[Recepción del artículo: 03/05/2021]
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 05/07/2021]

Art, Religion and Narrative: A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Buddhist Indian Art

Arte, religión y narración. Una comparación del Primer arte cristiano y el temprano arte indio budista

Jaś Elsner
University of Oxford / University of Chicago
jas.elsner@ccc.ox.ac.uk
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8378-4880

Abstract
This article, in honour of one of the greatest living scholars of early Christian Medieval art, attempts to use a comparative method to examine the development and uses of narrative in the arts of early Christianity and early Buddhism – both new religious interventions in their respective landscapes, which conducted major revisions of their visual and dogmatic worlds, and employed visual imagery in relation to Scripture. In particular I compare images that conflate different times from the arts of each religion – a typological juxtaposition of Old and New Testaments in a fourth century Roman sarcophagus found in southern France and the thematic juxtaposition of a scene from the Buddha's final life with ones from his earlier incarnations as recounted in the *Jātaka* tales on a probably third-century CE frieze from a stūpa in southern India. At stake art historically are the ways that images supplied commentarial competition to the forms of commentary and exegesis offered by texts in both religions and cultural contexts, through parallels of visual narrativity implied by the themes juxtaposed.

Keywords: Early Christian art, Sarcophagus, Typology, Narrative, Buddhist art, Stūpa, Amarāvatī, Jātaka, Nālāgiri, Comparison.

Resumen
Este artículo, en honor de uno de los mayores estudiosos vivos del arte medieval paleocristiano, intenta utilizar un método comparativo para examinar el desarrollo y los usos de la narrativa en las artes del cristianismo temprano y del budismo temprano, unas y otras nuevas intervenciones religiosas en sus respectivos paisajes. Ambos llevaron a cabo importantes revisiones de sus mundos visuales y dogmáticos, y emplearon imágenes visuales en relación

con las Escrituras. En particular, en estas páginas comparo imágenes que combinan diferentes épocas de las artes de cada religión: una yuxtaposición tipológica del Antiguo y el Nuevo Testamento en un sarcófago romano del siglo IV encontrado en el sur de Francia y la yuxtaposición temática de una escena de la vida final de Buda con otras de sus encarnaciones anteriores, tal y como se relata en los cuentos Jātaka en un friso probablemente del siglo III de una stūpa del sur de la India. Lo que está en juego desde el punto de vista del arte son los modos en que las imágenes proporcionaban una competencia a las formas de comentario y exégesis ofrecidas por los textos en ambas religiones y contextos culturales. El examen se efectúa a través de los paralelos de narratividad visual implícitos en los temas yuxtapuestos.

Palabras clave: Arte paleocristiano, Sarcófagos, Tipología, Narrativa, Arte budista, Stūpa, Amarāvatī, Jātaka, Nālāgiri, Comparación.

Traducción realizada con la versión gratuita del traductor www.DeepL.com/Translator

Introduction

One of the profound transformations that defined the shift from the ancient to medieval worlds across Afro-Eurasia was the arrival of salvific religions to supplement or replace largely oral polytheisms. These new religions – one thinks of Jainism and Buddhism in India, of Manichaeism and Islam in the near East and of Christianity in the Mediterranean as well as its non-hegemonic forms that travelled to Persia, India and China – had foundations in scripture by contrast with their predecessors which were grounded in rich traditions of local mythology and ritual. They combined an extensive canon as well as its commentaries with radical reform of pre-existing moral and ethical codes for living, in particular forms of asceticism for their elites and priesthoods. None made claims for being entirely new, but rather for profound revision of existing models of devotion and livelihood. All made use of visual imagery alongside textual exegesis to transmit their call to salvation, to gather adherents and to deliver their teachings. Since ancient polytheism whether in India or Mesopotamia, Egypt or the Greco-Roman world had combined ritual with a profound focus on sacred images of all kinds (from cult statues to votive offerings, from pilgrimage souvenirs to funerary dedications), the use of imagery was one of the inheritances from the past – but suitably transformed with new iconographies and sometimes shifts in representational systems (such as the reluctance to three-dimensional statuary or figurines in Christianity and Islam at any rate early on, or the reluctance to figural imagery in some forms of Islam at certain periods).

All these religions needed to find ways to incorporate as well as change the former cultural frameworks on which they were building but which at the same time they were transfiguring. This is where the incorporation of earlier traditions through referring back to their narratives, suitably redefined, became a significant pattern of visual and literary ancestralism – the building of antique genealogies into newly recalibrated systems of religious culture. The study of these issues has hardly ever been comparative across Afro-Eurasia, despite the

parallel structures of religious reform and transformation – in part because the study of what have come to be called 'the world religions' has largely preferred texts over images and writing over mythological traditions of orality. But the choices of ancestral reference are very interesting: Christianity was always torn between Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural origins, Manichaeism was extraordinarily eclectic in calling upon Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Christian ancestries, Islam heralded a Jewish, Christian and to some extent Zoroastrian heritage in monotheistic 'peoples of the Book' but excoriated the polytheists, including the adherents of Buddhism. When it came to visual culture, all these religions drew eclectically on what was available in the environment including from distant cultures through trade – editing and transforming it. Even the rich artistic heritage of late antique Judaism drew beyond its own narrative histories on such themes from Roman polytheism as Helios in the form of a charioteer within a Zodiac; Islam looked to late Roman (Byzantine) and Sasanian visual models; Buddhism drew on the vibrant imagery of India and central Asia as well as adapting iconographies from Roman Hellenism. That is, we have structures of differentiated and competitive self-fashioning around genealogy and around material self-affirmation between these religions.[1]

In this brief paper, celebrating the great contribution of Herb Kessler to the study of late antique and medieval art, I turn to questions of visual narrative.[2] But rather than sticking with a single culture (Umayyad art, late ancient Jewish art, Manichaean art and so forth), I will attempt a comparison between the uses of narrative in early Christian art in the Mediterranean and early Buddhist art in India. My aim is to attempt to supply a larger scope for understanding the uses of narrative themes in medieval religious art and to explore the possible place for comparativism beyond mono-culturally constrained art history across Afro-Eurasia.

Comparison

Let us begin with a somewhat abraided columnar sarcophagus of the later fourth century, probably made in Rome (Fig. 1). One of a large number of sarcophagi exported by sea to the Southern French coast, this piece was reused as an altar in the chapel of St Gregory in the cathedral of St Sauveur at Aix-en-Provence.[3] After the French Revolution the object

[1] This opening section draws on the Leverhulme Trust project, *Empires of Faith*, between the British Museum and Oxford, in which I was PI from 2013-18. Thanks to all who participated in it. See e.g. J. Elsner, S. Lenk et al. *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, Oxford, 2017; J. Elsner (ed.), *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*, Cambridge, 2020; J. Elsner, R. Wood (eds.), *Imagining the Divine*: *Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity Across Eurasia*, London, 2021.

[2] On narrative see Herb's seminal contributions of the 80s: "Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-century Gaul", *Studies in the History of Art*, 16 (1985), pp. 75-91 and "Pictures as Scripture in Fifth-Century Churches", *Studia Artium Orientalis et Occidentalis*, 2 (1985), pp. 17-31; his *Studies in Pictorial Narrative*, London, 1994; and of course the major monography on the Dura synagogue frescoes in relation to early Christian art, written with his teacher K. Weitzmann, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (*Dumbarton Oaks Studies* XXVIII), Washington D.C, 1990.

[3] See R. Guild, J. Guyon, L. Rivet, "Aix-en-Provence: Group épiscopale Saint-Sauveur-Sainte-Marie" in N. Duval (ed.) *Les premiers monuments chrétiens de la France, vol. 1 Sud-Est et Corse*, Paris, 1995, pp. 109-117.

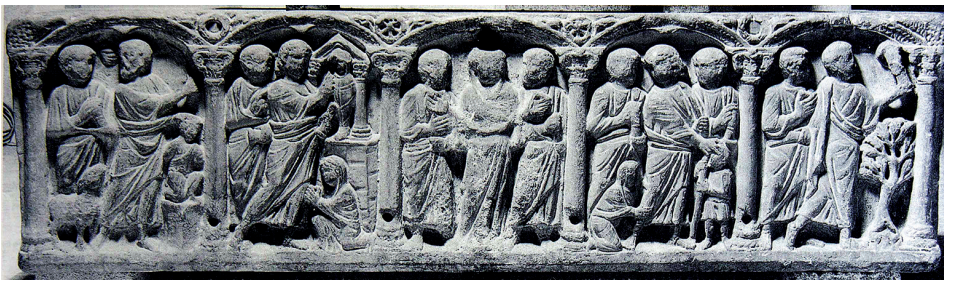

Fig. 1. Five-arched columnar sarcophagus with, left to right, the sacrifice of Isaac, Jesus raising Lazarus, a female orant between male figures, Jesus healing the blind man, Moses before the Burning Bush and receiving the Tablets of the Law. Probably from Rome. Marble. Late fourth century CE. Musée Granet, Arles. After G. WILPERT, I *sarcophagi cristiani antichi*, Rome, 1932, vol. II tav. ccv. 5

was appropriated by the French State in 1806 and removed to the Musée Granet at Aix.[4] The visual conceit of this piece – and many others like it – is that its long side represents a colonnade of five arches over six Corinthian columns within which the five historiated scenes chosen to frame the Christian body originally buried within it are placed. This makes the coffin a display case of five visual subjects separated by architectural framing, unlike for instance the frieze sarcophagi without obvious separations between subjects that were also popular in the period. At the same time, the scenes are aligned and juxtaposed in a way that proclaims their equality and parallelism. In the spandrels above the columns are garlanded martyr-crowns, of which the central two – framing the frontal scene in the middle – are filled with Christograms. Its ends have conch-shaped patterning and the back is not carved, aspects typical of sarcophagi of this period and provenance.

This historiated decoration has Old Testament scenes at either end. To the far left is the sacrifice of Isaac with Abraham turning to the angel;[5] to the far right, Moses simultaneously before the Burning Bush and receiving the Law,[6] presumably with Aaron behind him. In the central intercolumniation is a female orant between two male figures, probably saints or apostles. In the intermediate scenes are shown two of Jesus' miracles. On the left, he raises Lazarus from the dead with a small female figure—perhaps one of the dead man's sisters, Mary or Martha—kneeling before him.[7] To the right, Jesus heals the blind man, but turns towards a kneeling female figure whose pose and position reflects that of the woman in the Lazarus scene, and may well be the woman with the issue of blood who was healed

[4] See E. Le Blant, *Les sarcophages chrétiens de la Gaule*, Paris, 1886, no 206, p. 144; B. Christern-Briesenick, *Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage III Frankreich, Algerien, Tunisien*, Mainz, 2003, no. 22, pp. 10-11; J. Elsner, "The Christian Museum in Southern France: Antiquity, Display and Liturgy from the Counter-Reformation to the Aftermath of Vatican II", *Oxford Art Journal*, 31 (2009), pp. 181-204, part. 186-188; J. Elsner, "Decorative Imperatives between Concealment and Display: The Form of Sarcophagi", *RES*, 61/2 (2012) pp. 178-195, part. 192-193.

[5] For the sacrifice of Isaac on sarcophagi, see G. Koch *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, Munich, 2000, pp. 140–141.

[6] For this Moses iconography, see Koch *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, pp. 142 and 145–146.

[7] On Lazarus: Koch *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, pp. 167–168.

by Jesus.[8] This imagery proposes three levels of temporality – patterned on a centralized model where the two pre-Incarnation scenes referring to famous Old Testament narratives form the outer frame, the two images of Christ's miracle-bearing mission grounded in New Testament Scripture the inner frame and the a-temporal scene, not itself dependent on a canonical text but we might say exegetically evocative, of the frontal *orant* in worship at the centre. Reference to the Roman culture out of which this imagery grew is largely ignored except for the architectural features of the frame and such visual elements as the altar on which Isaac is bound.

The imagery entirely eschews any kind of sequential narrative reading, although its set of scriptural references to existing texts, known to viewers or exegetes for illiterate viewers, clearly keeps the intimation of prior narratives in play. Instead, a Christian middle comprising three intercolumniations (the central one framed by Christograms) is flanked by an Old Testament exterior of Jewish ante-types, so that a typological interpretative model – with a series of exegetic invitations to the viewer – replaces diachronic narrative. There is a typological play between death and Resurrection (from Isaac to Lazarus, the miniature figures in both scenes effectively standing for Jesus' own sacrifice and Resurrection that would affirm his divine nature) and a further play on double miracles in the two scenes on the right where Moses performs a double theophany (the Burning Bush and Tablets of the Law conflated into a single space), while Christ performs a double miracle in healing both the blind man and the woman with the issue of blood. There is also an interesting sub-theme of female salvation in the triangle of the central female *orant* and the two women kneeling before Jesus, which may tie into the imagery of the human soul as female prevalent in the Patristic commentarial traditions on the *Song of Songs*. In both the scenes where he appears, Jesus turns in towards the centre (even though his body is facing right and away from the centre in the right-hand niche), while in the two Old Testament images—both of epiphanies in that Abraham sees the angel while Moses is before God at the Burning Bush and when he receives the Tablets of the Law—the prophet looks away from the centre to the edge of the sarcophagus. This marks the Old Testament's (and Judaism's) inferiority to Christianity in that its revelation is never of the Incarnate God: by looking away from the centre, neither Abraham nor Moses looks towards Christ, as do all the miniature and keeling figures in the two scenes with Jesus.

While there are many sarcophagi of the type – with arcades demarcated by columns or trees filled with two- or three-figure scenes from Christian and Old Testament narratives – there are no surviving cognates with precisely the same combination of themes. Some themes recur frequently in the same place in a number of caskets, such as the sacrifice of Isaac at first left or the orant in the centre.[9] A pair of fragments survive from a single sarcophagus, now divided between Berlin and Bonn, in which the same iconography is apparent in the central scene (an orant between two male figures) and the intercolumniation to its right which shows

[8] On healing the blind man: Koch *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, pp. 172–173; on the woman with the issue of blood: *ibid* pp. 165–166. On this sarcophagus in relation to Christ as healer, see D. Knipp, *'Christus Medicus' in der frühchristlicher Sarkophagskulptur*, Leiden, 1998, pp. 136–137.

[9] E.g. Isaac: G. Bovini, H. Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, Vol. 1, Rom und Ostia*, Wiesbaden, 1967, nos. 52, 677, 680; orant: *Ibidem* nos. 60, 67, 651, 682, 683, 757, 777, 780, 822, 826, 857, 912, 921, 928, 936, 990.

the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, Christ turning in towards her and to the centre, as in the Granet example. The remains of the intercolumniation to the left of the orant certainly do not show Lazarus, although the healing of the blind man is a plausible hypothesis, again reflecting aspects of theme in the sarcophagus from Aix.[10] It is likely therefore that Aix sarcophagus is a unique interpretative combination of its subjects, created with some artistic and theological force, or one of very few originally made that replicated its specific themes.

The sarcophagus is 0.58 m in height and 2.10 m in length. Let me compare it now with a slightly smaller panel, 0.37 m high and 1.44 m long, which survives from the exterior casing of the drum of the great stūpa at Amarāvatī on the Krishna River delta in Andhra Pradesh near the eastern coast of central India (Fig. 2). The dates of this monument are difficult to pin down precisely, but it appears to have been completed by the third century CE, to which period this relief is usually dated – making it not much more than a century earlier than the Aix sarcophagus.[11] This frieze also uses architectural features – notably the city wall between the scenes at the centre and the right, as well as vertical rows of 4 lotus bosses – to distinguish visually between its narratives, and appears to operate on a centralized model, presenting its subject-matter with the sides sandwiching the middle. Like the Christian example, each of its visual representations gives focus to a specific episode from a much longer narrative, turning it into a metonym of a bigger story. And like the Christian sarcophagus, it places visual episodes, identifiable from a prior scriptural tradition, in contiguity and thus allows the juxtaposition of stories from different temporalities. In the case of Buddhist art, these are drawn on the Bodhisattva's many lifetimes (as told in the *Jātaka* and *Avadāna* traditions) before his final reincarnation when he became the Buddha. They enable the placement of particular chosen narratives alongside each other and juxtaposing these (or events within these) against particular events in the Buddha's life. As I will argue, that placement allows these episodes to function not only typologically but also metaphorically, enabling the exegetic implication of conceptual arguments or entailments arising from parallel imagery.

The central scene shows the Buddha, the standing to the left with halo and robe and probably with Ānanda his attendant to the far left, taming the intoxicated elephant Nālāgiri (Fig. 3).[12] On the right of the image, the elephant rushes out of the gate of the city of Rājgir, released by associates of the Buddha's evil cousin and enemy Devadatta, crushing a person beneath its feet in its rampage and scattering a crowd of others who run towards the Buddha. But when it reaches the Buddha's presence the elephant is tamed and bows before him.

[10] J. Dresken-Weiland, *Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage II Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt*, Mainz, 1998, no 118, pp. 38-39.

[11] BM 1880,0709.90 in R. Knox, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa*, London, 1992, no. 56, pp 115-6. Knox's text at pp. 115-116 misrepresents the *Jātakas* carved on this frieze.

[12] The story is told in the framing narrative of the Cullahamsa *Jātaka*, see H.T. Francis, *The Jātaka, or, Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, vol. 5, Cambridge, 1905, no. 533, pp. 175-178; in the *Kullavagga* section (on dissention within the order of monks) VII.3.11-12 of the *Vinaya* (the Monastic Code of Discipline), see T.W. Rhys Davids, H. Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts*, Oxford, 1885, vol. 3, pp. 247-250; *The Questions of King Milinda* IV.207-9, see I. Horner, *Milinda's Questions* London, 1964, pp. 300-303, where the elephant is called Dhanapālaka. It is referred to twice in Dhammapāla's fifth or sixth-century *Udāna Commentary*, see P. Masefield, *The Udāna Commentary by Dhammapāla*, Oxford, 1995, vol. 2, pp. 634 and 788. For its place in visual culture: M. Zin, *Mitleid und Wunderkraft: schwierige Bekehrungen und ihre Ikonographie im indischen Buddhismus*, Wiesbaden, 2006, pp. 69-100.

Fig. 2. Drum-frieze slab with, left to right, the Sarvamdada Avadāna, the Buddha quelling the madness of the elephant Nālāgiri, the Sasa Jātaka. From the stūpa at Amarāvatī, Andhra Pradesh, India. Palnad limestone. Perhaps third century CE. British Museum, London. Photograph: British Museum

Fig. 3. Detail of the central scene of figure 2, with crowds fleeing the elephant as it rushes out of Rajgir, trampling people in his way, to the right, and bowing before the Buddha with his attendant Ānanda behind him on the left. British Museum, London. Photograph: British Museum

This scene is clearly read from right to left, following the circumambulatory passage of the viewer-devotee who moves around a stupa with her right to the monument, thus moving along the reliefs on the drum from right to left. It represents a famous story not from the *suttas* spoken by the Buddha or from the later biographic writings about him, but from the framing narrative of the Cullahamsa *Jātaka*. The slab offers two moments within the story – the elephant's charge and the act of taming with the animal, which is depicted twice – but it climaxes on a specific episode, namely the Buddha's action in banishing the aggressive madness. The story however has a number of other elements excluded here (such as the malice of Devadatta) and excluded but implicit when interpreted against its contiguity with the two *Jātaka* scenes to either side. That is, the offers made by a number of the Buddha's disciples including Sāriputta and eighty chief elders to confront the wild animal, and especially that of Ānanda to sacrifice his life for the Buddha in order to allow him to escape.[13] In other words,

[13] Francis, *The Jātaka*, pp. 176-177.

what is depicted requires the viewer (or at least some viewers) to know rather more of the story than is explicitly seen and to use this knowledge exegetically. Beyond the specific story, one might add, the model of elephant training as persistent metaphor for training the mind (in the case of this narrative the extreme and crazed mind) is deep in the Buddhist tradition.[14]

To either side of Nālāgiri's madness are scenes not from the Buddha's life but from the *Jātaka* tales of his former lives as Bodhisattva (Fig. 2). The versions of these tales probably belong to a lost Mahāsāṃghika tradition of the *Jātakas*, prevalent in Andhra Pradesh, which means they differ in a number of details from narratives surviving in either the Pāli Theravāda tradition or the Sanskrit stories later transmitted in Tibetan and Chinese.[15] The subject of the episode on the right is thought to be a representation of the Śaśa *Jātaka* in which the Bodhisattva is a wise hare whose generosity is tested by Sakka, the king of the gods, who disguises himself as a brahmin and asks for food.[16] The Bodhisattva's companions, a monkey, a jackal and an otter all offer food of their own, but the hare offers his own flesh to the brahmin. Sakka reveals himself, refuses the gift and honours the hare by painting his shape on the face of the moon. In the much abraided frieze, it is possible the regal figure standing to the far right between two columns is Sakka observing the action, or it may be that this is intended to be some other subject. To the left of this is a country setting defined by trees and a rustic hut with pointed roof, with the hare at the lower centre leaping up to a seated figure, presumably the brahmin, ahead of the other animals (which are now very difficult to identify). Behind them is a standing figure with arms raised – perhaps Sakka revealing himself. The subject of the scene on the left is a story known as the Śibi *Jātaka* or the Sarvamdāda *avadāna*, in a form that does not exist in the Pāli tradition, but is preserved in some early Sanskrit texts and Chinese versions.[17] In this story, the Bodhisattva in the form

[14] See L. Covill, *A Metaphorical Study of Saundarananda*, Delhi, 2009, pp. 71-98.

[15] See M. Zin, "Buddhist Narratives at Amaravati", in A. Shimada, M. Willis (eds.), *Amaravati: The Art of an Early Buddhist Monument in Context*, London, 2016, pp. 46-58, part. 48; M. Zin, "Narrated with Chisel and Paintbrush. On the Importance of Research into Art History for Understanding Buddhism – Some Examples", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, 70 (2017), pp. 274-306. For evidence of a lost Mahāsāṃghika canon, see N. Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 58-61.

[16] See H.T. Francis, R. A. Neil, *The Jātaka, or, Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, vol. 3, Cambridge, 1897, no 316, pp. 34-37 and S. Shaw, *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*, Delhi, 2006, pp. 114-121. For Āryaśūra's fourth-century Sanskrit version see *Jātakamālā* no. 6 with P. Khoroche, *Once the Buddha was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā*, 1989, pp. 32-38. For the slab and story see B. Subrahmanyam, *Jātakas in South Indian Art*, Delhi, 2005, pp. 70-75; J. R. Rana, *The Sculptural Art of Amarāvatī*, Delhi, 2013, pp. 92-95; S. Chowdhuri, *A Case Study of Amarāvatī Art in the Context of Andhra Archaeology*, PhD thesis Calcutta, 2018, pp. 86-87 (at https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/248797/8/08_chapter%203.pdf). The story is mentioned and explicitly quoted in the fifth-century *Nidānakathā* 45 as exemplary of *dāna* or generosity in N. Jayawickrama, *The Story of Gotama Buddha: the Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*, Oxford, 1990, p. 58, and appears likewise at *Cariyāpiṭaka* I.10 as a model of *dāna* in I. Horner, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon* III, *The Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa) and Basket of Conduct (Cāriyāpitaka)*, Bristol, 1975, pp. 14-16. For some discussion: R. Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature*, New York, 2007, pp. 14-17, 126-127, 280-281.

[17] See D. Schlingloff, 'Śibi – Sarvamdada', *RTAM: Shri Gopal Chandra Sinha Commemoration Volume*, 16-18 (1984-86), pp. 299-308; also Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood*, pp. 121-122, 169 and 192-193; for the frieze slab and narrative as represented there: Rana, *The Sculptural Art of Amarāvatī*, pp. 115-118; Chowdhuri, *A Case Study of Amarāvatī Art*, p. 70-71. Andhra comparanda: B. Subrahmanyam, *Jātakas in South Indian Art*, Delhi, 2005, pp. 159-168.

of the righteous king Śibi or Sarvamdāda (meaning 'all giving') comes across a pigeon in terror, fleeing from a hunter, who is Sakka in disguise. The king agrees to ransom the bird from the hunter with his own flesh, cut from his legs and weighed against the weight of the pigeon. Asked if he has any regrets the king replies: 'I have neither hesitation nor regret for my actions. By the truth of this may my body be restored…', and he is indeed restored to health. The tale is popular in representations in both Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere in early Buddhist Indian art,[18] with a series of other examples from Amarāvati itself.[19] In the image the king is seated on a high-backed throne, probably cradling the bird in his left hand (but there is much damage); to the right is a standing figure with scales for weighing the Bodhisattva's flesh and below the throne beside the scales the king is represented again, cutting the flesh from his left leg with a sword.

In this block from the drum frieze, a story from the Buddha's life is sandwiched by two episodes from previous lives, both exemplifying exceptional *dāna* or generosity – the first perfection of the Bodhisattva path in both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions.[20] In both scenes the Buddha-to-be is offering his flesh, even his life, for the sake of other beings. In the centre, the miraculous scene from Buddha's own life has an interesting thematic link with the two *Jātakas*. First it is given as the framing story of another *Jātaka* tale, the Cullahamsa *Jātaka*. That is, it relates to the *Jātaka* tradition by giving the context in the Buddha's life for when he chose to tell a story of his former life. In this case, the cepisode is characterised by the Buddha's attendant, Ānanda, attempting to place himself between his master and the elephant, to sacrifice his own life to save the Buddha. Three times the Buddha asks him to move, and three times Ānanda refuses so that the Buddha has to remove him by supernatural power before taming the elephant.[21] In honour of Ānanda's altruism, the Buddha tells the Cullahamsa *Jātaka* in which he is Cittakūta, the king of the geese, and Ānanda is Sumukha, his chief captain.[22] The king-goose gets caught in a snare but Sumukha refuses to leave him, offering to give up his own life for his master. The fowler who set the trap is so entranced by this altruism that he frees the Bodhisattva. Thus, Buddhologically, all three episodes celebrate the act of dāna in its extreme and perfect form as the altruistic offer of one's own life or flesh to save another. But, while the acquisition of perfection through generosity is the theme of both the Śaśa and Śibi/Sarvamdada stories in the Bodhisattva's own incarnations, it is the sub-theme of Ānanda's route to perfection in the Nālāgiri and Cullahamsa stories. In

[18] D. Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 86-92; Zin, "Buddhist Narratives", pp. 48-49.

[19] E.g. BM 1880,0709.14 (a rail pillar), BM 1880,0709.69, BM 1880,0709.87, BM 1880,0709.95 (all miniature decorations with stupa-relief drum slabs), respectively, Knox, *Amaravati*, nos. 14, 68, 77, 76; C. Sivaramamurti, *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum* (*Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum* vol. IV), Madras, 1956, nos. III B 18 and IV B 2; also from a lost panel recorded among Colin MacKenzie's early nineteenth-century drawings, BL WD1061, fol. 68, http://vll-minos.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0340-07large.jpg, (also J. Burgess, *The Buddhist Stūpas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta*, London, 1887, pl. XXXIV.2), where it appears on a miniature dome slab to the left of the āyaka pillars.

[20] For *dāna* among the perfections, see T. Endo, *The Buddha in Theravada Buddhism*, Colombo, 1997, pp. 267-99; H. Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi, 2004, pp. 165-269.

[21] Francis, *The Jātaka*, p. 177.

[22] Francis, *The Jātaka*, pp. 178-86; Āryaśūra Jātakamālā 22 in Khoroche, 1989, pp. 140-52. Chowdhuri, *A Case Study of Amarāvatī Art*, pp. 107-108 claims that this narrative is elsewhere depicted at Amarāvatī.

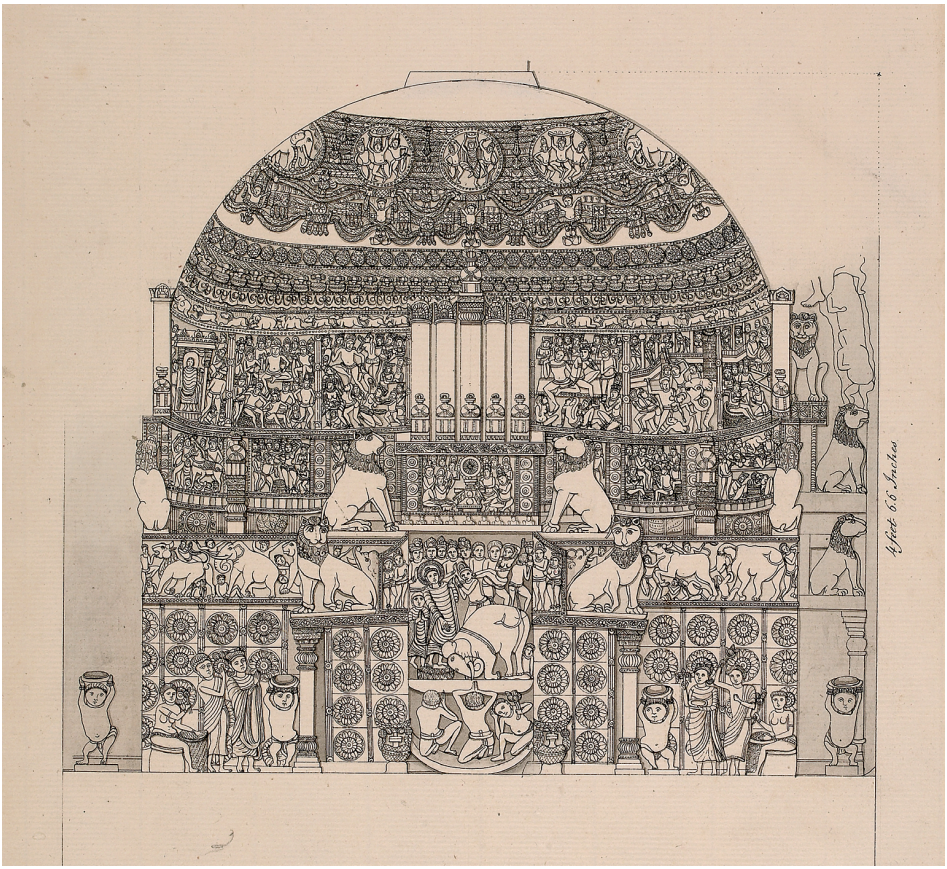

Fig. 4. Drawing of a now lost drum panel ('4 ft. 6.6 in. x 4 ft.') from Amarāvatī, showing a stūpa with the Buddha and Nālāgiri at the central entrance of the railing. The original in Palnad limestone, perhaps third century CE. Drawing dated 15 Nov'r 1816. From Colin MacKenzie's Amarāvatī Album, WD 1061, fol. 26. British Library, London. Photograph: (c) The British Library Board

the Nālāgiri episode, the Buddha himself shows mastery of all the perfections in his defeat of the enraged elephant, beyond the compassion of Ānanda's self-sacrifice (which would only have led uselessly to his death). The slab thus uses the episodic model of narrative juxtaposition to illuminate Buddhist teaching about the Bodhisattva path as a process of perfecting that leads to a place beyond even the highest forms of *dāna*.

It is striking that images of the Nālāgiri story appear again in the surviving sculptures from Amarāvati, on the inner face of the gateway coping to the right, in miniature, in a relief stupa from the drum in the British Museum,[23] as well as several lost slabs attested through

[23] BM 1880,0709.81, Knox, *Amaravati*, no. 74.

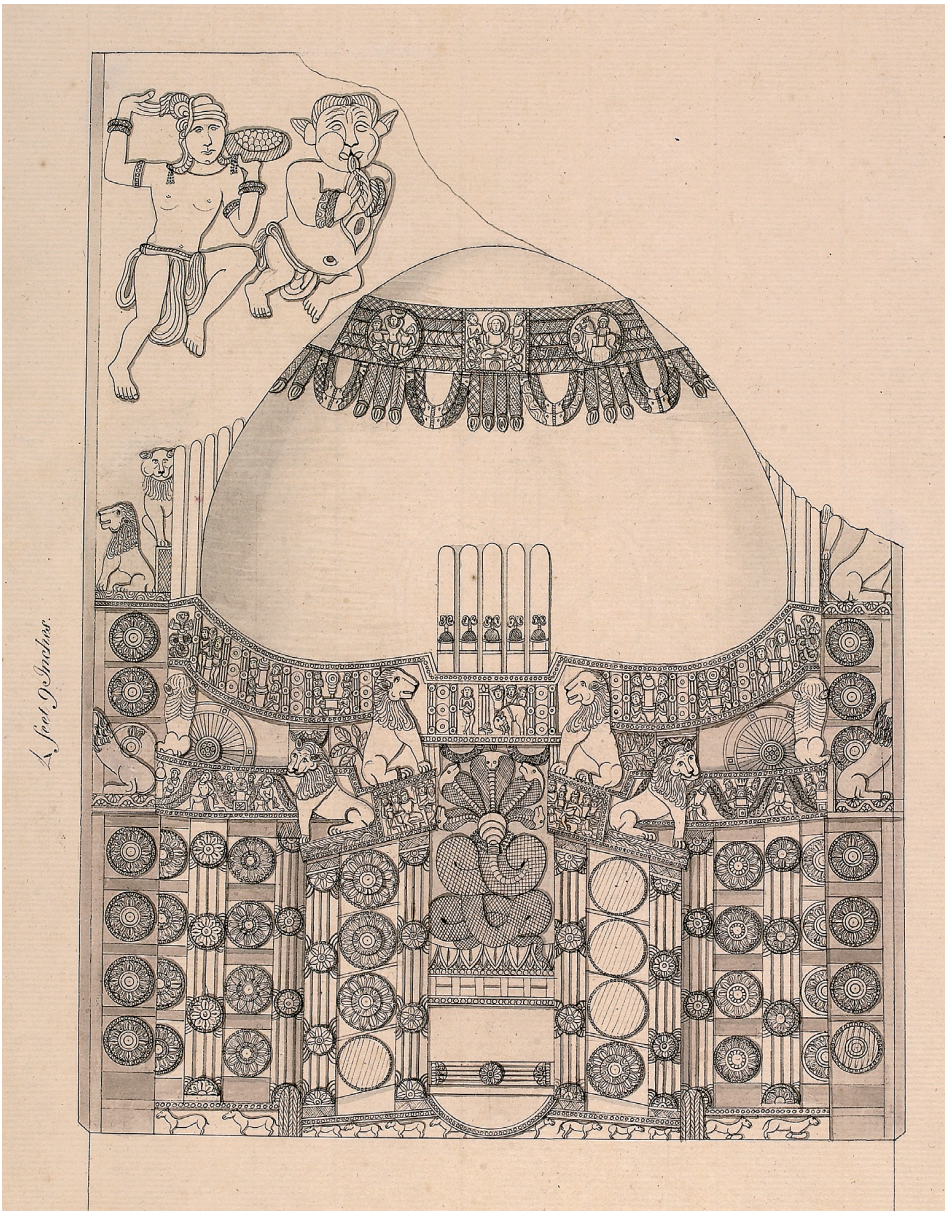

Fig. 5. Drawing of a now lost drum panel ('4 ft. 9 in. x 3 ft.') from Amarāvatī, showing a stūpa with a Nāga-serpent at the central entrance and Nālāgiri bowing to the Buddha in the form of a flaming column in the frieze panel immediately above the entrance. The original in Palnad limestone, perhaps second or third century CE. Drawing dated 15 October 1816. From Colin MacKenzie's Amarāvatī Album, WD 1061, fol. 35. British Library, London. Photograph: (c) The British Library Board

Fig. 6. Medallion at the centre of a cross-bar from the inner railing of the stūpa at Amarāvatī, showing the elephant Nālāgiri rampaging from left to right and then bowing before the now lost image of the Buddha in the form of a flaming column, with was at the extreme right. From the stūpa at Amarāvatī, Andhra Pradesh, India. Palnad limestone. Perhaps third century CE. Government Museum, Chennai. Photograph: akg-images / Jean-Louis Nou

Colin MacKenzie's nineteenth-century drawings (e.g. Figs. 4 and 5),[24] and in a cross-bar medallion from the inner railing around the stūpa now in Chennai (Fig. 6).[25] This latter piece in particular is spectacular – with the elephant twice depicted (as in the drum frieze section just discussed) but this time rampaging towards the right, to be read in the left-right direction

[24] BL WD1061, fols. 26, 35, 70, 80; respectively, http://vll-minos.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0335-03large.jpg (Burgess, 1887, pl. XXXIII.1) where the episode with the embodied Buddha to the left appears in the gateway at the centre with an unusual dharmacakra version of the first sermon in the āyaka panel above; http://vll-minos.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0336-03large.jpg (Burgess, 1887, pl. XXXVIII.2) where the elephant bows to the emblematic Buddha as flaming pillar and trisula in the āyaka frieze; http://vll-minos.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0341-01large.jpg where the elephant (on the left)

in which the pilgrim moved along the inner railing. In this case and in the miniature frieze above the gateway of MacKenzie's sheet at Fig. 5, the Buddha was shown emblematically at the margin of the image as a flaming pillar crowned by a *trisula* rising from a lotus with Buddhapāda (or footprints) at the base (but this element has flaked off in the damage to the right-hand side of the Chennai slab). In them, the emphasis is on the miraculous aspects of the Buddha's elephant-taming, and he is shown in a symbolic way implying the *Dharmakaya*, or supra-human truth body, as the agent of the miracle. But in the drum frieze, where the Buddha is embodied in the *rupakaya* of his human form, the thematic thrust is on a dialogue of perfection between embodied incarnations within specific lifetimes, rising to his ultimate human rebirth, in which all the perfections have been accomplished.[26] Buddhological issues, in other words, can be seen to determine iconographic choices around the Buddha's form, even in narrative scenes where the same choices are made about what element of the story to depict, as in the Chennai roundel and the British Museum drum frieze section which both show the elephant twice.

Conclusions

This venture into visual Buddhology shows extraordinary parallels with Christological models of typology in early Christian art, as instanced by the Aix sarcophagus. In both cases wide ranges of narratives are marshalled visually into theologically coherent arguments – whether through juxtapositional contrast (as in the Prophets being not like Christ despite their exemplary status) or juxtapositional crescendo of similarity (as in the Bodhisattva's development of perfections leading up to his fully perfected form as Buddha). Narratives within each tradition are made comparative by focalization on a specific episode, epitomizing the thematic intent, and then placed side by side to enable viewers to create new exegeses of their own within the broader interpretative patterns of the religion and its commentarial models.[27] This is not to deny sequential narrative traditions in either context, but to emphasize the exegetic theological options implied in the visual evocation of stories, juxtaposed against each other. Moreover, the intricate carvings on these single, highly coherent, slabs of stone are unlikely to be based on prior interpretative texts within Buddhism or Christianity that put these particular stories together, even if each of the stories is dependent on a known Scriptural or folkloric tradition. At any rate, in the vast commentarial literatures of each of these traditions, no such text that specifically puts *these* narratives together has survived.

bows to the embodied Buddha on a dome slab to the left of the depicted gateway – the panel shows repeated images of the embodied Buddha; http://vll-minos.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/amaravati/images/c0342-04large.jpg, where the narrative appears in the drum frieze with the elephant repeated twice to the right of the āyaka panel.

[25] Sivaramamurti, *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum*, III A 15, 188-9

[26] Another example of a medallion fragment where the Buddha appears in his *rupakaya* is a recently discovered piece in Varanasi: Zin, *Mitleid und Wunderkraft*, p. 82, no. 2; Rana, *The Sculptural Art of Amarāvatī*, p. 35 and pl. 2.35b. Both forms of the Buddha in this scene appear in Nāgārjunakonda: see Zin, *Mitleid und Wunderkraft*, pp. 82-84, no. 4-6.

[27] On episodic epitome in the arts of Mediterranean late antiquity, see J. Elsner, 'Visual Epitome in Late Antique Art' in M. Formisano, P. Sacchi (eds.) *Epitome. From Fragmentation to Re-composition (and Back Again)*, London, forthcoming.

Rather, they represent creative thinking with the materials of scripture and folklore within the community of artists or their (often scholarly and monastic) patrons. Those efforts may not be dependent on, but are not culturally separable from, the extraordinary vibrancy of interpretative energy the scholarly adherents of each of these religions poured into exegetic commentary, from the long and anonymous earlier history of commentarial traditions now preserved best in the Pāli syntheses after the fifth century CE by the likes of Buddhaghosa, Buddhadatta and Dhammapāla,[28] to the efflorescence of Patristic esposition in both Latin and Greek from the third century onwards.

Both reliefs juxtapose narratives in a subtle merging of times – combining the chronology of the Buddha's own life with lives of the same being aeons ago and with life-forms beyond the human, that include the god Sakka and animals, or placing Jesus alongside Abraham, Isaac and Moses as predecessor prophets and looking towards the female *orant* in a timeless space of worship. That is, even on the relatively minuscule level of single pieces of carved stone, questions of repetitive time, cosmic time and timelessness,[29] as well as multiple levels and kinds of beings are in subtle play – evoking the universal grandeur of the path to salvation. This large vision is challenged in the here-and-now of seeing the specific slab, when visiting the stūpa or the tomb where the sarcophagus was placed, in the life of any believing viewer or travelling devotee.

It is not impossible that the Amarāvatī slab borrows from traditions like *Nidānathā* 45-7 or the *Cariyāpiṭaka*,[30] which categorised groups of *Jātakas* by virtue of the perfection which their narratives showed its heroes developing. In this case it is *dāna*, giving or generosity. But the stūpa as a whole, mixing numerous stories in its juxtapositions of episodic epitomes of narratives, is a unique compendium of multiple narratives mingled in a unique way, in parallel with the ways pre-Buddhist stories, repurposed as earlier lives of the Buddha were collected and retold with different intent and in different orders by the range of different commentarial traditions. Part of the effect, in the case of the stūpas was to create a play of times and of *karma* to create a vast pattern of cause and effect in the Bodhisattva's development of perfection. This effect is of course immensely magnified beyond any single piece of stone by the richness of the iconographic intermingling between the imagery of the Buddha's final life and the range of images of his many earlier lives. What is created is an interplay of temporalities and causalities much like the uses of typology in early Christian art, which also uses episodic reference to Old or New Testament narratives in contiguity and

[28] See e.g. J. Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravāda Buddhism*, Abingdon, 2002, 89-100 (on Dhammapāla); M. Heim, *The Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words*, Oxford, 2018, pp. 60-106.

[29] On these issues see N. Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path*, London, 2010, pp. 63, 86, 117-118 and 148-149.

[30] For some reflections on the significance on the biographical texts, *Cariyāpiṭaka*, *Buddhvamsa* and *Apadāna* in relation to stupas, see J. Walters, 'Stūpa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India' in J. Schober (ed.), *Sacred Biography and Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, Honolulu, 1997, pp. 160-192; and for the *Cariyāpiṭaka* in relation to the perfections see Appleton, *Jātaka Stories*, pp. 66-68.

juxtaposition to make theological claims by visual means.[31] But at the same time Christian typology – despite some early experiments with pagan parallels (such as the uses of Hercules in the fourth-century paintings of the Via Latina catacomb) – effectively settled on Jewish genealogies as the relevant series of narratives.[32] It focused on prediction and fulfilment, not biographic perfectibility over lifetimes (with hints of others, like Ānanda in the Nālāgiri story, also moving towards perfection).

What stūpas can do, more effectively and lightly than textual presentations of narratives, is to repeat references to key iconic elements presented as epitomic episodes to make differentiated commentarial points in relation to specific juxtapositions. The perfection of generosity (*dāna*) is effectively made to underlie and frame the Nālāgiri narrative – which determines which aspects of that story (i.e. Ānanda's offer to sacrifice his life) are the topic of focalization. That means, in the context of the block in the British Museum discussed here, that the exegetic thrust is aligned with the way the story appears in the *Jātaka* tradition (in relation to Ananda's self-sacrificial act of *dāna*) as opposed for instance the way it is told in the *Vinaya* and *Udāna Commentary* where it concerns schism and the wickedness of Devadatta or in *Milinda's Questions* where it is the occasion for a discussion about whether arahats (human beings who have become enlightened by following the Buddha's path) can experience fear.[33] However, other representations of the Nālāgiri story at the site may well, in their original context, have offered significations aligned in different commentarial directions.

Hence the image of Nālāgiri bowing to a flaming pillar in the panel above the central gateway into the stūpa drawn in Fig. 5, is at the midpoint of a frieze depicting on each side three frontal panels with aniconic columns between worshippers. At the outer edges, the pillar appears to be surmounted by a Bodhi Tree (implying the Enlightenment), a wheel or dhammacakra (indicating the First Sermon that turned the wheel of the Buddha's dharma or teaching) on the near left and in the central panel to the right, and a stūpa (symbolizing the Buddha's death and interred relics) at the mid left and near right. The five pillars arising from the frieze section with Nālāgiri (over the so-called āyaka platform) also have relief decoration in the form of stūpas surmounted by umbrellas. Here the Nālāgiri theme, with its emphasis on the loving-kindness by which the Buddha tames schism and attack,[34] within a visual discourse that is aniconic about the Buddha's own figure, is the central culmination of the representations of the key moments of his mission. This is in contrast with the roundels at the top of the stūpa whose central image represents the Buddha in human form

[31] See for instance: see A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Princeton, 1968, pp. 109-148; J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 271-87; S. Schrenk, *Typos und Antitypos in der frühchristlichen Kunst*, Münster, 1995; C. Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket: Typology and the Early Christian Imagination*, Paris, 2002, pp. 51-62.

[32] On Hercules in the Via Latina catacomb, see e.g. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, pp. 271-282.

[33] See the references in n. 12.

[34] For loving-kindness (*mettā*), see Francis, *The Jātaka*, p. 177 and Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts*, p. 249; for the emphasis on schism see e.g. Dhammapāla's fifth-century commentary on the brief *sutta* on schism in the sangha, *Itivuttaka* 1.28 (no. 18): *Itivuttaka-atthakathā* 67 in P. Masefield, *The Commentary on the Itibuttaka*, Oxford, 2008, vol. 1, p. 167.

amidst disciples, with scenes from his path to enlightenment to either side (on the right the great renunciation with the horse Kanthaka leaving the palace and to the left his throwing away of his begging bowl, which is at once taken up to heaven by deities). By contrast in the richly carved slab drawn by MacKenzie's illustrators at Fig. 4, the Nālāgiri theme at the centre of the stūpa's entrance seems to cap a visual interplay of elephant imagery. Elephants move across the coping frieze at the top of the outer railing to left and right of the central opening. In the far-right panel of the drum frieze above this railing, the Bodhisattva himself in the form of a miniature elephant descends upon his mother Maya in the classic iconography of his conception. Above that, among the larger slabs that decorate the upper drum, an elephant appears in an unidentified military scene. In the two roundels to the extreme left and right of the dome, elephants bow towards the three medallions that show deities carrying relics up to heaven. While the specific interpretative key may elude us, there is no doubt that this imagery plays with and upon elephants and elephant-narratives in the tradition. Part of the compendious exegetic force of the ways narratives are presented, repeated and framed by a stūpa is that numerous levels of meaning can be made to interplay across the totality of the monument. Stūpas offer a kind of commentarial competition through visual narrativity to the forms of commentary offered by the literary collections of the same period and later.

This raises a comparative issue of fundamental significance. By comparison with the extraordinary scope and ambition of the visual arts of early Buddhism, those of roughly contemporary early Christianity are significantly limited. We have small-scale relief monuments and relatively limited expanses of painting or mosaic (restricted for instance to the walls above the nave arcades, the triumphal arches and the apses of such churches as St Peter's, St Paul outside the Walls and Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome)[35] by contrast with the sculpted immensity of an entire stūpa mound as well as its perimeter railing inside and out, as at Amarāvatī. No early Christian monument shows anything like the richness and ambition of the early Buddhist stūpas in creating and marshalling complex iconographies across huge surfaces of carved stone. The greatest Byzantine church, Justinian's St Sophia, built in the first half of the sixth century was essentially aniconic as far as figural or narrative imagery is concerned (at any rate regarding the fabric both inside and outside) although it contained a finely historiated chancel barrier for which the poetic description by Paul the Silentiary from the 560s survives.[36] In terms of sculptural expanse and visual ambition, only the 'cocliate' columns of Trajan and Marcus in Roman and of Theodosius and Arcadius in Constantinople can be compared with the stūpas,[37] although these are of course essentially

[35] For Herb's masterly account of some of this, see H. L. Kessler, *Old St Peter's and Church Decoration in Medieval Italy*, Spoleto, 2002, pp. 15-96.

[36] See e.g. S. Xydis, "The Chancel Barrier, Solea, and Ambo of Hagia Sophia", *The Art Bulletin*, 29 (1947), pp. 1-24; M. Whitby, "The Occasion of Paul the Silentiary's Ekphrasis of S. Sophia", *The Classical Quarterly*, 35 (1985), pp. 215-228; R. Macrides, P. Magdalino, "The Architecture of Ekphrasis: Construction and Context of Paul the Silentiary's Poem on Hagia Sophia", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 12 (1988), pp. 47-82; J. Kostenec, K. Dark, "Paul the Silentiary's Description of Hagia Sophia in the Light of New Archaeological Evidence", *Byzantinoslavica*, 69.3 (2011), pp. 88-105.

[37] On the columns as a collective generic type see G. Beccatti, *La colonna coclide istoriata*, Rome, 1960. For questions of narrativity: see e.g. R. Brilliant, *Visual Narratives*, Ithaca, NY, 1984, pp. 90-123; S. Settis, "La colonne Trajane: invention, composition, disposition", *Annales* ESC, 5 (1985), pp. 1151-1194; S. Settis, *La*

imperialist political rather than religious monuments. Arguably only with the great display portals of Romanesque and Gothic churches did European art attempt anything like the narrative ambitions on a large scale of late ancient India. One reason, especially in the Christian context, might be the reluctance to images – almost always at best the handmaiden to Scripture – evinced by the Jewish and Christian traditions, and the fear of idolatry; issues that simply did not arise in any of the Indian religious cultures.

Both Christian and Buddhist art appropriated the visual traditions of the cultures within which they developed, and adapted them to complex visual arguments, philosophically founded on more or less canonical models of scripture and its commentaries, for purposes that transformed the interpretative traditions of their cultures, as we have seen. In doing so, they created immensely sophisticated theological traditions of visual thinking, much more complex – and interdependent with highly complex textual commentaries – than the more generalized mythological referentiality of the arts from which they borrowed. Here we have been looking at some of the surprisingly parallel ways in which different salvific religions constructed their identities and conducted their public interface with both non-adherents and believers.

Colonna Traiana, Turin, 1988; P. Veyne, "Conduites sans croyance et oeuvres d'art sans spectateurs", *Diogène* 143 (1988), pp. 3-22; S. Settis, "La colonne Trajane: l'empereur et son public", *Revue Archéologique*, 1 (1991), pp. 186-198; P. Veyne, *L'Empire gréco-romain*, Paris, 2005, pp. 379-418; F. de Angelis, "Sublime Histories, Exceptional Viewers: Trajan's Column and Its Visibility", in J. Elsner, M. Meyer (eds.), *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture*, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 89-114.