Perspectives

The site of Kanaganahalli in the Gulbarga district of Karnataka is largely unknown, and it appears that this situation will not change at least over the next few years, until the stupa there is rebuilt and opened to tourists. However, in the restricted circle of art historians, the site is already recognized for its extraordinary beauty, matchless design, and exceptionally well-preserved reliefs carved in light-coloured limestone. Until such time as the excavation reports of the Archaeological Survey of India are published, this short essay shall provide at least brief information about the site, focusing on its significance for research on Buddhism. The credit for making the findings known to a wider audience should go to the archaeologists of the Karnataka Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India. I congratulate them warmly for their painstaking work.

Kanaganahalli (also known as Kanganhalli) was discovered in 1988, though the area was previously familiar to archaeologists. Just a few kilometres from the site lies Sannati, and even closer still the Chandralamba temple in which an Ashokan edict has been preserved. The site of Kanaganahalli was excavated in 1994–98 and 2000–02; it consists of several structures, the most important being the main stupa. The stupa was rebuilt in the course of its history; there is the old anda (hemispherical dome), built of limestone and filled with rubble and earth, which sits on a drum base creating the lower medhi (terrace surrounding the dome). The medhi was later extended with four ayakas (projections) in the cardinal directions. Stylistically, the friezes on the ayakas correspond with reliefs of the 2nd century CE from Amaravati; some are even later and remind us of reliefs from Nagarjunakonda.

The reliefs on large slabs placed against the body of the stupa are quite unique and much earlier. The lower series of slabs was placed against the drum – these slabs are more or less square and measure about 1.4 x 1.2 metres. Above the medhi, adjacent to the dome, was placed the second set of reliefs – huge slabs, about 3 metres high and 1.2 metres wide. Above them was yet another ring of stones (apparently to stabilize the construction), an encircling collar beautifully decorated with mythical creatures. The umbrella once placed at the top of the dome was also found along with the small railing around it. The stupa when discovered was preserved up to a level only slightly above the medhi. The big slabs covering the dome, whose lower sections had broken off, were in many cases still in situ.

Narrative Reliefs in Kanaganahalli: Their Importance for Buddhist Studies

Monika Zin

1 Kanaganahalli, upper register of dome slab no. 39 (showing King Pulumavi and King Ajayata).
The slabs covering the sides of the drum and the dome are elaborately worked. They have all been uniformly conceived: the 1.4-metre slabs on the drum contain one register, the 3-metre ones two; stylistically they are the same and can be dated to the same period. As part of a working hypothesis, these slabs may be dated to the beginning of the 1st century CE.

A large number of slabs from the drum are surrounded by ornamental decoration; however, their main surface, though polished, was left undecorated (the same can be observed on stylistically similar slabs from Amaravati or Jaggayyapeta). The registers may have been decorated with paintings.

Each of the huge slabs that once covered the sides of the dome – which are truly exceptional in Indian art and on which this article will focus – had two registers placed one above the other; these contained figurative scenes or symbolic depictions (such as the stupa or the dharma-chakra pillar). These registers are separated by a frieze of geese. Every slab has a depiction of a railing below, and of a pilaster on one side – sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, as explained later. Inscriptions that identify the events represented in the registers are placed below the lower register, on the “coping stone” of the railing depicted beneath.

Kanaganahalli is of great significance to Buddhist studies. It fills a gap in the development of early Buddhist art, and provides names of jatakas and episodes in the life of the Buddha. The relief slabs may be situated between the early Ajanta paintings (Caves 9 and 10), and the reliefs of Sanchi (1st century BCE) on the one hand, and the mature reliefs of Amaravati (2nd century CE) on the other. They reveal not only the
development of earlier depictions but also independent forms, perhaps going back to the autochthonous tradition.

Kanaganahalli must have been a place connected with the Satavahanas. Not only are they named in inscriptions discovered there, but Satavahana kings are also represented on the reliefs and named in the labelling inscriptions; for instance the Satavahana king Pulumavi (figure 1) is identified by the inscription at the bottom of slab no. 39.1 Such representations amid depictions of Buddhist motifs are not known from any other site; they therefore call for a more in-depth study on their role and meaning. For the time being they serve as one instance of the exceptional character of the site.

Before we move on to the analysis of select reliefs, let us begin with a piece of information relating to the western entrance (from where the present-day visitor enters the site) where a beautiful nine-headed Naga is represented. The Naga on the west is certainly no coincidence, since one of the kings of the directions, Virupaksha, together with his retinue of Nagas, protects the western part of the world. The Naga on the western entrance thus seems to project images familiar from textual traditions; however, the similarities soon give way to dissimilarities. The Naga in Kanaganahalli was placed on one of the cardinal projections, or ayaka. The ayaka were a popular element in the design of stupas, as seen in the Satavahana and Ikshvaku monuments in the lower Krishna valley. In Kanaganahalli, the pillars which once stood on the ayaka have survived – however, they are not five, as in Amaravati or Nagarjunakonda, but four. It is not that the fifth pillar is just lost, for there are two depictions of stupas on the slabs – both show four ayaka pillars (figure 2). If the number five for pillars actually has symbolic meaning, as is often claimed, this was apparently not of significance in Kanaganahalli.

After this digression – apparently symptomatic of the problems relating to the entire site – let us take a look at the narrative depictions on the large slabs (I have followed the system of numbers allotted to the slabs by the site archaeologists.2 We may well expect the reliefs to represent the familiar traditional themes, yet they are also different in one or the other way. And their tradition appears to be of very early times.

Slab no. 15 depicts the nativity scene of the future Buddha Shakyamuni. The inscription states bhakavato ja(t)i. In the lower register (figure 3), on the right-hand side, stands Queen Maya. She holds a branch of a tree with her left hand, and four gods stand in front of her holding a long piece of cloth. There is also a female dwarf whose role in the scene is not clear. Was it perhaps indecorous for the queen to be accompanied only by men, with the available space at the same time being sufficient for just a dwarf figure? With regard to the relief, it should be noted that it may well be the earliest extant representation of the nativity scene, as this is not included at Bharhut or Sanchi. An earlier depiction is preserved in the painting on the left side-wall in Ajanta Cave 10 where Maya is shown holding the branch of a tree, but not in the gestus of a shalabhanjika. Here, however, she is shown not only standing like a tree-spirit, but also holding her earring – exactly as tree-spirits are often portrayed in Amaravati art. There is no Buddha-pada (footprint) on the piece of material held by the gods, as an aniconic symbol of the presence of the newborn. Additionally, there is no typical stool and pitcher as represented in the scene in the Amaravati reliefs, symbolizing the infant
Bodhisatva’s first bath. Some elements are incised in the railing below: seven steps and the royal parasol (which according to the texts should appear above the newborn prince – *Majjhimanikaya* 123) are represented above and on the right of the inscription, while on the left something very peculiar and, to my knowledge, never ever depicted again, is shown. It is a bowl with two long, not quite straight, objects in it – is it a basin of water for the bath, with two ladles in it? The register above depicts celestials flying or being carried in a litter, apparently to attend the event below.

The nativity slab has the pillar on the right-hand side. The slabs in Kanaganahalli were designed in such a way that one pilaster appeared between two slabs. That is why the slabs have pilasters only on one side. Of the 61 large slabs only four are symmetrical, two without pilasters and two with pilasters on both sides – these four must have been “switching” panels. All the slabs on the right of these panels would have had their pilasters on the right; and those on the other side – on the left. The right-pillared slab with the birth scene (see figure 3) does not make a sequence with either the left-pillared slab showing the descent of the Bodhisatva from the Tushita heaven in the form of an elephant (slab no. 3) or with the scene showing the newborn child brought to the Yaksha Shakyavardhana (slab no. 7).3 The slab with the birth scene was probably placed opposite the southern entrance to the enclosure and was followed (in the direction of the *pradakshina*) by the slabs with the scene of the Bodhisatva leaving Kapilavastu (no. 8) and the episode of the turban being carried to Indra’s heaven (no. 9). The arrangement of the slabs showing events from the life of the Buddha calls for further study; for the moment it appears that most of the episodes were shown in the southern and western quadrant, placed without forming an exact chronological sequence. The “switching” panel here (slab no. 10) shows Sujata offering food and the Nagaraja worshipping the Bodhisatva, i.e. events shortly before the Enlightenment.

The inscriptions on the slabs provide designations for the events, not entirely known before. The presentation of the newborn Bodhisatva to the Yaksha goes by the name of *sakiyavadhanamte ratiyam* (?); the Bodhisatva leaving Kapilavastu is labelled *abhinikhamana*; the ascent of the turban to heaven: *cudaharana*; the descent of the Buddha from Indra’s heaven: *devadarana*; the distribution of the relics and their transport on elephants: *sariravibhago*.

Particular importance should be given to the inscription labelling slab no. 13 that in its two extremely well-preserved registers depicts the Buddha being worshipped by men in princely attire (figure 4). In both scenes the empty throne symbolizing His presence is shown standing in a rocky landscape. The inscription below states *khalatiko pavato* (Sanskrit: *khalatika parvata*). To the best of my knowledge, the mountain Khalatika is not known in the Buddhist tradition, but was however familiar to Patanjali (commentary to the fourth *varttika* to Panini 1.2.52) and can be geographically fixed, thanks to an Ashokan inscription. The hill where Ashoka donated caves to the Ajivikas (today known as the Barabar hills) is referred to as Khalatika in the inscription in the so-called Vishvamitra cave.

The inscription in Kanaganahalli seems to be the only testimony extant today for linking the Buddha with the Khalatika mountain. In light of this evidence we are bound to reconsider representations of the Buddha in a rocky landscape from other
early Buddhist sites like Sanchi or Bodhgaya, which according to interpretations proposed hitherto were read as the Buddha visiting Indra in the Indrashaila cave – even though the iconographical sign of this episode, Panchashikha playing the vina, is not represented – or as a representation of the cave of the Buddha’s shadow.

Through depictions of the *jatakas* too, Kanaganahalli not only provides us with new pictorial material but perhaps also sheds new light on known representations. One of the large slabs (no. 38) bears the inscription *bodhisato kusaraya*, i.e. Bodhisatva Kushara; another one (without number) ...*dhisato somarato*, i.e. Bodhisatva Somarata. This means that it was not the stories that were labelled here but their protagonists, the Buddha in his previous lives. The first slab must relate to the *Kushajataka* (Pali collection No. 531), even though the registers merely represent a nonspecific king riding an elephant and a king with his wife. The second slab is far more difficult to explain since Somarata is not known in textual traditions and the reliefs again show just a royal personage surrounded by women.

Among the *jatakas* portrayed in Kanaganahalli are: *Shaddanta*, *Vishvantara*, *Sutasoma*, *Sadhina*, *Hamsa*, and *Shuka*. Some stories are depicted in only one register; others in up to three whole slabs. The narratives can be ascertained by the iconography known from other sites, as also by the inscriptions. As soon as the depictions are clear, it does not require a big effort to explain the inscriptions. Some of the names of the *jatakas* differ from those used in Kanaganahalli. The *jataka* referred to in the Pali canon (No. 545) as the *Vidhurapanditajataka* is labelled *jatakam vidurapunakiya* in Kanaganahalli (slab nos. 56 and 57), which means that the title here (as it was already in Bharhut) bears not only the name of the Buddha in his previous life (Vidhura) but also of the Yaksha Purnaka, the real protagonist of the narrative. The depiction of the *Nalapanajataka* (slab no. 44 below; the upper part depicts a different story) (figure 5) reveals a different practice. The story (Pali collection No. 20) tells us about the demon Dakarakkhasa who lived in a lake and devoured monkeys who came there to drink water. On the advice of the king of the monkeys (the Bodhisatva), the animals learnt to avoid the danger, and the relief shows them drinking water with straws. The inscription states: *jatakam dagarakham [iyam]*, labelling the *jataka* after the villain of the narrative. The titling of the representations in Kanaganahalli thus shows us how the *jatakas* were named in ancient times, these names not necessarily coinciding with those provided in the *jataka* collection known today. Thus the *Mahakapijataka* (Pali collection No. 507) is labelled *jatakam aridamiya* in Kanaganahalli after Arindaman, as the human king is named in the story (slab no. 45).

We are faced with a more difficult task where the reliefs illustrate less popular stories for which we have no pictorial comparison. The upper register of slab no. 51 (figure 6) depicts a narrative of this kind. There are two scenes shown on it: on the top left we see a snake emerging from a sack while a poorly clad man with a string across his body stands next to it talking to a tree spirit. Below this is a scene with the same man with the string talking to a person of rank sitting on a throne. The inscription states: *jatakam senakiyam* (and even specifies that it is the upper register that is referred to: *upari*). The story is not well-known but included in the Pali collection of the *jatakas* (No. 402). It is the *Sattubhasajataka*, the story of a poor wandering brahmin (the...
umbrella by his side seems to indicate that he is on the move). A tree spirit predicts to him that if he reaches his house on the same day his wife will die, but if he returns home only the next day, he will himself die. The brahmin then goes to the city and meets the wise Senaka who understands the words of the tree spirit: a poisonous snake which had crept into the brahmin's sack would bite him if he reached into it for a cake while travelling, or it would bite his wife if he were to return home without opening the sack. The wise Senaka recommends that the sack be thrashed with a stick. The viewer who is acquainted with the story will notice that the brahmin carries a sack on his back.

There are numerous open questions concerning the narrative reliefs from Kanaganahalli, many of which will not be explained until the problem of the sequence of the slabs is solved. It seems probable that some registers belonging to a single narrative are to be read horizontally as well: that is, across two registers from adjoining slabs. Arranged in such a way are registers belonging to slab nos. 49 and 50 (figures 7–9). Their upper registers depict the advance of Mara’s hosts (no. 49, figure 9 above) and the scene of Buddha’s enlightenment (no. 50, figure 8 above), represented by the throne with Buddha-padas under the Bodhi tree. Mara’s daughters and Mara himself stand around it. Both lower scenes do not correspond with the upper ones at all, and depict a group of men in one register (no. 49, figure 9 below, unfortunately partially lost) and a group of women in the other (no. 50, figure 8 below). The groups are oriented towards each other. In spite of the poor state of preservation of the right-hand register, we are able to recognize that the turbaned man is holding a bow and is apparently aiming it at the lady in the left register. The inscriptions below leave no room for any doubt when they state: devi samivati on the left-hand slab and rayodayeno on the right. The narrative depicted here is the story of King Udayana and his consort Shyamavati who was a lay follower of the Buddha. As the story goes, due to the intrigues of a villainous co-wife, Queen Shyamavati had to face the terrible wrath of her husband Udayana who picked up his bow and shot at her. Shyamavati, however, continued to exude boundless love, which she had learnt from the Buddha, and the arrows fell by the side.

The story of Shyamavati and Udayana was popular in the art of the Satavahana period. They are depicted several times in Amaravati, and in the older paintings in Ajanta Cave 10. The depictions in Ajanta include numerous scenes, in the apex of the cave, behind the stupa, i.e. between the life of the Buddha on the left side-wall and two important jatakas, Shyama and Shaddanta, on the right side-wall. Included in the pictorial programme of Ajanta Cave 10, the stories of Shyamavati reveal a great deal about the role of the laity – particularly the female laity – in early Buddhism. In Buddhist tradition, Shyamavati’s attendant, the hunch-backed Khujjuttara, is the one who could learn the Buddha’s sermons by heart best of all (Anguttaranikaya I.14.7).

The placing of the two slabs with devi samivati and rayodayeno in Kanaganahalli were probably of great significance since they were placed directly opposite the eastern entrance. If one considers the most important episodes from the life of the Buddha, namely Mara’s attack (placed above the wrathful Udayana) and the Enlightenment or attainment of boundless love (above Shyamavati), as having parallels with the depictions in the registers below, the whole requires further investigation.
Monika Zin  Narrative Reliefs in Kanaganahalli
These few examples show how important Kanaganahalli is, not just for the history of art but also for the explanation of Buddhist subjects, for inscriptions, and the relationship of the reliefs to textual sources or to the ruling class: in other words all that constitutes the cultural and religious background of art. Recent excavations at Kanaganahalli raise some important new points — and these illustrate the fact that our current conceptualization of ancient Buddhist culture is actually based on fragmentary material evidence that has survived by chance up to the present day.

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NOTES

1. It cannot be the famous king Vasisthiputra Pulumavi (2nd century CE) known from historical sources but rather another early king, Pulumavi who is listed in the Matsya Purana (see Table No. V, Andhras) in second place before Hala (Hala can be dated to the first half of the 1st century CE); see M. Zin, “Mandhatar, the universal monarch, and the meaning of representations of the cakravartin in the Amaravati School, and of the kings on the Kanganhalli stupa”, in Proceedings of the International Congress “Buddhist Narrative in Asia and Beyond”, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 8 to 11 August 2010, eds. Peter Skilling and Justin McDaniel, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.

2. The numbering referred to here matches the underlined numbering at the site.

3. For a photograph of the register see M. Zin, Indian Art, Köln/Hong Kong/London/Los Angeles/Madrid/Paris/Tokyo: Taschen, 2011, pl. 9.


5. For a photograph of the first scene of the painting with Udayana shooting an arrow at Shyamatvati, see Zin 2011, pl. 6.