

A Story of the UNESCO World Heritage Site: The Great Stupa of Sanchi

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ABSTRACT

Sanchi, a town in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh, India is famous for being home to one of the oldest Buddhist monuments in the country. This site has been declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1989.¹ The life history of Gautam Buddha and the dynastic rulers of the Maurya to Satavahana did bring an unimaginable difference in building up the site at Sanchi. The story of the distribution of the relics after Buddha's Mahaparinirvana² and the ideology of Dhamma amazed the Great Mauryan ruler Ashoka. A part of relics of the Buddha are said to be buried in the Great stupa commissioned by emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. This paper will take you to the very beginning of Ashoka's interest towards Buddhism and the making of the Stupa at Sanchi; it will also focus on how it evolved through the ages becoming a symbol of peace which is a widely visited place in the country today.

Keywords: *Buddha; Buddhist Sanchi; Heritage; Relics; Ashoka; Stupa.*

INTRODUCTION

There are a very few personalities in the history of human thought who have had such a wide and lasting influence as the 'Buddha'. A monk, sage, medicant, philosopher, teacher and religious leader on whose teachings, Buddhism was found, it provided the basis of an idealistic humanism and a culture of great sensibility. Accounts of his life, sermons and monastic rules are believed by Buddhists to have been recapitulated after his death and memorized by his followers. Many collections of his teachings, were passed down by oral tradition and were committed to writing for the first time after about 400 years.

At the age of 80, the Buddha made known that he would soon reach *Parinirvana*, or the final deathless state. After this, Buddha's cremation relics were fractionized amongst 8 royal families and his disciples. However, King Ashoka's change of heart after the war of Kalinga, did leave a permanent impression in his mind leading him towards a life with peace and non-violence and eventually to Buddhism.

It can be considered that there has been a strong influence on the thought process of Ashoka, along with the interpretation of his edicts because of the use of Buddhist sources in regenerating

¹ Buddhist monuments of Sanchi fall under the category of 'cultural site' by UNESCO; apart from these several are natural and one in mixed.

² The passing away of Buddha.

Ashoka's life. Many early scholars, recognized Ashoka as primarily Buddhist monarch who went through a changeover to Buddhism and was actively engrossed in patronizing and supporting the Buddhist monastic institution.



Figure 1. War over the Buddha Relics; southern gateway (Image courtesy: <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/cover-story/2020/06/09/ramagrama-stupa>)

After many centuries they were enshrined by ruler Ashoka into 84,000 stupas. Many great stories surround the history of his relics as they became a catalyst in the spread of Buddhism and gave legitimacy to rulers. War over the Buddha's Relics held by the city of Kushinagar³ beautifully narrates the story of how Ashoka strived to dig out Buddha's original burial sites and distribute his relics into hundreds of new stupas, built by him throughout his reign.

ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION OF THE GREAT STUPA

King Ashoka commissioned the mound of the Great Stupa during his reign. The Ashoka Pillar was also erected in the 3rd century B.C. which consists of a shaft and a crown of four lions that stand back to back in polished sandstone. Unfortunately, the complete Ashoka Pillar does not stand here today. The shaft of the pillar can only be witnessed at the gateway but the crown has been kept in the Sanchi Archaeological Museum. This figure of lions was later adopted as the National Emblem of India in January 1950. As the time passed by, improvisation of the stupa did take place over the next thirteen centuries. The original brick structure was expanded to twice its size during the 2nd century BC, Shunga period. It was then covered with stone slabs as well.

³ A stone carving displayed at south gate stupa no.1, Sanchi

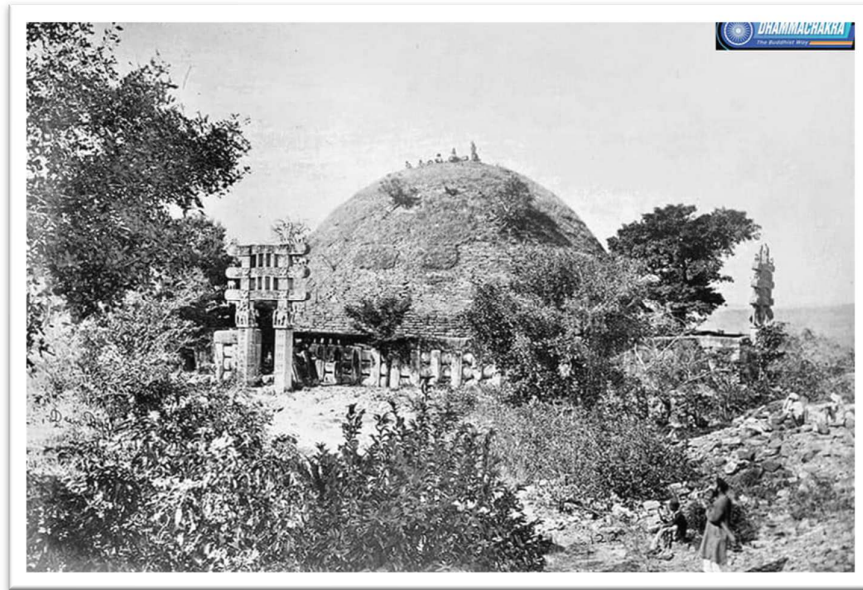


Figure 2. Old Picture of Sanchi Stupa (Image Courtesy: The Great Patron of Buddhism)

Surrounding the mound of the stupa, a circumambulatory walkway was built which was circumscribed by a stone railing called as *Vedika*. An important part of the Buddhist rituals and devotional practices include *parikrama* or *Pradakshina*.⁴ At the top of the mound, there is a square structure namely *harmika*, it holds a three-tiered umbrella also called *Chatravali*. The three jewels of Buddhism- the Buddha, the dharma (teachings of Buddha) and the Sangha (Buddhist order) is represented by the three tiers of the umbrella.

During the rule of Satavahanas from 1st Century BC to 2nd Century AD, some elaborate extensions were made to the structure of stupa; these included *Toranas* (four stone gateways) added in four cardinal directions. These gateways are made up of two stone pillars surmounted by capitals (top column). The capitals successively support three architraves (lintel or beam which extends from column to column and rests on their capitals) with volute (scroll-like ornamentation found within the capital of an Ionic column) ends. These architraves are richly carved with episodes from the lifetime of Buddha and also the Jatakas (stories from the lifetime of Buddha).

The successiveness of the four gateways are as follows: Southern, Northern, Eastern and Western. The names of the devout people who donated these gateways are written on its pillars. The reason these pillars carry so much importance is because of the relief figures carved on them. These figures surely give a glimpse about the lives of the people in the second half of the 1st century BC.

During the Gupta period, further additions to Sanchi were made including a Buddhist temple and a lion pillar. On the railing of the Great Stupa, dating to the 4th century A.D. – the victory

⁴ Doing a circumambulation around a sacred place to gather the energy.

inscription of Chandragupta II is inscribed. From the 3rd Century BC to the 13th Century A.D, the site is said to have been a prosperous religious centre. The decline of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent coincided with its decline as a prominent religious site.

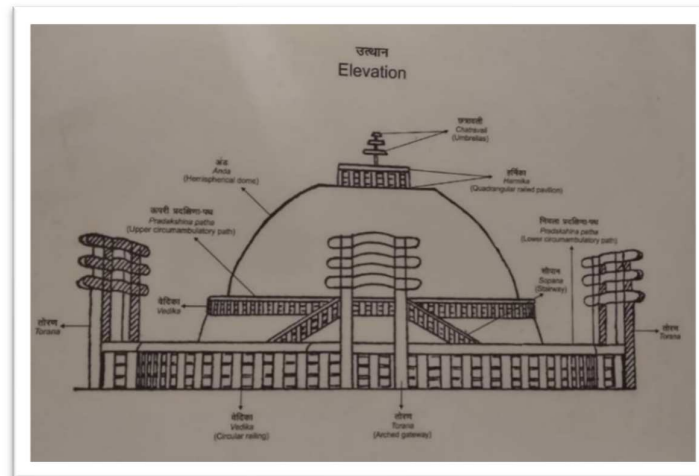


Figure 3. Labelled diagram of Stupa

REDISCOVERY

The site of Sanchi was rediscovered in 1818 by the Britishers under the supervision of General Henry Taylor of the Bengal Cavalry. Although the first scientific excavation took place in 1851 under the guidance of Major Alexander Cunningham of the stupa. In November 1853, an offer was sent by the Begum of Bhopal to the then Governor General of India in Council to present the two Gateways of the Tope- Northern and Eastern to the Queen Victoria. These richly carved stones were very delicate and needed exquisite arrangements to be transported, eventually this reason led to the delay in the shift. Meanwhile in 1857, huge rebellion was triggered to oppose this move.

Later in 1869, the idea was improvised and the plaster casts were made of these gateways to be transported to the British Museum, London. A significant foregoer to the preservation and conservation attempts at Sanchi was the arrival of H.H. Cole in 1869 at Sanchi. It was that time when a huge project of photographing, copying, and replicating of the monuments at Sanchi took place along with the restoration of the structures.⁵

⁵ Massive efforts were made by the British Government India to preserve the ancient site of Sanchi.

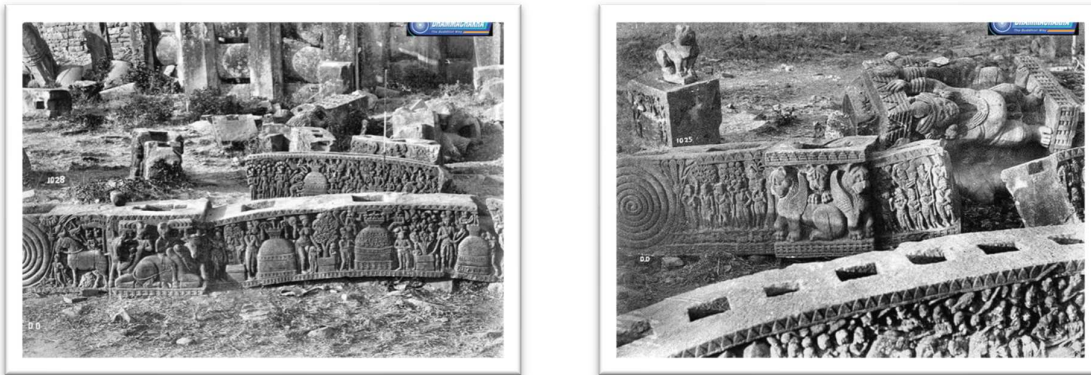


Figure 4. Figure 5. Old Pictures of the carved stones at Sanchi (Image courtesy: The Great Patron of Buddhism)

During the three known phases of preservation, restoration and conservation of the Sanchi site, many damages were also done to the structures by the different teams, although the intentions weren't bad, the first and foremost idea was to bring least irreversible damages to the site.

In 1920, Bhopal Durbar's heir Nawabzada Hamidullah Khan wrote a letter to then political agent at Bhopal stating that objects along with few original relic caskets were taken away to the British Museum by Alexander Cunningham from Sanchi. As Sanchi then had its own Archaeological Museum made, it was a relevant request to bring them back to its roots. However, the British Museum declined the request. The relics of the chief disciples of Buddha (Sariputra and Moggallana) were repatriated to the Sanchi site from the Victoria and Albert Museum after massive efforts from the Government of India and the Maha Bodhi Society of Bombay in 1946. These are presently enshrined in the Chetiyaigiri Vihara at Sanchi.⁶

National Museum, New Delhi is presently the house to two of the sculptures from Sanchi as a part of the preservation and conservation policy of antiquities of the Indian Government. The images are shown below.



Figure 6. Elephant Rider (Source: <https://www.molon.de/galleries/India/Delhi/Museum/img.php?pic=7>)

Figure 7. Fragment of Torana (Source: <https://kevinstandagephotography.wordpress.com/2020/10/26/national-museum-new-delhi-maurya-shunga-satavahana-kushana-ikshvaka-sculpture/>)

⁶ It was a grand ceremony attended by crowd and the Buddhist leaders from Cambodia, Burma and Sri Lanka along with the first Prime Minister of Independent India- Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1952.

CONCLUSION

The Great Stupa of Sanchi witnessed the change of eras, stood there erect with poise, went through a series of expansion and improvisation, and attracted huge attention by the British as well as today. The World Heritage site at Sanchi includes many Buddhist monuments like stupas, monolithic pillars, temples and monasteries. The inscriptions at the *Toranas* of the Great Stupa is in Brahmi, deciphered by James Prinsep in 1937. The intricate carved structures, inscriptions, supporting monuments and huge mounds of the stupa built over the Buddha relics are of great artistic and architectural importance leading UNESCO to make it a World Heritage Site in 1989.

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