



# COMPOSING WORLDS WITH ELEPHANTS

*Interdisciplinary dialogues*

Edited by  
Nicolas Lainé  
Paul G. Keil  
Khatijah Rahmat

  
Éditions

collection  
[mondes vivants]

# COMPOSING WORLDS WITH ELEPHANTS

---

*Interdisciplinary  
dialogues*

Edited by  
Nicolas Lainé  
Paul G. Keil  
Khatijah Rahmat

  
Éditions

### Editorial coordination

Corinne Lavagne

### Copy editing

Octopus editing

### Proof reading

Anne Causse

### Graphic design

Alan Guilvard - Format Tygre

### Page layout

Aline Lugand – Gris Souris

### Photo engraving

IGS-CP

Cover: © Paul G. Keil

The mahout, Oupe, caringly hand-feeding the sub-adult female, Rohila, before she returns to the forest for the evening (Kamrup, Assam, 2014).



This publication is open-access and made available to the public under the terms of the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, which can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en>. Under this license, the original work can be freely distributed as long as the authors and publishers are credited and a link to the license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 is provided. Modifications are not authorised and the work must be published in its entirety. The material may not be used for commercial purposes.

© IRD, 2023

FRENCH NATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Paper ISBN: 978-2-7099-2993-6

PDF ISBN: 978-2-7099-2994-3

Epub ISBN: 978-2-7099-2995-0

## CHAPTER 6

# TUSKS OF WISDOM

## The elephant in the Buddhist art of Kanaganahalli, southern India

*Srikumar M. Menon, Anindya Sinha*

### INTRODUCTION

The Asian elephant *Elephas maximus* has always occupied a prominent place in the art of the Indian subcontinent. From Harappan seals (MENON, 2002) to later depictions in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain art, the elephant is arguably the most commonly depicted animal in south Asian culture. In this paper, we discuss the depictions of the Asian elephant and its cultural implications at a recently excavated Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli in Karnataka state of southern India.

Kanaganahalli and Sannati are two villages in this region where the remains of an extensive Buddhist religious landscape were unearthed over the last two decades of the 20th century. Although the existence of a Buddhist past in this region was suspected as early as 1954 (SESHADRI, 1965), it was only after excavations from the mid-1980s onwards that definitive evidence began to emerge (POONACHA, 2011). Evidence for a settlement site near Sannati village (SUNDARA, 1988) and brick and limestone stupas (HOWELL, 1995) preceded the discovery of the remains of the Great Stupa at Kanaganahalli (POONACHA, 2011).

## | THE BUDDHIST STUPA AT KANAGANAHALLI

The extant structure of the Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli consists of a large, stepped cylinder, which must have been surmounted by a now-missing dome, surrounded by a railing. Excavations reveal that the monument possibly began as a simple earthen mound in the 1st century BCE, during the reign of the Mauryan dynasty (POONACHA, 2011). The structure was enlarged and embellished in phases, stretching till the 3rd century CE, by the succeeding Satavahana rulers (POONACHA, 2011), encompassing both the *Hinayana* as well as *Mahayana* phases of Buddhism.

The structure in its final form, decipherable from its remains (Figure 1), had a diameter of 26 m, with a lower, larger cylinder – the Lower Drum, and a narrower, taller, upper cylinder – the Upper Drum. A circumambulatory path girdles the stupa at the ground level and is surrounded by a railing with entryways roughly in the four cardinal directions (POONACHA, 2011). The stupa is constructed of limestone, while rubble, earth and bricks were used to fill the limestone casing of the structure.



© S. M. Menon

Figure 1 | An aerial view of the stupa showing its various components.



The railing of the stupa consists of uprights and crossbars, with a heavy coping running all across the top. These coping stones have images of real and mythical animals, all shown moving from right to left, indicating the clockwise direction of circumambulation, which a devotee should follow. The Lower Drum, 1,2 m high, was clad with 76 limestone slabs, each 0,75 m in width. Four ritual platforms, known as *ayaka* platforms, projected from the Lower Drum, corresponding to the four entryways. Above the Lower Drum is a cornice running all around the Upper Drum, an imitation of the higher-level ambulatory, common in many stupas. This element possibly functioned as a flower receptacle for devotees to deposit their offerings (POONACHA, 2011; SETTAR, 2020). The Upper Drum, 3 m in height, is taller and encased in 60 slabs, each 1,2 m wide, held in position by a collar at the bottom and weighted down with a frieze at the top. The frieze stones were also embellished with figures of real, as well as mythical, animals, proceeding from right to left, reinforcing the indicated direction of circumambulation.

The Lower and Upper Drum slabs were decorated with sculpture in shallow relief, mostly pertaining to the *Jataka* stories of the Buddha in his previous births (RHYS DAVIDS, 1929), narratives from the life of the Buddha or that of his disciples or followers, historical events or of individual people, including prominent rulers (ZIN, 2018). As very few of the Lower Drum slabs remain *in situ*, the sequence of these slabs is undeciphered, with certain narratives having been put forward (ZIN, 2018). The stupa has been enlarged at least twice in the history of the monument, necessitating the introduction of additional slabs encasing both the Lower and the Upper Drums. These slabs were possibly carved more than a century after the initial slabs were embellished, with the difference in treatment by their respective sculptors often evident.

## **| ELEPHANT DEPICTIONS AT KANAGANAHALLI**

The Asian elephant has been depicted on various components of the stupa. Beginning from the railing and working our way inwards, elephants are represented on the coping stones of the railing (Figure 2a), Lower Drum slabs (Figure 2b), friezes on the *ayaka* platforms (Figure 2c), Upper Drum slabs (Figure 2d) and the friezes running above them (Figure 2f).

© S. M. Menon



© S. M. Menon



© S. M. Menon





**Figure 2 |** Depictions of elephants on the various components of the stupa.

- a- One of the stones that formed the coping of the railing encircling the stupa.
- b- One of the Lower Drum slabs of the stupa, known as the *Bhavachakra* panel, depicting an elephant-drawn cart.
- c- A portion of a frieze from an *ayaka* platform depicting the transport of the relics of the Buddha.
- d- An Upper Drum slab, showing the Satavahana king, Satakarni donating silver lotuses to the stupa, with his royal mounts portrayed in the lower register.
- e- Detail of an Upper Drum slab, showing Chhaddanta, the six-tusked elephant, in a lotus pond with other elephants.
- f- Part of an animal frieze situated above an Upper Drum slab, depicting an elephant in musth.



There are also depictions of elephants on certain special elements, such as the components of finials, atop the dome of the stupa. The popularity of elephants as subjects for the Kanaganahalli artisan is revealed by the fact that 19 out of the 60 Upper Drum slabs contain prominent representations of elephants.

We present an analysis of the elephant sculpture of Kanaganahalli under three broad themes: the natural history and biology of elephants, the handling and behaviour of captive elephants, and the elephant as a symbol in Buddhist religion and rituals.

## **| THE NATURAL HISTORY AND BIOLOGY OF ELEPHANTS**

The artisans who worked on the Kanaganahalli stupa were clearly familiar with the elephant, as evident from their mastery in depicting the anatomy and physiology of the species in their art. It is noteworthy, however, that similar skills are lacking in representations of, say, the camel. Interestingly, depictions of camels at Kanaganahalli exclusively feature the two-humped Bactrian camel, never encountered in southern India historically and hence, potentially unfamiliar to the contemporary artisans.

The anatomy of the elephant has been very skilfully depicted in most sculptures at Kanaganahalli. For instance, the profile view of the fore-quarters of adult male elephants has been portrayed in many of the Upper Drum slabs as the royal mount of historical and mythical kings. These depictions show the accuracy with which certain features, such as the folds of the ear, wrinkles around the eye, the forehead bump, or the tusks and lower jaw, have been carved. Of similar exactness is the frontal view of an elephant sculpted on one of the friezes on an *ayaka* platform, depicting a scene in which the armies of the demon Mara attempt to distract the Buddha from attaining enlightenment. Another *ayaka* frieze showing the transport of the relics of the Buddha—a recurrent theme in stupas—is stunning in its fidelity to the form and gait of the Asian elephant. An excellent example of the ability of the sculptors to execute the form of the elephant in deeper relief than on the slabs is also revealed by a unique finial element of the stupa.

Most depictions of elephants at Kanaganahalli feature captive individuals. The only scene in which elephants are shown in their natural habitat is on one of the three Upper Drum slabs and concerns the *Chhaddanta Jataka*—the birth story of the six-tusked elephant, the Buddha in one of his previous births. The narrative on the panels is of Chhaddanta (“six teeth” in Sanskrit), the six-tusked elephant and his two wives, who live happily in the forest, occasionally frolicking in a lotus pond. A detail of this panel (Figure 2e) shows how elegantly the six tusks of Chhaddanta and the tusks of the females have been depicted. Later in the story, the younger wife becomes upset by her perception of the preferential treatment meted out by Chhaddanta to his older wife and takes her own life, only to be reborn as the queen of Varanasi. She then convinces her husband, the king of Varanasi, to commission a hunter to kill the tusker and saw his tusks off. The hunter achieves this objective with the active cooperation of Chhaddanta, a Bodhisattva or enlightened being. In a particularly poignant scene, the elephant assists the hunter in removing his tusks, saying, “The tusks of wisdom are a hundred times dearer to me than these, and may this good act be the reason for my attaining omniscience” (NIVEDITA & COOMARASWAMY, 1994: 254). Tragically, the queen, on seeing the tusks of the dead elephant, is filled with remorse and subsequently passes away, all perhaps an exercise in futility.

Remarkably, many depictions of elephants at Kanaganahalli show adult male elephants with prominent tusks and in a state of musth (Figures 2a, 2d, 2f). Several of the Upper Drum slabs thus reveal historical or mythical kings in the upper register, with their royal mounts—elephants and horses, shown in the lower register. The elephant, shown as the royal mount in Figure 2d, is in an advanced state of musth, with the flow from the temporal glands streaking its cheeks all the way to its mouth, as is typical in nature.

Another Upper Drum slab shows an ideal *Chakravartin* (literally, “wheel-turning monarch”, an ideal one, upholding the *Dharma*) with the seven jewels that such a ruler is required to possess (ZIN, 2018). The seven jewels are a wife, citizens and an army general, all sculpted in the upper register of the panel, while the Wheel of Law (*Dharmachakra*), a gem, an elephant and a horse are depicted in the lower register. The elephant “gem” in the lower register is also in a state of advanced musth, with temporal fluid streaking down its cheeks and into its mouth.

Trautmann has examined the Indian ideal of a war elephant in great detail, based on sources such as certain sections of the epics *Ramayana*

and *Mahabharata* that describe kingship and warfare, or the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the ancient Indian treatise in Sanskrit (3rd century BCE), dealing with economics, statecraft and military strategy (TRAUTMANN, 2015). The canonical Indian war elephant was a fully mature male elephant with long tusks (*sudanta*, in Sanskrit); his ideal age varying from forty (*Arthashastra*) to sixty (*Mahabharata*) years (TRAUTMANN 2015); and ideally in a state of musth, thus ensuring a “state of heightened combativeness” (TRAUTMANN, 2015: 61), arguably more effective in warfare. Notably, a rutting elephant is a traditional trope in classical Indian poetry, as seems to be the case with sculpture, too, with several depictions of elephants at Kanaganahalli as being in musth (Figures 2a, 2d, 2f). The elephants, portrayed as royal mounts in the Kanaganahalli slabs, thus possibly represented war elephants, in accordance with the suggestion that “once invented, the war elephant served ever afterwards as the standard, and all other functions became secondary and derivative” (TRAUTMANN, 2015: 51). The depiction of the “elephant jewel” of the ideal *Chakravartin* is also in agreement with Trautmann’s observation that the enormous amount of manpower involved in capturing, training and deploying elephants in numbers needed for state warfare necessarily put the ownership of the pachyderms squarely within the realm of kingship.

## **| HANDLING AND BEHAVIOUR OF CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS**

The elephant sculptures at Kanaganahalli yield ample evidence of the close acquaintance of the sculptors with the handling and behaviour of captive elephants at the time. They also depict elephants in warfare, providing rare insights into how war elephants were outfitted and handled on the battlefield.

Trautmann has noted that there is no evidence, in either literature or sculpture from early times, for the provision of a *howdah* on elephants during warfare (TRAUTMANN, 2015). This is borne out in all the depictions of elephants at Kanaganahalli. Elephant riders, whether mahouts or royalty (ZIN, 2018), are shown riding bareback, while the elephants are usually encircled with a girth chain or rope. One image clearly shows

the girth rope, as well as a unique harness attached to it, presumably to prevent the rider at the rear from tipping off. The sculptor accurately depicts the manner in which the rider at the rear of the elephant, where its back begins to slope downwards, tucks up his legs to prevent toppling over backwards. The details of this stance reinforce our conviction about the sculptors' intimate familiarity with elephants and their handling.

The war elephants, portrayed in the upper and lower registers of an Upper Drum slab, show part of an army arriving to receive a portion of the Buddha's relics (ZIN, 2018). The two registers of this slab represent three divisions of the army: the infantry, cavalry, and the war elephants. Historian Thomas Trautmann discusses the fourfold army, mentioned in ancient Indian texts, as having four divisions, namely the foot soldier, the horse, the chariot and the elephant (TRAUTMANN, 2015). The chariot is missing in this representation at Kanaganahalli, in spite of earlier Buddhist textual sources referring to all four divisions coming to receive the relics (ZIN, 2018).

The elephant in the upper register, referred to above, has three riders—one sitting in front to control the animal, while an archer sits behind him, with an assistant at the rear, to hand him arrows from four quivers, three suspended on the side of the elephant and one hung from his ear. The lower register, however, depicts only one rider on the elephant. Both the elephants appear to be controlled by the use of *ankush*, an iron hook held by the riders, as in almost all depictions of elephants with riders on them at Kanaganahalli (see, for instance, Figure 2d). The *ankush* has traditionally been used to goad the elephant forward, as well as to restrain it, and remarkably enough, the form of the *ankush*—with points at the end of the shaft and on the tip of the hook—depicted in the stupa, has remained virtually unchanged over nearly two thousand years.

An uncommon use of the elephant, carved in one of the richly embellished Lower Drum slabs, known as the *Bhavachakra* panel (POONACHA, 2011) and usually not met with today, is that of two male elephants pulling a cart or a chariot (Figure 2b). We suspect that the vehicle could actually represent a chariot, as it is being pulled by two tuskers. It may also be relevant to note that virtually all elephants—depicted either in battle, as a royal mount or in pulling a carriage—at Kanaganahalli are tusked males. Female elephants had rarely been carved; they have been portrayed only as the wives or attendants of Chhaddanta or, in one panel, as a companion to a royal mount (Figure 2d).



## THE ELEPHANT IN BUDDHIST RELIGION AND RITUALS

The elephant has featured conspicuously in Buddhist religious tradition and rituals. The legend of the Buddha narrates his descent into the womb of his mother, queen Maya, in the form of a white elephant, in a dream (ZIN, 2018). One of the Upper Drum slabs at Kanaganahalli depicts this dream of the queen in its lower register, where the Buddha is shown as an elephant at its top left corner. An elephant also features in an *ayaka* frieze as a member of the army of the demon Mara when they attack the Buddha, as he sits below the Bodhi tree on the eve of his enlightenment. This important event in the life of the Buddha is also depicted on an Upper Drum slab, wherein the elephant is exhibited prominently once again.

The elephant returns to us in several other contexts in Buddhist religious literature. The preaching of the first sermon by the Buddha after enlightenment is shown by the setting in motion of the *Dharmachakra*, or the Wheel of Law. This motif is repeated in several slabs at Kanaganahalli. It is noteworthy that although several animals, such as bulls and occasionally human figures, are featured in the pillar that supports the *Dharmachakra*, it is usually a trio of elephants that directly hold up the *chakra*.

The elephant also plays a prominent role in another legend concerning the Buddha. Devadatta, a scheming cousin of Buddha, hatches several plots to kill him, one of which involves setting a maddened tusker, called Nalagiri, upon him. This attempt fails when Nalagiri calms down in the presence of the Buddha and kneels before him in submission. This legend is carved on one of the *ayaka* friezes, which, judging from the depiction of the Buddha in human form, as well as the diminished quality of carving, could be from a later phase in the life of the stupa.

The elephant seemed to have formed an invaluable part of the religious ceremonies and pageants of early India. For example, the *ayaka* frieze, shown in Figure 2c, depicts the transport of the relics of the Buddha—an important event in Buddhist history—as do two of the Upper Drum slabs (ZIN, 2018). In all these sculptures, the relics are being carried in urns by riders on elephants. According to Buddhist legend, the relics were distributed into eight portions for eight clans, each portion

later enshrined in stupas, to which they were carried presumably by elephants, although, interestingly, some stupas in the Gandharan region are known to depict the relics being carried on camels (ZIN, 2018). Such use of elephants in important religious ceremonies apparently stems from the tradition of the war elephant, as described by Trautmann thus: "... some forms flow from kingship to religion, as when a god or a sacred relic or a newly published book is carried on elephant back, like a king." (TRAUTMANN, 2015: 49) It is noteworthy that religious pageants, similar to this, involving elephants, continue even today, as, for instance, in the Hindu temple festivals of Kerala in southern India (VIJAYAKRISHNAN & SINHA, 2019) and Buddhist Sri Lanka.

An interesting detail from the transport of the relics on the Upper Drum slabs mentioned above is the use of the ceremonial flywhisk in adoration of the relics. Ceremonial flywhisks, called *chamara*, usually made of yak tail hair, have been a common appurtenance of religious and royal adoration in Indian historical tradition. Similar rituals continue to be seen today in the contemporary temple festivals of Kerala, where the ceremonial flywhisk, called *venchamaram*, is an integral part of the pageant involving elephants. The similarity between the scenes, depicted in slab relief at Kanaganahalli and often encountered in the socio-culturally shaped pageants of today, thus hints strongly at the continuities that have persisted in religious traditions across the Indian subcontinent for over two millennia.

## **| CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli is a recently-excavated specimen of early Indian monumental architecture, approximately two millennia old. The stupa is richly embellished with carvings of mythical and historical events and the stories associated with them. The Asian elephant, in turn, has occupied an unusual position, historically, in statecraft and warfare, as well as in religion and ritual in the Indian subcontinent since very early days. They come together remarkably in the sculptural programme of the Kanaganahalli stupa, which testifies to the importance of the elephant in religious and secular life of the Indian subcontinent,

even two thousand years ago. And finally, the skill with which the exquisite elephant images have been carved in the stupa not only offers unique insights into elephant behaviour and the handling of captive elephants in India during the early centuries of the Common Era, but also reflects the intimacies that existed between humans and elephants within the co-constructed lifeworlds of the two species.

## I REFERENCES

HOWELL J. R., 1995 – *Excavations at Sannathi 1986-1989. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India 93*. New Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India, 104 p.

MENON V., 2002 – *Tusker: the story of the Asian elephant*. New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 311 p.

NIVEDITA S., COOMARASWAMY A. K., 1994 – *Hindus and Buddhists: myths and legends*. London, Studio Editions, 414 p.

POONACHA K. P., 2011 – *Excavations at Kanaganahalli (Sannati), Taluk Chitapur, Dist. Gulbarga, Karnataka. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India n°106*. New Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India, 659 p.

RHYS DAVIDS C. A. F., 1929 – *Stories of the Buddha, being selections from the Jataka*. London, Chapman and Hall Limited, 244 p.

SESHADRI M., 1965 – Buddhist monuments at Sannathi. *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, 57 (1): 35-37.

SETTAR S., 2020 – *Early Buddhist artisans and their architectural vocabulary*. Manipal (India), Manipal Universal Press, 188 p.

SUNDARA A., 1988 – Excavations at Sannati 1986-1987. *Puratattva*, 17: 22-25.

TRAUTMANN T. R., 2015 – *Elephants and kings: an environmental history*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 372 p.

VIJAYAKRISHNAN S., SINHA A., 2019 – Human-captive elephant relationships in Kerala: historical perspectives and current scenarios. *Gajah*, 50: 29-35.

ZIN M., 2018 – *The Kanaganahalli stupa: an analysis of the 60 massive slabs covering the dome*. New Delhi, Aryan Books International, 262 p.

## | ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge the Archaeological Survey of India for kindly permitting photography of the stupa at Kanaganahalli, which is not yet open to the public. We thank Prof. Kailash Rao for his companionship and valuable help in the study of the stupa. We remember, with gratitude, the cheerful assistance of the late *Azeem Bhai* on site at Kanaganahalli, and wish to dedicate this paper to his memory and the wonderful times spent together.