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Architecture: Buddhist Monasteries in Southern Asia

Buddhism, one of the world’s true monastic religions, began using retreats and parks as “monasteries” from as early as the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni. During his lifetime Śākyamuni founded the Buddhist community that consisted of four orders of the faithful. They were the bhikṣus, or male mendicant professionals; bhikṣunīs, or female mendicant professionals; upāsakas, or male lay followers of the Buddha; and upāsikās, or female laity. The bhikṣus and bhikṣunīs were essentially wandering mendicants who sought shelter in forests and caves and begged for food. The upāsakas and upāsikās, on the other hand, were householders, members of the nobility, and those who lived a secular life. They did not necessarily seek nirvanic release but derived soteriological enhancement by obtaining merit through making altruistic offerings and supporting the mendicant community.

During the monsoons in parts of southern Asia, heavy rains and floods made it impossible for the bhikṣus and bhikṣunīs to wander and beg. During these periods, places of shelter for the wandering mendicants became necessary. Thus, from the very time of the Buddha Śākyamuni, tracts of land, parks, and buildings were donated by the laity to accommodate the monastic community. These retreats were called ārāma or saṅghārāma, and, in literature on the Buddha’s life, the Jetavanārāma at Śrāvasti is the most significant.

One of the Buddha’s lay followers, Anāthapiṇḍada, invited the Buddha to visit the city of Śrāvasti. The advanced party of monks, seeking a suitable place for the Buddha to sojourn, agreed on a vana, or park, owned by Prince Jeta. However, when approached by Anāthapiṇḍada, who wished to donate the land to the monastic community, Prince Jeta was unwilling to part with the land. In the hope of dissuading Anāthapiṇḍada, the prince asked for an exorbitant price— that he be given as many gold coins as it would take to cover the entire land area. Eager to provide the saṅgha with the best ārāma, Anāthapiṇḍada, much to Jeta’s surprise, agreed to the latter’s offer. Unfortunately, with only a small section remaining to be covered, Anāthapiṇḍada ran out of gold and was unable to meet the required price. Regardless, greatly impressed with Anāthapiṇḍada’s spirit of
the Jetavanarāma existed, and, presumably, many events related to the early layers of the Buddhist sūtras occurred at the site. The Jetavanarāma site has been excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India to the late Guptā levels (c. fifth century). Unfortunately, at this time no effort has been made to reach the earlier levels.

**Early Buddhist Monasteries**

Major gifts of the Jetavanarāma type aside, the early Buddhist mendicants ordinarily took shelter in existing natural caves. Such natural caves are known at the sites of Grdakūta (Vulture Peak) at Rājgir in Bihar state, Pitalkhora in Maharashtra, Gunṭupalle in Andhra Pradesh, Gum Bahal at Sāñkhū in Nepal, and Anurādhapura and Mihintale in Sri Lanka.

Subsequently caves sculpted out of rock cliffs and boulders were excavated in the environs of the natural cave sites. From at least as early as the first century B.C.E., the excavated monastic sites, as well as those that were to follow in the succeeding centuries, came to consist primarily of two types of buildings. The first type of building was the vihāra, or “station.” The second was a building known in English as a caitya hall, or a hall housing a caitya, or sacred place. Vihāras provided the residential quarters for the monks and consisted of small sleeping chambers with a ledge for a bed in each and frequently a small niche for the inhabitant’s belongings. In later vihāras a series of such sleeping chambers were arranged around a square courtyard. In contrast the caitya hall differed from a vihāra in both function and structure. The caitya hall was the worship area and was used for Buddhist teachings. Whereas the vihāra was square or rectangular in plan, the caitya hall was generally apsidal with a stūpa at one end serving as the devotional focus.

**Brief Survey of the Development of Rock-Cut Monasteries in Early India**

**The Vihāra**

Early examples of “excavated” monastic shelters in the form of rock-cut huts exist at Gum Bahal near Sāñkhū, Nepal (Fig. 2), and in badly damaged remains at Pitalkhora in Maharashtra, India. The name “Gum Bahal” is a Newari derivation of the eastern Indian term Gumpha Vihāra, literally “Vihāra of Caves.” Vocative changes with syllables omitted is characteristic of Tibeto-Burman languages such as Newari. Thus, with almost no sound value for the final consonant, gumpha becomes gum, and vihāra (sometimes pronounced bihāra) becomes bahal. In the manner of typical early vihāras, the caves at these sites are small boxlike structures carved directly out of the rock. The vihāra at Gum Bahal best exemplifies the earliest type of excavated rock shelters. The structure is two-chambered, with a small sleeping room behind an entrance area. The entire matrix of the rock mass is removed except for the walls and the ceiling. The presumably high cost of such excavations suggests that the shelters were probably used by high-ranking teachers. Oral history at Gum Bahal maintains that Buddha Śākyamuni himself visited the site and that he resided in the cave retreats for one rainy sea-
son. Whether or not this visitation actually occurred, hagiographic and architectural histories support an early date for Gum Bahal, placing it in the narrow historical niche between natural caves and the more elaborate excavated complexes.

The excavated vihāra at Gunṭupalle, Kondivte, as well as others at Pitalkhorā are more complex than the early boxlike structures and exemplify the developmental nature of monasteries in southern Asia. Although carved in stone the caves are close copies of contemporaneous wooden architecture. It is assumed that a fully developed wooden architectural tradition preceded and coexisted with the rock excavations of southern Asia. Unfortunately, because of the ephemeral nature of wood, no examples of wooden buildings survive. It is also believed that initially, wood craftsmen, rather than stone masons, worked on the design of several rock-cut caves. For example, at Pitalkhorā the exceedingly thin walls of the early vihāra, made of a particular type of volcanic rock, have collapsed because of the lack of tensile strength. These walls could have been designed only by craftsmen unfamiliar with the properties of rock. Moreover in several early caves in western India (e.g., Pitalkhorā and Bhājā), the methods of wooden joinery are carved into the rock matrix. The “joints” merely emulate wooden architecture and serve no functional purpose. The best preserved of these vihāras is at Bhājā in Maharas-
tra, India (Fig. 3). The structure is entered through a veranda that leads into a square room around which the sleeping chambers are clustered. The plain exterior of the cave belies the rich sculptural decoration, emulating wooden prototypes, on the interior.

As rock-cut monasteries developed in southern Asia, the design of the excavations moved away from wooden prototypes and began to use the rock matrix in a more organic and integrated manner. Further, many types of structures were added to the architectural vocabulary of a monastery.

Vihāra 3, also known as “Gautamiputra Cave,” in Nāsik, Maharashtra, exemplifies the next stage in the development of the
Nāsik Cave 3 (top left)
Bāgh Cave 2 (top right)
Ajantā Cave 2 (lower left)
Ajantā Cave 17 (lower right)

Fig. 4: Comparative plans of selected western caves.
Drawing courtesy of John C. Huntington, based on original drawings in *Art of Ancient India*, 1985
rock-cut residence hall (Fig. 4). The plan is more organized than in earlier caves such as at Bhāja, with cells radiating in a seemingly symmetrical manner from a central courtyard. The richly decorated veranda foretells the direction in which rock-cut architecture develops, coming to fruition in the succeeding years at the cave sites of Ajanta and Ellora.

Variants on the simple square-plan vihāra occurred from around the mid-fifth century and are evident at sites such as Bāgh and Ajanta. Although the sleeping cells were still arranged around a square courtyard, in Cave 2 at Bāgh, Madhya Pradesh, a shrine housing a stūpa was added to the back wall of the vihāra (Fig. 4). At Caves 1 and 2 at Ajanta, an image shrine was added to the back wall (Fig. 4).

With time, the modest rock-cut vihāras were richly embellished with sculptural and painted panels and were meant to emulate the palaces of the gods and paridis of the Buddhas (see Susan L. Huntington with contributions by John C. Huntington, Art of Ancient India, 1985). For example, according to an inscription in Cave 16 at Ajanta, the vihāra is said to resemble the palace of the god Indra (Vasudeva Vishnu Mirashi, editor, Inscriptions of the Vākṣṭakas, Corpus Inscriptorum Indicarum, volume 5, 1963, p. 111, verse 27). Thus, when a devotee entered the cave he or she was essentially entering the paradisiacal environment of Indra’s heaven, Trayastrimśa.

Specialized types of vihāras also evolved and are evident at later Buddhist vihāras at Ajanta and Ellora. In Cave 5 at Ellora the roughly square plan of most early vihāras gave way to a longitudinal, rectangular form with long central benches and several subsidiary image shrines (Fig. 5). An ambulatory passage was added around one of the inner shrines, allowing the devotee to circumambulate the Buddha image within by walking around the entire shrine. In other caves, such as Cave 17 at Ajanta, a passageway was added within the interior of the shrine, allowing just the image to be circumambulated (Fig. 4).

The mature phase of the development of rock-cut architecture in India was marked by variants such as the caves discussed previously as well as by vihāras developing into enormous multi-story temple complexes. Cave 12 at Ellora in Maharashtra is an expansive structure consisting of three floors (Fig. 6), each different in plan (Huntington, 1985). The first and second floors were occupied by the monk’s chambers, small cells, and image shrines. The third floor is a large pillared hall, richly adorned with sculpture. This might have served as an assembly hall or an area where advanced initiations took place.

Fig. 5: Ellora Cave 5, near Maharashtra, India.
Photo courtesy of John C. Huntington
The Cāitya Hall

There is no demonstrable proof of just when the cāitya hall became a standard feature of a Buddhist monastic site. However, there are rock-cut cāitya halls at Gunḍapalle, Kondivite, and a spectacularly large one at Pitalkhōrā, all dating from the second or first century BCE. Both Gunḍapalle (Fig. 7) and Pitalkhōrā (Fig. 8) are obvious copies of wooden prototypes. Indeed, given the elaborate architectural conception of these excavated cāitya halls, there is no doubt that similar wooden structures were far more common.

At both Gunḍapalle and Kondivite (Fig. 9), the stūpa is enshrined in a circular cell with barely enough space for circumambulation. These caves were obviously designed for individual worship rather than congregational assemblies. By contrast the cāitya hall at Pitalkhōrā is a large apsidal structure in the manner that remains characteristic for several centuries to follow. Here the mendicants would have gathered to listen to the teachings of the Buddha as interpreted by the local preceptor or master of the Dharma. In inscriptions, cāitya halls are called gandhakuti, or “fragrance hall” (Huntington, 1985), referring to the breath of the Buddha as he taught. This clearly indicates that cāitya halls were not merely structures to house the object of worship but were active teaching venues as well.

A detailed analysis of the development of vibhāras and cāitya in southern Asian architecture is well beyond the scope of this article. It should suffice to say that after several hundred years, for reasons unclear, rock-cut monasteries ceased to be excavated and that freestanding structural buildings made of wood, brick, and other material became the preferred mode of architecture. Whereas the development of monastic rock-cut architecture in southern Asia can be traced in a roughly linear manner, studying the development of freestanding monasteries is a more challenging task.

Brief Survey of Remains at Freestanding Monasteries

Most important monastic sites invariably grew and flourished along major trade routes that ensured continued lay support. For example, the renowned monastic complex at Sānchi in Madhya Pradesh was located near ancient Vidiśā, an important trading center from as early as the time of Šākyamuni Buddha himself. Situated along the trade route between the western coastal regions and the central Gangetic plain of India, Vidiśā remained a primary mercantile and religious center for centuries to follow (Huntington, 1985).

Whereas trade routes and economy were some of the external factors that yielding monastic complexes, the sites were focused within around a place or object of devotion, such as a stūpa, a temple, or an image. Such focal points are the defining statements of the Buddhological essence and thus vivify and serve as generators of a monastic setting. For example, significant monasteries developed around the sites of the eight transformative events of the Buddha’s life – parībhogakā reliks – each marked by a stūpa. The first four events – the birth at Lumbini, the enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, the first sermon at Sarnāth near Vāraṇasī, and the parinirvāṇa at Kuśinagara – are men-
tioned in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*. They are considered places appropriate for pilgrimage by lay followers. The secondary four sites — the Buddha’s descent from Trāyastriṃśa heaven at Sāṅkāśya, the great miracle at Śrāvasti, the taming of the rogue elephant Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha, and the monkey’s gift at Vaiśāli — had come into prominence by the second and first centuries B.C. The latter do not become part of a single text until a later date. However, they existed in narrative sculptural representations on the architectural railings of Bhārhat and the gateways of Stūpa I at Sāñci from as early as the first century B.C. Located at or near significant political centers and serving as powerful places of pilgrimage, the stūpa drew in laity who, in turn, sustained the Buddhist *saṅgha*.

Although certain aspects (e.g., political, economic, and religious) of freestanding monastic settlements might appear obvious, specific information regarding the organization, design, and function is less evident. For example, the types of monuments that existed at a site or the precise nature of the activities conducted by the monks and laity are questions that are more difficult to answer. Whereas in rock-cut monastic sites it is clear that a *vihāra* and *caitya* hall served as the basic unit, in structural buildings no established formula is obvious. Largely built of ephemeral materials such as wood and brick, buildings within monastic complexes have left few remains. What remain are skeletons of architectural structures that provide limited information about building types. Moreover increased religious support and the burgeoning of complex religious practices called for different types of architectural structures to be constructed within each complex. These buildings appear to have included temples for specific deities and rituals, commissaries, storehouses, and so on in addition to the regular residence cells and teaching halls of earlier periods. The following discussion features disparate examples of remains at important freestanding monastic complexes that provide a glimpse into the rich variety

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**Fig. 7:** Gunṭupalle *caitya* hall, Andhra Pradesh, India, second or first century B.C.E.  
Photo courtesy of John C. Huntington
of architectural visions that arose during the last half of the first millennium.

The monastic complex at Nāgarjunakonda in the Krṣṇa River region of Andhra Pradesh, India, comprises three structures as opposed to just the regular two: a vihāra and a caitya hall. Here a stūpa-vihāra alignment from east to west is the central focus flanked by an apsidal image hall and an apsidal caitya hall (Fig. 10). The three-part configuration was used repeatedly at the Nāgarjunakonda site. Interestingly the bilateral symmetry of the two halls is also found in eastern Asia. For example, in the Horyu-ji in Nara, Japan, the kōdō, or “golden hall,” and the to, or pagoda, are located on either side of the central axis that leads to the kō-dō, or lecture hall. The significance of the three-part configuration implies that a distinction was made between the stūpa as reliquary of the Buddha and the image of a Buddha. Without inscriptions, specifically which Buddha is represented is impossible to identify. It is possible that Śākyamuni, Maitreya, or possibly even a Buddha of either the past or the future is depicted. The underlying meaning of the three buildings might represent the Mahāyāna concept of compassion and wisdom combining to form enlightenment. The stūpa in the first hall represents the compassion of the Buddha, exemplified through his life and activities as a teacher. The image of a Buddha in the second hall exemplifies the wisdom of the Dharma. Together they constitute the enlightenment of future Buddhas—expressed through the monastic community residing in the central vihāra.

One of the most interesting sites with a number of unique structural remains is Parihāsapura in Kashmir, India. Located along the way to Gandhāra, the Indic terminus of the Grand Silk Route, Parihāsapura’s monuments are reputed to have served as models for Buddhist architecture all over Asia. At the site the remains of a basement of a large square structure with additional cells indicates that the building was probably a vihāra, a place for resident monks associated with the flourishing Buddhist center. However, the foci of the complex were two unique structures: (1) an 80-foot copper image housed within an enormous caitya and (2) an enormous stūpa. Byød, or “gigantic,” images of the Buddha became increasingly prevalent in Mahāyāna Buddhism from the second century on and conveyed the concept of the universality of Buddhist teaching. Buddhist Dharma was personified as enormous Buddhas. They were es-
sententially the visual manifestation of the Dharmakāya, or “body of the Dharma.”

According to literary accounts, the caitya was built in the second quarter of the eighth century by Lalitāditya, the powerful emperor of Kashmir and a devout Buddhist practitioner (Mark Aurel Stein, translator, Kalhana’s Rājatarangini, A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir, 2 vols., 1900, 1:42). Only the plinth and a massive block of stone that would have supported the metal image survive today. However, a painted representation of the caitya at the Sum-tsek at Alchi monastery in Kashmir provides information regarding the monument’s original appearance (Fig. 11).

The stūpa, the second major monument at the site, was also built in the eighth century by Emperor Lalitāditya’s Tokhārīan minister, Cankūṇa. Unfortunately all that survives of the structure is a complex cruciform base. However, a painted representation at the monastery at Alchi (Fig. 12) indicates that the stūpa had a high base and a relatively small hemispheric dome. Above the dome rose a tall spire of 13 disks, reflecting the Tantric tradition. Cankūṇa’s stūpa served as the archetype for structures in the neighboring regions of Ladakh, Nepal, and Tibet.

Another unique type of structure that has been tentatively identified as a maṇḍala hall occurs at Nālandā, the most influential monastic complex of eastern India. The presence of the “maṇḍala hall” at a major site such as Nālandā suggests that other monastic complexes in the region might have had similar monuments, thereby making such buildings a common feature of monasteries. In a literary account the Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin, who visited Nālandā in 1235, mentions the presence of a Cakrasamvara temple that had survived the Islamic onslaught of 1199–1203 (George Roerich, Biography of Dharmasvāmin: A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim, 1959). Although no Cakrasamvara temple structure has ever been archaeologically

Color images have been substituted for the original publication’s grey scale.
Fig. 13: Mahābodhi temple, Bodh Gayā, Bihar, India. Various dates of construction and restoration from c. 250 B.C.E. through 1984. Photo courtesy of John C. Huntington.
identified, it is possible that Dharmasvāmin referred to what is now known as Temple 2 at the site. All that remains of Temple 2 is a plinth with sculptural representations of a series of Hindu deities. These indeed might be a reference to the so-called exterior vajras located in the outer rings of some Buddhist mandalā, including most forms of the Cakrasaṃvara Mandala. Thus, it is possible that the temple was intended to be a three-dimensional mandala, thereby justifying its designation as a “mandala hall.”

The Mahābodhi, or “Great enlightenment,” temple, whose present structure dates to around the fifth century, is the focus of a thriving monastic settlement at Bodh Gayā in Bihar, India (Fig. 13). It is unique for two reasons. First, it commemorates the viharā, or seat beneath the pipal tree under which Śākyamuni sat in meditation. Second, it is a deliberate three-dimensional architectural “sculpture” of Mount Meru, the Buddhist world system as a sanctified mountain. The Mahābodhi temple indicates that pyramidal temples were probably a characteristic feature of monastic sites, along with residence cells, prayer halls, teaching venues, and so on. It is possible that the Mahābodhi temple type inspired several other similar monuments, including the stūpas at Rawak in Khotan, Vikramśila and Nālandā in Bihar, and Pāhāṛpur in Bangladesh. These monuments are said to have had significant pyramidal towers, presumably also communicating the Mount Meru notion.

A detailed analysis of the various types of buildings at each monastic site is well outside the parameters of this article. In general it is sufficient to note that specialized structures at monastic complexes are dependent on local teachers, the supporting laity, and specific traditions practiced in the region. Overall a monastic complex can be divided into two types of structures. First, buildings such as residence halls, teaching or assembly halls, and accompanying devotional structures form the basis necessary for the routine functioning of the monastery. Second, the specialized forms of architecture, such as temples for specific rituals, mandala halls, and so on, are offerings themselves, donated by the patrons to accrue punya, or merit. Together the two types serve to define the sacred environment within which the ultimate religious goal can be sought.

The Monastic Universities of Early India

By the eighth century and especially during the rule of the Pala dynasty (8th through 12th century) in eastern India, large monastic establishments known as mahāvihāra, or “great monasteries,” served as universities. The monasteries housed thousands of monks who were trained by preeminent teachers of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Along with religious theory the curriculum also included grammar, linguistics, composition, debate, rhetoric, astrology, mathematics, Ayurvedic medicine, and the arts of music and painting. Such institutions provided students with superior educational facilities and produced some of the highest intellectual thinkers and creative minds of the time.

As recorded in both Chinese and Tibetan literature, Uddāṇḍapura, Vikramśila, and Nālandā in Bihar were the important universities of eastern India. Today most of the buildings at these educational institutions are destroyed. However, what remains at the sites suggests that the premises of each university consisted of grand temples, large dormitories, refectories, libraries, and a variety of other structures.

According to Tibetan sources Uddāṇḍapura was a fully established institution by at least the beginning of the ninth century. The university was most noted for its extensive resources and large library. Indeed when the library at Uddāṇḍapura was burned in the Islamic invasion of 1200, it is estimated that perhaps tens of thousands of manuscripts were lost.

Vikramśila was one of the major centers of esoteric Buddhism that flourished in eastern India. The proselytizer Atiśa, an important figure in the second propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, studied at Uddāṇḍapura and then acquired a high position at Vikramśila. When specially invited by the king of Gu Ge in Tibet, he is said to have transported 60 loads of manuscripts and goods carried on horseback. Through these means Atiśa transmitted much of the religious and intellectual knowledge of the university to Tibet (Susan I. Huntington and John C. Huntington, Leaves from the Bodhi Tree, 1990).

By all estimates Nālandā was the most influential institution. It was founded no later than the fourth century A.D., presumably at the birthplace of Buddha Śākyamuni’s favorite disciple, Sāriputra. Its prominence grew during the Pala period, and it was noted for high standards of education, selective admission, and challenging examinations (Huntington, 1990). Scholars from Tibet, China, and other neighboring countries traveled to India, especially to visit or study at Nālandā. The Indian Monk Subhākarasimha, who transmitted and introduced the esoteric traditions to China, studied at Nālandā and was just one among the many progressive thinkers at the university.

Conclusion

It is clear that monastic settlements formed the core of Buddhist religious activities from the earliest of times. The Buddhist monasteries of India ran the gamut, ranging from modest communal areas to large, impressive imperial establishments. Monasteries were created and sustained for the protection of the political state. They also served as important institutions of higher learning that generated intellectual thinking. Thus, whether carved of stone or built of ephemer, a monastery was intended to exist “as long as the sun dispels darkness by its rays” (Mirashi, 1963, p. 129, verse 29). In essence the Buddhist monastery was an expression of faith and the profound belief in the benefaction of Buddhist teachings.

John C. Huntington and Chaya Chandrasekhar

See also Ajantā, India; Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka; Bodh Gayā, India; Buddha (Śākyamuni); Cave Temples and Monasteries in India and China; Disciples, Early Buddhist; Mount Meru; Nālandā, India; Stūpa

Further Reading

Note: Unfortunately, no definitive publication of Gum Bahal has been published in Western languages.

Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Reports, various editors and locations, 1902–1929


