctos*' *stupas* discussed earlier. Similar *stupas* occur throughout the study area, both within larger



FIGURE 3.3 Sanchi Stupa 1

Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.



FIGURE 3.4 Andher Stupa

Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.

monastic compounds, and independent burial grounds, as on Dargawan hill to the west of Sanchi (Figures 3.2 and 3.3) (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2005, 8–12; Shaw 2007, 111); similar evidence occurs at Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh (Fogelin 2004, 2006).

Where were the monks? Monasteries and monasticism

Stupas, of course, did not exist in isolation. While, as suggested earlier, the Buddha was represented architecturally by the *stupa*, the other two components of the *triratna* – the *dharma* and *sangha* – were manifested in the *caitya* hall or shrine, and monastery respectively (Shaw 2000). The only structures at Sanchi dated with certainty to the site’s earliest (Mauryan) phase of construction are *Stupa* 1, the Ashokan pillar, and the apsidal temples 18 and 40 (Shaw 2007, 86–87, fig. 9.1). The crucial question thus is ‘where were the monks living during this early phase’?

It is likely that monks resided in makeshift structures that have not survived, as well as some of the rock-shelter dwellings that cluster around the edges of Sanchi hill and many other sites in the area (Shaw 2007, 2016, Figure 3.5). Schopen (1994b: 547) has argued that the *sangha* did not adopt fully institutionalised sedentary monasticism until the early centuries AD, and such sites together with ‘disorganised’, makeshift buildings constructed of non-durable materials represented the main form of monastic dwelling for at least the ensuing half millennium. This is because the closest architectural match for textual allusions to

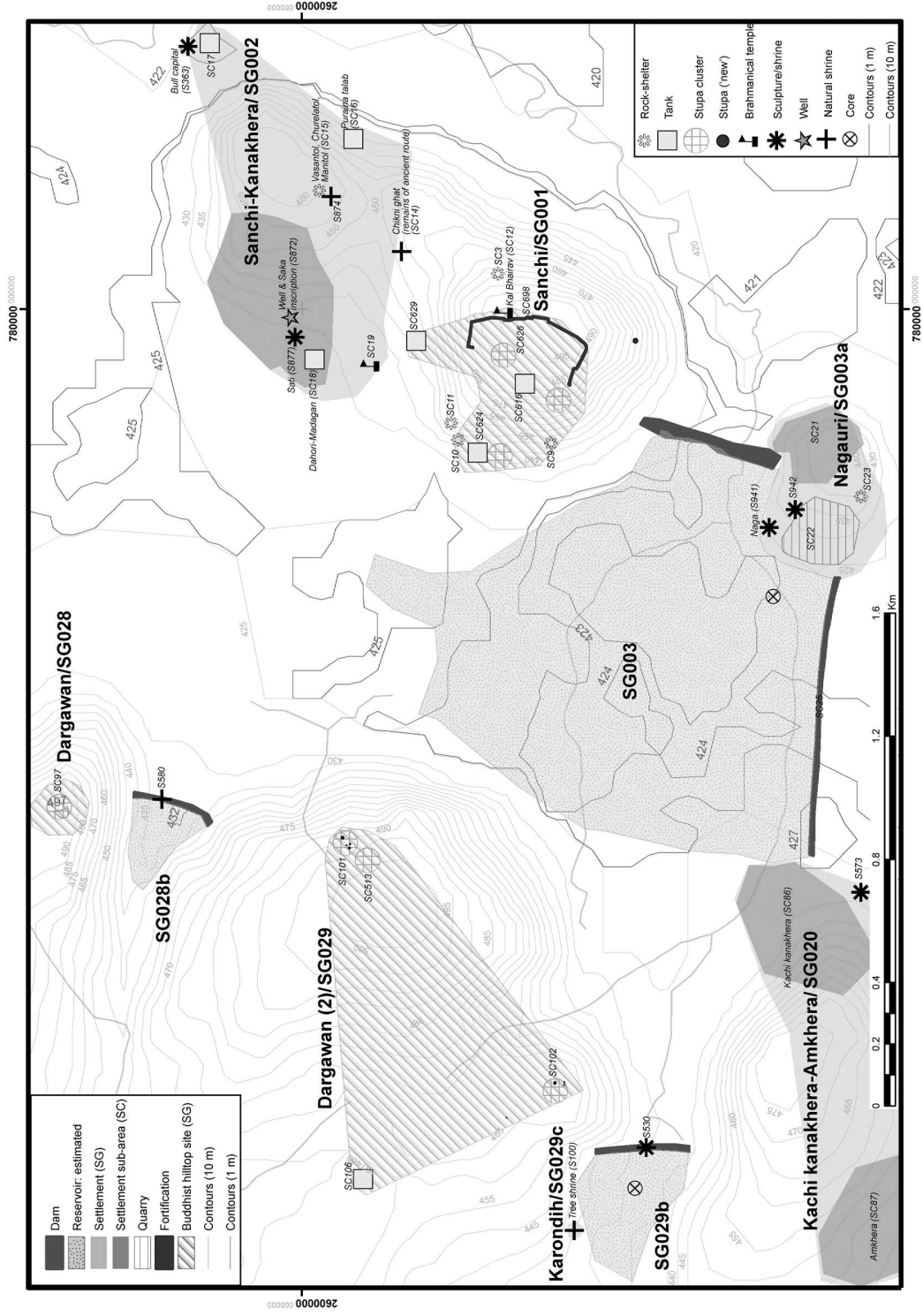


FIGURE 3.5 Early historic complex at Sanchi hill
Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.

the transition between peripatetic mendicancy and sedentary monasticism and the consolidation of sustainable exchange networks is, according to Schopen, the courtyard monastery. Marshall (1940, 63–64) held that the courtyard tradition originated in the Northwest during the early centuries AD, reaching Sanchi in the Gupta period, as represented by the Phase IV examples in the southern part of the site. As discussed elsewhere (Shaw 2011), Schopen's hypothesis is flawed on a number of grounds, more generally speaking because it perpetuates structuralist-type correlations between architectural and social manifestations of 'order', and specifically because it overlooks key evidence such as the rock-cut sites of the Deccan where the courtyard monastery had reached a fully developed form by the 2nd century BC (Shaw 2011). Schopen's model is challenged further by data from the SSP area including two major Phase II structural monastery types datable to the late centuries BC (Figure 3.6): i) simple single or double-roomed dormitory style buildings (Agrawal 1997 fig. 7; Shaw 2007); and ii) large 'platformed' monasteries, at Sanchi surviving as Building 8, with better-preserved examples at nine other sites including Satdhara, Sonari, Morel khurd and Ander (Cunningham 1854; Shaw 2007, 2011). These imposing platforms were originally surmounted by towering brick and stone superstructures which at some sites such as Mawasa still bear traces of a courtyard plan (Shaw 2007, 2011), and which show similarities in form and layout to early rock-cut counterparts in the Deccan such as Pitalkhora (Shaw 2011). What is clear is that the majority of *stupa* sites in the SSP area were, by the late centuries BC, accompanied by permanent monasteries, the scale and size of which is suggestive of large communities of monks. The broader SSP land-use and settlement data, when viewed against Bailey and Mabbett's (2003) hypothesis that while small peripatetic groups could have survived through daily begging rounds, larger communities would have required more integrated exchange networks that went beyond a subsistence economy, strongly suggest that the type of institutionalised monasticism placed by Schopen in the early centuries AD were already established several hundred years earlier.

Reliquary inscriptions and monastic networks

Returning to the *stupas* themselves, these also did not exist in isolation, but formed parts of interlinked ritual landscapes bound partly through the dynamics of the relic cult as well as through broader economic mechanisms (Shaw 2007, 2016). The reliquary inscriptions from Sanchi *Stupa 2* and the neighbouring sites of Andher, Morel khurd, Satdhara and Sonari indicate that all five sites were linked to a group of teachers known as the Hemavatas, led by a monk named Gotiputa (Cunningham 1854; Willis 2000a, 2001; Shaw 2000, 2007, 2009). The Hemavatas were one of the missions sent out to parts of Asia under Ashoka, in this case to the Himalayan region, and for some reason their relics were brought to central India during the 2nd century BC. This school evidently took over the older sites of Sanchi and Satdhara and established new centres at Sonari,

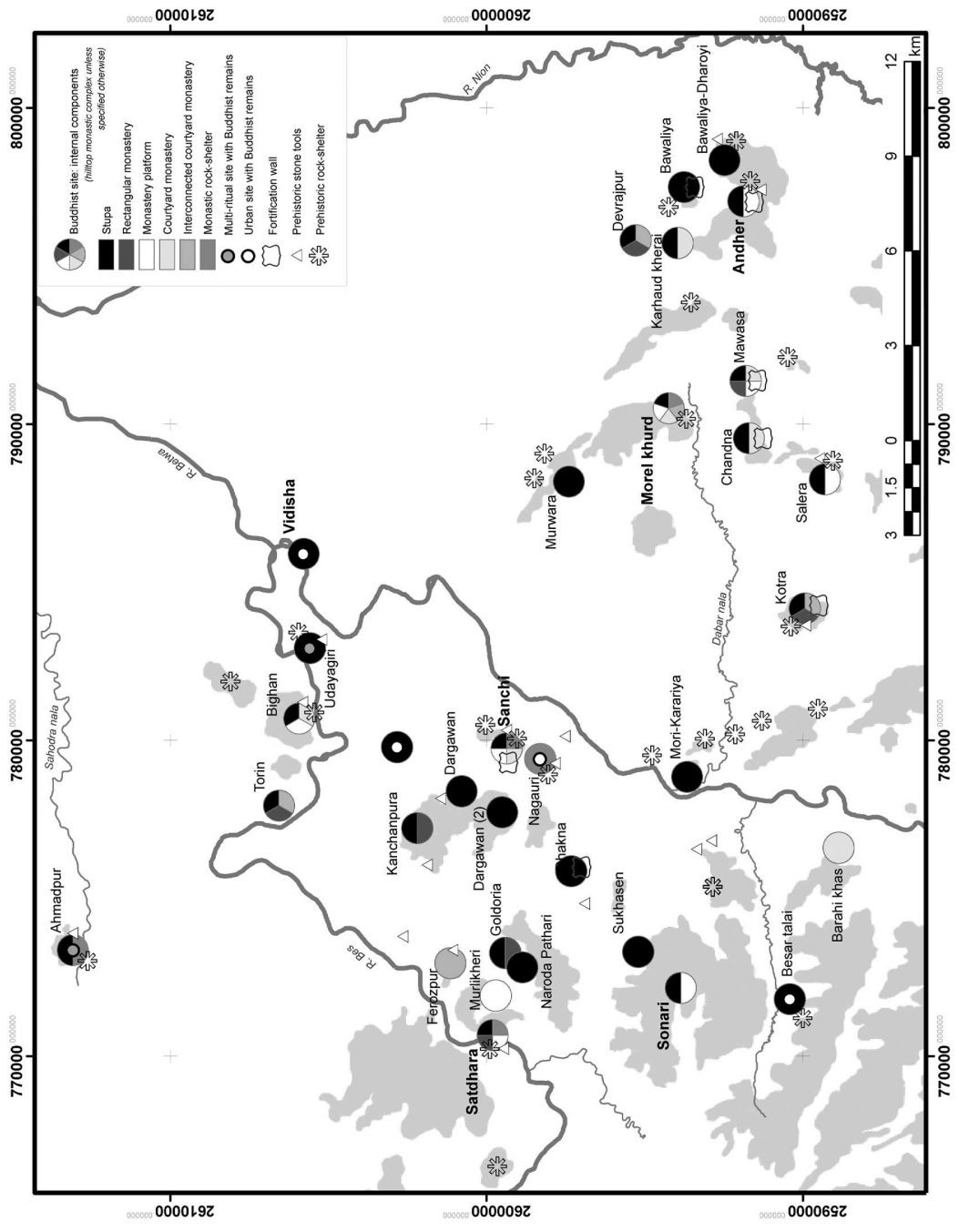


FIGURE 3.6 Buddhist site types and settlements

Source: Courtesy Julia Shaw.

Morel khurd and Andher. The reliquaries show that these sites were linked and were established (or expanded up in the case of Sanchi and Satdhara) in a single campaign.

Although no relics have ever been retrieved from the central *stupa* at either Sanchi or Satdhara, indirect evidence suggests that they originally contained, and perhaps still do, the relics of the Buddha himself. This may be inferred from the fact that at both sites, the *stupas* containing the relics of Sariputa and Mahamogalana (at Sanchi, no. 3 and Satdhara, no. 8), the Buddha's chief disciples, are situated next to *Stupa* 1 (Shaw 2000, 30). This arrangement conforms to rules in the *Vinaya* (*Mahaparinibbana sutta* v. 95.2.7), stipulating that the positioning of monks' *stupas* should mirror their rank in life and, more specifically, that Sariputa and Mahamogalana's *stupas* should thus be placed next to that of the Buddha (Roth 1980, 184–185; Willis 2000a). At Sanchi, *Stupa* 2 is situated halfway down the hill at a removed distance from *Stupas* 1 and 3, mirroring possibly the Hemavatas' historical distance from the Buddha and his immediate monastic circles, although there are obvious visual linkages between the Hemavata *stupa* sites and the central site of Sanchi which as argued later was both a sign of deference to older hierarchies as well as conforming to the dynamics of burial *ad sanctos*. Quite how these Hemavata sites related, both in terms of hierarchy and monastic schools, to newly documented *stupa* sites that lack recorded reliquary inscriptions, or how associated monastic territories (*sima*) were delineated is an unsettled matter (Shaw 2007, 137–140). Willis (2000a, 95) has suggested that Sonari was a kind of subsidiary to Satdhara, while Andher was dependent on Morel khurd. Further inferences about localised hierarchies and networks based on *stupa* size, decoration, site area and geographical particularities have been made (Shaw 2007, 137–140), while insights into the diachronic relationships between monastic hierarches and Sanchi's multi-stranded religious geography are provided by the spatial and temporal distribution of architectural and sculptural remains across the study area (Shaw 2007, 176–193, fig. 12.1).

Patronage

While the Phase I monuments at Sanchi (3rd century BC) were connected with Mauryan patronage, the most prolific construction took place during the ensuing two centuries (Phase II). Donative inscriptions show that this later campaign was funded principally by extensive programmes of collective patronage pooled together from powerful families and guilds (Singh 1996), following a process not dissimilar to modern 'crowdfunding' (Shaw 2016; Agrawal *et al.* 2014). At Sanchi, thousands of single-lined inscriptions on paving stones and railings record donations of these individual architectural elements. Similar inscriptions are found at Satdhara (Agrawal 1997) while their absence at many of the newly documented SSP sites, may reflect stone-reuse and site disturbance in historical times (Shaw 2017).

Although such collective donation is usually highlighted as the predominant mode of patronage during the post-Mauryan phase (II), there are exceptions to this rule. A notable example comes from a newly documented site to the east of Sanchi called Mawasa, where an inscribed *stupa* slab datable palaeographically to Phase II, reads ‘*makadeyena karapite*’ ([This was] caused to be made by Makadeya’) (Shaw 2007, 2011). This particular wording is not found in the inscriptions from Sanchi or Satdhara which commonly end with the term *danam*, referring to the gift of individual railing parts and paving slabs. By contrast, the Mawasa inscription seemingly describes the funded construction of the whole *stupa*, and possibly the whole monastic complex including several major monasteries of the platformed type described earlier. Its causative construction combined with the use of the nominative singular marks Makadeya out as one who has the ability to get things done. Similar wording in early Sri Lankan inscriptions recording royal donations of rock-shelter dwellings (Paranavitana 1970: vol. 1, nos. 500, 813) provides further suggestions of Makadeya’s commanding, if not royal, stature. Together with a similarly worded inscription from Besar Talai (IAR 1978–1979: 13), a *stupa* and habitational settlement site to the south of Sanchi (Shaw 2007, 2011), the Mawasa inscription sheds light on forms of patronage at other newly documented sites with no recorded inscriptions.

Hilltop *stupas* in the landscape: monks, fields and forests

The majority of *stupas* in the SSP area are situated on hilltops, and form part of larger complexes, comprising monasteries, shrines and other structures (Shaw 2007) although single-purpose *stupa* and burial sites have, as described earlier, also been documented (Figure 3.6). Central to the SSP’s theoretical and methodological position is the recognition that hilltop Buddhist complexes are likely to form part of both local and inter-regional monastic networks. Additionally, the intervening valleys and the lower slopes of the hills were occupied by large villages and towns, in striking contrast to the area’s rural appearance today. The closely entwined fortunes of the monastic and lay populations living in these different zones are central to our conceptualisation of the gradual and long-term process of monumentalisation and entanglement with the socio-ecological environment that underpinned the development of sedentary monasticism as well as urban culture in the Sanchi-Vidisha region (Shaw 2016).

We might ask why these hilltop locations were so consistently sought out by the *sangha*. Crucially, hilltops provided refuge from monsoon flooding which is why so many habitational settlements are also situated on some form of raised ground. However, in central India, it is rare to find a village on a hilltop due variously to their susceptibility to siege, poor accessibility, low agricultural value and deficient water supplies. On the other hand, the forests that they support are valuable economic resources for agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers alike. Contrary to the post-colonial, social construction of forests as the primordial ‘natural’ other to agricultural ‘development’, recent research for the long-term

history of forest exploitation (Morrison and Lycett 2014; Evans 2016) highlights the importance to urban and inter-regional economies of forests and the plant and animal resources that they support (Shaw 2016). Nevertheless, the numerous prehistoric painted rock-shelters and microlithic tool scatters found throughout the central Indian hills (Neumayer 2011) attest to their special link with hunter-gatherer and peripatetic lifeways, an association which continues into historical times through the traditional association between hills, rock-shelters and ‘property-renouncing’ ascetical groups (Jacobson 1975, 81). Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* (2.2.5), a state-craft manual traditionally attributed to the Mauryan period but more likely a composite text which did not reach completion before the early to mid-first millennium AD (Trautmann 1971), refers to the designation of non-agricultural land for the purposes of scholarly and ascetical activities.

Whether or not such prescriptions influenced in any way the siting of early Buddhist dwellings in the Sanchi area, it is interesting to note that nearly half of the documented Buddhist sites here contain prehistoric rock-shelters (Shaw 2007, figs. 45–55). Together with habitational settlement patterns discussed next (Shaw 2013b, 2016), these data attest to peripatetic, possibly hunter-gatherer occupation in the hilly zones from at least the Chalcolithic period. Many of the prehistoric shelters show evidence for having been adapted for monastic use, possibly as an intermediate stage between peripatetic and sedentary monasticism as represented by the aforementioned Phase II platformed monasteries (Shaw 2007, 37, 117, 129–136). These ‘monastic shelters’ show parallels with the drip-ledged shelters (*lena*) of Sri Lanka, whose 3rd-century-BC donative inscriptions, mentioned earlier, represent the earliest form of lay-monastic exchange in that region (Coningham 1995). As in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, some of the SSP shelters were undoubtedly occupied into later periods as part of a two-tiered urban/forest model of monasticism. Future excavation, and rock-art analysis are expected to clarify their chronological and historical relationship to structural monasteries and institutional monasticism, while palynological and geoarchaeological analyses is required in order to shed light on how Buddhist propagation related to wider patterns of forest clearance and land-tenure. This is important given the *sangha*’s alleged pioneering role in encouraging population shifts into new areas (Ray 1994, 5), and more recently posited comparisons with medieval examples of Hindu and Islamic ‘monastic governmentality’ (Chatterjee 2015).

The future excavation of the SSP ‘monastic rock-shelters’ may also illuminate the extent to which the Buddhist landscape of *stupas* and relics intersected with pre-existing zones of the dead. In South India, many early Buddhist sites have been found to overlie older, ‘protohistoric’ burial grounds (Schopen 1996). Being unsuitable for agricultural purposes, such locations suited the *sangha*’s ‘non-producing’ status, but due to their mortuary function, they may have had polluting associations for orthodox Brahmins. Moreover, textual evidence suggests that certain, albeit marginal, sections of the Buddhist *sangha* actively sought out cremation grounds as foci for meditation on death and decay (Schopen 1996).

Although comparable evidence for local mortuary practices is lacking in central India, many excavated rock-shelter sites, such as Bhimbetka, 70km southwest of Sanchi, contain human burials (Misra and Sharma 2003, 40–43). Many of these shelters, reused in later years by Buddhist monks, contain Chalcolithic paintings of wild animals depicted in hunting, post-butchery, or hide-preparation scenes, or with animals' internal organs and skeletal structure visible (Neumayer 2011). Buddhist forest monks would have had as close dealings with the hunting communities that created this art as they did with local farmers, and indeed, as today, there would have been considerable overlap between these two lifeways (Shaw 2016, 2019).

Hilltop stupas and 'local' ritual

Hilltops also hold particular symbolic and mythological associations, described in ancient texts as the abode of *yakshas* and other place-bound spirits (Misra 1981, 50; e.g., *Digha Nikaya*, 41). These shrines, referred to as *cetiya* (Misra 1981, 42; Coomaraswamy 1980, 17; *Anguttara Nikaya* II. 550), provided the focus of hilltop celebrations (*gir-aggā-samajjan*) such as the annual festival at Rajagaha in Bihar (Hardy 1903, 61–66), or one of the events listed in Ashoka's edicts 1 and 9 as being prohibited for monks and nuns (*Vinaya* II. 107, 150; III. 71; IV. 85, 267, 360; *Jataka* III. 538). The suggestion that the topography of Buddhist sites followed certain conventions is also central to earlier, albeit untested, arguments regarding the prevalence of pre-Buddhist ritual practices at major monastic sites (Cunningham 1892, 40; Byrne 1995; Kosambi 1962). That *yaksha* shrines were referred to as *cetiya* offers an additional gloss on the possible antecedents of the *stupa* given that the terms *cetiya* and *stupa* were used interchangeably in later Pali literature (Cousins 2018; Law 1931; Misra 1981, 91–93; Irwin 1987; Van Kooij 1995). There are also suggested linkages between the carved panels on the *torana* gateways of Sanchi *Stupa* 1 and the *charana chitras*, the pictorial scrolls whose public display was, according to texts such as the *Samyutta Nikaya*, or *Arthashastra*, an integral component of the banned hilltop festivals (Ray 1945, 69). Whether the *sangha* actively sought out places already regarded as sacred is difficult to determine, especially since *yaksha* or *naga* 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 1st century BC, that is, long after the arrival of Buddhism (Shaw 2004). Further, their representation in sculptural form may say more about the Buddhist worldview and etic codifications of the 'other', than of 'local' religious practices (Shaw 2004, 2007, 2013a; for parallels with 8th century Tibet see Dalton 2004). However, the suggestion that the *sangha* occupied spaces already associated with revered local deities, may have been part of a 'localisation' strategy of the type posited by Cohen (1998) for Ajanta. There is also evidence for the *sangha's* more direct assimilation of the *naga* cult and related rainmaking rituals into its own water-harvesting strategies and related proselytising strategies (Shaw 2004, 2016).

Hilltop *stupas*: 'seeing' and placing the Buddha's body

Hilltops would have helped to further these proselytising aims by ensuring that *stupas* were seen throughout the surrounding landscape. At Sanchi, *Stupa* 1 can be seen for miles around, and at Andher, the principal *stupa* perches dramatically on the edge of a cliff, creating a striking silhouette on the horizon (Figure 3.4). This would have created a strong sense of connectivity with local villages as illustrated clearly at Andher, where a Phase IV *stupa* at the southern edge of the hill is clearly visible from the village of Hakimkheri below. Conversely, from the southernmost edge of Andher hill, the sights and sounds of the present-day village (that overlies an earlier settlement) below are strikingly obvious. Despite the monks' departure from village life, they were still socially engaged, through the aforementioned economic functions of the monastery, but also through basic phenomenological and experiential modalities.

Cunningham (1854, 342) periodically commented on what could be seen from principal spots in the landscape, including the element of intervisibility between *stupa* sites, a point which is explored further in the following discussion. But he also made reference to the 'picturesque' aspect of Buddhist sites including the pleasant views afforded from such places. Similar observations have been made in recent garden-as-monastery scholarship (Ali 2003; Schopen 2006), an association which is reinforced by the Sanskrit terms by which monasteries are described in early inscriptions and texts: *vihara* and *arama* are translatable variously as 'pleasure tour' or 'pleasure place', while 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 time, leisure and comfort, and that an agreeable environment would be in keeping with such aims. As argued by Schopen (2006), in contrast to the traditional notion of monasteries as places of austerity that reject urban courtly culture, their landscape setting conformed closely to contemporary notions of the garden, as the epitome of urban or courtly sophistication. Ali (2003) has argued that the sensuous, ornamental and in particular, 'floral' motifs in early Buddhist thought and art represented an *inversion* rather than rejection of urban courtly values.

Within such discourse, much is made of the abundant plant imagery that decorates the post-Mauryan pillars surrounding *Stupas* 1 and 2 at Sanchi and contemporary sites. But interestingly these plants are not regarded as real foliage, but as idealised utopias, or '*dharma* spaces' (Brown 2009), representing monks' transcendence of, rather than engagement with, 'nature'. Similarly, the *yakshini* images at Sanchi are no longer 'nature' spirits but rather courtesans, whose role in well-known romantic tales set in palace gardens, made them ideal mnemonic symbols for monks' transcendence of worldly pleasures (Shimada 2012). These highly decorative displays of the harnessed powers of 'nature' (Ali 2003, 231) were, according to Schopen (2006, 496), intended to transport the monk or lay visitor to a higher plane, while also acting as places from where 'nature' could be admired from a safe distance (Schopen 2006, 498–503).

My view, however, is that such approaches reflect a socially-detached model of monasticism which is mirrored by broader discourse on the assumed 'passivity' of early Buddhist attitudes towards 'nature' and 'environmentalism' (Shaw 2016). While Schopen comments on the bucolic views afforded from Sanchi and contemporary sites, the SSP data paints a rather different kind of 'view', one characterised by cultivated, 'managed' agrarian and hydraulic landscapes, interspersed by large numbers of semi-urban habitational sites (Shaw 2007, 2015, 2016). My position is that the control and harnessing of 'nature', and particularly water, is what the Buddhist monastery excelled at, and the garden was the ideal visual medium for illustrating such skills. Large numbers of monastery-governed hydraulic systems documented during the SSP were, like the elaborate water displays at rock-cut monasteries in the Deccan (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2003), instruments of lay patronage, symbolising not the *sangha's* transcendence of the 'natural' world, but rather its ability to 'tame' and harness natural resources, to harvest and store water in regions of climatic uncertainty (Shaw 2004, 2007, 2013a). While local populations were otherwise dependent on rainmaking cults for timely rainfall as well as drought and flood-control, mediated through the propitiation of dangerous serpent deities (*nagas*) (Shaw 2004, 2016; Cohen 1998), they were now assured reliable and timely water supplies through their investment in new frameworks of technological and administrative knowledge. Water-shortage is a primary cause of human suffering, especially in regions where 90% of annual rainfall occurs in two-to-three months (Sutcliffe *et al.* 2011), and the *sangha's* ability to alleviate this suffering was made explicit through outward symbols of its engagement with environmental control.

We may extend this view to sculpted plant imagery and 'nature spirits' at Sanchi as symbols of the *sangha's* ability to 'live well' with 'nature', harness its resources, and overcome its more dangerous and unpredictable elements (Shaw 2016). Such imagery is dominated by aquatic species such as lotus along with fish, turtles or snakes, while freestanding *naga* images documented during the SSP are closely linked, spatially and chronologically, with historical water-resource structures (Shaw 2004; Cohen 1998). This aquatic theme reflects the 'watery' landscape out of which the monuments on Sanchi hill emerge (Shaw 2016): Sanchi's hydraulically engineered landscape forms the basis of an emerging 'Buddhist economics' (Schumacher 1973; Pryor 1990; Green 1992) that sustains monks as a non-producing section of society and provides a practical means for alleviating the human suffering (*dukkha*) at the heart of the Buddha's earliest teachings. The 'swampy' vegetation depicted on Sanchi's monuments accords with the irrigated rice-growing environment in the Gangetic valley from where the earliest Buddhist missions spread outwards in the late centuries BC. A key argument, supported by preliminary pollen sequences from excavated reservoir deposits in the SSP area, is that monastic culture in central India was also predicated on a predominantly rice-growing economy (Shaw *et al.* 2007). Similarly, *yaksha* and *naga* sculptures were likely etic and generalised attempts to represent the 'local', with specific iconographies reflecting older ritual-ecological realities in the Gangetic valley heartland

(Cohen 1998; Shaw 2004). Symbolically, too, Sanchi hill and the *stupas* there can be viewed as rising from primordial waters in ways that mirror cosmogonic references to Mount Meru at many sacred sites across South and South-East Asia. The earliest monuments in the Sanchi area were established only after long periods of pre-monumental engagement with comparatively ‘wild’, peripheral zones of the settled landscape, as represented by the aforementioned monastic rock-shelters replete with prehistoric paintings of wild animals and hunting scenes. One might justifiably view, therefore, the plant imagery at Sanchi as mnemonic indicators of monks’ transformation, rather than transcendence, of nature on the one hand and their transcendence of conventional modes of urban-based production and consumption on the other (Shaw 2016; 2019).

Local *stupa* and relic networks

The element of intervisibility *between* individual *stupa* sites in the Sanchi area is also striking. I have argued that this was not a passive network, but rather an active strategy for reinforcing linkages between key ritual sites (Shaw 2000, 2007). As discussed earlier, texts and inscriptions have described *stupas* not simply as repositories of the Buddhist relic, but containers of *prana* (life-force or ‘vital breath’) (Schopen 1997a) that projected the presence of the Buddha, senior monks, and the *dharma* into and across the surrounding space. The highly visible setting of *stupas* highlights the importance of ‘seeing’ (Pali: *dassana*; Sanskrit: *darshana*) at Buddhist sacred sites. Both Trainor (1997, 174–177) and Schopen (1997a, 117, n. 9) have noted the analogy between ‘seeing’ or ‘beholding’ and worshipping within the Buddhist tradition, highlighting the importance of direct visual contact between the Buddha and his followers. A similar analogy at monastic sites receives sanction in the Buddhist Canon: in the *Mahaparinibbana sutta*, the dying Buddha tells Ananda that the four main pilgrimage places connected with his life are places which ‘ought to be seen’ (*dassaniya*) (*Digha Nikaya* 16: 5: 7–8; Rhys Davids 1910, 153–154). The objects of this ‘seeing’ are not merely sacred places, but ‘relics of use’ (*paribhogika dhatu*); 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 the Buddhist places, therefore, was equivalent to seeing and worshipping the Buddha. The concept of *darshana*, 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 (*pradakshina*) as one of the main aspects of *stupa* worship (Falk 1977, 290; Trainor 1996).

A clear example of this ‘life-force’ attributed to the relics and *stupas* at Sanchi is provided by an inscription on the west gateway of the main *Stupa* there. This warns that

he who dismantles . . . the stone work from this [*stupa*], 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 *sangha*) which correspond to those defined in the *Vinaya* rules; the emphasis here on the murder or injury of a living being suggests that the *stupa* too was seen as a living being, hence the need to protect it from dangerous forces, both ritual and political (Shaw 2000, 2007).

These points help to highlight the proselytising dimension of *stupa* architecture, whose trajectory of influence could transcend material constraints through the visual sphere. For the Buddhist monks, this mechanism was a means of quite literally 'presencing' the *dharma* in new areas. Furthermore, the visual prominence of Sanchi *Stupa* 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 local non-monastic communities irrespective of whether they knew or invited it. The additional aims of such an arrangement were no doubt multi-faceted, providing on the one hand an ever-present reminder to monks of the proximity of death in keeping with the Buddhist recognition of life as a preparation for death (Cuevas and Stone 2007), but also embodying the paradox of Buddha's attainment of *nirvana* while enduring in the form of his relics. A key question here, however, is how Buddhist *stupas* were perceived by non-monastic populations whose attitudes towards death, and indeed life, may have been heavily proscribed by orthodox notions of purity and pollution (Shaw 2016), and according to which such visible expressions of the 'breathing' dead may have represented a source of danger and contamination.

Fortification and surveillance: the protection of relics

A similar concern with maximising the visual presence of *stupas* is discernible in the internal layout of monastic sites. As part of a body of evidence on the 'cult of the monastic dead', Schopen (1990; cf. Roth 1980, 186) has noted how the entrances to early monastic buildings tended to be oriented upon the principal *stupa*, albeit at some distance, while later quadrangular monasteries were built around a *stupa* in the central courtyard (Schopen 1990); in other cases, small *stupas* 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 and other newly documented SSP sites (Shaw 2007). Finally, even without their superstructure, all of the aforementioned Phase II platformed monasteries provide an all-encompassing panorama of the site as a whole. Returning to our discussion of 'seeing', this would have allowed the monks to keep the most important *stupas* 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 *stupas* to be admired but may also be explained as part of the need to protect relics by regulating access to the *stupas* and maintaining close surveillance of them. On account of its ritual status as a human being, the *stupa* was not only open to the gaze of the devout but also

to more malevolent types of ‘seeing’. The staggered, *svastika*-plan gates placed at the four cardinal points of the stone railing that surrounds Sanchi *Stupa* 1 were evidently 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, 117–135). 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 *dharmaraja* and *cakravartin*. Although the use of relics as instruments of polity received its fullest elaboration in Sri Lanka, Strong (1983) has argued convincingly that this mode of kingship was first developed by Ashoka in the 3rd century BC (see also Duncan 1990).

Stupas were also open to the threat of ‘mundane’ human action, which helps to explain why so many hilltop Buddhist sites in the Sanchi area 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, sets them apart from the surrounding landscape in a dramatic manner (Figure 3.4). Further, key structures are often raised on high platforms (Shaw 2000, 2007, 110–145). At Morel khurd, for example, the platformed monastery has towers at each of its four corners (Shaw 2013a, fig 3), its height creating a fortress-like aspect not dissimilar to later vertically oriented monasteries in the Himalayan regions (Shaw 2011, 117). As well as providing important protection against monsoon flooding, the platformed monasteries would have deterred prospective attackers, thieves, as well as wild animals, 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 2000). Finally, the towering superstructures not only provide all-encompassing views of the *stupas* but also are highly ‘visible’ themselves. This would have increased the level of intervisibility between sites, thus enforcing the continuous presence of the *shasana* (collective Buddhist teachings) across the landscape.

Other elements of fortification include substantial boundary walls, which at many SSP sites are provided with towers and bastions (Figure 3.6). 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 10th or 11th 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 (Shaw 2007, 93), as does a much older fortified *stupa* enclosure at Bighan to the north of Vidisha (Shaw 2007, 127–128). Similar turreted plans are found at major 11th-century monasteries in Bihar such as Nalanda, Antichak Vikramashila and Odantapuri (Rajani 2016; Verardi 1996), and tradition goes that Odantapuri was attacked during Muslim conquests because of its resemblance to a military fort (Verardi 1996, 244). The reason for building these later defences in the Sanchi area may be related to the forces behind the eventual decline of local Buddhism, although it is important to note that the traditional model of a homogenous post-Gupta Buddhist decline in central India

is challenged by evidence for late Mahayana outposts in the region (Willis 2013; Skilling 2014; Shaw 2015). In Bihar too received models of a passive *sangha* at the mercy of Brahmanical oppression is challenged by evidence for a late flourishing at Nalanda and related sites (Rajani 2016), and landscape data that emphasise the element of Buddhist resistance and adaptation to Shaiva *tantric* developments (Singh Amar 2012). Similarly, the later history of Buddhism at Sanchi needs to be viewed against broader developments in the area's multi-stranded religious history based on spatial and temporal patterns within the SSP's sculptural and architectural datasets (Shaw 2004, 2007, 176–193, fig. 12.1, 2013b).

However, there are also suggestions of religious tension and competition over custodianship of ritual sites in earlier periods (Shaw 2007). Further, the post-Mauryan king Pushyamitra 'Shunga' was reputedly inimical to Buddhism, and traditions which associate him with the horse sacrifice and identify him as a staunch Brahmana, demonstrate his alignment with the vigorously orthodox (*smarta*). This has led to suggestions that *Stupa* 1 at Sanchi was damaged intentionally in the post-Mauryan era (Marshall *et al.* 1940, 23–24; Verardi 1996, 230–231; Shaw 2007, 87, n.16–18). While there is no direct proof that Sanchi was directly threatened by Pushyamitra Shunga, and indeed the post-Mauryan period is marked by invigoration rather than decline in Buddhist construction and expansion, the circumstances are sufficiently compelling to regard any injury to the *stupa* there as an assault on the *shasana* 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 Ashokan period (Willis 2000a).

Conclusion: *stupa* networks in a pan-Indian landscape

Sanchi's local Buddhist geography with its individual *stupas* also formed part of a much larger Buddhist 'world map' conceived as an ever-expanding Buddha corpse (Walters 2002). *Stupas* were not just mortuary monuments that may have 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 700 years after the earliest known Buddhist *stupas* (Bakker 1996; Bakker and Isaacson 2004; Shaw 2015). Returning 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 *stupas* and the absorption of landmass into a local and pan-Indian geography may also have been central to the process of achieving custodianship over land and natural resources. The *sangha* played a pioneering role in the spread of new agricultural and water management regimes during the late centuries BC and it may be assumed that the hilltops on which *stupas* and monasteries were constructed had first to be cleared of forest cover, at least in the immediate vicinity.

Although monastic sites are generally situated on non-agricultural land, this is not to perpetuate the long-standing view of forests and their products as being

external to mainstream economics. Rather, the element of exchange between upland medico-culinary products and lowland crop-based agricultural economies and lifeways (Morrison and Lycett 2014) offers promising new directions for understanding the immediate socio-ecological setting of early Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, in terms of lowland agriculture, they are not disconnected from the forces of production as illustrated by archaeologically, textually and epigraphically attested examples of monastic landlordism across South Asia Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001, 2003, 2005; Shaw 2007, 2016; Coningham et al 2007). By the late centuries BC, the *sangha* 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 as well as enabling the *sangha* to pursue its 'non-producing' monastic lifestyle. Early forms of Buddhist 'monastic governmentality' are 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 (*murti*) of gods who not only can interact directly with devotees through worship (*puja*), but who have full-blown legal jurisdiction to, amongst other things, own property (Willis 2009a), in ways that parallel early developments in relation to the *stupa* and relic cult.

Note

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