



SARNATH

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE PLACE
WHERE BUDDHISM BEGAN

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Preface

While reading a massive biography of Ludwig van Beethoven, which I'll probably still be plodding through long after this book is in circulation, I thought about writing a biography of a place. But it would be quite unlike Jan Swafford's approach to the Beethoven biography, in which he argues, "When it comes to history and biography, I believe submission to objective fact is, for all its limitations, what the discipline is about." The commitment to objectivity reminds me of Sgt. Joe Friday on that old radio and TV show, *Dragnet*: "Just the facts, ma'am." I am not convinced that there is such a thing as objective fact. Rather, I am taken with Paul Brass's presentation of the diverse perceptions of a single event in his *Theft of an Idol* (1997), by his recognition that memory clouds and shapes witnessing, that "facts" can represent hope as much as objectivity, and that distance in time, place, and culture can bring new but meaningful realities. And so, as I thought and wrote about Sarnath, I treated it as more than a physical locus, a site charged with history and meanings. (Note that my use of *meanings*, plural, is intentional.)

That recognition of multiple realities explains the watercolor on the dustjacket of this book. The two stupas it shows are easily recognizable: the Dhamekh stupa and the Chaukhandi. They are separated by a distance of about a kilometer, and even without modern construction and recent landscape growth, there is no way one could have been seen from the other, as the artist has in this work. The rendering, like much I discuss in this book, is a construction, a way of giving a simultaneous view of two works that on the ground could not be viewed simultaneously.

This book started simply with a wish to write about a place that I had often



admonition recorded in the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* (in Pali, called the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*)—a text from about the fourth century CE on the Buddha's death and attainment of nirvana—to visit the sites associated with his life came to Varanasi, they likely were directed to a particular spot, very possibly today's Sarnath.⁵ But there is no evidence of any permanent structures there prior to the third century BCE. That is when the Maurya dynasty king Ashoka (269–32 BCE) erected his magnificent lion pillar at Sarnath, the one with four addorsed lions that today serve as the emblem of the Republic of India. Although he does not say so explicitly in the pillar's inscription, as he does at the site he designated as Lumbini, the place of the Buddha's birth, the very act of erecting the lion pillar probably was intended to mark the place as the location of the Buddha's first sermon. In other words, here as elsewhere, we see Ashoka assuming responsibility for shaping an important facet of Buddhism: the pilgrimage sites. The circulation of monks among these sites would have been essential to the stability of Ashoka's vast empire, and the permanent settlement of monks at sites associated with the Buddha's life, as well as at other sites distant from his capital, Pataliputra, would have ensured a Magadhan presence even in places far from the capital. Speaking Ashoka's language and sharing his culture, the monks would have helped shape a unified empire and been able to ensure a flow of critical information back to Pataliputra.

The pillar bearing Ashoka's inscription and its capital, detached from one another when they were

excavated in 1904–5 (FIGURE 2), serve as an effective metaphor for Sarnath today. When German archaeologist F.O. Oertel reported the pillar's discovery during his excavation, he did so with remarkable detachment, surely unaware of the subsequent history that capital would have.⁶ The archaeologist simply notes that the capital was unearthed “close to the western wall of the [Main] shrine,” a short distance from the remains of the pillar on which it once stood (a distance exaggerated today by the capital's placement in the Archaeological Museum Sarnath). *Detachment*, however, is precisely the right term to use for more than Oertel's report. The pillar remains broken in several pieces at the site and is now protected by a glass enclosure that separates the pillar from visitors. The pedestal for the capital lowers it to eye level from its previously far more



FIGURE 3
Indian passport cover, 2015. Photo by A. Sulthan.

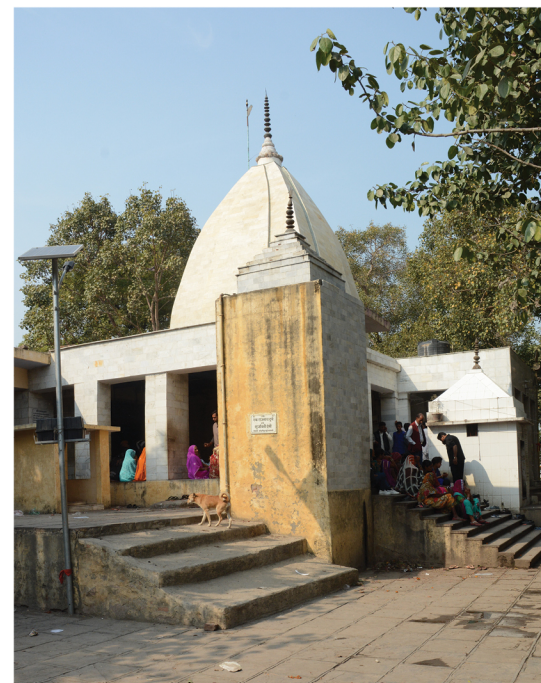
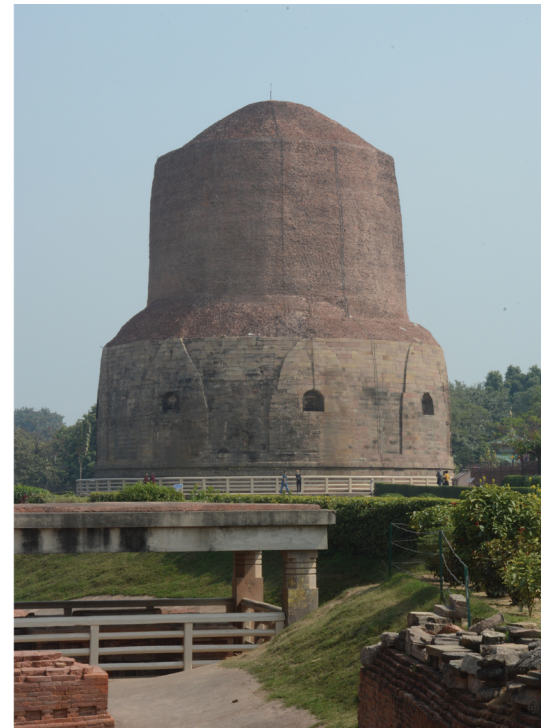


FIGURE 4
Dhamekh Stupa, ca. 800 (in its present form), 43.5 meters above the original base.

elevated position. The museum also makes it an art object, dissociating the capital from its powerful symbolism. The fence around the perimeter of the excavated area disconnects the ticketed portion of the site from the larger area that once comprised the monastic site. And the many two-dimensional reproductions of the capital as the emblem of the Republic of India (FIGURE 3) are detached from the finely sculptured original work.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the name Sarnath applied only to the stupa today known as the Dhamekh stupa, which is often considered the site where the Buddha preached his first sermon (FIGURE 4). But before Sarnath became an archaeological site replete with signs identifying the names of places within the excavated area and sometimes providing bits of historical information (or speculation), the name Sarnath belonged “properly to a small Brahmanical temple on the western bank of the lake.”⁷ Which temple and which lake is not clear. The temple is probably what is known today as the Saranganatha temple, a Shiva temple (FIGURE 5). The lake is likely what was called, in the time of Alexander Cunningham (the first archaeologist to systematically explore Sarnath), the Naya Tal (New Tank or New Lake); it is one of three fairly large bodies of water to the east, northeast, and north. These lakes probably demarcated the monastic site much as the bodies of water at Nalanda likely did. The Saranganatha temple is now a prominent structure elevated from the plain close to the nearly dry body of water that corresponds on Cunningham's map to the Naya Tal

FIGURE 5
Saranganatha temple, 20th century (in its present form).



(FIGURE 6). I asked several people if this is the Naya Tal. Repeatedly, I was told that it is not new at all; it is very old.

As visitors—tourists, pilgrims, even the occasional scholar—walk through the excavated site as it appears today, many must imagine that this is the way it was, as if the past were an undifferentiated thing, a discrete time period. That is not the case, of course. Even when it was in daily use as a monastic

establishment, the place constantly changed not only with the addition of new structures, the renovation of older ones, and the total disintegration of still others but also with the changing population of monks themselves, who held new and evolving beliefs or practices. Although here we can use monuments to document some of that instability, they reveal more about additions than decay, while sculptures and inscriptions can, to a limited extent,

reveal changes of practice. What the sculptures do not disclose, however, is the extent to which older practices persisted alongside the acceptance, at least by some, of newer ones. Nor do they or the architectural remains divulge the ways in which monks interacted daily with the architecture in which they lived, worshiped, and studied, much less the sounds and smells that were so much part of any establishment. And, finally, I worry that by focusing, as I do,

on each of Sarnath's monuments separately, I give little sense of the whole, the ensemble that at any one point of time in the past constituted the monastic establishment.

SITE OF THE BUDDHA'S FIRST SERMON

Was Sarnath the site of the Buddha's first sermon, his discourse on the Middle Way and the Eightfold Path? Maybe that is not a reasonable question to ask because no one can be certain precisely where the Buddha sat when he delivered the sermon to the five disciples who had previously abandoned him, even though signage at the Dhamekh stupa suggests the possibility that the sermon was delivered there.⁸ But oral tradition and the practice of pilgrimage must have focused on the site we today call Sarnath.

Excavations at Sarnath indicate that the oldest levels date to the Maurya period, specifically to the reign of Ashoka. Even though an inscription on Ashoka's column at Sarnath admonishes the monks and nuns resident there to avoid schism (denoting to some that a Buddhist monastery had long been established there), it is perfectly possible that the monarch wished to ensure, even to demand, a sort of unity among monks who had arrived relatively recently. In other words, there is a compelling reason to speculate that Ashoka, by patronizing a monastery and placing his edict pillar at the site, sought to identify the location of the Buddha's first sermon, much as Ashoka assumed a role in identifying other sites associated with the life of the Buddha.⁹

That first sermon established a community: the *sangha*, or Buddhist order. At the time of the

FIGURE 6
Naya Tal, the lake north of the excavated site, probably defining the northern border of the monastery.

Cunningham then turns attention to the *viharas*, the monastic dwellings. While excavating one building, which he calls a temple, his new-found friend, the one who led him to the stone box that encased the reliquary in the Jagat Singh stupa, told him that workmen had found a large number of sculptures while collecting building materials for the nearby village, Jagatganj. Although the bricks were removed, the statues, he was informed, remained untouched. Here, Cunningham reports, he found some sixty

statues and reliefs, all upright and packed closely together in a space less than three meters square, as if placed together for protection. He presented these sculptures to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, but they are now in the Indian Museum, where the register notes them, as it does with the stupa box, the gift of Captain (now Major-General) Cunningham.

Cunningham's use of his native informant, Sangkar, as he spells it, recalls that of other explorers, in fact, of a whole range of colonial administrators

who exploited knowledgeable Indians for their own gain. Aurel Stein's massive collection of Buddhist manuscripts at Dunhuang represents one form of such "collecting" by a British colonial explorer. But perhaps the best-known use of this exploitation might be Colin Mackenzie's use of the Telugu Brahmin Venkata Boria and especially his younger brother, Cavelly Venkata Luchmiah, to engage in the process of collecting and thus forming of colonial knowledge.¹⁸

Cunningham concludes his report by proposing that no further excavations be conducted at Sarnath: "In the absence of any general plan of the ruins, showing the extent of the explorations carried on by Major Kittoe and his successors, I do not think it would be advisable to undertake any further excavations at Sarnath, Benares; I have already suggested that the ground immediately around the great tower [the Dhamekh stupa] should be levelled for the purpose of affording easy access to visitors. In carrying out this operation, every fragment of sculpture should be carefully preserved."¹⁹ And to this end, Cunningham prepared a design for a museum at the site (FIGURE 1.3).

MARKHAM KITTOE

Even though Kittoe didn't live long enough to publish the findings of his exploration of Sarnath in 1851–52,²⁰ he left a corpus of drawings made at the site, all of them today preserved in the British Library (FIGURE 1.4). Cunningham, however, provides some information on those excavations, drawing on a letter from Kittoe of 1852. In that letter,

Kittoe notes four stupas at Sarnath, while Cunningham had found only three. In an uncharacteristically generous gesture, Cunningham grants Kittoe's count and adjusts his plan of the site accordingly. He also reports that Kittoe had excavated a rectangular structure about nineteen meters long by thirteen meters wide. Located thirty-eight meters west of the Dhamekh stupa, Kittoe identifies the structure as a hospital on the basis of mortars and pestles found there. Cunningham accepts this identification and

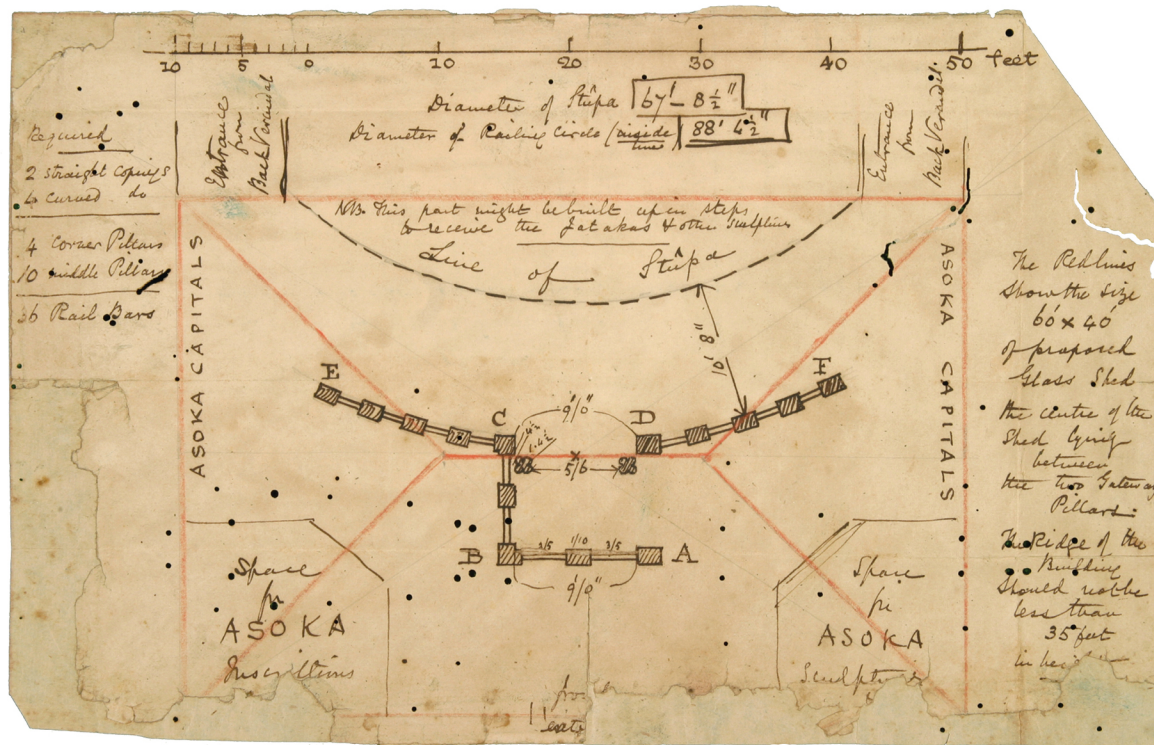


FIGURE 1.3 Hand-drawn plan for a site museum at Sarnath, contained in Alexander Cunningham's letter to J.D. Beglar, dated Simla, 23 June 1885. Kolkata, Victoria Memorial Hall.

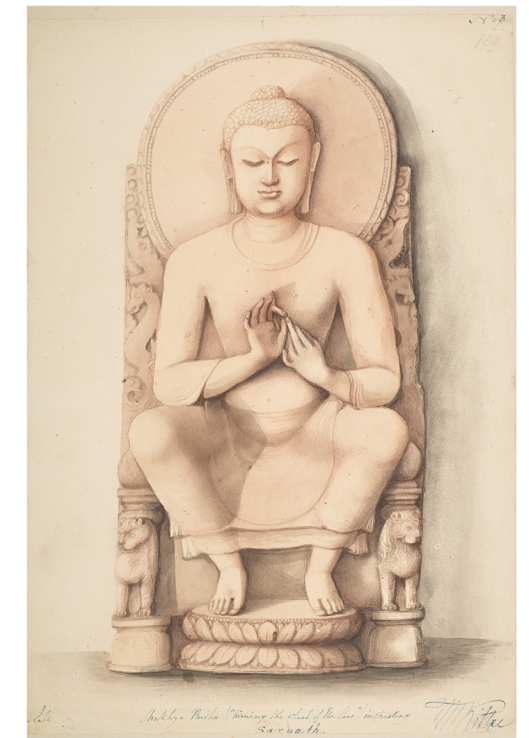


FIGURE 1.4 Drawing of seated Buddha by Markham Kittoe. From *Sarnath: Album of 50 Drawings of Sculpture at Sarnath, Bodhgaya and Benares (U.P.)* (1846–1853), n.p. London, British Library.



which was supplemented by a grant from the local government, presumably from the Benares administration. His work there, extending from December 1904 to early April 1905, employed some two hundred coolies working under Oertel's direction (FIGURE 1.5) before he was transferred to Agra soon after the season concluded.³⁴

Despite the lengthy report on a single season of work, this was not the excavation that yielded the preponderance of Sarnath sculptures, although it did provide the most famous—and perhaps most important—ones. His primary work was in the vicinity of the Jagat Singh stupa, known today as the Dharmarajika stupa. After excavating the shrine north of the stupa, now called the Mulagandhakuti, Oertel found the stump and fragments of a large column just west of the shrine. This was the column of Ashoka, the one whose capital he next uncovered and a work that has become the emblem of the Republic of India. In his report, Oertel evinces none of the excitement that such a discovery might induce

but rather records finding the pillar and capital in dispassionate descriptive terms. Perhaps it was no surprise to find this since, as he notes, Xuanzang had observed the pillar and described its height as a bit more than twenty-one meters, almost twice as high as Oertel estimates it stood above the original ground level.³⁵ If Xuanzang saw the pillar, then Oertel must have assumed it would be there, waiting for someone like him to reveal it.

Oertel conducted enough minor excavations around the Dhamekh stupa to draw a cross-section of it (FIGURE 1.6). He notes that the stupa in its present form is not the form in which Xuanzang saw it, although I am not at all sure how he determined exactly which among the structures the Chinese pilgrim describes is the Dhamekh stupa. And finally, while casting blame for the present—that is, 1904–5—appearance of the stupa, he suggests that Jagat Singh's workmen managed to remove some of the structure's sculptured frieze, although it is not clear how they would have reached this elevated

FIGURE 1.5
Excavations in progress, 1904–5, Sarnath. From F. O. Oertel, "Excavations at Sarnath," in *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1904–05* (1908), fig. 2.

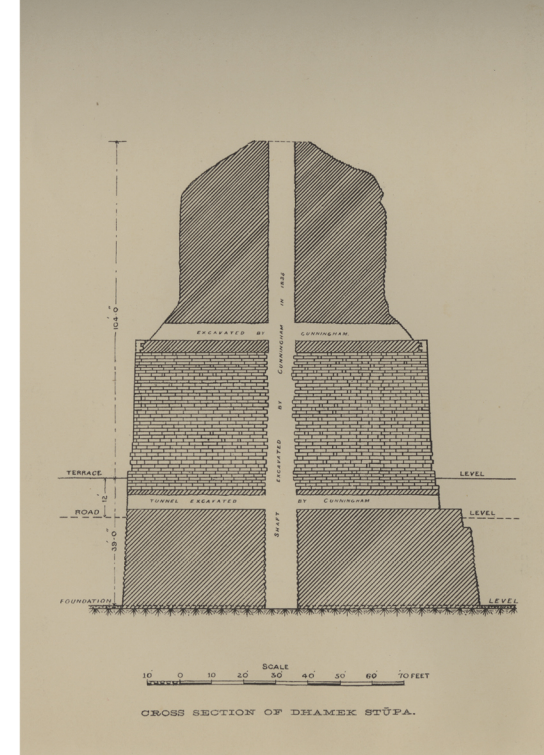


FIGURE 1.6
Cross-section of Dhamekh stupa. From F. O. Oertel, "Excavations at Sarnath," in *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1904–05* (1908), pl. XXI.

level or why they would have bothered when there was so much building material that could be pillaged at ground level.

About three-quarters of a kilometer south of the excavated site is the Chaukhandi stupa, a tall mound surmounted by a tall tower that was built by Akbar (1556–1605), as the inscription notes, to commemorate the visit of his father, Humayun, to the site (FIGURE 1.7). The inscription's reference to the "lofty tower reaching the blue sky" echoes the

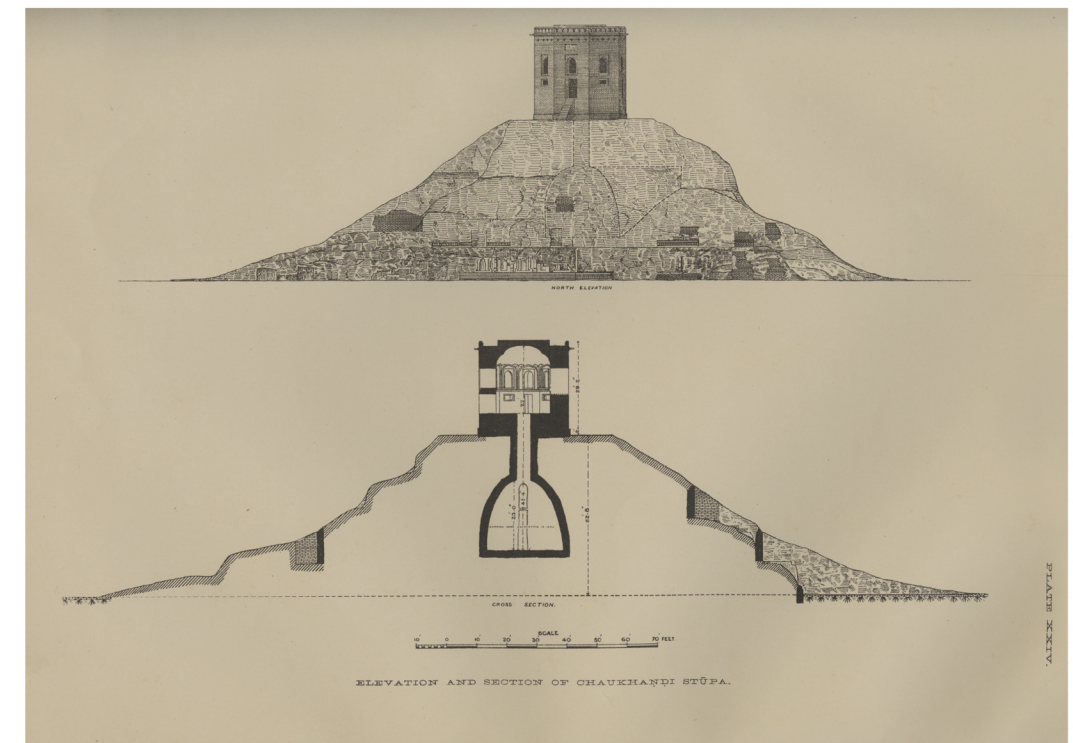
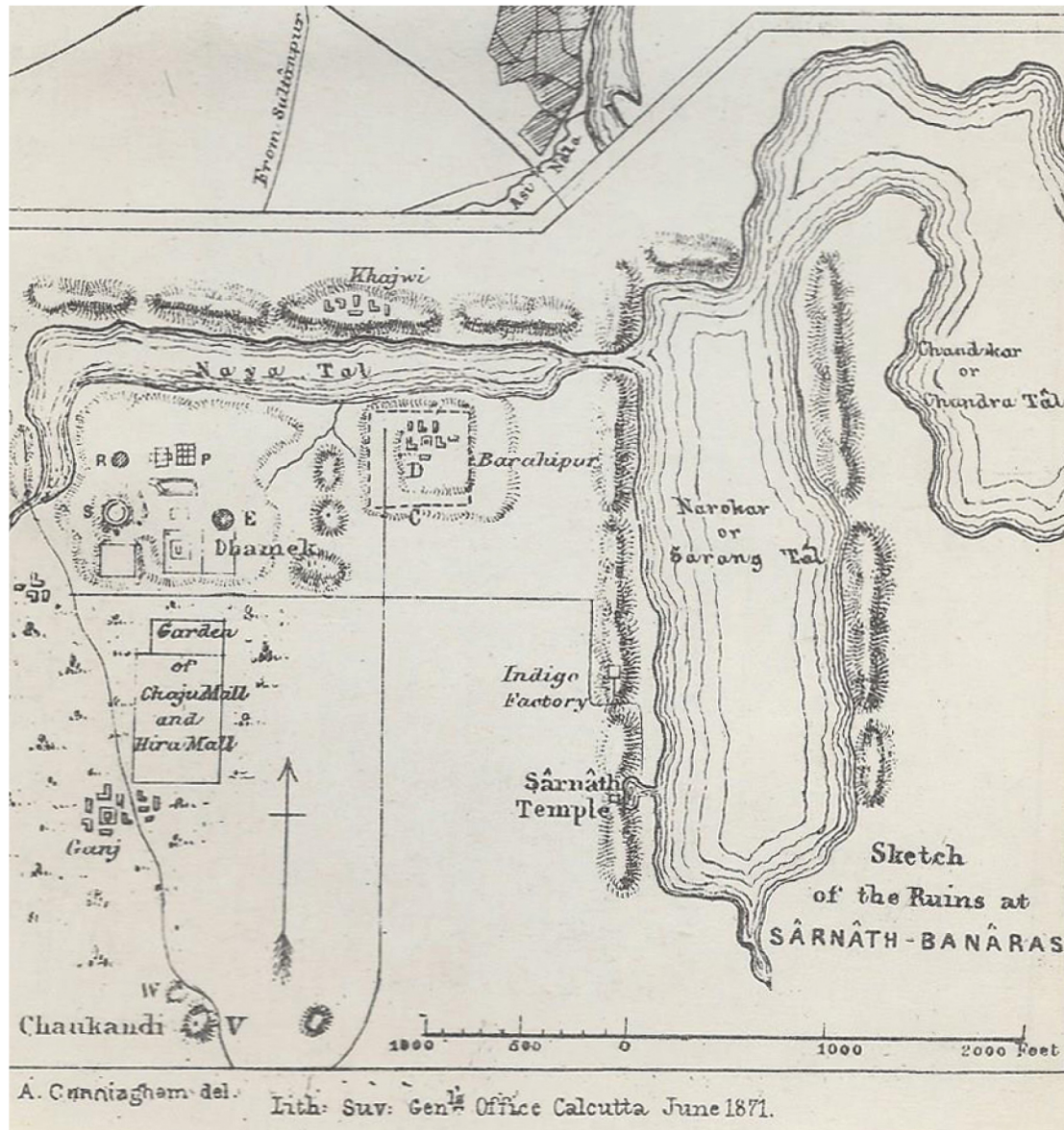


FIGURE 1.7
Chaukhandi stupa. From F. O. Oertel, "Excavations at Sarnath," in *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1904–05* (1908), pl. XXIV.

The Excavated Site



For many visitors, the excavated site (FIGURE 2.1) is simply a prelude to the rich imagery housed in the Archaeological Museum Sarnath. That may be because it lacks the coherence of many Buddhist sites such as Nalanda, Paharpur, and Vikramashila, though not, curiously, the sites associated with the life of the Buddha, which similarly lack obvious coherence. To many, it appears much like a hodgepodge of foundations that give little sense of Sarnath as an inhabited place where monks lived and studied, forming a connection to the establishment of the Buddhist order. The excavated site, moreover, represents only a portion of the ancient monastic complex, one that extended even beyond the Chaukhandi stupa on one side and to the bodies of water, now usually dry, on the other.

In this chapter and elsewhere in the book, I refer to Sarnath as a *monastery* or *monastic establishment* and to the seven monastic dwellings also as *dwellings* or *viharas*, to use a Sanskrit term that is widely misapplied. I do so, however, mindful of Gregory Schopen's parse of these words and his well-argued sense of what a monastery is.¹ Despite the image

that the word *monastery* might evoke, especially to a Western reader, they were not, he says, isolated, chaste, serene, ascetic, and austere spaces. The very word *vihara*, commonly understood as “monastery” because it is used in inscriptions (even those from Sarnath), means “a place of recreation, a pleasure ground.” The term *arama* (or *sangharama*), also usually interpreted as “monastery,” means—and meant to the Buddhist monks resident there—“a place of pleasure, a garden.” That resonates well with the ancient name of the place, Mrigadava, or Deer Park, perhaps more literally Deer Forest. And the pleasures there were not just spiritual or intellectual, as Schopen further notes. It was a garden where the deer probably frolicked, but a garden is also a place where the gods liked to sport, and where, we might imagine, so did the monks and nuns. Monasteries can be aesthetic, material, even sexual. Nevertheless, because I cannot think of an English word or phrase that better describes what Sarnath, as we call it today, once was, I use the word *monastery* to refer to the entire excavated site and the unexcavated area that composed the ancient establishment as well as

FIGURE 2.2
Plan of Sarnath. From Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made during the Years 1862-63-64-65* (Archaeological Survey of India Report), vol. 1 (1871), pl. XXXI.

weight and lend stability to the structure. Because the pillar was not standing intact, many believe it was destroyed in a wanton act of vandalism. Xuanzang reports that the pillar, “bright as jade . . . glistening and [sparkling] like light,” was erected at the very spot the Buddha began to turn the Wheel of the Law—that is, the place where he preached his first sermon.¹⁴ He adds that people pray before the pillar, as if by the seventh century it had become an object of devotion, not a vehicle for conveying Ashoka’s edicts as originally intended. The Chinese pilgrim’s report was probably accurate, for on the Bodhgaya railing, we see figures with hands folded reverentially before a pillar and possibly circumambulating it. Even today, worshipers pray before the pillar at Lauriya-Nandangarh, one of only two Ashokan pillars that remain standing intact, and visitors to Sarnath, some of them Euro-devotees, sit as if in meditation before the pillar shaft, probably without any idea of the inscription’s content.

Like other pillars erected by Ashoka, this one is monolithic, its capital carved from a separate piece of sandstone, possibly from the quarries of Chunar, just forty-four kilometers south of Sarnath though on the opposite bank of the Ganges, as Vidula Jayaswal argues, or possibly from the quarries on Pabhosa Hill, about two hundred kilometers west of Sarnath on the Jamuna River, as Harry Falk suggests.¹⁵ The pillar does not contain the usual six edicts of Ashoka but rather, similar to the inscription on the pillar at Sanchi, an eleven-line admonition to the monks and nuns as well as the laity residing at Sarnath to avoid a schism, relegating those who do seek to

“break up the *Sangha*” to wear white robes and live in a “nonresidence.”¹⁶ This admonition must have seemed a great deal more important to Ashoka than a declaration that the pillar marked the spot of the Buddha’s first sermon and the establishment of the Buddhist order, in contrast to the Lumbini pillar inscription, in which he notes in a sort of addendum that this was the site of the Buddha’s birth. What constituted breaking up the order is not at all clear. Was this in response to the beginning of the separate schools of Buddhism? The opening lines of the inscription on the Sarnath pillar state that the admonition came from Ashoka himself, here identified as “Devanampriya Priyadasi” (Beloved of the Gods, Who in Turn Loves Everyone), an epithet of Ashoka, as we learn from his inscription at Maski that begins with “Devanampriya Ashoka” (Ashoka, Beloved of the Gods).¹⁷ Portions of the pillar, one of them the pillar’s stump still in situ, remain beneath a modern glass-enclosed structure probably intended to shield them from depredation by visitors to the site (FIGURE 2.4).

THE DHAMEKH STUPA

By far the largest and most prominent standing monument at Sarnath is the Dhamekh stupa (FIGURE 2.5), located at the easternmost portion of the excavated area and aligned more or less with the Dharmarajika stupa. It once was probably rivaled in size by the Dharmarajika stupa, which measured 33.5 meters in diameter as compared to the Dhamekh stupa’s 28.3-meter diameter. Sarnath is unique among sites associated with the life of the Buddha for having

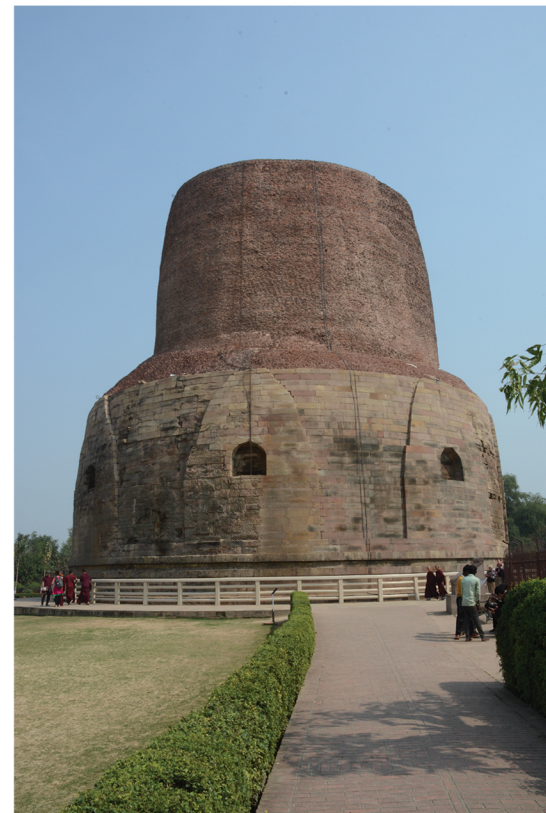


FIGURE 2.4
Remains of the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath, 3rd century BCE.

more than one large stupa.¹⁸ Modern signage suggests that the Dhamekh stupa marks the spot where the Buddha preached his first sermon, a suggestion based on an inscription dated 1020 that refers to it as the Dharmachakra stupa—that is, the stupa of the Wheel of the Law, which the Buddha set in motion when he preached his first sermon. The problem with that identification is that the sculpture bearing this inscription, an image of the Buddha, was found at the Dharmarajika stupa, not the Dhamekh stupa.

The structure, rising 43.5 meters above the original base and 31.6 meters above the present terrace, stands on a foundation of what Cunningham calls very large bricks sunk 8.5 meters below the ground level of the excavated area. The lower part of the Dhamekh stupa is constructed of stone, each block of masonry clamped to the adjacent one; the upper part is built of brick that once may have been faced with stone. Adorning the bottom portion are eight arched projections with niches generally formed in the same shape. In each niche, Cunningham observed a pedestal with a depression that must have been intended to hold the tenon projecting

FIGURE 2.5
Dhamekh stupa, ca. 800, in its final form.



FIGURE 2.6
Miniature stupa, ca. 10th century, a composite stupa as it presently appears.



from the base of a sculpture;¹⁹ the sculptures likely were eight Buddha images. This is similar to several miniature stupas at Sarnath and other Buddhist sites that bear four niches, each with an image of the Buddha performing a different mudra (for example, FIGURE 2.6).²⁰ At just over a meter and a half in height, these niches are large enough to house many of the seated Buddha images excavated at the site but not the taller standing figures. Daya Ram Sanhi suggests that three seated images discovered close to the Dhamekh stupa—two representing the Buddha (one in *dhyana mudra*, the other in *dharmacakra mudra*) and the third representing Avalokiteshvara (FIGURES 2.7, 2.8, 2.9)—were once among the figures placed in the niches.²¹ Sir John Marshall, who excavated the images in the course of the 1907–8 excavations, proposed that the three were carved by the same artist,²² which is very possible given their

FIGURE 2.7
Seated Buddha discovered in 1907–8 excavations, ca. 9th century. Sarnath, Archaeological Museum Sarnath.



style. They are about 112 centimeters in height and so would fit nicely in the niches. Their date, about the ninth century, is probably close to the date of the floriated band carved in a relief band that runs fully around the stupa at the level of these niches; in fact, the floral pattern on the lintel at the shoulder level of these images appears very close to the form of the floriated relief band on the stupa, suggesting that this band, and thus the stupa in its present form, dates closer to 800. That is considerably later than most writers have dated the Dhamekh stupa, but there is little justification for an earlier date.²³

THE DHARMARAJIKA STUPA

All that remains today of the Dharmarajika stupa, also known as the Jagat Singh stupa, is a circular platform that formed the base (FIGURE 2.10). Signage at the site asserts unequivocally that Ashoka

FIGURE 2.8
Seated Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara discovered in 1907–8 excavations, ca. 9th century. Sarnath, Archaeological Museum Sarnath.



erected the stupa, one of 84,000 that was constructed to enshrine relics of the Buddha from the original seven stupas. That, of course, adds special sanctity to Sarnath overall and specifically to what is left of the Dharmarajika stupa, essentially a relic itself—an archaeological relic. But the evidence for that conclusion is flimsy at best. The stupa's attribution to Ashoka comes from an inscription on the base of a Buddha image said to have been found within the stupa.²⁴ The inscription, dated equivalent to 1026, during the reign of the Pala dynasty king Mahipala, records gifts by two generous brothers named Sthirapala and Vasantapala. According to most readings of the inscription, they restored a stupa of Ashoka and also “built a new temple of stone from the eight holy places,” presumably the eight major pilgrimage places associated with the Buddha's life.²⁵ That, however, is not quite what the

FIGURE 2.9
Seated Buddha discovered in 1907–8 excavations, ca. 9th century. New Delhi, National Museum of India.



correctly when he wrote many years later, it was believed that the Buddha preached his first sermon at the site of the pillar and the stupa that came to be known as the Dharmarajika. So it may be—but only maybe—that this stupa, whose base remains, is the one that Xuanzang cites, and it may be—but again only maybe—that the stupa marks the site of the Buddha’s first sermon, at least the site imagined at some point in the past to mark that site.

THE CHAUKHANDI STUPA

Less than a kilometer south of the excavated site is the structure known as the Chaukhandi stupa, a monument constructed entirely of brick (FIGURE 2.11). The base appears to have been composed of three square terraces, each somewhat smaller than the one below though each approximately the same height, 3.7 meters.²⁷ That square base—which gives the stupa its name, Chaukhandi, meaning four-sided or square—might suggest the stupas erected by the Pala king Dharmapala (circa 783–820) at Paharpur and Vikramashila, both in eastern India and both more or less square in plan. Above the third tier, though not really evident today, the structure becomes octagonal, with “starlike points,” as the excavator Oertel notes.²⁸ At the summit is an octagonal structure erected by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 996 AH/1588 CE to commemorate the visit of his father, Humayun, to this place, one of a great many indications of Delhi’s Muslim rulers’ admiration for the ancient past.²⁹ The ornamentation at the stupa’s base (FIGURE 2.12) clearly shows regularly spaced pilasters creating niches, a form commonly seen on



inscription says. Rather, it says that they repaired the Dharmarajika, the source of this name for this structure, which most writers take to be an epithet for Ashoka. But it could be an epithet for the Buddha, king of dharma—that is, king of the law—for it was at Sarnath that he set in motion the Wheel of Dharma. And the term widely translated as “temple” is *gandhakuti* (perfumed hall), probably a temple of the Buddha but by no means certainly.

From that, some imaginative creators of Sarnath’s history turn to the Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, who refers to a stone stupa built by Ashoka with a pillar in front of it. Here, Xuanzang reports, the Buddha preached his first sermon.²⁶ So at least in the seventh century, if Xuanzang recalled

FIGURE 2.11
Chaukhandi stupa, Sarnath, ca. 4th–5th century, according to signage at the site, but brickwork at the base suggests a date of ca. 8th–9th century. The octagonal structure at the top is dated 1588.

FIGURE 2.10
Base of the Dharmarajika stupa, Sarnath.

FIGURE 2.12
Detail of Chaukhandi stupa base, probably originally with additional detail rendered in stucco, Sarnath.

courtyard; it is approximately 61 meters wide by 38 meters long and extends east to west from the Main Shrine (SEE FIGURE 2.13). Sanhi proposes that it was intended for monks to listen to lectures because on the back wall there is a solid brick platform that he suggests would have been used by the teacher or “chairman of the congregation.” That seems unlikely. If we take as a model the present-day appearance of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya, then this simply would have been an open courtyard without any designated function, one providing an unrestricted view of the Main Shrine.

CIRCULAR SHRINE

Immediately north of the Main Shrine is a courtyard that leads to a circular foundation—or, more precisely, a pair of concentric circular foundations that are approximately 3.8 meters in diameter (FIGURE 2.17).⁴¹ Harold Hargreaves, whose excavation revealed the structure, wondered if the inner structure might be a stupa base and the outer one the walls of a circumambulatory passage (*pradakshinapatha*), but he rejected the idea, noting that there is no obvious entrance point and the rectangular structure that abuts it would have prevented a full circumambulation. He also wondered if the concentric structures might represent successive encasements of a stupa.⁴² Krishna Kumar, however, starts with the assumption that the shrine was a circular *chaitya-griha*—that is, a shrine to enclose a stupa such as one at Guntupalli in Andhra Pradesh and other places in south India—despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest what the elevation of the

structure might have been.⁴³ Most likely, this is the base of a stupa, not unlike the many brick stupa bases that remain nearby. Kumar goes on to surmise that this structure marked the spot where the Buddha prophesied the Buddhahood of Maitreya, an event described by both Faxian and Xuanzang but a place entirely fabricated by Kumar.

THE PANCHAYATANA TEMPLE

Much is made of the structure described as the Panchayatana temple, actually the brick plinth of a very small temple comprising a central structure with four corner shrines (hence *panchayatana*, or “five-fold shrine”) (FIGURE 2.18). It is located between the Dharmarajika stupa and the Dhamekh stupa, immediately north of the grassy area that covers Monastery V and within an enclosure that is intended to shield it from rain that might destroy the remaining stucco adornment. It is by no means the only *panchayatana* structure at Sarnath—several others may be seen among the remaining plinths at the site. But among all the architectural remains in the excavated area, this most clearly reveals details of form rendered in terracotta with traces of stucco, giving it a sense of vitality that most of the other remains lack. The structure’s adornment includes pilasters and rich floral decoration that suggests a fifth- or sixth-century date. The architectural form, too, recalls structures of this date, most notably the Gupta temple at Deogarh. While almost all visitors to the site take time to see the structure, it desperately needs an interpretive plaque. Today, there is only a sign reading “Panchayatana Temple,” with



FIGURE 2.17
Base of circular shrine north of the Main Shrine, Sarnath.

FIGURE 2.18
Brick temple plinth called the Panchayatana temple, Sarnath.