

Perfecting the Mountain: On the Morphology of Towering Temples in East Asia[◦]

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Abstract: This paper is an inquiry into South Asian models for towering Buddhist architecture in Early Medieval China, both formal and conceptual. I suggest that central concepts behind the creation of the towering Hindu temple: altar, mountain, and palace, were as important to the *ta* as the relic at its center. Using a spiritually charged diagram as a plan, one similar in shape to both the altar of first creation and ground plan of the cosmic Mount Sumeru in South Asian cosmology, these temples organized tiers of palatial forms along a central vertical axis to tap the generative power of first sacrifice that created the world. The result was a perfectly constructed cosmic mountain, whose exterior appeared as a towering palace appropriate to house Buddhist as well as Hindu deities wherever it might be built. With it, worship of regenerative spirits need not take place within specific sacred landscapes (South or East Asian). Rather the spiritual presence of the sacred mountain could be brought to the devotees themselves.

Keywords: Yongningsi, sacred mountains, pagoda, stūpa, mandala

摘要：本文旨在从形式和概念两方面探析中世纪早期中国巍峨的佛教建筑的南亚原型。笔者认为，印度高耸神庙建造背后的几个中心概念，即祭坛、山和宫殿，对佛塔建筑的重要意义不逊于塔中供奉的舍利。这类神庙建筑依托充满精神能量的设计蓝本，其形制和平面类似于最原始的祭坛和南亚宇宙观中巍峨壮观的须弥山，围绕垂直中轴形成多层级宫殿建筑，以承袭作为世界始源的第一祭祀所拥有的原动力。一座完美的宇宙山就此构建而成，其外部表现为巍峨高耸的宫殿，以作为供奉佛教或是印度教神祇的圣殿。其落成后，对再生之灵的祭祀崇拜不再局限于特定地方圣地（南亚或东亚），信徒在此也可以真切感受到圣山的精神氛围。

关键词：永宁寺，宫塔制度，塔，浮图，佛图

This paper is an inquiry into South Asian models for towering Buddhist architecture in Early Medieval China, both formal and conceptual. Historically a number of different terms have been used to describe the multiplicity of objects now commonly referred to as “*ta*”(塔) in modern (Chinese, or, in modern English, using the Portuguese - derived (and somewhat Orientalist) “pagoda” or Sanskrit

● This paper is based on a presentation delivered at the Senior Academics Forum on Ancient Chinese Architectural History in Osaka, Japan, December 7-8, 2013. I am most grateful for the many comments I received from colleagues at that time as they allowed me to rethink much of my argument. I would also like to express my deep thanks to Alexandra Harrer for her help editing the text of the manuscript.

stūpa.^① But neither pagoda nor *stūpa* effectively captures the soteriological potential of this towering monument. The reduction of terms appears to have occurred in China during the seventh century when Tang period monks, most famously Xuanzang (玄奘) (602—664), equated a variety of different words used to describe this unique Buddhist architecture with the domed *stūpa* (Fig. 1), thereby reducing the different architectural forms used for rites of Buddhist worship into a singular ritual motivation: devotion to the Buddha over other deities through veneration of his relics. Yet the *stūpa* and reliquary were only portions of the towering *ta*, a multi-storied monument was formally closer to the Hindu temple (Fig. 2). Here I suggest that central concepts behind the creation of the Hindu temple: altar, mountain, and palace; were as important to the *ta* as the relic at its center. Using a spiritually charged diagram as a plan, one similar in shape to the both the altar of first creation and ground plan of the cosmic Mount Sumeru in South Asian cosmology, these temples organized tiers of palatial forms along a central vertical axis to tap the generative power of first sacrifice that created the world. The result was a perfectly constructed cosmic mountain, whose exterior appears as a towering palace appropriate to house Buddhist as well as Hindu deities wherever it might be built. With it, worship of regenerative spirits need not take place within specific sacred landscapes; rather the spiritual presence of the sacred mountain could be brought to the devotees themselves.

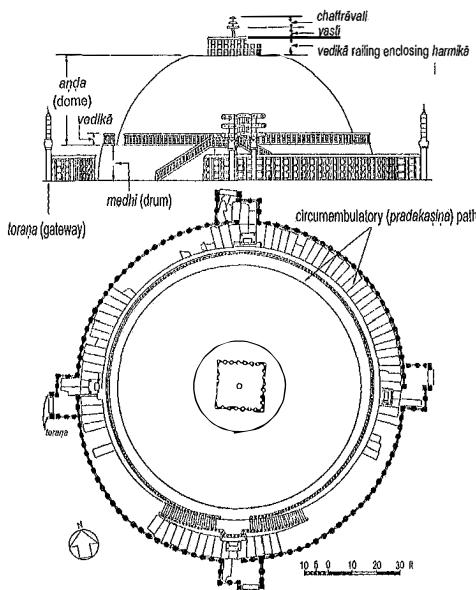


Fig.1 Stūpa 1 (Great Stūpa) at Sōñcī, Madhya Pradesh, India, brick with stone facing, ca. 1st century BCE-CE

(Plan and elevation after Debala Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 25)

① The Foguang dacidian and the Daikanwa jiten both provide “*stūpa*” as the definition of a *ta*. Foguang dacidian bianxiu weiyuanhui (佛光大辞典编修委员会), ed., Foguang dacidian (佛光大辞典, The Foguang Encyclopedic Dictionary), Gaoxiong: Foguang chubanshe, 1988: 5421. Morohashi Tetsuji (諸橋轍次), Dai Kan-Wa jiten (大汉和辞典, The Encyclopedic Chinese-Japanese Dictionary) Tokyo, 1960, rpt. 1984; Taipei rpt. ed.: Heng Sheng tushu gongsi, 1987: entry 5332. “*Pagoda*” is, of course, an English word derived from the sixteenth-century Portuguese word *pagode*, used to refer to the multi-tiered temples encountered by sixteenth-century traders in South or East Asia. The Western term was also used to refer to the images found within them. See “*pagoda*, n.” OED Online, June 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/Entry/136027?redirectedFrom=pagoda&> (accessed August 11, 2014).

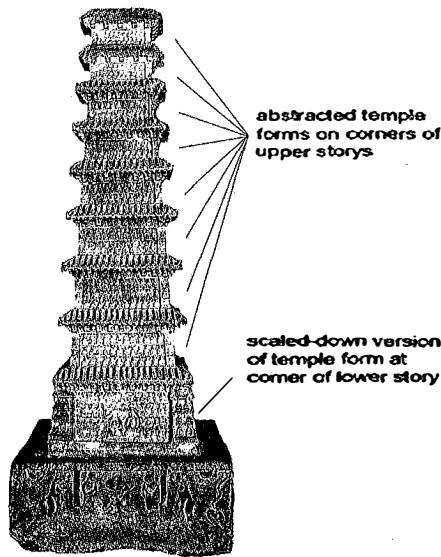


Fig. 2 Cao Tianfu stone *ta*, dated 466, sandstone, h. 153.1 cm, Shuoxian, Shanxi, China;
currently in the National History Museum, Taipei

(Photo after Guoli lishi bowuguan bianji weiyuanhui 国立历史博物馆编辑委员会, ed. *Guoli lishi bowuguan guancang jingpin* 国立历史博物馆馆藏精品 [Catalogue of Collection Highlights in the National Museum of History].
Taipei: National Museum of History, 1997, no. 77)

In order to make this argument, I shall first review the familiar Tang and Northern Wei sources discussing the meaning of different terms for the Buddhist tower to highlight the possible interpretations of the terminology. Then I shall turn to the way in which abstracted palace forms were organized into multi-storied temples in the 2nd- 6th centuries CE in South Asia, and finally I shall discuss how this form was used to allow access to the regenerative power of the cosmic mountain at Yongningsi (永宁寺), in the urban environment of the Northern Wei capital of Luoyang.

The Issue of Morphology for the East Asian *ta* and Tang Representations

When searching for the connection between the term *ta* and *stūpa*, one first looks to twentieth-century scholarship on the subject, such as Zhang Yuhuan (张驭寰) and Luo Zhewen (罗哲文)'s classic: *Zhongguo fota jingcui* (中国佛塔精萃). The first topic of discussion is the difficulty of determining the origin of the Chinese term "ta," at root a multi-storied structure with an intimate relationship to the Buddhist reliquary architecture of India. Professors Zhang and Luo, like most others discussing the term, turn to a passage in the *Da Tang Xiyuji* (大唐西域记), written by Xuanzang in the seventh-century.^① In his description of the town of Tirmidh, he gives an explanation of his use of the term *sudubo* (窣堵波) to describe what he found there:

^① Zhang Yuhuan (张驭寰) and Luo Zhewen (罗哲文). *Zhongguo fota jingcui* (中国佛塔精萃), Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1988: 1.

诸窣堵波即旧所谓浮图也。又曰餚婆又曰塔婆。又曰私餚簸。又曰麅斗波。皆讹也。^❶

(These sudubo are what used to be called *futu*, also called *toupo*, also called *taopo*, also called *sitobo*, also called *soudoubo*, these are all mistakes.)

From this passage it is easy to conclude that theta is an abbreviated form of *taopo* (塔婆), a transliteration of one (mistaken) word used for the familiar mounded *stūpa* in a language other than Sanskrit.^❷ The authority of Xuanzang's reading has influenced our understanding of the differences between South Asian and Chinese architecture into 21st century, where scholars of survey textbooks characterize the Buddhist architecture of South Asia, influenced by Hellenistic and Persian cultures, as being primarily made of stone, and that of China and places further east of wood.^❸ Following this logic, the multi-storied Buddhist *ta* of China becomes a "Sinicization" of the South Asian *stūpa*, the result of a wedding between the form of the mounded masonry *stūpa* and the *que* (阙) or *lou* (楼) towers known in Han dynasty architecture through stone or ceramic models found in the funerary context.^❹ Yet, early scholarship on South Asian architecture emphasizes its own tradition of timber architecture now lost to time, an architecture reconstructed (as is also the case in China) by turning to Buddhist relief carving for source material.^❺ Wood itself was, furthermore, critical to Buddhist narratives; a tradition lost in this simple dichotomy.^❻

❶ Xuanzang (玄奘, 602—664). Da Tang Xiyuji (大唐西域记), chapter 1; Takakusu Junjirō (高楠順次郎) and Watanabe Kaigoyoyoku (渡辺海旭), ed., Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (大正新脩大藏經, The Taishō Tripitaka), 85 vols (Tokyo Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924—1932) (hereafter "Taishō"), 51.2087: 872-871. The entry describes the monasteries in the kingdom of Tirmidh (Damiguo 咀蜜国) and is the primary source for determining the meaning of the Northern Wei terms *fotu* or *futu*. For an English translation see: The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions, trans. Li Rongxi. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996: 32.

❷ In this case, it could be short for *taopo* (塔婆) which might be a transliteration of the Prakrit *thūpo* or the Pali *thūpa*.

❸ Fu Xinian (傅熹年) et al., eds. Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi, di er juan: Sanguo, Liang Jin, Nanbeichao, Sui Tang, Wudai jianzhu (中国古代建筑史第二卷:三国两晋南北朝隋唐五代建筑). Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2003, rpt 2009: 201. For more on the *stūpa*-temple as it developed across Central Asia and into China see also Heinrich Gerhard Franz, "Stūpa and Stūpa-temple in the Gandhāran Regions and in Central Asia, in The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance, ed. Anna Livera Dallapiccola (with Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallement), Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980: 39-58.

❹ An early example of this formulation can be found in Liang Ssu-ch'eng, A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture, ed. Wilma Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984, Dover rpt. ed. 2005): 26-33 (for evidence of timber-frame structures in the context of tombs and cave temples) and 124-125 (for the relationship between the Han *lou* tower and the *stūpa* in the creation of the *ta*). Although Liang's work was largely completed by 1946, these two formulations have remained influential. Recent examples include: Fu Xinian, "The Three Kingdoms, Western and Eastern Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties," Chinese Architecture, ed. Nancy Steinhardt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 85; following this passage John Kieschnick, "Buddhist Monasticism," in Early Chinese Religion, Part Two: The Period of Division (220—589 AD), eds. John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010): 565-566; Li Yuqun, "Classification, Layout, and Iconography of Buddhist Cave Temples and Monasteries," trans. John Kieschnick, in Early Chinese Religion, Part Two: The Period of Division (220—589 AD): 638.

❺ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. Essays in Early Indian Architecture, ed. Michael W. Meister (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

❻ The pipal, or "Bodhi," tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, which was itself the center of a storied hypaethral shrine, and timber pillars used as *yasti* in early *stūpas*, are two examples of the importance of timber in early Buddhist sacred architecture. I would like to thank Professor Wu Qingzhou for emphasizing this point during my presentation of this paper in December, 2013.

Xuanzang did not describe the shape of the sudubo, and the passage does not clarify whether these other terms may have suggested different architectural forms with only peripherally related ritual functions.^❶ By the time Xuanzang had returned from the major Buddhist centers in South Asia, however, sutras addressing the purpose for constructing both images of the Buddha and containers for his remains provide a rationale for collapsing the distinctions between the mounded stūpa and the towering temple. The Foshuozaota gongde jing (佛说造塔功德经) translated into Chinese in 680 by the Central Indian monk Divakara (地婆诃罗), suggests that the benefits of making a stūpa were not restricted to those wealthy enough to construct an elaborate tower. Rather, even the simplest structure would have the same merit-generating power. Although no Sanskrit version remains to the present, the Chinese translation is preserved in the Tripitaka (三藏 or 大藏经) and has been translated into English by Daniel Boucher. I include the full text below, replacing “stūpa” with the transliteration of the Chinese term “ta,” to show the way the sūtra essentializes the power of votive ta production as a means to gain karmic merit:

大唐中天竺三藏法师地婆诃罗唐言日照译

(Translated by the Central Indian Tripitaka master of the Tang dynasty, Divākara, whose name means, in the language of the Tang means, the “Day Illuminator.”)

如是我闻：

(Thus I have heard at one time.)

一时佛在忉利天宫白玉座上，与大比丘大菩萨等，及彼天主无量众俱。时大梵天王、那罗延天、大自在天及五千闍婆王等，各与眷属俱，来至佛所，欲问如来造塔之法，及塔所生功德之量。

(The Buddha was in the heavenly palace of the thirty-three devas on a pure jade seat, together with an immeasurable assembly of great bhikṣus, bodhisattvas, as well as the lord of the devas, Indra. At that time Brahmā, Nārāyaṇa-deva, Maheśvara, and the five gandharva kings, each with his retinue, came to where the Buddha was. They desired to ask the Tathāgata the method of building a ta, and the amount of merit that would be produced by the ta.)

会中有菩萨，名观世音，知其意，即从座起，偏袒右肩，右膝着地，合掌向佛，而作是言：“世尊！今此诸天、千闍婆等故来至此，欲请如来造塔之法，及塔所生功德之量。唯愿世尊为彼解说，利益一切无量众生！”

(In the midst of this assembly, there was a bodhisattva named Avalokiteśvara, who, knowing their wishes, rose from his seat, bared his right shoulder, and placed his right knee on the ground. With palms together in salutation, he faced the Buddha and made this statement: “World-Honored One, the reason that these gods, gandharvas, and others have come here today is that they desire to request of the Tathāgata the method of building a ta and the amount of merit that would be produced by this ta. I only desire that the World-Honored One expound this for them, benefitting all the innumerable beings.”)

❶ The terms may have been used like caitya (zhiti 支提), denoting the sacred traces of the Buddha regardless of form or even of the function of housing corporeal relics. For more on the issue of relics (or lack thereof) in many early “pagodas” see: Eugene Wang, *Pagoda and Transformation: The Making of Medieval Chinese Visuality*, PhD thesis (Harvard University, 1997): 17-20.

尔时世尊告观世音菩萨言：“善男子！若此现在诸天众等，及未来世一切众生，随所在方未有塔处，能于其中建立之者——其状高妙出过三界，乃至至小如庵罗果；所有表刹上至梵天，乃至至小犹如针等；所有轮盖覆彼大千，乃至至小犹如枣叶——于彼塔内藏掩如来所有舍利、发、牙、髭、爪，下至一分；或置如来所有法藏十二部经，下至于一四句偈。其人功德如彼梵天，命终之后生于梵世。于彼寿尽，生五净居，与彼诸天等无有异。善男子！如我所说如是之事，是彼塔量功德因缘，汝诸天等应当修学！”

(At the time the World-Honored One explained to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara: “Noble son, among the heavenly beings present here and all the living beings of future generations, whoever is able to erect a ta wherever there is a place without one—whether its form be so exaltedly marvelous as to surpass the triloka or so extremely small as an āmalaka fruit; whether its mast ascends to the brahma heaven or is as extremely small as a needle; whether its parasol covers the great chillicosm or is extremely small like a jujube leaf—and if inside this ta one encloses the [body of the] Tathāgata down to even one minute portion of his relics, hair, teeth, beard, or fingernails; or else if one deposits the twelve section scripture, which is the storehouse of the Tathāgata’s dharma, down to even one four line verse, this person’s merit will be as great as the brahma heaven. At the end of his life, he will be born in the brahmaloka. When his long life reaches an end in that realm, he will be born in the five pure abodes; there he will be no different than the gods. Noble son, of such matters have I spoken—the magnitude of these ta and the cause of their merit. You and all the heavenly beings should study and observe this.)^①

Based on this passage, if an architectural form containing any type of Buddhist object, from corporeal relic to text, had: 1. a body, 2. a central pillar, 3. a roof or covering, it would provide the patron with the transformative power to become “no different from the gods.” Furthermore the Buddha himself was not contained within this form, he resided in a more exalted place, the “heavenly palace” (天宫). The Mahāyāna texts translated into Chinese in the early centuries CE might have inspired patronage of a different type of physical interface than an open-air mounded stūpa.

This text appears to have been written as a reaction to an increase in the scale of ta production, an effort to ensure that common people did not feel the benefits of Buddhist worship were out of their financial reach. Indeed, internal to the passage itself we see that, although merit can be gained by a reliquary constructed with an āmalaka fruit, needle, and jujube leaf, the form could also be quite vast, with a mast extending to the brahma heavens. The sutra surely resonated in 7th century China, where vast state resources were given over to the production of Buddhist material culture, including the Ci’ensi (慈恩寺) and its Great Wild Goose Pagoda (大雁塔, initial construction ca 652), as well as the Great Buddha Niche at Fengxiansi (奉先寺) in Longmen Grottoes completed in 675 (Fig. 3).

① Foshuo zaota gongde jing 佛說造塔功德經 (Taishō 0801a23); English translation after Daniel Boucher, “The Prātyasamutpādagāthā and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics,” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14 (1993): 8-9.

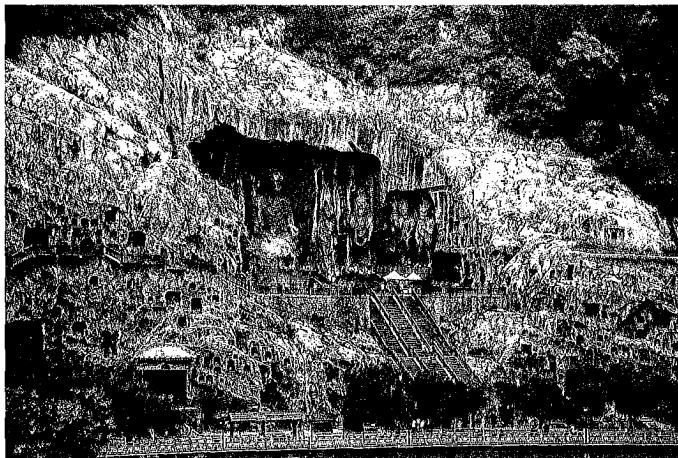


Fig. 3 Great Buddha Niche, Fengxiansi, Longmen Grottoes, Henan province,

China, Tang dynasty (completed in 675)

(Photo by author, 2013)

The Tang court was continuing a long tradition of imperial Buddhist patronage. In Wei Shou's (506—572) "Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism" in the Weishu, from roughly one hundred years earlier, we read of the rapid increase in constructing towering futu/fotu in a format which incorporated the palace (gong 宫) into the conception of the iconic Buddhist domed stupa:

凡官塔制度，犹依天竺旧状而重构之，从一级至三、五、七、九。世人相承，谓之“浮图”，或云“佛图”。晋世，洛中佛图有四十二所矣。^❶

(The general palatial-ta system follows the ancient Indian models, but is built up in layers from one level to three, five, seven, or nine. People of the world, learning the names from each other, called them futu or fotu. During the age of the Jin, forty-two were within Luo[yang].)

The "ancient Indian form" (天竺旧状) as part of the "palatial-ta (tower) system" (官塔制度) in this text has been a critical question for scholars looking at the development of the ta. Fu Xinian's team suggests this is the form of stupa-shrines developed under the Kushans, which was then elevated with multiple stories in the Chinese context.^❷ Wu Qingzhou (吴庆洲), has observed that the multi-storied forms were not developed in Central Asia or China, but rather had precedents in India.^❸ Pilgrimage objects produced at sites along the Ganges River support the hypothesis that the futu/fotu produced in East Asia during the Period of Division are replicas of the towering South Asian "Hindu" temple which

❶ Wei Shou (魏收, 506—572). Weishu (魏书) Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997 rpt. ed.: 3029. Translation follows Leon Hurvitz, Wei Shou: Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism, an English Translation of the Original Chinese Text of Wei-Shu CXIV and the Japanese Annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryū (Kyoto: Jimbunkagaku kenkyusho, Kyoto University, 1956): 47, with modifications.

❷ Fu Xinian et al., eds. Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi, di er juan: 199.

❸ Wu Qingzhou (吴庆洲), Jianzhu zheli, yijiang yu wenhua (建筑哲理, 意匠与文化) Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2005: 127.

developed during this period. Called “*prāsāda*,” a term that can be translated as “palace,” eventually became a tower composed of stories of miniaturized palace forms. I will discuss this development further below.

The rapid transmission of the form of the towering temple from sooth Asia for ther east may have been facilitated by the spread of these magical souvenirs, many showing images of multi-story temples for Buddhist worship, such as the well-known examples of the towering temple at Bodhgaya.^① One of the earliest of is the famous Kumrahar plaque, dated to the 2nd- 3rd centuries (Fig. 4).^② Careful analysis of the towering temple shows that it is composed of five stories, each delimited by a woven railing. The first story is taller than the others, and opens up to contain a seated Buddha image, seemingly in the *bhūmisparśa mudrā* of enlightenment, appropriate for an image from the site of Bodh Gaya. Each of the four intermediary stories are composed of a series of arched

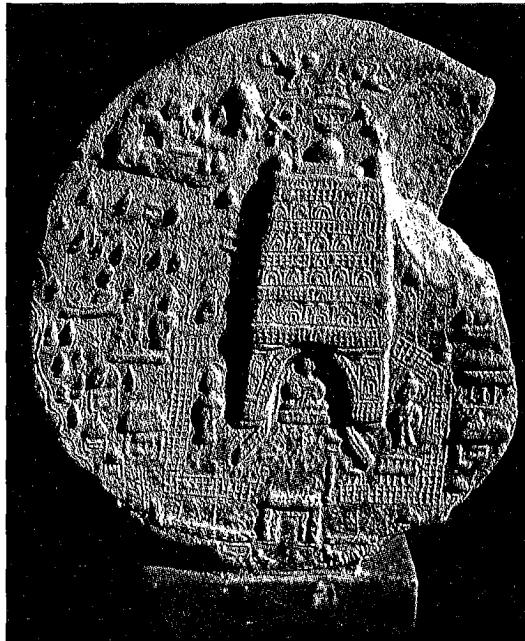


Fig.4 Terracotta plaque of Towering Buddhist Temple from Kumrahar, Bihar, India, 2nd—3rd centuries

(Photo from American Council for Southern Asian Art, University of Michigan, courtesy
University of Michigan History of Art Department, Visual Resources Collections)

① Although currently from a much later rebuilding, there is evidence to suggest that even early forms of the temple at Bodh Gaya followed the same morphology as other towering temples of the region. John Guy, “The Mahabodhi temple: pilgrim souvenirs of Buddhist India,” *The Burlington Magazine* 133.1059 (1991): 356-367. Faxian (法显, ca. 337—422) describes the temple at Bodh Gaya as a “*data*” (大塔), see: James Legge, trans. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of His Travels in India & Ceylon in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, (Chinese text): 31.

② Dietrich Seckel, “*Stūpa* elements surviving in East Asian Pagodas,” in *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, ed. Anna Livera Dallapiccola (with Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallement) (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980): 249-259. In his “*The Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics” Daniel Boucher reads the upper portion of the building as having an *āmalaka*, but that is not in evidence in the high-resolution image I have.

doorways, similar to that containing the Buddha image on the first story. At the top, the approximate width of the arched opening for the Buddha image, is a mounded stūpa with a mast through its center and woven railing at its base. The corners of this upper story are punctuated with small finials. This plaque has not only been used by scholars as a source of information for early Buddhist pilgrimage objects, it has also been a source for understanding the early towering temples in India, the majority of which are associated with Hindu worship.^① But, like the religious architecture of China, the essential elements of temple architecture in India were shared across religious sects as an architectural language. An inquiry into the symbolic potential of the Hindu temple is therefore instructive in understanding why the storied reliquary composed of reduplicated Chinese palaces might have resonated with lay Chinese patrons as much, or more than, the mounded stūpa.

The Timber Architecture of Buddhism and the Regenerative Power of the Mountain

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Because of the dominance of stone in the construction of later Hindu temple architecture, it is easy to forget that the vocabulary of wooden palaces with masonry foundations were critical for expressing the divine power of local deities in South Asia, including the Buddha. These timber forms were added as a façade to mountains in the early centuries CE, both in actual timber members and in carved relief. The combination of timber and masonry infused the earliest Buddhist architecture, and was also critical in the development of towering temple architecture during the same period. In this section I review the essential characteristics of South Asian Buddhist architecture through limited remains at early monasteries and caves temples. Then I summarize research on the South Asian towering temple to show how these same forms were used to create an idealized mountain.

The earliest Buddhist monastic complexes combined open-air stūpas with timber buildings for other aspects of Buddhist life and worship.^② Although the ta discussed in the Foshuo zaota gongdejing needed to only have a relic, body, pillar, and covering, we know that the stūpa of the early centuries BCE-CE consisted of as many as seven parts (Fig. 1): a (1) drum to elevate the (2) mound, a (3) central pillar (*yasti*) extending upwards from a (4) reliquary chamber, through a (5) square base (*harmikā*) surrounded by a (6) railing (*vedikā*). The *yasti* is then crowned by one or more (7) ceremonial umbrellas

① Shown in: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Early Indian Architecture*: 105 and 114.

② The literature on the significance of the South Asian stūpa is very rich, with multiple separate volumes and articles dedicated to its explication from both historical and religious perspectives. See, for example, Jason Hawkes and Akira Shimada, eds., *Buddhist Stūpas in South Asia*, 2009; Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, 1985; Anna Livera Dallapiccola (with Stephanie Zingel-ave Lallemand), *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, 1980; and Anagarika Brahmacari Govinda, *Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa*, 1976. Most consider the stūpa to be a multivalent symbol of the *parinirvāna* of the Buddha, his teachings, and even the Buddha himself, see: Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971, rpt. 1980): 21, and 21n.1. Other scholars go further to suggest that the stūpa is more than a "symbol," it is an actual manifestation of the sacred power of the Buddha and therefore cognate with the Buddha and his teachings, John C. Irwin, "Origins of Form and Structure in Monumental Art, (Editor's Summary)" in Karel Werner, ed., *Symbols in Art and Religion* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990): 61.

(chhatrāvali).^① The primary rite of worship at a stūpa is circumambulation (pradakṣīna) to the right following and replicating the course of the sun. The woven form of the stone vedikā suggest that wood was used for at least portions of the first Buddhist stūpas, as do the wooden pillars have been found in yasti cavities extending from the top of some stūpa mounds.^②

Furthermore, the stūpa was only one part of a larger monastic complex which could include one or more caitya-gṛha, buildings designed for a combination of circumambulation around the caitya as well as congregational worship, and the vihāra or monastic quarters (Fig. 5). The term caitya, which may have originally denoted the corporeal relic, came to be used to refer to the stūpa, but could also refer to a "... temple, sacred tree (vriksha-caitya) and even an image of Buddha. However unlike the open-air stūpa itself, it was housed by the hall to shelter the devotee."^③ Constructed of timber vaulting on a masonry foundation, the caitya hall (caitya-gṛha) is believed to have developed as a means to cover the caitya and devotee so that worship could take place more comfortably in inclement weather.^④

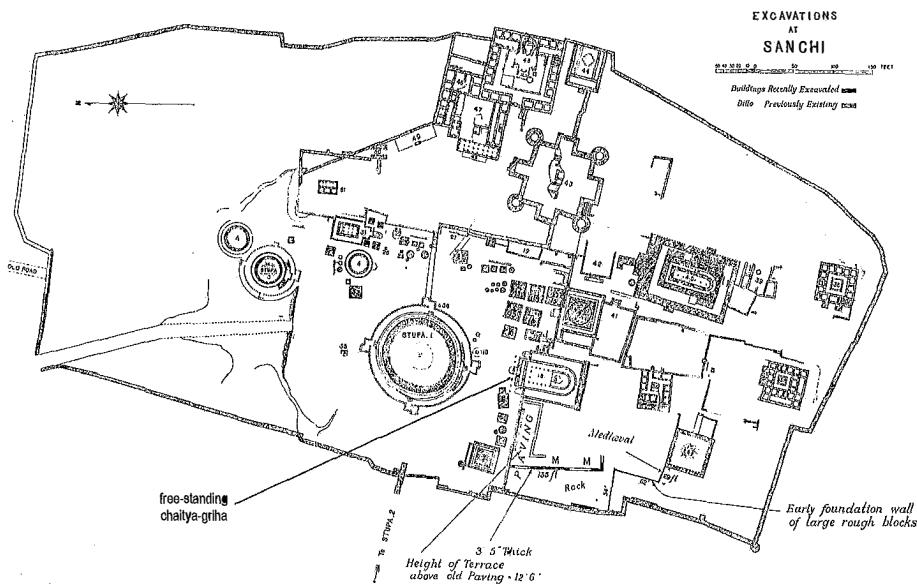


Fig.5 Site plan showing excavations at Sāñcī including free-standing stūpas with later caitya-gṛhas and monasteries, Madhya Pradesh, India

(Plan after John Marshall, A Guide to Sanchi, pl. X)

① Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 24.

② For a discussion of the evidence for timber being used for the central pillar in the stupa, see Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 24n. 12. Peter Harvey suggests that these may have been pre-Buddhist yupas that would have been encased in the stūpa by "converted brahmins." See: Peter Harvey, "Venerated Objects and Symbols of Early Buddhism," in Karel Werner, ed., Symbols in Art and Religion: 90.

③ Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 21.

④ The form developed from a circular hall to an apsidal shape, which was recreated in live rock when the grottoes were carved, Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 41-48.

Although the original freestanding timber buildings of early South Asian Buddhist monasteries are lost to time, the famous rock-cut versions of these structures provide an early example of the importance of the mountain and multi-story palace in the conception of the divine paradise (in Buddhist or other South Asian religious sects). However the monastic complexes excavated into the cliff faces of the Indian Deccan during the 3rd through 2nd centuries BCE also show that an additional layer of symbolic meaning was added to the form of the free-standing monastery and caitya hall, now contained by the numinous mountain itself. Many of the cave temples had facades made either partially or fully out of wood, reflecting the freestanding prototype. Yet, the cave entries allowed for a sculptural expression, potentially of religious belief, through the carving of miniaturized palaces on the surface of the rock. It is here that architectural historians have turned to explore the complex symbolism embodied in the towering temples developed in the early centuries CE.

A close reading of the façade of the caitya hall at Karla will help to illustrate this point. Dating to approximately the 2nd century, the 38-meter high caitya hall stands out as one of the most grand of any of the Buddhist grottoes in South Asia (Fig. 6). Beyond the columned façade are a large entry verandah and an internal façade with three doorways into the interior. The central doorway is marked by a large horseshoe-shaped arch leading into the apsidal hall, with a stūpa at the apse. The side doors lead to the circumambulatory path. Although the arch itself is made of stone, it is clearly a representation of a timber tradition of freestanding ritual halls.^①

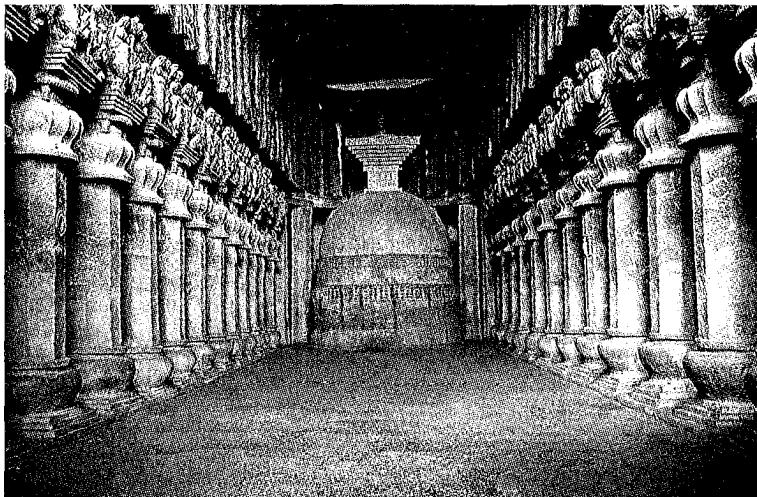


Fig.6 Hall with timber ribs and stūpa-shaped caitya, Caitya Hall, Karla Caves,
Mahārāṣṭra, India, 1st—2nd centuries

(Photo from American Council for Southern Asian Art, University of Michigan. Courtesy
University of Michigan History of Art Department, Visual Resources Collections)

^① Original timber rafters added to the ceiling of the apsidal hall still visible on the interior enhance the illusion of a freestanding structure made of wood, Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 154-155.

The caitya windows and railings on the walls of the Karla verandah are abstracted forms of royal palaces including registers of railings, barrel vaults, and horseshoe arches, forms strikingly similar to what we see roughly inscribed on the Kumrahar plaque (Fig. 7).^① Given the use of timber to heighten the illusion of freestanding architecture in the Buddhist cave, one can reasonably conclude that the relief is a representation of South Asian timber palaces as would have been familiar to the local inhabitants.^②

Their multiplication of miniaturized palatial facades on the walls of the Karla verandah is an effective expression of the transformative power and expansive presence of the Buddha. The reduplication of the body of the Buddha as an expression of his superior wisdom and divine power appears frequently

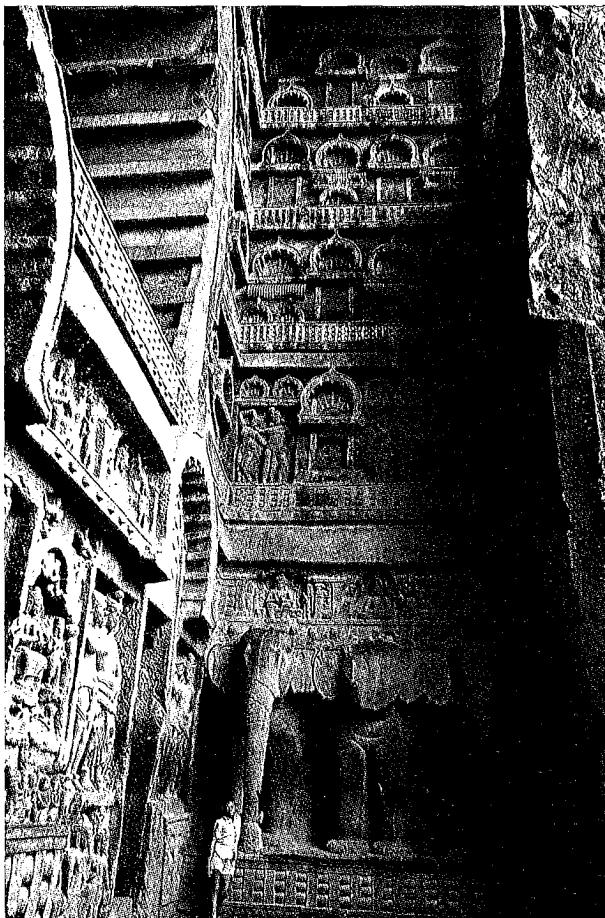


Fig.7 Right side of Verandah, Caitya Hall, Karla Caves, Mahārāṣṭra, India, 1st—2nd centuries

(Photo from American Council for Southern Asian Art, courtesy University of Michigan History of Art Department, Visual Resources Collections)

① Vidya Dehejia, "On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art," *The Art Bulletin* 72.3 (1990): 385.

② Indeed the reliefs on Buddhist monuments are so detailed that they have long been used to reconstruct the architectural landscape of early India. See, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Early Indian Architecture*: 32-69.

seen in narrative panels of one of the most well known miracles, the Great Miracle of Śrāvasti found in Chapter 12 of the *Divyāvadāna*.^① In artistic renderings of this story, the divine power of the Buddha, one able to convert disbelievers, was also expressed sculpturally as the reproduction of the body of the Buddha along a vertical axis (Fig. 8). In the early centuries CE, with the development and popularization of the *Avatārasaka Sūtra*, the meaning of replication appears to have been extended to suggest a general “Buddhist theophany,” if not the myriad Buddhist realms more specifically.^②

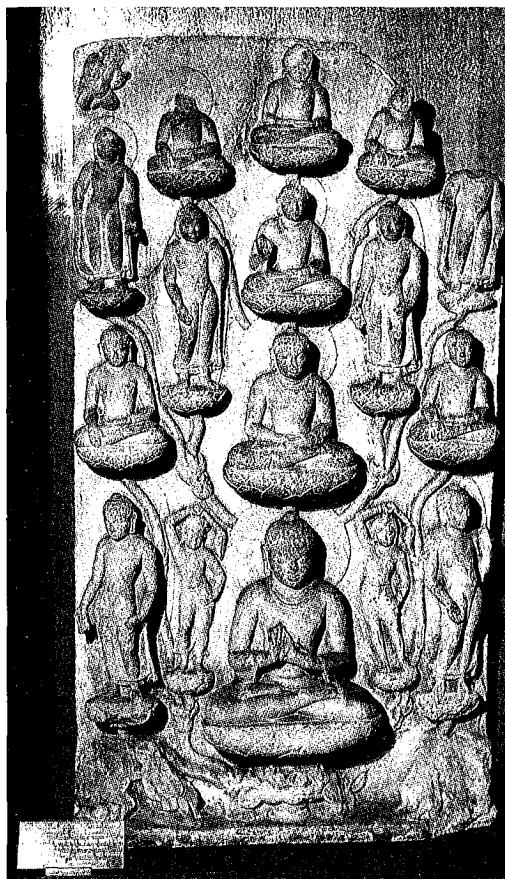


Fig.8 Miracle of Śrāvasti, sandstone, Sarnath (now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, India), Gupta period, ca. 5th century

(Photo by John C. Huntington, courtesy of The Huntington Photographic Archive at The Ohio State University)

^① See: Mitra, Buddhist Monuments: 5, and Andy Rotman, trans., *Divine Stories: Divyāvadāna*, pt. 1 (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008): 278-281.

^② By the early centuries CE, replication was seen in a number of different texts associated more closely with Mahāyāna Buddhism. Because it is not specifically associated with a narrative sequence in much of the Buddhist art of the early centuries CE, John Rosenfield suggests that connotation of replication during this period is better understood as expressing a “Buddhist theophany” more generally. See his *Dynastic Art of the Kushans*: 236-238.

Altar and Pillar: Horizontal and Vertical Axes of the Universal Mountain

The concept of the cave housing the source of spiritual development and divine rebirth was clearly important enough for South Asian builders and patrons, Hindu and Buddhist, to seek to create the form independently of the natural mountain. The towering temples of the early centuries CE were the next level of abstraction in this symbolic architecture where divine generative power is found in the heart of the mountain.

But how is one to design an efficacious reproduction of the mountain-residences of the gods? And if that were accomplished, how would one regulate and control the spiritual power of the mountain? As detailed by Michael Meister, the dramatic form of the Hindu temple, both north and south, organized the morphemes of the language of Indian palatial architecture around a central vertical axis using the ritual diagram of the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*, the altar of first creation, as a ground plan (Fig. 9).^① Typically composed of either 9x9 or 8x8 squares depending on the particular symbolism desired by the designer, the diagram refers to the altar used at the moment of the earth's creation, when the demon preventing the separation of the earth from the heavens was pinned to the earth by protective deities.^② The deities are represented on the plan as occupants of the individual squares on the periphery, or, in the case of the 8x8 plan half-squares at the corners. In either plan the width is three units with the central unit being 3x3 or 4x4 squares. This is considered to be the space of the generative principle, *brahman*.^③ With the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala* as its plan, the builder is able to harness the generative power of the "supernal man" to create a monument that might aid in the quest for enlightenment or rebirth in paradise. As Kramrisch explains in *The Hindu Temple*, the "solar-spatial symbolism is primary and the lunar symbolism is accommodated within the *Vāstu-diagram*." When rendered into a building plan, the border is divided into 32 units, representing the regents of the four planets who rule over the points represented by the cardinal directions (as the equinoctial and solstitial points) and the regents of the 28 Nakshatras, or the lunar mansions of the course of the moon.^④ The diagram may have been drawn full-scale onto the ground to ensure proper empowering of the structure itself, but of course, these lines would have been completely lost as the building came into being.^⑤

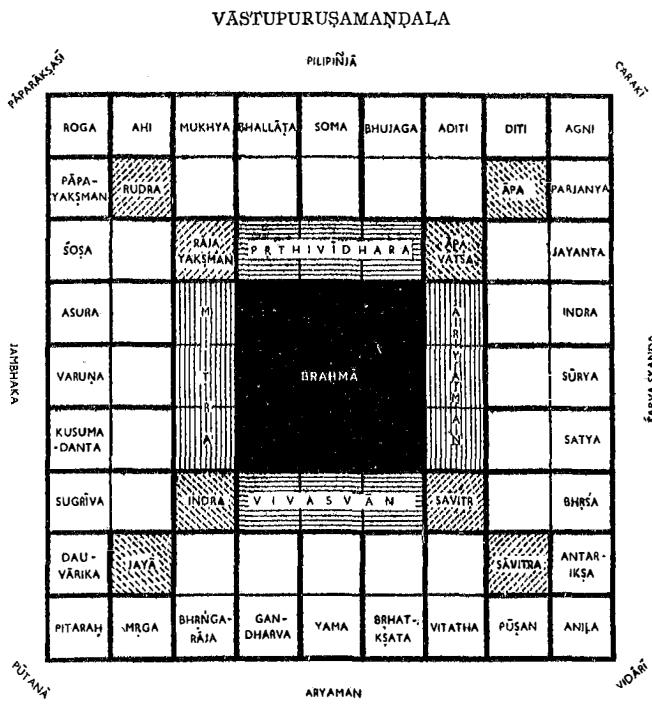
① Michael Meister, "Prāsāda as Palace: Kutina Origins of the Nagara Temple," *Artibus Asiae* 49.3-4 (1988—1989): 256-257.

② Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol. 1 (Delhi, Varanasi, Patna: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1946, rpt. 1980): 67-97.

③ Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*: 88.

④ Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*: 31.

⑤ For evidence of the use of South Asian methods for determining the columnation of a Chinese style palatial hall, see Tracy Miller, "Naturalizing Buddhist Cosmology in the Temple Architecture of China: The Case of the Yichui Pillar," in *Heaven on Earth: Temples Ritual and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*, ed. Deena Ragavan (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2013): 17-40.

Fig. 9 *Vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*(Drawing after Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 32)

But why a towering form? The South Asian temple was constructed using the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala* as its plan, but its elements were also projected vertically. Again, as shown by Michael Meister, this process was accomplished through a basic post (gnomon) and cord, the most fundamental building tools, using the circle to orient the building to the cardinal directions (thereby coordinating it with the rising and setting of the sun and moon) and generate, initially, a square, octagonal, or multi-faceted plan. These monuments were at once the first altar of cosmic creation and the base from which one could construct a universal cosmic mountain, a replica of Mount Sumeru, as a means to directly access the highest forms of divinity depending on the deity (or relic) housed within it. Climbing the ta might aid in the conceptualization of the ritual process. Guided by a master, either monk or priest, the process of ritual progression would be materially manifest to the aspirant:

Such multitiered structures represent the temple as palace (Skt. *prāsaāda*...) for the enshrined divinity, using the morphology of terraces, vaults, gables, and pavilions taken from an urban architecture in ancient India known to us through Buddhist rock-cut replicas and its representation in relief carvings of the last few centuries B.C. and the first centuries A.D. Organized around a central axis, however, the temple regularizes such an architecture to meet its symbolic needs.^①

① Meister, "Prāsaāda as Palace," 256.

A comparison of sources extant in India from the early medieval period shows that early towering Hindu and Buddhist temples shared many of the same powers and might therefore require they satisfy the same symbolic needs in their outer appearance. For example, in the Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtra* in 8000 Lines (*Asṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*), translated into Chinese in the 2nd century, the temple of Bodh Gaya, and other temples built in its manner, are described as providing great power in this life, including protection from all harm:

Furthermore, Kauśika, just as those men or ghosts who have gone to the seat of enlightenment (bodhimanḍa), or to the vicinity of the seat of enlightenment, or to its interior, or have gone to the foot of the Bodhi tree itself, they accordingly cannot be harmed by men or ghosts, even with the help of evil animals, or be injured or taken possession of by them, except as a result of former deeds... In the same way Kauśika, where a son or daughter of good family will set up, preserve, [etc.] this perfection of wisdom, there, Kauśika, beings cannot be harmed... Why? Because by this perfection of wisdom, Kauśika, this spot of ground is made a true shrine (caitya bhūta) for all beings...^①

Significantly, this “true shrine” had an interior the patron or other devotee could visit to gain closer access to the place of enlightenment itself, rather than an open-air shrine.

A discussion of similar powers appears in documents of the same period describing Hindu temples. The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, likely a seventh century text, contains a description of a Viṣṇu temple that describes the power it can transmit to those who sponsor its building or worship at the site. The powers of the structure are similarly to the “true shrine” of Bodh Gaya—it is capable of healing illness and protecting the visitor from calamity, as well as allowing the patron to live in heaven for eternity, making them a cakravartin(转轮王):

“One who builds such a temple in accordance with the prescriptions and always worships all gods is known as a cakravartin in the beginning of the Tretāyuga; he resides in heaven as long as he wishes, and then he attains communion with Viṣṇu... Undoubtedly, anyone who enters it is not susceptible to disease, sudden death, calamity. Demons have no power over him...”^②

Alexander Lubotsky has linked this seventh century text iconographically with the Gupta Temple at Deogarh (ca. 525), one of the earliest examples showing the essential characteristics of the North Indian temple. Although the superstructure of this temple is no longer intact, stone remains scattered around the site indicate that it once consisted of multiple stories of miniaturized palace forms including pillared halls and arched dormer windows. The more complete form of this development can be seen in the superstructure of the Rājīvalocana Temple in Rajim, Madhya Pradesh of ca. 600 (Fig. 10), and although highly abstracted , similarities are still visible. In both examples we see a tri-partite arrangement

① From the *Asṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* 28, quoted in Daniel Boucher, “The *Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics.” 3. Emphasis mine.

② Alexander Lubotsky, “Iconography of the Viṣṇu Temple at Deogarh and the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*,” *Ars Orientalis* 26 (1996): 65.

at the lowest level punctuated by a central doorway. The first level above the base appears at a larger scale, with the architectural forms reducing in scale at each level from bottom to top. A combination of pillars and arched windows are used to suggest a greater space than is actually represented. The upper crowning element is the size of the central chamber located on the space of brahman, the generative center of the *vāstupuruṣa mandala*. A major difference can be seen at Rajim, however, in that the corner elements are miniaturized examples of the temple as a whole, with its crowning *āmalaka*, rather than retaining the original palatial symbolism from which the architecture developed. The towering temple at Bodh Gaya and the Hindu temples appear to have developed using the same symbolic language, a symbolic language that was fully formed and in use in the northern reaches of the Yellow River valley by the fifth century as we can see in the Northern Wei Cao Tiandu (曹天度) stone ta of 466 (Fig. 2).¹⁰

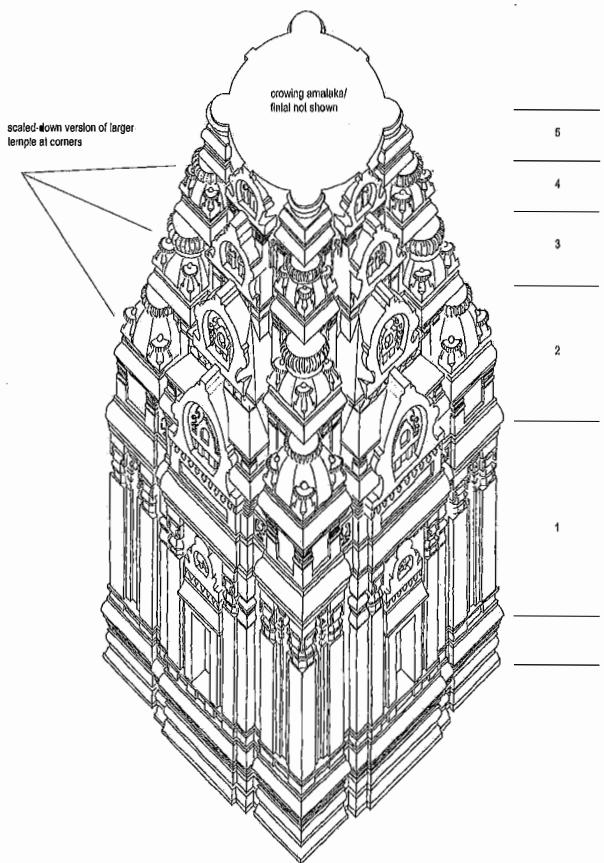


Fig.10 Rajim, Rājīvalocana temple, Rajim, Chhattisgarh, India, original construction ca. 600
(Axonometric drawing after Michael Meister “Prāsāda as Palace,” Fig. 23, courtesy Michael Meister)

¹⁰ For more on the Cao Tiandu stone ta, see Shi Shuqing (史树青), “Bei Wei Cao Tiandu zao qianfo shita” (北魏曹天度造千佛石塔), Wenwu 1 (1980): 68-71.

Thus, when the early pilgrims traveled from China to India, multi-storied temples were being constructed for more than just the acquisition of karmic merit, they were tools for actualizing divine power. Through the simple act of their construction and use, they were believed to be capable of protecting the devoted from all harm and, potentially, provide access to divinity itself. But if a patron wanted to be reborn in a specific Buddhist paradise, such as the five pure abodes, these monuments, great or small, would need to be consecrated with a Buddhist relic of some kind. Perhaps patrons at the highest levels, the emperors of dynasties with capitals at Pingcheng, Luoyang, and Nanjing, desired to create authentic Buddhist towering temples with the same iconography in order to gain these other benefits.^① They needed more than just karmic merit, divine support for their rule and the elimination of calamities would prove they held the Mandate of Heaven, a concept critical for imperial legitimacy in the Chinese sphere. A rereading of the descriptions of early *futu* suggests that the imperial patrons of Buddhism during the Northern-Southern dynasties period were aware of the difference between the *stupa* and towering temple and sought to create the latter for their own purposes.

Gongtaazhidu (宫塔制度) and the Universal Mountain in China

Early Buddhist visual culture in China reflects a translation of the fundamental concepts at work in the well-developed sacred architecture used for Buddhism (and other religions) in South Asia into the local architectural language. Yet, similarities with indigenous beliefs in South and East Asia facilitated its spread. The spiritual power of mountains and the caves leading into them has long been understood as a human universal, and were also part of Chinese culture before the introduction of Buddhism. In Chapter 6 of the *Daodejing* (道德经) we read of the limitless power found in mountain valleys, the “root of heaven and earth”:

The valley spirit never dies (浴神不死)
It is called the mysterious female (是胃玄牝)
The gate of the mysterious female (玄牝之門)
Is called the root of heaven and earth (是胃天地根)
Gossamer it is; seemingly insubstantial (县县呵若存)
Yet never consumed through use (用之不勤)^②

^① Building multi-storied *ta* was extremely popular among the rulers of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. For more on their activities see Zhong Xiaoqing (钟晓青), “Beiwei Luoyang Yongningsi ta fuyuan tantao (北魏洛阳永宁寺塔复原探讨), *Wenwu* 5 (1998): 58, and Fu Xinian et al., eds. *Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi*, di er juan: 200-201.

^② *Daodejing* (道德经), chapter 6 in the traditional ordering of the text. My translation follows Victor Mair, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990): 65, with some modification. The Chinese text follows the excavated Mawangdui manuscripts published in: Robert G. Henricks, trans., *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989): 199, with minor modifications. The significance of mountains in Chinese religion has been the subject of much scholarship past and present. The similar interest in caves as an entry point into the earth is seen as early as the passage John Hay has discussed parallels between the *Daodejing* passage and the concepts of Hindu temple architecture are in his *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute of America, 1985): 62.

In this section I review scholarship discussing the translation of the forms we see at Karla into the Chinese sphere, using the paired caves at Yungang Grottoes from the late 5th century (Figs. 11, 12) as an example. Then I turn to the religious beliefs that allow a similar relationship between caves and towering temples in South Asia and China.

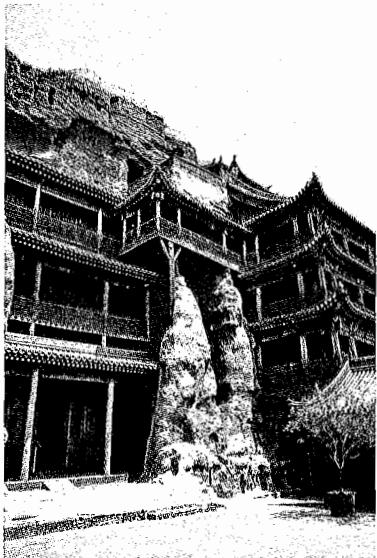


Fig.11 Timber facades of Caves 6 and 7, Yungang grottoes, Datong vicinity, Shanxi, China, 17th-century reconstruction
(Photo courtesy Scott Gilchrist)

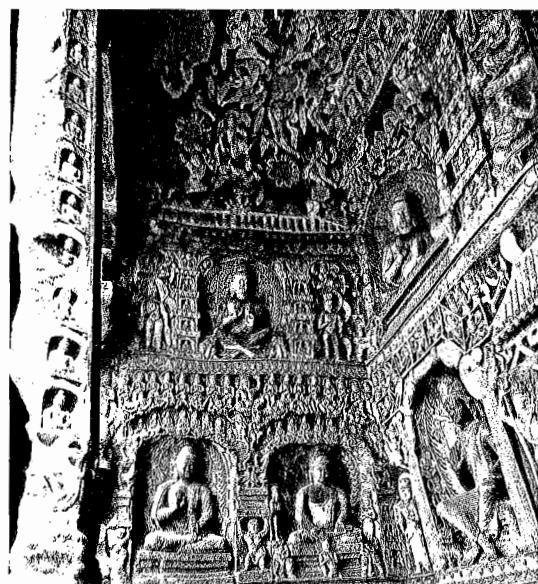


Fig.12 Front verandah of Cave 9, Yungang grottoes, Datong vicinity, Shanxi, China, late 5th century, detail of verandah carvings
(Photo courtesy Scott Gilchrist)

Like the interior of the verandah at Karla, the multitude of palatial facades seen on the paired caves excavated at the sacred Mt. Wuzhou (武州山) (Yungang caves 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, late 5th century) signifies the transformative and infinite power of the Buddha in a localized architectural language.^① The differences between the architectural forms at Karla and Yungang have little to do with medium. Reliefs at both cave sites show representations of timber palatial forms in stone. The architectural facades on the walls similarly suggest that the mountain itself contains, in a rather chaotic and uncontrolled manner, an entire Buddhist universe, where each niche implies a hall, and perhaps even a larger palace complex, behind the surface. In both cases, timber facades and other elements, most of which have been lost to time, would have enhanced this effect. But these localized mountains from which were carved cave temples were clearly insufficient to satisfy the ritual needs of Asians, South and East, during the early centuries CE. The towering temple may have helped satisfy the demand for more accessible, effective, ritual architecture.

One of the most prominent and well-studied examples of the period, the imperially sponsored Yongningsi, located in the heart of the Northern Wei capital of Luoyang, is a case in point. In his Luoyang qielanji (洛阳伽蓝记), Yang Xuanzhi (杨玄之) tells us that the complex was founded by Empress Dowager Ling (灵太后) in 516. The whole was perceived to be on par with, and formally similar to, the imperial palace. The complex was surrounded by a wall covered with rafters and ceramic roof tiles, “in the manner of a contemporary palace wall” (…若今宫墙也..). A Buddha Hall (佛殿) in the north portion of the main ritual compound was said to have been made in the style of the Taijidian, the main audience hall of the imperial palace (…形如太极殿). The lavish decoration of the buildings and the wealth of materials used in the production of images (said to have been made of gold, pearl, and jade, among other media), clearly impressed visitors who left inscriptions stating that the Hall of Treasures on Mt. Sumeru and the Palace of Purity in Tusita Heaven could not compare to it (是以常景碑云：须弥宝殿，兜率净宫，莫尚于斯也).^②

Evidently, the inhabitants of Luoyang imagined the cosmic Mount Sumeru as being covered with heavenly palaces for the divine Buddhas. These palaces have the overall appearance of the imperial palaces with which they were most familiar. The similarity between the architecture of Yongningsi and the imagined appearance of Mt. Sumeru was extended to the most prominent building in the complex: the nine-story (jiu ceng 九层) futu sitting just south of the Buddha Hall. The building appeared to be constructed entirely of timber, but had a solid central core:

① The narrative panels are primarily positioned at eye-level in a direction that suggests the practice of pradaksina. Discussion of the archaeology and dating of the caves can be found in Su Bai, Zhongguo shikusi yanjiu: 76-88. A full description of the narrative panels in Cave 6 can be found in Patricia E. Karetzky, Early Buddhist Narrative Art: Illustrations of the Life of the Buddha from Central Asia to China, Korea, and Japan: 122-127. For more on the significance of pradaksina in South Asian temple architecture and its relationship to cyclical time, see: Stella Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple: 89 and 106.

② Yang Xuanzhi (杨玄之, 6th century). Luoyang qielanji jiaojian (洛阳伽蓝记校笺). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju: 2-17. For an English translation see: Yang Hsüan-chih, A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang, trans. Yi-t'ung Wang. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984: 13-42.

中有九层浮图一所，架木为之，举高九十丈。有刹复高十丈，合去地一千尺。去京师百里，已遥见之。初掘基至黄泉下，得金像三十躯。太后以为信法之征，是以营建过度也。刹上有金宝瓶，容二十五石。宝瓶下有承露金盘三十重，周匝皆垂金铎，复有铁鎔四道，引刹向浮图。四角鎔上亦有金铎，铎大小如一石瓮子。浮图有九级，角角皆悬金铎，合上下有一百二十铎。浮图有四面，面有三户六牖，户皆朱漆。扉上有五行金钉，其十二门二十四扇，合有五千四百枚。复有金镮铺首，殚土木之功，穷造形之巧。佛事精妙，不可思议。绣柱金铺，骇人心目。至于风永夜，宝铎和鸣，铿锵之声闻及十余里……^❶

(Rising nine hundred Chinese feet above the ground, it formed the base for a mast that extended for another one hundred Chinese feet; thus together they soared one thousand Chinese feet above the ground, and could be seen as far away from the capital as one hundred *li*. When the foundation was initially excavated, deep underground were found thirty golden statues. The empress dowager believed this was a sign of her belief in [Buddhist] teachings, and because of this the construction was more excessive [emphasis mine]. On top of the mast was a golden, jeweled urn^❷ with the capacity of twenty-five piculs. Underneath the jeweled urn were thirty tiers of golden dew basins with golden bells hanging from the rims of each basin. Additionally there were four rows of chains linking the mast to the four corners of the *futu*; golden bells, each the size of a one-picul jar, were suspended from the linkworks. The *futu* had nine levels (*ji* 级), with golden bells suspended from the corner of each one, totaling 120 in all. The *futu* had four sides, each having three doors and six windows. Painted in vermilion, each door had five rows of gold nails. Altogether there were 5400 nails on the twenty-four panels of the twelve double doors. In addition the doors were adorned with knockers made of golden rings. The construction embodied the best of masonry and carpentry in the elegance of its design and its excellence of construction. Its Buddhist aspects (*foshi* 佛事) were exquisite and ingenious, are mysterious and cannot be fully understood [emphasis mine]. Its carved beams and gold doorknockers fascinated the eye. On long nights when there was a strong wind, the harmonious jingling of the bejeweled bells could be heard more than ten *li* away. …^❸)

The *futu* in Yongningsi was more elaborate because of the empress wanted to express the sincerity of her belief. It was decidedly not a “tower” (*lou*), but rather a nine-story (*ceng*) or level (*ji*) structure. This may have been an important distinction.^❹ From the miraculous excavation of thirty golden images underneath its foundation, the *futu* had the potential for a Buddhist theophany at its center. The façade of each of the four sides had three doorways and six windows, allowing each level to be a

❶ I have chosen to translate *baoping* (宝瓶) as “jeweled urn” to retain a possible connection with the *baoping* used to hold the ashes of the Buddha in Wei Shou’s “Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism.” See Wei Shou, Weishu: 3028.

❷ This translation follows Yang Hsüan-chih, A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang:15-16, with modifications.

❸ Yang Xuanzhi, Luoyang qielanji jiaojian: 11-12.

❹ As is well known, as early as the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 CE), transcendent beings were known to like towering residences (*xianren hao lou ju* 仙人好楼居), Ban Gu (班固, 32-92). Hanshu (汉书). Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1997: 1241. It would therefore have been appropriate to imagine this new kind of divinity as residing in a tower as well.

replication of the level below. Like representations of the Miracle of Śrāvastī and the veranda of the chaitya hall at Karla, the multiplication upward suggests the power of the Buddha and his expanded presence.

Excavations in the 1970s have allowed modern scholars to understand this structure much better than we could with textual sources alone. The 1996 volume *Bei Wei Luoyang Yongningsi* (北魏洛阳永宁寺) shows that the timber frame pagoda was raised on a square platform of pounded earth, 2.2 m high and 38.2 m square. This platform was faced with limestone and approached by pathways at the four cardinal directions. Archaeologists discovered square bases for perimeter columns on the platform that would have generated nine bays on each of the four sides, as described in textual documentation of the structure. Additionally the excavation confirmed that each side had three doorways, but the configuration of the doorways showed each separated by two windows.^① Zhong Xiaoqing's reconstruction of the structure reflects this perspective, as do the curators of the Henan provincial museum who used it for their exhibition on objects from the site (Fig. 14).^② This is unexpected for a nine-bay wide hall with three doorways. One would imagine the doorways to fall towards the center of the structure, with two bays, perhaps containing windows, in the side bays, as seen in the reconstruction published in Fu Xinian's survey volume.^③ At Yungang the essential form of the palace appears to be three-bays wide, often with a doorway in the central bay (Fig. 12). Perhaps, like the caitya arch in South Asia, the three bay façade signifies the "palace." Thus, the plan of the building reflects a replication as well, here twelve miniaturized "palaces" which are then further multiplied by nine as the ta rises upward.

Although I have not found any texts describing the ta precisely in this manner, the possibility for this type of complex symbolism exists in Yang Xuanzhi's description quoted above. That the "Buddhist aspects (foshi) were exquisite and ingenious, are mysterious and cannot be fully understood," suggests that Empress dowager Ling employed designers, either ritual specialists or builders, or both, who could imbue the structure with spiritual power.

As Zhong Xiaoqing noted in her 1998 article, the columnation of the ta, including the combination of adobe brick and timber columns in the central seven bays, is also idiosyncratic. Each of the corners of the lower floor exterior is composed of a four-column group: three on the exterior edge and a fourth set at a 45° angle to the corner column but pulled slightly toward the center of the structure. The corner columns, furthermore, do not align with any interior columns. The eight central columns on each façade align with the eight columns framing the adobe brick center, but not precisely with the smaller columns contained within the brick. Zhong Xiaoqing proposes that the unusual distribution of the columns was

^① See Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiu suo (中国社会科学院考古研究所), *Bei Wei Luoyang Yongningsi* (北魏洛阳永宁寺), Beijing: Zhongguo dabaike quanshu chubanshe, 1996: 13-19.

^② Zhong Xiaoqing, "Bei Wei Luoyang Yongningsi ta fuyuan tantao:" 51-64.

^③ Fu Xinian et al., eds. *Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi*, di er juan: 208-211.

largely the result of structural concerns. For this monumental building extra reinforcement necessitated multiple columns at the corners and a central core of earthen materials. The lack of consistent alignment of the interior columns may have been the result of the reduction in scale of each individual level.^①

Zhong Xiaoqing's argument is entirely convincing. Yet, I believe the location of the columns on this building might have also had ritual importance. One could describe the Yongningsi *futu* in the same manner as the North Indian temple, whose towering form was beginning to come into fruition at this time. If we understand the plan of the Yongningsi *futu* in this system, the 9 bays in each façade corresponds to the 9x9 diagram used for the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala*, resulting in 32 bays around the periphery. But from what point on the plan was the *maṇḍala* measured? We do have some information regarding the generation of these diagrams during the sixth century. As I have discussed elsewhere, diagrams carved on the walls and the base of the small Buddha hall on the Yicihui pillar (义慈惠石柱) (ca. 562-570) indicate the means by which the distribution of columns was determined using South Asian techniques of laying out the *vāstupuruṣa maṇḍala* for a given temple (Figs. 13, 14).^② The fact that the same size circle could be used to generate different plans was critical to the carvers of the Yicihui pillar, potentially as an expression of the Buddhist concept of interdependent origination as well as controlling time and space.

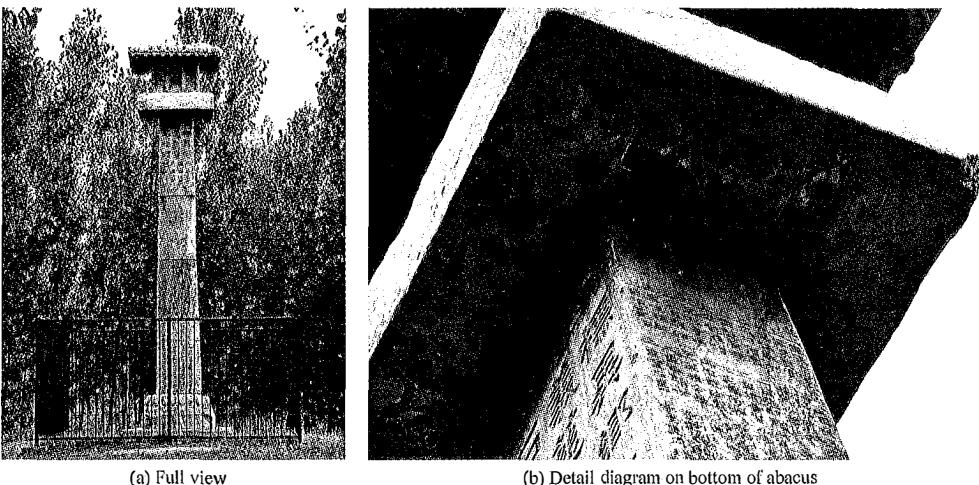


Fig.13 Yicihui Pillar, limestone, Dingxing, Hebei, China, ca. 567-570, h. ca. 6.6 m
(Photo by author)

① Zhong Xiaoqing, "Bei Wei Luoyang Yongningsi ta," 58.

② Tracy Miller, "Naturalizing Buddhist Cosmology in the Temple Architecture of China: The Case of the Yicihui Pillar," in The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminars 9, ed. Deena Ragavan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013): 17-39.

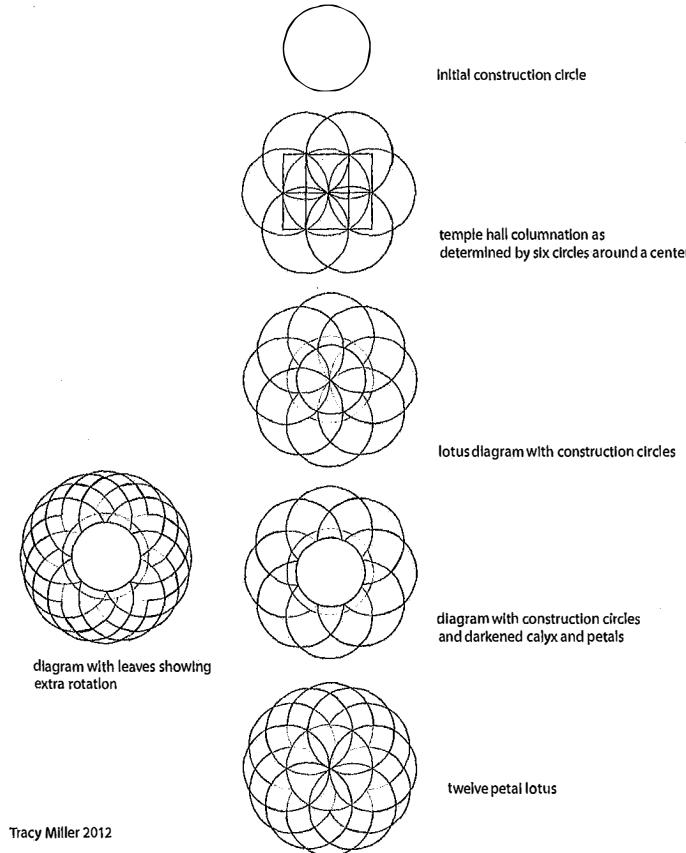


Fig. 14 Yichui Pillar, limestone, Dingxing, Hebei, China, ca. 567-570, h. ca. 6.6 m., diagram showing mandalic derivation of building plan, 8-petal lotus, and 12-petal lotus

(Photo by author)

Although the Buddha hall crowning the Yichui pillar was a sculpture rather than a full-size building, the same technique appears to have been used to determine the complex columnation of the Yongningsl futu, suggesting that “ingenious Buddhist aspects” may have been incorporated into this structure through the plan of the futu itself. Using the central timber pillar and width of the exterior columns as the center and diameter of the construction circles, we can see that a nine-circle diagram, eight circles around the center, was used to locate the corners of the exterior ring of columns as well as the length (Fig. 15(a)) and width of the central adobe brick core (Fig. 15). This diagram is entirely consistent with methods of determining the proportions of the mandalas used for the plans of South Asian temples (Fig. 16).^① A different system appears to be in place for the distribution of columns, however. Again, following the example of the Yichui pillar, whose base was a twelve - petal lotus also

① Michael W. Meister, “Mūṇḍesvāri: Ambiguity and Certainty in the Analysis of a Temple Plan,” in Kaladarsana: American Studies in the Art of India, edited by Joanna G. Williams (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH, 1981): 83.

seemingly derived from the seven-circle diagram. When the thirteen-circle diagram (twelve petals around a center the same diameter those in the 9-circle diagram) is placed on the plan, it seems to locate six of the nine columns around the central adobe-brick core (Fig. 15(b)), and the corners of the fourth ring of columns (15(b)). We have not yet arrived at the grid of the *vastupuruṣa manḍala*, however. Yet, when we look at the diagrams together, we find other information suggesting the grid and the potential symbolic power of this technique. Where the two diagrams come together we find the width of ramps leading up to the central tower (Fig. 15(c)) and, the location of the “supporting” corner columns (Figs. 15(c), 17(a)). If one draws a regular 9×9 grid from those crossing points the columnation for the first floor is fully mapped. Furthermore, just inside the crossing point is the location of the interior single “supporting” column, and the center of brahman, the location of the central pillar for the entire structure, fits neatly within the central square (Fig. 17(b)).

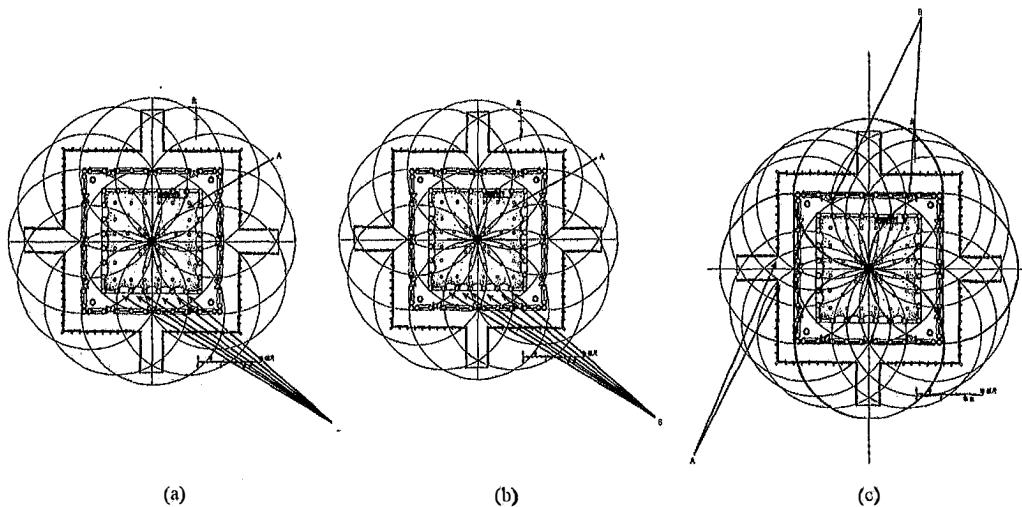


Fig.15 Yongningsi futu, Luoyang, Henan, ca. 516

(Plan modified from Zhong Xiaoqing, Beiwei Luoyang Yongningsi ta fuyuan tantao: 56)

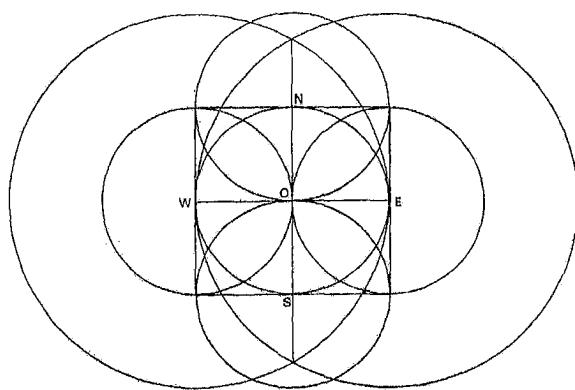


Fig.16 Construction circles to determine plan of the Mundeshvarī Temple

(Drawing after Michael Meister “Ambiguity and Certainty:” 83)

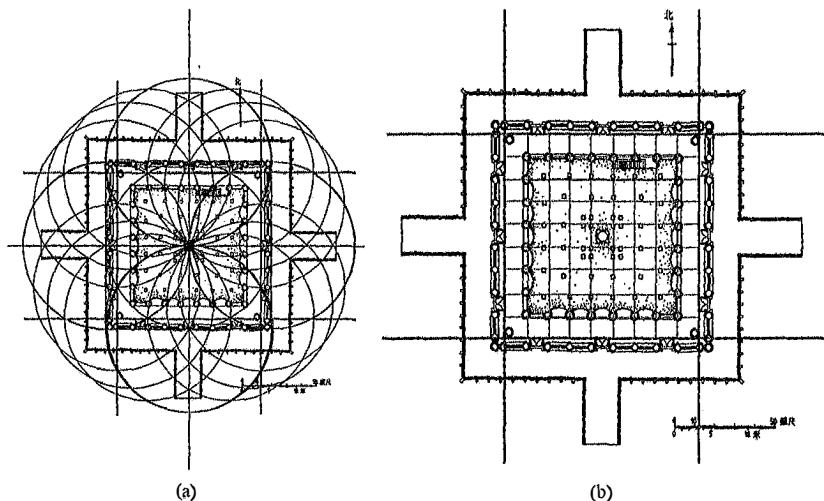


Fig.17 Yongningsi futu, Luoyang, Henan, ca. 516, determination of 9×9 grid
(Added to plan from Zhong Xiaoqing, Beiwei Luoyang Yongningsi ta fuyuan tantao: 56)

One final combination is worth mentioning. According to the Indian astronomer Varāhamihira's sixth century *Brihat Samhita*, a text critical for understanding the use of the *vāstupuruṣa mandala* in the early centuries CE, the 8×8 grid was employed for temples whereas the 9×9 grid was employed primarily for palaces. Clearly, from the evidence we have, multiple systems of measurement were being used, likely to make this monument ever more powerful. Might the 8×8 grid also be employed? Placing a regular 8×8 grid measured according to the construction circles used for the overall plan in a north-south orientation over the plan does not reveal any strong connection in and of itself (Fig. 18(a)). However, if the plan is rotated 45° we get a surprising result. The corner columns of each column ring shown on this reconstruction drawing are at the crossing of a point in the 8×8 grid, providing guidelines for the location of corners and x-axis for the forth and fifth ring of columns, which otherwise fall outside of the 9×9 grid (Fig. 18(b)). By combining the two, all of the columns could be located using this system (Fig. 18(c)), imbuing the monument with symbolism of temple and divine palace in one potent monument.

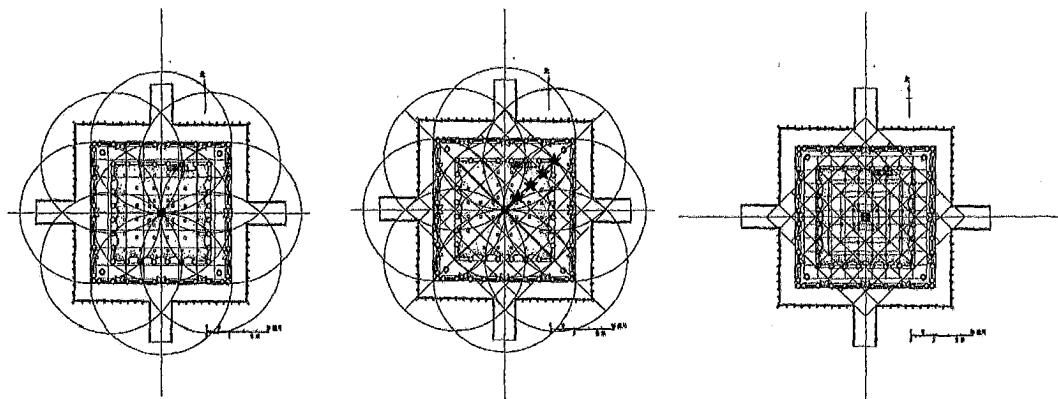


Fig.18 Yongningsi futu, Luoyang, Henan, ca. 516, plan with 8×8 grid
(Added to plan from Zhong Xiaoqing, Beiwei Luoyang Yongningsi ta fuyuan tantao: 56)

Wei Shou's 宮塔制度 or “palatial ta (tower) system” seems an apt description of this complex monument that was both palace and temple, able to not only impress the viewer with its magnificence but also to express the infinite power of the divine Buddha who resides in a palace (天宮) on Mount Sumeru. With its timber façade and masonry central core, one containing images in the niches on the east, west, and south sides, the Yongningsi futu must have appeared very much like a cave temple before its timber façade had fallen away (Figs. 11, 12). However the mountain is chaotic, with unpredictable surfaces along the facade. It is only through carving the interior that the mountain can be rendered into regular forms. Not so with the towering futu/ta. The replication of palaces at multiple levels around a central axis communicates the regenerative power of the *vastūpuruṣa mandala* as a plan for the temple, as well as the three-dimensional space of the temple itself. The central axis is critical in the symbolism of both the stūpa and the towering temple, and is thought to symbolize the cosmogonic moment of creation in the larger Vedic tradition.^① Moreover, an aspirant could climb this structure, allowing access to divinity through a controlled ascent in any setting, urban or rural. With replicated palace forms built on a square plan around the earthen center the monument was at once the altar of first creation and the cosmic Mount Sumeru. With its multiple levels, this cosmic mountain could embody time as well as space: through circumambulation the worshipper reenacts the movement of the sun and moon, represented in the thirty-two peripheral divisions of the *mandala* itself; each story steps inward bringing the worshipper inward and upward to the upper harmika covering the generative brahman center, the spiritual progression of multiple lifetimes reduced, at least symbolically, to a single climb. “Mysterious and cannot be fully understood” indeed.

Conclusion

Using the *vastūpuruṣa mandala* as temple plan and central vertical axis to organize ascension to divine realms allowed for the construction of a perfected cave-temple in any location. A model of Mount Sumeru, the intermediary levels were constructed as layers of luxurious palatial forms organized around the central vertical axis. The upper portion of the tower, whose shape replicated the form of the stūpa reliquary, directly surmounted this generative center. But it is more than the original stūpa. The design of the tower appears to have developed from the rock-cut caitya hall, where the timber temple form was used to express symbolically the divine regenerative power present in the natural mountains themselves. The futu/fotu/ta thus enables the practitioner to transcend the localized landscape; it generates a “u-topian” space to ensure an effective climb regardless of actual location.^② The devotee no longer needs to go to a specific sacred mountain or bodhimanda, rather, a more powerful cosmic

① John Irwin, “The axial symbolism of the early stūpas: an exegesis,” and Michael Meister, “De- and Re-Constructing the Indian Temple,” *Art Journal* 49.4 (1990): 395-400.

② Here I follow John Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) and after him Bernard Faure *Chan Insights and Oversights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 155-174, in the distinction between the worship of “locative” vision as focusing on a particular place vs. the “utopian” vision as placing value on transcending specific locations.

mountain is brought to the devotee for access to a divine Buddha and his regenerative power. That China had its own belief of the power of the cave/mountain to give access to immortality would have only confirmed the truth of these ideas for the local population, thereby facilitating the transmission of Buddhism from South to East Asia. The belief in the regenerative power of the mountain and the replication of the palace form as an appropriate shelter for divinity was critical to the sacred program in all of these contexts. The temple could be more than a reliquary: if truly exquisite the power of the Buddha as the anthropomorphized force of nature could be marshaled to multiply his bodily form, and potentially transform the patron into a cakravartin—knowledge that would certainly convince the potential “heretics” of the power of deity and patron, even in distant lands. Armed with these new principles of construction emperors and empresses in the Yellow River Valley were able to employ the freestanding indigenous architectural language to effectively express Buddhist devotion by generating their own mountain paradises for the gods.

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