# Archaeologies of Buddhist propagation in ancient India: 'ritual' and 'practical' models of religious change

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## Abstract

This paper assesses the degree to which current 'ritual' and 'practical' models of religious change fit with the available archaeological evidence for the spread of Buddhism in India during between the third and first centuries BC. The key question is how Buddhist monastic communities integrated themselves within the social, religious and economic fabric of the areas in which they arrived, and how they generated sufficient patronage networks for monastic Buddhism to grow into the powerful pan-Indian and subsequently pan-Asian institution that it became. While it is widely recognized that in time Indian monasteries came to provide a range of missionary functions including agrarian, medical, trading and banking facilities, the received understanding based on canonical scholarship and inadequate dialogue between textual and archaeological scholarship is that these were 'late' developments that reflected the deterioration of 'true' Buddhist values. By contrast, the results of the author's own landscape-based project in central India suggest that a 'domesticated' and socially integrated form of Buddhist monasticism was already in place in central India by the late centuries BC, thus fitting closely with practical models of religious change more commonly associated with the later spread of Islam and Christianity.

## Keywords

Buddhism; Ancient India; Practical models of religious change; Pan Indian v. 'local' religion; stupas; relic cult; intervisibility; monasticism; water-management; ritual landscapes.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to assess the degree to which current models of religious change in India fit with the available archaeological evidence for the spread of Buddhism from its base in the middle

Gangetic valley between the third and first centuries BC. The key question is how the Buddhist *saṅgha* (collective body of monks) integrated itself within the social, religious and economic fabric of the areas in which it arrived, and how it generated sufficient patronage networks to grow into the powerful pan-Indian and subsequently pan-Asian institution that it became. The key focus of enquiry is central India, based largely on the results of the Sanchi Survey Project (Shaw 2007) and some comparative material from the Deccan to the south west. The somewhat later history of Buddhist propagation in South India is not dealt with in any great detail here beyond reference to two landscape-based studies carried out in more recent years in Andhra Pradesh.

Despite a body of literature on 'tribal absorption' or 'cultic integration' in the Brahmanical tradition (e.g. Kulke 1993), there are important gaps in our understanding of the dynamics of religious change with regard to early Buddhism. Approaches to the subject have been dominated by 'theological' models, based largely on textual accounts of the Buddha's 'conversion' or subordination of 'local' deities such as *nāgas* and *yakṣas*. In recent years, the issue of whether the *saṅgha* was overtly interested in converting local populations has come under doubt, with scholars such as Cohen (1998) or Bloss (1973) arguing instead that the *saṅgha*'s assimilation of local folk deities was a mechanism for 'localizing' itself in new areas. However, a principal contention of the present study is that the assumed 'pan-Indian' v. 'local' polarization, upon which both of the above narratives rest, may be inappropriate when it comes to assessing spatial and temporal patterns in Sanchi's archaeological landscape. The fact that the appearance of *nāga* and *yakṣa* sculptures there postdates the arrival of Buddhism by several hundred years should warn us against viewing them as clear-cut indicators of 'pre-Buddhist' cultic practice, as is usually assumed to be the case. Rather, their representation in pan-Indian sculptural conventions may have been just as much the result of Buddhism's own view of local deities as that of their actual devotees, so we are thus dealing with an etic, rather than emic standpoint.

Another key thread of this study is the argument that, in order to construct a more socially integrated model of religious change, it is necessary to move beyond the 'ritual' landscape *per se*, to an examination of the archaeological landscape as a whole. This point is discussed later, drawing on 'practical' models of religious change, hitherto focussed primarily on the Islamic and Christian traditions, which have stressed the non-religious motives of 'conversion' such as, for example, access to medicine, water supplies and improved agricultural resources (see for example Eaton 1993). In the Sanchi Survey Project area, the empirical basis for assessing these models is provided by the spatial and temporal distribution of Buddhist monastic sites, habitational settlements, irrigation systems and sculptural and architectural remains from a range of religious traditions. In particular, I will argue that the *saṅgha* aligned itself with local agricultural deities such as *nāgas* because the latters' perceived ability to control the monsoon rains was directly in keeping with the *saṅgha*'s own vested interests in water and land management. Not only did its involvement with water provide an instrument for generating lay patronage, but it acted as a very practical means for alleviating suffering (*dukkha*) which lay at the heart of the Buddhist message. Finally, there are strong suggestions that the Sanchi dams were built for irrigating rice agriculture which raises a number of questions regarding the wider cultural, religious and ideological underpinnings of food change during the late centuries BC.

## Sanchi Survey Project

The Sanchi Survey Project (henceforth SSP) – initiated in 1998 with fieldwork seasons continuing until 2005 –aimed to build an integrated model of religious, economic and environmental history

through the documentation of ritual sites, settlements and water-resource structures. Key research questions included: how Buddhist propagation related to wider processes of urbanization, state formation and changes in agrarian production between the third century BC and the fifth century AD; how incoming monastic communities established themselves within the pre-existing ritual landscape; and how they built up patronage networks with local populations. Covering an area of approximately 750 square kilometres, the survey resulted in the documentation of thirty-five Buddhist sites, as well as a large number of settlement sites, water resource systems, temples and sculptural fragments belonging to a variety of religious traditions.
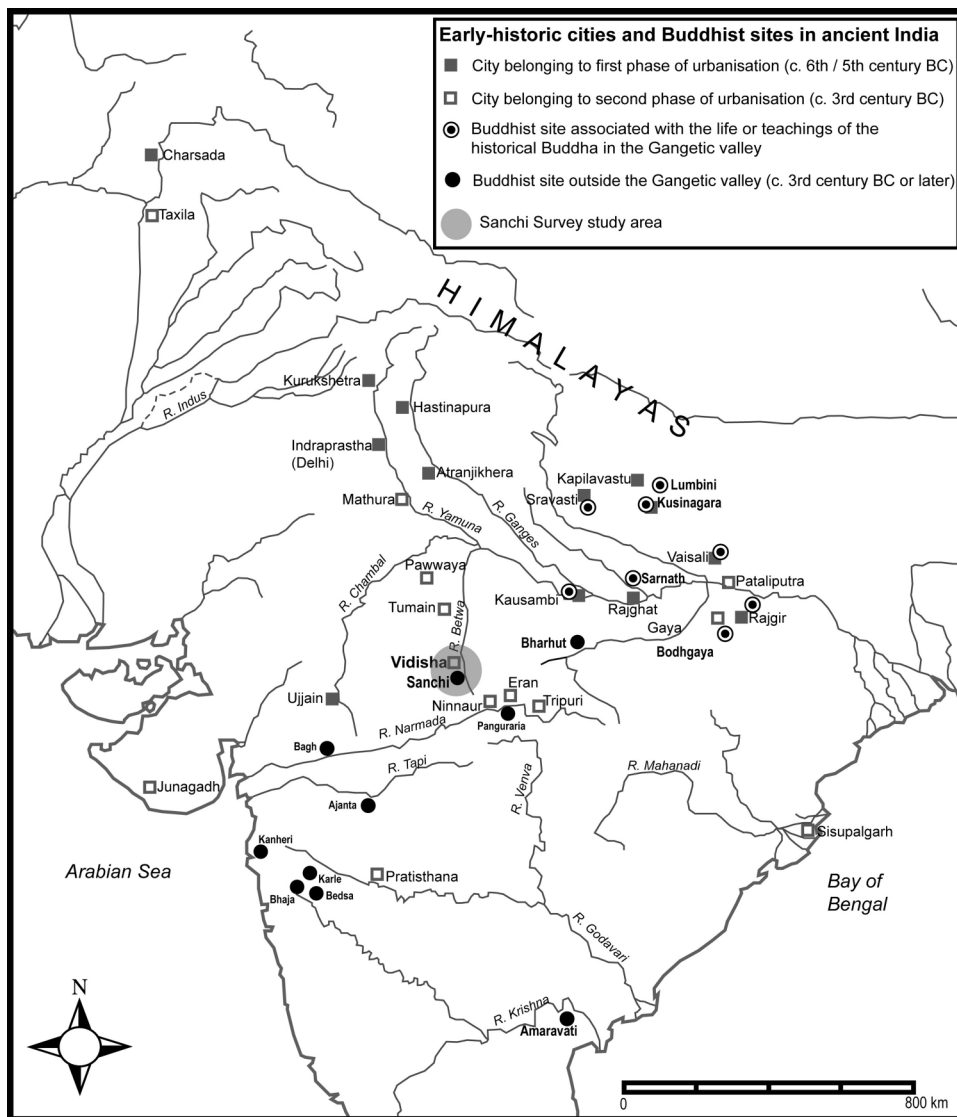


*Figure 1* Buddhist sites and urban centres during and after the time of the Buddha.
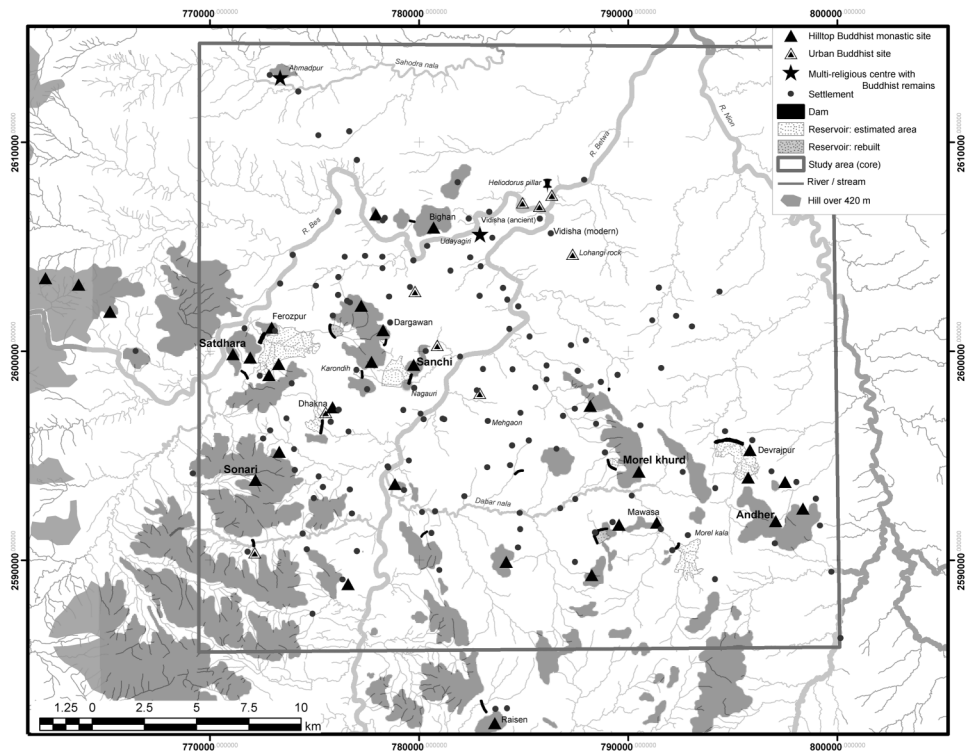
*Figure 2* Sanchi Survey Project: site distribution (Buddhist sites, settlements and reservoirs).

The project's primary focus was the UNESCO World Heritage Buddhist site of Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, in central India (Figs 1 and 2). Sanchi is one of the best-preserved and most-studied Buddhist complexes in India, with a continuous constructional history from *c*. the third century BC to the twelfth century AD. Four related Buddhist sites, Satdhara, Sonari, Morel khurd and Andher, all situated within a 15km radius of Sanchi, have undergone archaeological investigation from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Cunningham 1854; Marshall et al., 1940). The earliest monuments at Sanchi (Phase I) were connected with state patronage under the Mauryas, as attested by the Asokan edict there. However, the most prolific building, here and at the other four sites, took place during the post-Mauryan period (Phase II), datable to between the late second and the first century BC, and linked under a single school of monks called the Hemavatas (Willis 2000). Construction during this phase was funded mainly by collective patronage and recorded in the form of single-lined inscriptions on pillars and paving slabs.

The relative chronology between Phases I and II at Sanchi rests on a complex body of palaeographic, art historical and archaeological evidence, but even in the absence of some of these criteria it is usually possible to position newly documented Buddhist sites within this chronological framework, with the majority dating to Phase II. Additional chronological markers are provided by ceramic sequences, as well as some OSL and TL markers, from both excavated and non-excavated contexts (Shaw 2007; Shaw et al. 2007).

The city mounds of Vidisha, just 8km to the north of Sanchi, represent the earliest phase of urbanism in central India (Fig. 2); while fortified state capitals in the Gangetic valley appear to

have been formed the backdrop to the Buddha's life and teachings, similar developments in central and south India are not attested archaeologically until at least the third century BC (Fig. 1). Vidisha is also home to some of the earliest archaeological evidence for the Pancaratra system of the Bhagavata cult, a prototypical form of Vaisnavism which became prominent from around the second century BC onwards (Khare 1967; Shaw 2007: 53–5). The importance of orthodox Brahmanism continued throughout Vidisha's history, as illustrated by the mid-first-millennium-AD rock-cut temples at Udayagiri, which were connected with the Gupta royal family (Willis 2009).

Until recently, little was known about how the archaeological sequences at these sites related to areas beyond their formal boundaries. The SSP aimed to fill some of these gaps and to relate the key processes of Buddhist propagation and urbanization at Sanchi and Vidisha respectively to social and religious history within the hinterland.

## Buddhist history and archaeology

Although the dating of the historical Buddha has not yet been settled (Bechert 1991), his life and teachings are usually placed between the sixth and fifth centuries BC. He was born as Gautam Siddhartha, prince of the Sakya clan, based around the border of the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and the Nepalese Terai. His rejection of worldly life and his eventual attainment of Buddhahood are intricately bound up with his recognition of the omnipresence of human suffering (*dukkha*), and the formulation of his own version of *dharma* based on the 'eightfold path' and aimed at the alleviation of *dukkha* through various modes of 'corrected' thought, attitude and action. Although asceticism was also a recognized Brahmanical path, the Buddha's rejection of extreme renunciation for a more humanistic and measured response to the ills of the day, be they religious, social, economic, psychological or environmental, placed the Buddha's version of *dharma* firmly within the heterodox camp: the literal meaning of *dharma* within the Brahmanical context is 'law' which operates both on a universal (*sanatanadharma*) and personal (*svadharma*) level. Taken together with the closely related concept of *jati* (caste), *dharma* was hitherto the main shaping force behind personal identity and 'world view' sharing thus some of the attributes that we associate with the term 'religion'. The Buddha's reformulation of the term represented thus a radical departure from the established status quo, whilst the *saṅgha* (the collective body of monks), represented an idealized adaptation of the older tribal entities mentioned by the same name in Vedic texts, the fundamental difference being that membership was not reliant on family lineage.

Most of our information about the Buddha's life and teachings comes from texts purporting to have been composed during his lifetime. Although the four pilgrimage sites associated with his major life events have been located (Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kusināgara), there are no identifiable Buddhist remains datable to the pre-Mauryan period (see Coningham 2001). By contrast, many of the places in which the earliest Buddhist narratives are set (Rajgir, Kausambi, Sravasti, Vaisali), have been identified archaeologically as the fortified urban capitals of the emerging monarchical states of the mid-first millennium BC (Fig. 1). The absence of archaeological correlates for the earliest history of Buddhism may on the one hand reflect problems relating to excavation methodology in India (see especially Kennet 2004), but also point to the probable makeshift nature of monastic dwellings during the Buddha's lifetime when the *saṅgha* consisted of a body of monks compelled to wander for most of the year, apart from the monsoon months when

they were required to take up communal residence in temporary rain retreats. In time, these retreats grew into permanent monasteries. As discussed later, this transition is central to discussions regarding the 'domestication' of the *saṅgha*, as it is regarded as the key factor behind the formalization of exchange networks between monastic and lay populations (Shaw 2011).

It is not until the middle of the third century BC, following the Mauryan emperor Asoka's (r. 273 BC to 236 BC) embracement of Buddhism, that the *saṅgha*'s activities become manifest in the archaeological record both within and beyond its original heartland. For the first time we have Buddhist *stūpas*, spherical monuments for housing the relics of the Buddha and other saints and monks, as well as shrines (*cetiya*) and, slightly later on, monasteries (*vihāra*). The close link between Buddhist propagation and imperial expansion is illustrated through the distribution of Asokan edicts, many of which occur within Buddhist monastic compounds (Allchin and Norman 1985; Falk 2006). However, it was not state patronage alone which propelled Buddhism into the pan-Indian arena. Indeed the second, and most prolific, programme of propagation occurred during the post-Mauryan period (second–first centuries BC), funded by collective patronage pooled from a cross-section of society, with royalty playing a comparatively minor role. Other factors included the spread of pan-Indian modes of artistic representation of the Buddhist narrative, as well as the *stūpa* and relic cult whereby each relic was envisaged as a part of a larger Buddha-body or corpse which upheld the Buddhist world as a whole (Shaw in review; Walters 2002). The other major factor which forms the focus of this paper is a range of missionary functions that catered to local needs and acted as instruments of lay patronage. Examples of these 'practical' provisions include access to medical, banking, educational and agricultural resources (Schopen 1994; Shaw 2007, 2011; Zysk 1998). It would not be an understatement to say that the establishment of monastic centres across South Asia (and later Asia as a whole) was a remarkable religious and cultural feat. Quite how this was achieved is one of the questions that this paper seeks to address. However, it is important to stress that there was never a 'Buddhist period' in Indian history. Not only did Buddhism grow out of, and function within a multi-religious context, but being a monastic tradition, its ritual identity did not extend significantly, and certainly never exclusively, into the everyday lives of the laity.

## Buddhism, urbanization and monarchical statehood in the Gangetic valley

The causal relationship between the Buddha's teachings, and broader social, economic and political processes taking place in the Gangetic valley, in particular the rise of urbanism and monarchical states, has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Ghosh 1973). However, this relationship has not been assessed archaeologically, largely because of the narrow focus of regional site-distribution surveys which have tended to prioritize habitational settlements at the expense of other aspects of the landscape such as ritual centres or agricultural systems.

Although the SSP was concerned with Buddhist propagation in central India from the third century BC onwards, the way in which the earliest Buddhist *saṅgha* related to its social and economic environment in the Gangetic valley warrants further discussion here. Bailey and Mabbett (2003) highlight two apparently contradictory models concerning this relationship: 1) the 'positive' model (e.g. Thapar 1984), wherein Buddhism is viewed as growing out of, and encouraging, urbanization because it provided a means of legitimization for non-Brahmin elites such as merchants and traders; Buddhist monasticism was an instrument of monarchical

statehood, its success being attributed to the close relationship between monks and kings; and 2) the 'negative' model (e.g. Gombrich 1988: 58–9), which regards the Buddhist preoccupation with suffering (*dukkha*) as a reaction to the social upheaval, poverty and illness caused by urbanization. Buddhism offered a means of tackling this suffering, while the *saṅgha* (the collective monastic order) represented an idealized form of pre-state tribal organization (*gaṇa saṅgha*) described in Vedic texts. The principal argument here is that Buddhism was able to flourish because monks acted as mediators between the political and economic forces of the time, benefiting from the social changes that other groups were finding difficult to digest, i.e. they capitalized on what for others was fraught.

Bailey and Mabbett remark on the irony that 'scholars argue on both sides often without seeming to notice the contradiction' (2003: 13) between the two positions. Thus one camp regards Buddhist theology as appealing to non-monastic populations because it met the needs of these rising urban states, and the other sees it as a spiritual salve, an opiate, for those who suffered from the effects of urbanization. There are also inherent contradictions in each of these positions, that of the 'positive' model being that Buddhism was designed as an ascetic path for those renouncing society, not for those in its upper echelons (2003: 6). For the negative model, the fundamental question is: why did the Buddhist version of *dukkha* grow specifically out of an urban milieu when suffering can be assumed to have been common to all places and times? The irony of focusing on suffering at a time when significant sections of society must have been enjoying the economic rewards of urbanization and development has also been remarked upon (2003: 28). However, the downsides of development and urbanization are all too apparent from modern parallels in Asia where common 'side-effects' include overpopulation, unemployment, environmental stress, social dislocation and the erosion of traditional values.

The fundamental question, however, is why would a community of renunciates be so entwined economically and religiously with the merchant class? Further, why did the latter support the *saṅgha*, and what kind of economy allowed such a group to emerge and prosper?

As a first step to addressing these questions, it is important to stress that the Buddhist message was intended not only for monks but for the collective well-being of society (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 54–5). Not only did its emphasis on self-improvement and individual advancement accord with urban values, but unlike the message of the Brahmanical ascetic, it applied to society at large, rather than to specific caste groups. This point is illustrated by a canonical passage (*Vinaya* I 226) in which the Buddha explains to the laity that the alleviation of suffering is a fundamental step in the quest for material success (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 52–3). Monks have renounced society, but they are still concerned with its material and spiritual welfare, and not only for altruistic reasons: ultimately the *saṅgha*'s livelihood is dependent on lay patronage. As noted by Benavides, 'a degree of abundance is the prerequisite for asceticism' (2005: 82). In other words, large communities of both sedentary and peripatetic renunciates could not survive without a developed economy to support them. Benavides argues thus that Buddhism was neither a rejection nor an affirmation of wider economic changes, but rather a 'commentary', 'meditation' or 'distillation' of the new, urban way of life which was intricately bound up with a new attitude to labour and consumption.

Further, the concept of *dāna*, whereby the laity donates goods (primarily food, but also shelter and eventually, land and permanent structures) to the *saṅgha* in exchange for merit (*puṇya*), was a particularly Buddhist way of responding to these new attitudes to production and consumption (Benavides 2005: 87). By creating an arena for *dāna* which lies at the heart of the monk-laity dynamic, the monastery acted as a 'mirror' to the new emphasis on wealth. Ali (1998) comes to

a similar conclusion regarding the *saṅgha*'s relationship with urban and courtly society. Despite the divergent aims of the groups, both used a similar set of 'technologies' or 'signs', as suggested by the prominence of courtly imagery in Buddhist literature and thought. Taken together, these developments help to reconcile the two apparently contradictory models for explaining the relationship between Buddhism and urbanization. Benavides (2005) even suggests that 'to solve the mystery of giving and receiving, of sacrifice and asceticism, of work, leisure, and agency, would be to solve the mystery of religion'.

The irony of this dynamic is obvious: although monks are exempt from labour, the *dāna* on which they depend is the direct result of others partaking in work which is contrary to monastic regulations. The layperson has to endure the burden of not only the work itself, but also the pollution that results. However, as long as a percentage of the fruits of his labour is donated to the *saṅgha*, all resulting sin is removed through the latter's bestowal of merit: 'the villagers thus free the monks for higher pursuits, [while]…their labourings – even though polluting – are positively virtuous, too' (Tambiah 1970: 148).


## 'Passive' v. 'active' models of Buddhist propagation

While the advantages of this arrangement for the monk are clear, the benefits for the laity, beyond a purely spiritual sphere, are less so. What other incentives might there have been for supporting the *saṅgha*? Insights into this question have been hampered by the 'theological' or 'passive' model of Buddhism, which regards the *saṅgha*'s participation in social relations as a distortion of its original position as a body of renunciates concerned solely with individual enlightenment (Conze 1975; Ortner 1978).

The passive model is typified by Weber's (1963) view of Buddhism as being concerned solely with an 'other-worldly' ideal that represented the antithesis to modern capitalism. Weber did acknowledge Asoka's concern with social welfare as expressed in his pillar and rock edicts, but saw it as a coincidence that contradicted the original spirit of Buddhism. For the laity, the sole incentive for economic activity was to produce surplus in order to generate good *karma*, rather than a means for 'capitalist reinvestment'.

The earliest Buddhist monks are thus regarded as passive recipients of lay donation, with any reciprocation of merit being interpreted as superficial (Schopen 1996a), while evidence for more commercial forms of exchange is regarded as a deterioration of 'true' Buddhist values. For example, the post-Mauryan (Phase II: 2nd - 1st centuries BC) donative inscriptions at Sanchi and other north Indian sites, which record donations of individual building components, are generally viewed as indicators of a one-way system of gift-giving, in which the *saṅgha*'s role is regarded as one of passive non-reciprocity. These are contrasted with the inscriptions of the Gupta period (4th - 6th centuries AD), which for the first time refer to the donation of entire buildings and permanent endowments of land, together with interest.

Not only is any reciprocity on the part of the monks denied, but the deeper social implications of post-Mauryan inscriptions, for example, their possible function as 'advertisements' of the donors' piety for reasons of social prestige, have been overlooked by a body of scholarship which has focused entirely on the 'ritual' motives of gift-giving (Schopen 1996a). Further, little consideration has been given to the degree of social integration required for this kind of fund-raising exercise: Buddhism appears to have provided the earliest arena in India for 'competitive

giving' and the very public recording of this act in perpetuity. Finally, it is important to broaden the scope of evidence to include other indicators of lay-monastic exchange. For example, certain practical skills such as water harvesting and water management, as illustrated by the abundance of cisterns at second-century-BC rock-cut monasteries in the Deccan (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2003) and contemporary dams in the Sanchi area discussed below (Shaw 2007), evidently played a significant role in Buddhist propagation. These skills appear to have formed part of a practical form of evangelism that tackled suffering (*dukkha*) on an every-day subsistence level, but which also provided incentives for locals to extend their economic support to the monastery.

An additional critique of the 'passive' model of Buddhism is that it does not account for Buddhism's role as an active agent in contemporary Southeast and East Asian economies (Harvey 2000; Tambiah 1976). Although Weberian capitalist strands that are compatible with Buddhism have been identified in such contexts, some have argued for a distinctly 'Buddhist economics' which differs from both capitalist and communist constructs (Green 1992; Harvey 2000: 215–9; Schumacher 1973) and which can be compared with other religiously determined economies such as those of the Islamic Middle East. The call for a specifically 'Buddhist economics' has grown into a religio-political movement which draws upon historical evidence from Tibet, Southeast Asia and China where monasteries were operating as banks, money-lenders, bridge-builders and as agents for bringing new land into cultivation (Gernet 1956: 13, 117), as well as Sri Lankan monastic landlordism, although often tinged with idealized and moralistic interpretations reflecting a Victorian version of the Buddhist past (Green 1992; Harvey 2000). An early proponent of these views was E. F. Schumacher (1973), an economic adviser in 1950s Burma who advocated 'intermediate technology' as a reaction to Western development models. He called for an economic system based on Buddhist ethics, a 'Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility' which considers the social and environmental impact of business transactions rather than profit at the expense of both of these factors (1973: 48).

## 'Domestication' of Buddhism and monastic landlordism

One of the aims of the SSP was to examine the degree to which such an economic system based on Buddhist principles can be traced back to the early Indian contexts. This question is best situated within broader discussions regarding the development of institutionalized monasticism, otherwise referred to as the 'domestication' of Buddhism. This debate has been driven largely by textual indicators for the shift between peripatetic and sedentary monasticism and changing lay-monastic exchange networks as typified by accounts in the Tibetan version of the *Mulasarvastivadin* (Schopen 1994). Analyses of this text suggest that, since the flow of merit received by donors depended upon the continued use of their gifts, donations became increasingly directed towards permanent monasteries, with the addition of endowments to ensure their upkeep. Schopen has drawn on archaeology to date this development, with a particular focus on the history and chronology of Buddhist monastic architecture. His arguments have drawn predominantly on the courtyard monastery and its apparent late appearance in north-west India, and subsequent spread to north and central India. The assumption, based on interpretations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century excavation reports is that prior to the early-to-mid-first millennium AD, monasticism operated in a haphazard, disorganized fashion in keeping with

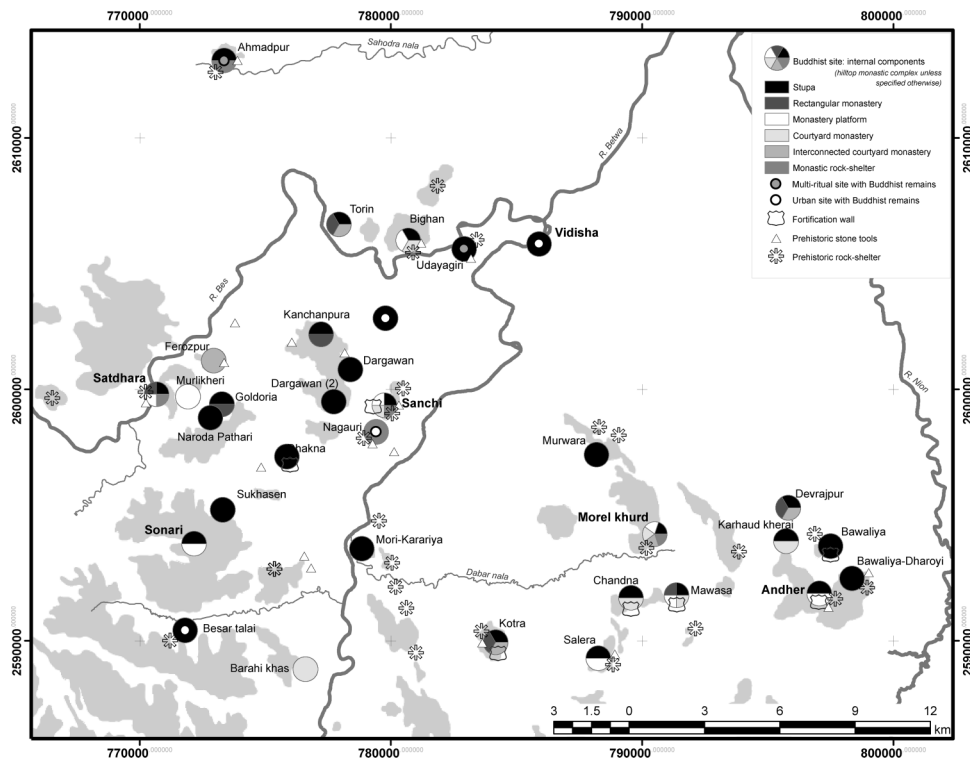*Figure 3* Platformed monastery at More Khurd (SSP), second century BC.



*Figure 4* Sanchi survey project: *stūpas*, monasteries and prehistoric remains.

the presumed disorderly quality of the buildings in which monks resided. These developments are thought to have led eventually to the eradication of the traditional, mendicant path of monasticism as expounded in the canon. Not only is such a model flawed by virtue of its structuralist, normative leanings, but it also omits significant evidence relating to forms of monasteries other than the courtyard type. For example, as discussed later, permanent monasteries are attested archaeologically in the Sanchi area from at least the second century BC (Shaw 2007, 2011; Figs 3 and 4), with close parallels to rock-cut examples in the Deccan, where in any case, the courtyard form is represented from the earliest period of excavation.

Further, academic perceptions of 'domestication' have been distorted by overly narrow terms of definition: by focusing predominantly on the *saṅgha*'s transition from peripatetic to sedentary monasticism, scholars have overlooked other indicators of domestication, such as the development of lay-monastic exchange networks which do not necessarily presuppose the adoption of permanent monastic establishments (Strenski 1983). For example, that Sri Lankan forest-dwelling monks had integrated themselves in local patronage networks by the third century BC is illustrated by donative inscriptions in 'drip-ledge' rock-shelters (Coningham 1995). By the second century BC, the main focus of Sri Lankan patronage had shifted to irrigation works with the associated system of 'monastic landlordism' providing the earliest empirical evidence for the kinds of textually attested exchange networks mentioned above. Many of these dams bear inscriptions linking them to nearby monasteries, themselves closely involved with agrarian modes of production as instruments of lay patronage (Gunawardana 1971). Together with texts, these inscriptions show that monasteries were recipients of lay donations of large tracts of property, including irrigation works and fields (Gunawardana 1971: 24; Paranavitana 1970, I: lxii, lxxxiv); they managed these resources and provided access to local farmers , while a percentage of the latter's yields were 'gifted' back to the *saṅgha* who in turn repaid a certain share to the original landowning donor. (Gunawardana 1978, 1979: 57–9). The dynamics of monastic landlordism thus unfolded through a 'three-way mutually beneficial relationship' between patrons, monks and farmers (Gunawardana 1971: 24). The success of this arrangement was further ensured by the donations of 'service villages' (*aramīkagāma*) or 'maintenance villages' (*bhogagāma*) which provided constant supplies of labour to the *saṅgha* (Gunawardana 1979).

In addition to offering an alternative to the 'Oriental despot' theory (Wittfogel 1957), the Sri Lankan material has been important for challenging received models of early Buddhist monks as passive mendicants and social parasites. Further, it accords closely with 'functional' models of religious change as developed, for example, in relation to the spread of Islam and Christianity, both in India and further afield. Eaton (1993), for example, has shown how the acceptance of Islam in east Bengal was intricately tied to the introduction of new agrarian schemes. This process was not just a reflection of political or economic change nor did it represent a transplantation of a fixed religious system into a 'passive' community. Rather, it involved a complex relationship between 'economic base and ideological superstructure' (Eaton 1993: 297), whereby the 'ideology of forest-clearing and agrarian expansion, [served] not only to legitimise but to structure the very socioeconomic changes taking place on the frontier' (1993: 267). In contrast to traditional 'conversion by the sword' models, Eaton (1993: 218, 264) argues that this system was not overtly concerned with 'conversion' but rather accommodated largely 'non-Brahmanized' communities, which in turn aligned themselves with the Muslim tradition of merging agrarian expansion with religious building activity; wherever a new village was founded, a temple would be established according to the religious affiliation of the local

landlord, while the construction of a mosque would ensure that the economic and ideological links with the hinterland were combined with the political ties to the state. There are also parallels with 'religion as technique' models as developed by Peel (1968) in his study of Christianization in west Nigeria. Peel uses a medical analogy to understand Yoruba attitudes towards religion, whereby each religious 'technique' is viewed as an independent means of reaching certain spiritual or social goals, just as a new cough medicine may be used alongside a traditional flu remedy (Peel 1968: 124–5; see also Goody 1975).

However, while the relationship between monasteries and irrigation reservoirs in Sri Lanka represents the archaeological embodiment of the monks' paradoxical relationship with the commercial world, identifying these developments in the early Indian archaeological record remains problematic. Although the *saṅgha*'s role in facilitating inter-regional trade, particularly in the Deccan, is acknowledged (Heitzman 1984; Morrison 1995; Ray 1986), the possibility that this role extended to local forces of production has been underplayed, largely due to the 'canonical' model of Buddhism and the lack of question-orientated collaboration between textual and archaeological scholars, but also because of the lack of systematic survey that could relate Buddhist monasteries to other aspects of the archaeological landscape. Exceptions to this trend include the SSP (Shaw 2007), as well as more recent surveys in Andhra Pradesh, at Thotlankonda (Fogelin 2004; 2006), and Amaravati (Shimada 2012) (also see Coningham et al. 2007, for Sri Lanka).

While the daily needs of peripatetic, begging monks might be supported with little difficulty by a village or set of households, large, settled monastic communities could not have been sustained without placing considerable pressure on the forces of production, a hypothesis which, in Bailey and Mabbett's words, requires testing in the form of:

> a systematic effort in locating and statistically analysing the number of villages grouped in close proximity to a given monastery. Nor…do we know how the presence of a monastery might have increased demand in the local economy of the area in which it was located. Two factors should be relevant: i) the simple function of the *saṅgha* as a purchaser of goods and services from the local area, hence a stimulator of demand for certain goods, and ii) the role of the *saṅgha* in creating an ideational motivation for increasing production or in modifying the methods of distribution.
>
> (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 68)

Although this passage was published some time after the primary documentation and analysis of the SSP data had already been completed, it acts as a useful framework against which to assess the Sanchi material. In other words, Bailey and Mabbett's challenge is to a certain degree met by the results of the SSP, which include data relating to the relative configuration of monasteries, settlements and irrigation systems.

## Buddhist transmission and reception: models of religious change

### *'Ritual' models: Buddhism and 'local' cults*

The few studies that have examined the material correlates for religious change in the Buddhist context have focused on the 'ritual' sphere of interaction between the *saṅgha* and 'local' cults. Suggestions have long since been posited regarding the pre-existing cultic associations of

Buddhist pilgrimage sites (Byrne 1995; Kosambi 1962), with obvious parallels to better-studied Christian counterparts in Europe (Harbison 1994; Stopford 1994). However, supporting archaeological evidence is almost entirely lacking beyond observations of undated 'natural' shrines and painted rock-shelters whose precise ritual associations cannot be ascertained in the absence of excavation.

The earliest material evidence relates to Buddhism's interaction with serpent (*nāgas*) and nature deities (*yakṣas*), the first Indian deities to be represented as anthropomorphic, free-standing stone sculptures (Fig. 5). Two main models have been used to interpret this relationship: 1) the 'conversion' model which draws on textual accounts and visual depictions from Buddhist bas-relief sculpture of the second century BC of the Buddha's subordination and ultimate 'conversion' of powerful local deities as a means of explaining the presence of *nāga* and *yakṣa* imagery at Buddhist sites (Marshall et al. 1940: pl. 52; Misra 1981); 2) 'localization' models premised on the belief that local cults were incorporated into Buddhist ritual practice as a means of legitimizing the *saṅgha*'s presence in new areas (Bloss 1973; Cohen 1998).



*Figure 5 Nāga* image on Nagauri hill, to the south of Sanchi hill (mid-first century BC).

The most common textual sanction for the first model is the story of Buddha's protection from a storm by *Nāga* Mucalinda during his quest for enlightenment. *Nāgas* are presented as dangerous beings because of their venomous bite, but also because of their ability to bring about environmental havoc through either withholding the monsoon rains or causing excessive deluges. Demoted from their position as independent deities, they become guardians of Buddhist relics, a direct adaptation of their role as protectors of subterranean and sub-aquatic treasure. Accordingly, *nāgas* often feature as architectural entrance guardians: at Sanchi, several of the *Stūpa* 2 railings bear serpent motifs, while at Pitalkhora in the Deccan, two rearing cobras are placed at the entrance of the main monastery, their mouths acting as pipes for draining the water from the complex above (Shaw 2007: pl. 77). This link with water, also borne out by the close spatial relationship between *nāga* sculptures and rivers, reservoirs and tanks (Puri 1968: 50; Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001, 2003), is in keeping with the *nāgas*' perceived control over the natural elements.

According to the second model (Bloss 1973; Cohen 1998: 377–8), the reason for their assimilation into Buddhism is that, because of their status as guardians of particular places, their appropriation is essential to the *saṅgha*'s establishment or 'localization' in new areas. By demonstrating his superiority over the local *nāgarāja*, the Buddha adopts the attributes of the divine ruler of the place, and thus gains ritual legitimization for the *saṅgha*'s presence. Cohen (1998: 377) argues that the *nāga* in Cave 16 at Ajanta, represents neither the newly converted devotee nor the protector of the Buddha, but rather the recipient of the Buddha's protection under whose auspicious gaze he sits.

Further, because of *nāgas*' strong regal associations, the Buddha becomes linked with the local king's authority: textual sources attest to the *nāga* as 'primary guardian and master of the territory' who provides legitimization for the king's rule which can be withdrawn if the king fails to behave properly (Bloss 1973: 42). Not only does the *saṅgha* adopt a similar legitimizing role in its relationship to the Cakravartin kings, it also appropriates the *nāga*'s principal power through its self-professed control over the natural elements. The suggestion that the *saṅgha* had gained a monopoly over the 'religious business' of weather control, through an alliance with powerful albeit subordinated *nāga* deities, is supported by accounts of rain-making rituals in Mahayana Buddhist texts; although *nāgas* continue to feature as the facilitators (and also withholders) of rain, it is the Buddha who ultimately grants them this power (Bendall 1880; Sanderson 2004; Schmithausen 1997: 58–65; Shaw 2007). Cohen also refers to the fifth-century AD Chinese pilgrim Fa Xien's descriptions of monks worshipping at *nāga* shrines inside monastic compounds in order to ensure adequate rainfall and to protect against 'plagues and calamities' (Cohen 1998: 377–8), and goes on to argue that the worship of *nāga* shrines within Buddhist complexes, as illustrated by the Ajanta example, should be regarded as a manifestation of 'properly, fully and fundamentally Buddhist practices' (1998: 400).

My own position is that the 'conversion' and 'localization' models should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, and that both are useful when it comes to assessing archaeological evidence relating to Buddhism's interaction with the *nāga* cult. However, neither is free from problems. My principal contention is that disproportionate emphasis has been placed on the ritual motives behind 'Buddhist' *nāga* worship, at the expense of 'practical', economic or political incentives. This reflects Indology's heavy reliance on religious texts which are not directly concerned with economic aspects of society. Although Cohen's and Bloss's studies break ground by combining textual and material evidence, they are both overtly concerned with the ritual sphere. This bias is

further exacerbated by their exclusively 'site-based' focus which, by not taking into account patterns in the archaeological landscape, means that broader questions regarding the *saṅgha*'s ritual, social and economic relationship with surrounding populations cannot be addressed. Second, there are striking disparities between the geographical and chronological contexts of the Buddhist and *nāga* traditions as far as their translation into stone media is concerned. A notable contradiction, for example, is the fact that references to *nāgas* in the early Buddhist texts are set almost exclusively in the Gangetic valley, where most of the historical Buddha's life was spent. We have no such evidence for central and western India, areas outside the Buddha's geographical orbit. Cohen's particular position on religious change is thus built on the hitherto untested assumption that similar 'local' cults were a universal phenomenon throughout India prior to the spread of Buddhism in the late centuries BC.

The chronological and temporal distribution of *nāgas* and *yaksa* sculptures across the SSP study area provides a starting point for assessing the validity of this underlying assumption (Fig. 5; Shaw 2004, 2007: Table 12.2). These sculptures form part of a larger body of over 1000 sculptural fragments datable to between the third century BC and twelfth century AD (Shaw 2007). The earliest free-standing *nāga* or *yākṣa* sculptures in the SSP area come from the area in the immediate vicinity of Sanchi, as illustrated, for example, by the mid-first-century-BC examples at Nagauri (Fig. 5) and Gulgaon (Shaw 2007: pl. 138). A somewhat later group, datable to between the late first century BC and early first century AD, was documented in the 'eastern zone' around Morel Khurd and Andher (Fig. 2) (Shaw 2004, 2007: pl. 141). The sculptures in this later group follow an iconographic programme associated with the agricultural deity, Balarama, who is incorporated into the Brahmanical, proto-Pancaratra system of the Bhagavata tradition (a precursor of orthodox Vaisnavism), as represented in Vidisha from the third century BC onwards at the Heliodorus pillar site (Khare 1967; Shaw 2004, 2007: 53–5); most of the *nāgas* in the immediate vicinity of Sanchi appear to be unconnected with the Bhagavata tradition. While serpent deities, whatever their sectarian affiliation, may have been worshipped in non-durable forms during earlier periods, their appearance in stone at least 200 years after the establishment of Buddhism calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional polarizations of 'Buddhist':'non Buddhist', 'pan-Indian':'local', 'high':'low' or 'state-level':'folk' upon which most 'ritual' models of religious change are predicated. Moreover, the idea of *nāgas* as the 'folk other' of Buddhism into which it is passively assimilated is challenged by evidence for organized, state-patronized *nāga* temples in the Gangetic valley, e.g. at Sonkh (Härtel 1993: 425) and Rajgir (Chandra 1938: 53).

For a more nuanced understanding, we need to distinguish between the practice and the representation of the *nāga* cult. Serpent worship no doubt existed throughout ancient India, but in many divergent, regional forms. The appearance of a standardized nomenclature, as well as iconographic and stylistic conventions for their representation is an altogether different phenomenon which may reflect the *saṅgha*'s attempt to formulate a uniform cultic category, possibly based on a specific regional context, that subsumed a host of disparate cultic identities.

We know from the aforementioned Mucalinda narrative that individual *nāga* deities with roots in eastern India became part of the standardized Buddhist repertoire in new areas; another example of this kind of 'portable local' deity is Hariti, well known in Buddhist stories as the terrifying child-eating *yakṣī* from Rajgir (Cohen 1998). The Buddha converts her, and the *saṅgha* commits to supporting and feeding her as long as she promises not to harm children again. Hariti images thus figure prominently in Buddhist refectories as the epitome of the

Buddhist conversion narrative whereby local deities are propitiated to prevent them from returning to their former, innate malevolence (Bloss 1973: 45; Cohen 1998). Drawing again on patterns at Ajanta, Cohen (1998: 12) argues that, in contrast to the 'local' *nāga* who is kept at a slight distance, Hariti is placed at the heart of the monastic compound due to her 'insider' status. Because the spheres of the local laity and the *saṅgha* are thus symbolically intertwined, the distinction between the 'foreign' monks and the locals, of whom Hariti is the symbolic representative, is also broken down. The *nāga* is inevitable due to the dynamics of local cultic activity, but Hariti is one of the props of Buddhist propagation. Although aspects of this interpretation are compelling, one should not make too much of its inherent 'foreign-local' polarization because, over time, Ajanta's monastic population, as in other areas, would have included significant numbers of monks drawn from the local community. There is also the danger of over-emphasizing the distinction between conversion and 'localization' models as represented by the Hariti and *nāga* images at Ajanta. In my view, the *nāga*, like Hariti, can also be regarded as a kind of transplanted deity. It is quite possible that other specific examples of interaction between Buddhism and local deities in eastern India, other than the Hariti story, may also have influenced the way in which newly encountered deities were interpreted and labelled by the incoming *saṅgha*.

A much later but instructive example of this process is the introduction to Tibet, from the eighth century AD, of Tantric Buddhism, which involved the 'taming' and ordering of indigenous demons and spirits: 'one of the constant motifs of Tibetan religion over the centuries has been the animated, and often malevolent, landscape, and the need to mollify it, pacify it, or subjugate it' (Dalton 2004: 760). Central to this process of 'demon subjugation' was the application of new systems of naming and codification, whereby a multitude of 'unruly' spirits with similar properties were subsumed within a new, overarching class of deity.

## *'Practical' models of religious change: Buddhist propagation and the alleviation of suffering*

The SSP aimed to assess the applicability of 'ritual' and 'practical' models of religious change discussed above through an assessment of the dynamics of what elsewhere I have termed the 'early-historic complex' (Shaw 2007), a set of interrelated complexes comprising Buddhist sites, habitational settlements, water-resource systems and ritual centres: almost every hilltop throughout the study area bears the remains of a Buddhist site, with an associated habitational settlement and sometimes an irrigation reservoir at its base. Ten out of a total of sixteen recorded reservoirs bear a direct spatial reference to monastic sites, the most prominent example being that immediately to the south of Sanchi hill (Fig. 2). The working hypothesis developed in detail elsewhere (Shaw 2007; Shaw and Sutcliffe 2001, 2003, 2005; Shaw et al. 2007, Sutcliffe et al. 2011) is that these reservoirs were built in *c.* the third to second century BC in order to increase agricultural output and support the increased population levels indicated by local settlement patterns.

Archaeological and hydrological analyses support the view that they were connected with wet rice cultivation although this assertion needs to be tested archaeobotanically. Not only would the introduction of rice, with its superior yields and nutritional value, have been an appropriate measure in the face of rising population levels associated with growing urbanization, it would also have been an inevitable outcome of a general spread of cultural influences from eastern India, where wet rice cultivation had formed the backbone of the agrarian economy since the

Neolithic (Fuller 2002). According to historical texts, rice also had a wide range of ritual, medicinal and economic uses (Smith 2006), and was considered an auspicious item in Brahmanical ritual as well as an object of donation within Buddhism. Various Indian and Southeast Asian myths illustrate the entwined histories of Buddhism and rice agriculture, the underlying idea being that 'rice grows as long as Buddhism spreads' (Benavides 2005: 80; Green 1992: 227–34; Shaw 2007: ch. 2). A growing demand for rice would have seemed quite natural as these influences became more deeply embedded in the Sanchi area.

At first, rice could have been introduced as a traded commodity, only later becoming a locally produced crop.[1] While we can distinguish between minor ritual use and large-scale production, the suggestion is that sustained use of rice within a monastic context would have required rice cultivation becoming embedded in the local agrarian infrastructure. While intensive rice cultivation would have been an effective way of coping with the increasing level of non-producing populations, changes to the central Indian diet also stemmed from the introduction of new religious and cultural trends that brought with them changing attitudes towards food and the body.

The traditional canonical view however is that, because monks are supposed to eat whatever is put in their begging bowl, they would have little power in influencing their daily diet. Such a view is based on the 'passive' model of Buddhism, which, as discussed earlier, sees the *saṅgha*'s participation in social relations as a distortion of its original position as a body of renunciates, concerned solely with individual enlightenment. Accordingly, Marshall et al.'s (1940: 13) reluctance to deduce any connection between the dam below Sanchi hill (Fig. 5) and the history of local Buddhism was based on a passage in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (V, 17) which prohibits monks from owning or managing agricultural land. Seemingly Marshall was innocent of the dynamics of monastic landlordism in Sri Lanka.

However, unlike in Sri Lanka, no inscriptions have been found in association with the Sanchi dams that might shed light on the kind of local patronage networks and modes of administration that underlay their construction, upkeep and management. Nevertheless there are strong grounds for arguing that the serpent (*nāga*) sculptures located on, or near, many of the dams had a deeper political significance, as symbols of the local oligarchy of the same name. The argument that these sculptures, which particularly during the Gupta period underwent a process of 'royalization', doubled as representations of the local *Nāga* dynasty, supports the view, also suggested by numismatic and epigraphic evidence, that the *Nāgas* were powerful local oligarchs closely connected with the patronage of Buddhist and agricultural building projects in the area. Both their role as facilitators of agrarian expansion and their identification with a totemic deity are features more commonly associated with the Guptas (and their Orthodox Brahmanical leanings), who from the fourth century AD appear to have usurped the *Nāgas*' authority in the area (Shaw 2004; Shaw and Sutcliffe 2003; Willis 2004, 2009). These developments are reflected by the fact that the later history (from the Gupta period onwards) of the Sanchi dams is closely associated with a notable increase in the number of Brahmanical temples and a corresponding decrease in Buddhist building projects.

An additional point to note is that the dams' 'monumentality' rivals closely that of even the largest local Buddhist structures: the volume of the Sanchi dam is approximately nine times that of *Stūpa* 1 on the hill above. This rather crude comparison needs to be tempered with consideration of the high costs represented by the elaborate *stūpa* railing and gateway carvings. Nevertheless, the heavy investment involved in constructing dams would have made sense only if an efficient system for ensuring profitability was already in place, including a developed administrative framework for overseeing the use and supply of irrigation. Rather than positing a

direct causal link between the establishment of Buddhism and the construction of dams, one may suggest a more general link: that Buddhism spread from eastern India as part of a wider package, including urbanization and new forms of political administration, that brought with it the need for more intensive agriculture. As both monasteries and urban centres grew in size and number, irrigated agriculture would have been an important means of catering for increased food demands. The view that water management was central to Buddhist propagation is supported further by observations regarding the ostentatious display of water-harvesting facilities at the Deccan rock-cut monasteries of western India (Shaw and Sutcliffe 2003: 92–5). The monastery's monopoly over the business of water harvesting and management was not only central to the generation of lay patronage, but accorded directly with Buddhist theology and its preoccupation with the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*): in a region of the world where 90 per cent of the annual rainfall occurs in two to three months, it provided a very practical solution to drought and flood, some of the key causes of everyday suffering.

Although the idea that the *saṅgha* was particularly interested in converting local populations has been challenged in recent years, largely within the context of the 'localization' models discussed earlier (Bloss 1973; Cohen 1998), the contention here is that the Sanchi material sits more comfortably with 'functional' models of religious change as developed in relation to the spread of Islam and Christianity. The monastic community's alignment with water and land management served two interests: for local society it acted as an agent for economic development and, for the *saṅgha*, it enabled the spread of Buddhist ideology in the most interior areas. The promise of religious merit (*puṇya*) is usually cited as the main incentive for buying into such schemes; there were also worldly advantages such as the promise of increased yields and improved nutrition. Given that the central tenet of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths is the omnipresence of human suffering (*dukkha*) as well as its causes and means of alleviation, the fact that the *saṅgha*'s scheme could also help to tackle some of the more 'mundane' and common causes of suffering, poverty and famine appears to be more than coincidental. Following this line of logic, one may view the *saṅgha*'s involvement with domestic and agricultural water supply as part of a very practical form of evangelism that tackled suffering on an everyday, subsistence level. The 'practical' model also helps to explain the prevalence of a two-tiered religious system in most 'Buddhist' countries. Because Buddhism, being a monastic tradition, was less concerned with infiltrating the everyday ritual lives of India's villagers, its more practical functions were easily usurped by competing religious traditions (Jaini 1980), 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, among other things, accept gifts, and own property (Willis 2009), in ways that parallel our early developments discussed above in relation to the *stūpa* and relic cult (Shaw in review).

## Buddhist monastic sites in the landscape

Further insights into the dynamics of Buddhist propagation are provided by the placing of Buddhist sites in the landscape, their internal organization, as well as their spatial and

chronological relationship to habitational settlements. With the exception of several urban monasteries and *stūpa*s, all of the other thirty known Buddhist sites in the SSP area are situated on hilltops, and consist predominantly of *stūpa*s and monasteries. Of particular interest is the 'platformed monastery' represented at Sanchi and nine other Buddhist hilltop sites in the area, datable on stylistic grounds, and consideration of the broader epigraphical and architectural context to the second century BC (Shaw 2007, 2011; Figs 3–4). This date is supported further by comparisons with rock-cut monasteries in the Deccan which also provide justification for viewing these structures as bases of towering monasteries whose superstructures in some cases followed a courtyard plan (Shaw 2007, 2011). This type of early monastery presents a direct challenge to the established chronology for the courtyard monastery and more specifically the late development of institutionalized monasticism to which it has been connected.

Despite the clear-cut, topographical delineation from other types of sites, there is rarely more than one or two kilometres between these hilltop monastic sites and settlements (Shaw 2007: fig. 13.6). This spatial relationship fits with canonical regulations that stipulate that monasteries should be situated close, but not too close, to towns (*Vinaya* III, 155). Both spatially and socially the monastery occupies a dialectical and 'ambivalent' position. It is 'outside' society but it also depends upon society for financial support (Gombrich 1988: 95, 156). The paradox, but also the key to the success of this arrangement, is that, for the Sri Lankan Buddhist laity, the extremity of a monk's detachment from society determines his religious standing, and, by extension, the level of perceived renunciation determines the amount of lay patronage that he receives. In return, the donor is granted *pūnya* in quantities that reflect the value of his donation (Gombrich 1988: 156).

Although the hilltops on which the monks built their monasteries were part of an interconnected landscape, they do, however, hold particular social and economic associations. Textual evidence attests their close associations with non-producing, hunter-gatherer groups as well as other peripatetic or 'property-renouncing' groups, including Brahmanical ascetics (*saṃnyāsins*) (Jacobson 1975: 81). The level of overlap between the types of sites chosen by prehistoric hunter-gatherers and later ascetic groups is attested locally by the frequency with which painted rock-shelters and/or microlithic tools occur at Buddhist sites. These kinds of prehistoric remains were found at fourteen out of thirty-three hilltop monastic sites (Fig. 4). It is possible that, as a 'non-producing' group, the incoming *saṅgha* had little choice when it came to finding a place for itself in the landscape but to occupy areas which had little or no other economic value. A similar set of restricting factors may explain the tendency for Buddhist sites, particularly in the Deccan, to overlie older, 'protohistoric' burial grounds (Schopen 1996b), although the latter phenomenon also reflects Buddhism's special relationship with death and mortuary activity (Shaw In Review).

Hilltops also hold special symbolic and mythological associations, described in texts as the abodes of *yakṣas* and other place-bound spirits (Misra 1981: 50). Whether the *saṅgha* actively sought out such places cannot be determined with certainty, especially since *yakṣa* or *nāga* worship rarely took on durable forms during the time in question. As discussed earlier, stone images of these deities do not appear in the Sanchi area until the first century BC, that is, some time after the arrival of Buddhism. Further, their sculptural representation may say more about the Buddhist worldview than 'local' religious practices. However, the fact that the *saṅgha* occupied places that held special cultic associations does raise questions about the *saṅgha*'s possible proselytizing aims, aided further by the high degree of visibility afforded by these hilltop settings: at Sanchi, *Stūpa* 1 is a particularly prominent visual feature in the landscape, while the principal *stūpa* at Andher perches dramatically on a cliff edge. The element of intervisibility between *stūpa* sites is also notable (Shaw 2007, 2009).

Texts and inscriptions describe *stūpas* not only as repositories of the Buddhist relic, but as containers of a 'living presence' which projected the 'life force' of the Buddha, and senior monks, into and across the surrounding space (Schopen 1987). The highly visible setting of *stūpas* highlights the importance of auspicious 'seeing' (*darśana*) as a means for gaining spiritual merit at ritual sites (Eck 1981): simply seeing the *stūpa* was equivalent to seeing the Buddha. For monks, this mechanism was a means of 'presencing' the *dharma* in new ground, while the visual prominence of important *stūpas* such as Sanchi *Stūpa* 1, which most probably contained the Buddha's relic (Shaw 2007, Under Review), allowed the Buddha to be 'seen' by monks residing at distant monasteries.

Stūpas were also media for extending the influence of the Buddhist *dharma* on both a local and pan-Indian level. As argued by Walters (2002), Sanchi's local Buddhist geography with its individual *stūpas* formed part of a pan-Indian Buddhist 'World Map' conceived of as an ever-expanding Buddha corpse. The creation of a pan-Indian Buddhist geography is not paralleled by developments within the Brahmanical world until at least 700 years after the first known Buddhist *stūpas*. For example, the rise of pan-Indian sacred centres of Hinduism, such as Ayodhya, Mathura or Varanasi, did not occur until at least the mid-first millennium AD, with further consolidation in the eleventh century AD, as a form of resistance to increasing Muslim oppression (Bakker 1996; Bakker and Isaacson 2004: intro.). Looking at Walter's Buddhist 'World Map' through an economic prism, the 'presencing' of the body of Buddhism through the construction of *stūpas* and the absorption of landmass into a local and pan-Indian geography would also have helped the *saṅgha* to gain custodianship over land and natural resources; again something which does not find parallels in the Brahmanical tradition until at least the Gupta period with the rise of the Hindu temple cult discussed earlier (Shaw Under Review).

It has been suggested that, despite its 'property-renouncing' status, the *saṅgha*, through its pioneering spirit, encouraged the movement of populations into new areas (Ray 1994: 5). We may assess this hypothesis against SSP site distribution patterns (Shaw 2007). First, the majority of Buddhist sites show evidence for occupation during much earlier periods: high numbers of painted rock-shelters and microlithic scatters at these sites attest to peripatetic, possibly hunter-gatherer occupation from at least the Chalcolithic period. Second, the chronology of habitational settlements suggests that much of the low-lying area surrounding these hills had been occupied by sedentary communities from at least 1000 BC, if not earlier. To state the obvious, the incoming *saṅgha* did not choose completely unsettled areas, while many of the monastic sites have more or less contemporary habitational settlements in their immediate vicinity (Shaw 2007: fig. 13.6). Although problematic local ceramic sequences mean that it is not possible to determine with certainty whether such sites predate the establishment of Buddhism, a number of significant changes are discernible at these sites during the second century BC (Phase II), the period to which the majority of hilltop monastic centres date. First, the earliest stone sculptures to appear in the study area beyond the capital city of Vidisha and the hilltop Buddhist sites are a group of Phase-II pillar and capital remains (Shaw 2007: pl. 119–26). The 'imperial' nature of these pillars, and their similarity to post-Mauryan examples from Vidisha itself, suggest that these places operated as political and economic 'nodes' in a larger interlinked network. Second, the strong Buddhist associations of these pillars provide clear indications of the focus of religious patronage during this period. The third point is that prior to the last quarter of the first century BC there is no evidence for non-Buddhist sculpture in these 'interior' areas. When examples do appear, the influence of artistic developments at neighbouring monastic sites is obvious. These points support the view that the growing patronage base of Buddhism between *c*. the third and second

century BC was closely related to the increasingly urban character of settlements, the emphasis being on the element of patronage rather than Buddhism *per se*. As argued by Ray (1994: 122) with regard to Buddhist propagation and expanding trade networks in the Deccan, it is important to view both processes as part of a larger set of economic and ideological changes involving the spread of urbanization and monarchical systems from their base in the Gangetic valley. Buddhism did not 'cause' the proliferation of trade, but rather both processes were linked to the emergence of an 'interactive support system' between monastic and lay sections of society that 'constantly evolved and adapted itself between 300 BC and AD 300' (Ray 1994).

Quite clearly, monks in the Sanchi area would not have been able to survive in their secluded hilltop monasteries without some level of integration within the local social and economic infrastructure. Although based on the relationship of a single Buddhist site to its immediate archaeological setting, Fogelin's (2006) survey in and around Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh offers useful parallels to the inter-site patterns discussed here. Comparative analysis of pottery found within both the monastic compound and a nearby settlement suggests a high level of economic interaction between monastic and lay populations (Fogelin 2006: 152–3), while large numbers of storage jars at Thotlakonda suggest that food was being stored and produced on-site, most probably by non-monastic staff, rather than acquired through begging rounds (Fogelin 2006: 165).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the applicability of various ritual and practical models of religious change to the archaeological patterns in the SSP area. The evidence relating to the history and chronology of monasteries, settlement and agrarian history, as well as cult spots connected to the *nāga* cult, suggests that, despite its distinct placing within the landscape, by the second century BC the *saṅgha* formed part of an interdependent economy with close parallels to systems of monastic landlordism known in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Lay support of the *saṅgha* was essential to the latter's survival, but practical services provided by the monastery, in this case, water for domestic and agricultural use, formed the backbone to changing social and economic conditions during the late centuries BC. These changing conditions included urbanization and agricultural 'involution'. The *saṅgha*'s close relationship with agricultural improvement and water management was an important instrument of lay patronage, but it was also closely related to Buddhism's deeper preoccupation with human suffering (*dukkha*) and the means of its alleviation. While it is widely recognized that in time Indian monasteries came to provide a range of missionary functions including medical, mortuary, trading and banking facilities (Ray 1986; Schopen 1994; 1996b; Zysk 1998), the dating of their involvement with such activities has been hampered by canonical scholarship on the one hand, and inadequate dialogue between textual and archaeological scholarship on the other. The material discussed here is important therefore for demonstrating that evidence for a 'domesticated' and socially integrated form of Buddhist monasticism was already in place in central India by the late centuries BC. Finally, it appears that Buddhism moved into new areas with resources that were intended to complement, rather than replace, the existing religious framework; hence the two-tiered structure of most 'Buddhist' countries where many of the laity's ritual requirements are taken care of by other religious traditions. Ironically, just as this selective and 'practical' role that monks played in the lives of local non-monastic populations was a major factor in the success of Buddhist

propagation programmes, it may also have contributed to the eventual downfall of Indian Buddhism, whose patronage base was already on the decline from the Gupta period onwards due to a combination of internal monastic disputes, and external Brahmanical oppression (Verardi 2003). Jainism suffered a similar fate, but unlike Buddhism, managed to survive into the present day by emulating Brahmanical practices, and perhaps even more importantly, by providing a strong and inclusive ritual identity to the laity. According to some scholars (Jaini 1980; Verardi 1996), it was precisely Buddhism's failure to do the same for its own laity that when some of its more practical functions were appropriated by competing Brahmanical religious traditions, it became reduced to isolated communities of monks with little in the way of tangible services to give back to society.

## Acknowledgements

## Note

1　Useful analogies here include the link between urbanization, rising population levels and the spread of Islam and new crops from Asia into the Middle East and the Mediterranean between the eighth and tenth centuries AD (Sherratt 1999: 30–1; Watson 1983: 15–16, 99–100). The link between rising population levels and wet-rice agriculture is a familiar one and forms the central focus of Geertz's (1963) seminal work on 'agricultural involution' in Southeast Asia. For a similar link between population growth, political change and the introduction of new rice species into southern China from Champa in central Vietnam during the eleventh century AD, see Glover and Higham (1996: 414). For the introduction of new irrigation technology and the spread of Buddhism in eighth-century Tibet, see Dalton (2004).

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