

Relic Worship in Buddhism and Its influence on Design, Symbolism and Spatial Organisation of Buddhist Architecture

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Abstract:

Relic worship existed at the centre of the Buddhist tradition from the very beginning, immediately after the death of the Buddha around 483 BCE. The recovery of the holy relics of the Buddha, originally enshrined in eight stupas, and their division into 84,000 parts for enshrining them in stupas among various regions by Emperor Ashoka, marked the propagation of Buddhism and the cult practice of relic worship. Buddhism began to appear in the archaeological record around the 3rd century BCE, revealing structures such as stupas and chaityagrihas, recognized as fundamental Buddhist monuments, and later viharas (monasteries). The spatial organization of these sites is relic-centered: the stupa forms the core, chaityagrihas provide congregational spaces, and viharas function as peripheral residential complexes, supporting ritual practice, monastic discipline, and community engagement.

This paper explores how relic worship influenced the form, decoration, and meaning of Buddhist monuments. Rather than viewing relics as merely lifeless objects of worship, this research suggests that they were primary drivers of monastic and architectural development. To examine this, four cases were selected: Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, and Borobudur, each representing a different stage in the development and proliferation of Buddhist architecture. At Sanchi, ritual movement centered on the stupa, drawing devotees into circular rounds around the relic, circumambulating the stupa. Amaravati added refinement to the concept with elegant carvings, in which narrative and relic veneration blended into a single visual form. Ajanta brought the tradition indoors, integrating relic shrines into monastic routine, and Borobudur elevated it, where pilgrims climbed through levels representing stages of enlightenment. Through these examples, relics remained the religious focus of Buddhist architecture, their form evolving to suit local culture and artistic preferences. This study presents relic worship as an evolving, unifying force that intertwined devotion, symbolism, and space in ways still experienced today.

Keywords: Ajanta, Amaravati, Borobudur, Buddhist architecture, Relic Worship, Sanchi.

1. Introduction:

The development of Buddhist architecture cannot be understood without realizing the central importance of relic worship. From the earliest times after the death of the Buddha, his corpse and symbolic remains were accorded object status as things of reverence that held profound spiritual significance. They were not merely revered as symbols of the Buddha's presence but as meaningful conduits of Buddha's

teaching and compassion. Over time, these remains shaped the development of architectural typologies intended to enshrine, venerate, and symbolically present them, while also facilitating communal assembly, ritual practice, and interaction with the sacred[1].

Stupa, the original and most familiar of these types, started as a simple mound of earth over the Buddha's relics. But as the tradition spread, it developed into an extremely symbolic structure that symbolized the universe, the enlightenment of the Buddha, and the axis uniting the human and heavenly worlds [2]. In addition to stupas, chaitya halls served to be ritual buildings where the relic was made the center of public piety, and viharas incorporated shrines within monastic domestic quarters, justifying daily discipline with divine practice. These architectural innovations were not random; they were propelled by the living cult of relic veneration that constantly influenced the organization and experience of the space.

Though a great deal has been said regarding Buddhist art and architecture, less has been said regarding the immediate role of relic veneration in shaping these monuments. Current scholarship tends to be concerned with stylistic development, regional differences and iconographic agendas. This research instead places the relic itself at center stage as the driver of change — considering how the imperative to enshrine, commemorate, and ritualize the relics, dictated the planning of monuments, iconography and their spatial configurations that structured the flow of devotees[3].

To pursue this study[4],[5], the research adopts four cases that trace the historical development and geographical distribution of relic-focused architecture: Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, and Borobudur. These places were chosen not only for their architectural significance but also because, when taken together, they illustrate various contexts in which worship of relics reconfigured Buddhist space. At Sanchi, the stupa set the template of relic as sacred center around which ritual routes were structured. Amaravati illustrated how narrative art could be incorporated into the very fabric of a reliquary monument. Ajanta transferred the cult into rock-cut settings that modulated into monasticism. Then Borobudur generalized the relic tradition to a cosmological vision, wherein the monument itself is a mandala of enlightenment. Through comparison of these sites, the fundamental question, How did the cult of relics influence the evolution Buddhist monuments, shape their symbolic and iconographic expressions, and determine the spatial organization of Buddhist monastic complexes?, emerged.

This research is constrained to a detailed study of four significant cases — Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, and Borobudur — spanning historical periods and cultural settings of Buddhist architecture. The focus lies in the convergence of relic cult and architecture, rather than to include a comprehensive survey of all Buddhist monuments. In as much as relic worship is commonly accepted as core to Buddhist piety, its explicit architectural consequences are usually not well examined. Much writing analyzes artistic style, building technique, or religious symbolism in a vacuum. This study addresses this lacuna by foregrounding relic veneration, arguing that it generated some of the most refined architectural and spatial expressions of the Buddhist past and reveals how belief systems actively shape material culture and lived space.

Employing secondary sources, archaeological records, inscriptions, canonical texts, architectural inventories, and historical-interpretive models, the study is qualitative in nature. The analysis integrates three perspectives: architectural typology to trace formal development; iconographic and symbolic interpretation to examine meanings invested in relics; and spatio-ritual analysis to understand how architecture mediated religious practice. Finally, this study contends that relic cult was not an auxiliary form of Buddhist piety but a fundamental ethos that repeatedly transformed buildings throughout regions

and centuries. In the process, it places relic cults in the forefront as an active agent that did not merely conserve memory but also stimulated imagination, leading to some of the most long-lived structures of the Buddhist world.

2. Literature review:

Interdisciplinary research in recent years has remapped relics from marginal devotional novelties back towards the centre as key impellers of religious practice and material culture. The British Museum publication, *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism* (eds. Janice Stargardt & Michael Willis) synthesizes textual, epigraphic, archaeological, and museum-based research to contend that relic cults organized pilgrimage, patronage, and monument construction throughout South and Southeast Asia. It is crucial for comprehending the archaeological evidence for relic deposits as well as the invocation of relics in textual sources[6]. Expanding on such syntheses, author highlights three aspects: (1) relics engendered social and ritual need for permanent monuments; (2) enshrinement practices conditioned patronage patterns (kings, guilds, lay donors); and (3) relics functioned as authoritative foci around which iconography and spatial practice cohered. These are the theoretical anchor points for approaching relic worship as an active force in architectural change (not just an interpretive theme).

Traditional art-historical and archaeological scholarship demonstrates how the stupa emerged as a reliquary form and gradually evolved into a symbolic cosmos. Guha-Thakurta's discussion of the production and reinterpretation of monuments at Sanchi illustrates how later generations reworked and re-presented the stupa, demonstrating how meaning was accumulated through reuse, additional toranas, and narrative panels. This illuminates the evolution from plain reliquary to multi staged ritual complex[7].

Aniconic and early visual language studies (e.g., examinations of early Sanchi and Amaravati panels) contend that before widespread use of Buddha images, emblems, footprints, and narrative scenes were employed by the stupa complex to signal sacred presence — a strategy only intelligible when read in relation to the central relic cult and circumambulatory rituals. Current debates regarding aniconism and the significance of emblematic imagery are significant for connecting relics and iconographic decisions[8].

The elaborate sculptures on the railings and drum of the Amaravati stupa connect the relic inside to Jataka stories, ritual processions, and scenes of heavenly worship, turning circumambulation into a narrative journey for devotees. Recent museum catalogues and research (such as British Museum and Oxford/ANU resources) record these panels and elaborate their didactic and devotional roles. Becker and others research on Andhra stūpas illustrates how patronage at the local level and artistic networks conditioned relief programmes, which in turn served relic cults through instruction in doctrine and narration of sacred biography to devotees who walked around the stupa[9].

Analysis of Ajanta architecture and painting helps explain how spatial rhythm, light, and painted story are used to engage the stupa shrine in the development of devotional experience. This literature is helpful in understanding how relic cults influenced not just plan but also ambience and ritual programming. More recent remote sensing and conservation literature assists in reconstructing site contexts and pilgrim styles, which are significant while positing ritual routes and movement patterns based on relic cults [10]. It also demonstrates how the apsidal chaitya, nave, and apse-stupa integrate procession, ritual practice, and meditative focus, creating a carefully structured sensory environment for engaging with the relic [11].

Borobudur scholarship (Soekmono's classic monograph and subsequent works) addresses the monument expressly as a three-dimensional mandala universalizing the relic principle: rather than a secret center only accessible by direct circumambulation, the whole monument contains relic meaning through concentric terraces and narrative relief ranges. The climb path is rendered a staged liturgy — a fleshed-out cosmology that fuses relic worship with Mahāyāna didactic programs. UNESCO and expert research continue to be standard references on the monument's architectural plan and ritual meanings[12].

Comparative studies and recent overviews help explain how a single religious practice led to different architectural forms across cultures. Articles in journals like Religions, Antiquity, and MDPI series offer comparative typologies useful to the Sanchi–Amaravati–Ajanta–Borobudur progression. Such studies are handy when making claims of continuity (stupa as axis) and divergence (size, narrative, monastic incorporation, mandala externalization)[13].

Table 1: Past Studies and actions to be taken for this study.

Author, Year	Findings from the Study	Limitations of the Study	Actions in Present Study to Overcome These Limitations	Lessons learnt
Sanchi studies (via “Sanchi Stupa No. 2” info) – reliefs, early decoration, and donor inscriptions)[7]	Shows Stupa No.2 has some of the earliest extensive decorative reliefs in India; inscriptions like Chandragupta II’s show continued patronage; demonstrates the complex layering of relief, donor identity, narrative depictions.	Many of the relief panels are studied in isolation; less work on how spatial circulation / pradakṣiṇā paths were shaped by relic placement; less comparison with Southeast Asian monumental stupas (e.g. Borobudur).	In this study, examine the spatial layout of Sanchi stupas in relation to relic chamber + pradakṣiṇā, then compare with the other case studies to show similarities & differences.	Understands how architecture guided ritual practice and devotion as depicted in reliefs and inscriptions.
General Amaravati studies [8]	Provides basic data: dating phases, that Amaravati sculpture fragments are dispersed, many damaged; that earlier	Many Amaravati studies are based on fragmentary evidence; site is ruined, fragments dispersed; few studies reconstruct full spatial organisation or ritual paths.	This study integrates museum data + published relief sequences to propose likely layout / ritual circulation; use comparisons with similar stupa sites to	The comparison analysis was used to recreate the ritual layout and circulation.

	iconography was largely relief, less surviving large iconic Buddha figures.		infer missing parts.	
Kowal, K. 2019 “Borobudur temple: the Buddhist architecture ...” [14]	Describes Borobudur’s structure, symbolism, and how its three-dimensional mandala layout embodies Buddhist cosmology.	Focused mainly on symbolism and heritage value; less detailed mapping of ritual circulation pathways or comparative study with Indian relic stupas.	The study will map ritual pathways and compare Borobudur with Indian case studies (Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta) to trace similarities/differences in spatial layout.	Spatial design of stupas and integration of symbolism and movement.
“Archaeoastronomy of the Sun path at Borobudur” [15]	Finds astronomical alignments— sunset points, zenith passages— linking temple layout (Borobudur + Mendut + Pawon) with solar ritual processions.	Focused on astronomical/astro-ritual alignment. Does not deeply deal with symbolism of relics, or broader architectural typology comparisons.	This work will incorporate such alignments as part of ritual pathway analysis, but tie it together with relic enshrinement, the presence of relic shrines, iconography, to build a more integrated account.	Understanding the holistic representation of astro-ritual with relic symbolism and the architecture.
Ray Chowdhuri, S. 2018 “Amaravati Art in the Context of Andhra Archaeology” [16]	Traces the long history of Amaravati art (4th c. BCE-14th c. CE), shows how Amaravati’s reliefs depict Avadanas, Jataka, surging continuity of Buddhist art in Andhra.	Very strong in art history and iconography, weaker in reconstructing original spatial layout of the Amaravati stupa and how pilgrims would move around it; also reliant on fragmented/museum-held material.	This study will combine the iconographic findings with spatial/ritual mapping, using published plans and reconstructions to hypothesize circulation paths, ritual zones, and compare with other stupas.	Understanding the invaluable analysis of symbolism with the integration of spatial and ritual studies.
The UNESCO	Reports	Focused on	Use environmental	Understand the

<p>State of Conservation Report, Borobudur Temple Compounds [17]</p>	<p>ongoing environmental degradation, issues with protection zones, management aspects.</p>	<p>conservation; doesn't consider relic worship, symbolism, or ritual layout as such; also management rather than historical usage.</p>	<p>and conservation data to understand how original architectural form and ritual circulation may have been influenced by geography, climate, protection zones, but keeping the focus on relic worship's influence on design/symbolism/spatial organisation.</p>	<p>limitations of environmental and structural issues, which influence the stupa layout and ritual and relic-based analysis.</p>
<p>"Intrusive Art at Ajañṭā in the Late Middle Period" [18]</p>	<p>Studies "intrusive" painted/relief donation art at later periods after original patronage ceased; shows lay and monk donors working, changes in patronage.</p>	<p>Late period intrusions are post-original monuments; they don't reconstruct original ritual pathways, spatial forms, or symbolic program linked to relics.</p>	<p>The study will focus on original phases, especially where relics were first installed, and reconstruct pathways and layouts.</p>	<p>Understand the shape of relic stupas, rituals and symbols</p>

Source : Author

3. Analytical Framework

This research uses a three-fold analytic approach to interact with the chosen cases : architectural typology, iconographic and symbolic analysis, and spatial/ritual mapping.

Typology of architectural study involves systematic investigation into the forms of buildings associated with relic cult, with particular emphasis on stupas, chaityas, and viharas. From close reading of published site plans, reports of excavation, and architectural surveys, the study traces the course of development of the forms in sequence through time and geography. This methodology brings into relief how enshrinement of relics not just determined the structure of Buddhist monuments but also affected larger architectural traditions.

Iconographic and symbolic analysis is concerned with the artistic and symbolic depiction of relics. Narrative reliefs, aniconic representations of the stupa, and symbolic motifs like the axis mundi are analyzed to determine how relics were imagined as such manifestations of the presence of the Buddha. By leveraging secondary sources and pictorial documentation, the study analyzes such images in light of

doctrinal writings and ritual traditions and thereby uncovers symbolic meanings inherent in Buddhist monuments.

Spatial and ritual mapping undertakes to analyze the structuring of sacred space and ritual movement within Buddhist complexes. Rituals such as circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*), hierarchies of spatial arrangement, and the integration of relic shrines into monastic contexts are explained by published architectural surveys and site maps. This approach allows the study to reconstruct how relic worship structured ritual experience and pilgrimage routes.

Through the combination of these three modes of analysis, the model assures a multi-dimensional understanding of the influence of relic worship on Buddhist architecture. Triangulation of typological, symbolic, and spatial analysis enables a comprehensive interpretation that mediates material evidence, ritual practice, and religion.

4. Results and Discussion

Architectural Forms and Spatial Organisation

The architectural forms of Buddhist monument's reflect a definite impact of relic worship on their development, plan, and purpose. Of the most significant forms, the stupa started as a plain reliquary mound, constructed with the major intention to house the Buddha or other venerated personages' remains. As time passed, the stupa became a symbolic mound, with layers of architectural and ritual import. The hemispherical dome, or *anda*, symbolized the cosmic mountain, while the relic chamber in the center of the stupa was the site for devotional practice.

Toward the later periods, the design of the stupa included cosmological representation, making the vertical elements of the *harmika* and *chatra* align to represent the *axis mundi* and the Buddhist cosmos. At Sanchi, the Great Stupa illustrates this development, featuring concentric *pradakṣiṇā* pathways and richly carved *toranas* to highlight both ritual process and symbolic centrality of the relic.

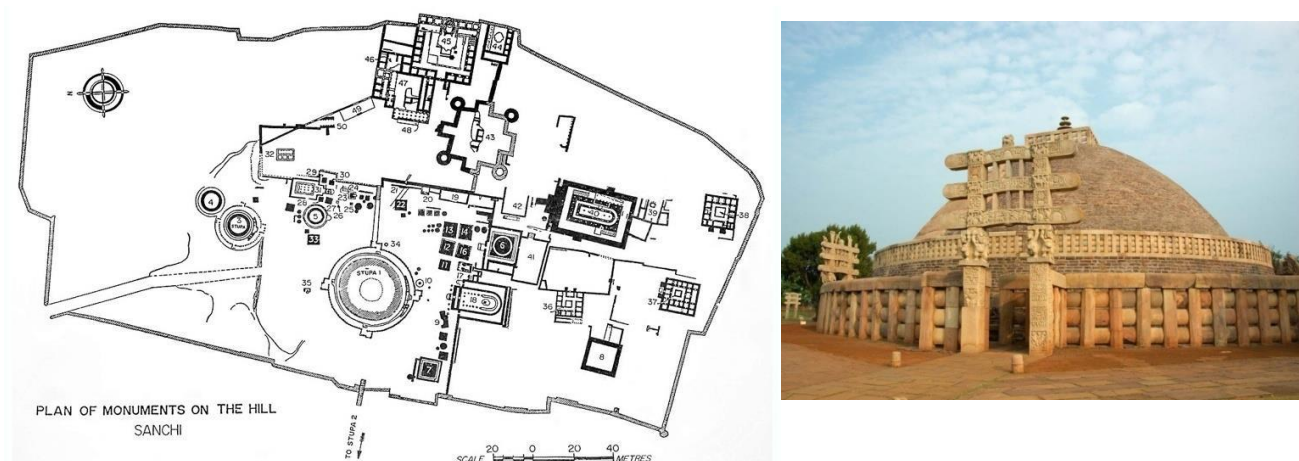
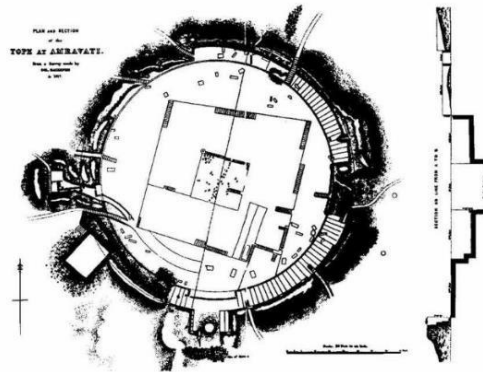


Figure 1: Great Stupa at Sanchi [19]

At Amaravati, there is more accentuation on narrative reliefs along railings along the stupa as well as a visual and doctrinal approach to relic worship without sacrificing the stupa as the axis of devotion.



"Stupa at Amaravati", Mackenzie, 1817.

Figure 2: Plan of Amaravati Stupa[20]

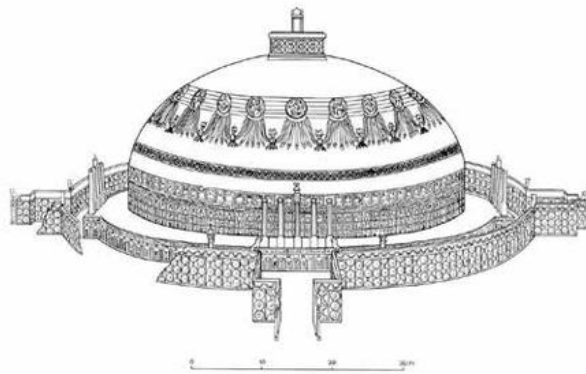


Figure 3: Reconstruction of Amaravati Stupa [21]

At Ajanta , Chaitya halls evolved as apsidal prayer halls with relic shrines, where ritual circulation to the central stupa was given priority in design. Rock-cut chaityas had the longitudinal plan, vaulted roof, and side aisles that guided the movement of the pilgrims around the relic chamber to enable circumambulation and congregational worship. Rooms that open up into central courtyards included shrine chambers with stupas or images of the Buddha, so that monks and lay pilgrims could engage in ritual and monastic life together in tandem. Viharas, which were initially built as monastic cells for living in, evolved into multipurpose buildings which integrated devotional and monastic practices.

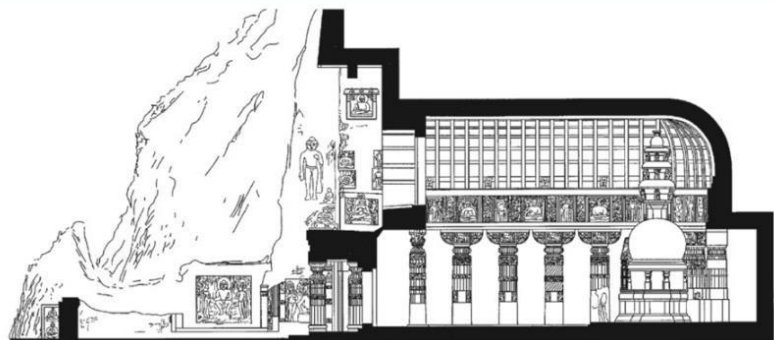
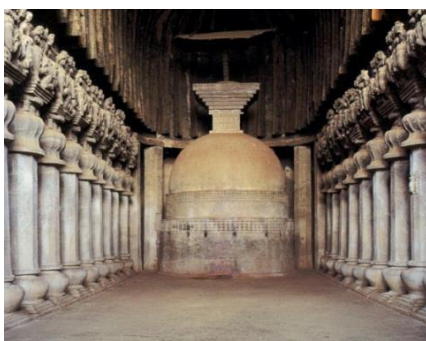


Figure 4: Interior view and Section of Chaitya Hall at Ajanta [22]

Schematic analysis indicates that the inclusion of relic shrines within viharas illustrates an architectural way of assimilating sacred presence into the daily life of the monastery, effacing the separation between

private dwelling and public space of devotion. It also uncovers uniform patterns: relic worship influenced form, spatial sequence, and functional priority of Buddhist temple and stupa. While Sanchi raises ritual path and Amaravati emphasizes narrative reliefs, they also agree on the centrality of relics defining architecture. Similarly, the chaitya halls and viharas in India and Southeast Asia are all different in form and scale to accommodate ritual use, indicating relic worship was a fundamental driver of architectural innovation in Buddhist sacred architecture.

Buddhist sacred architecture's spatial organisation was strongly influenced by the primacy of relic veneration, which also controlled ritual movement and hierarchical disposition as much as architectural design. Perhaps the most evocative element is the focus on circumambulatory routes (*pradakṣiṇā*). At places such as Sanchi, pilgrims walked around the stupa in concentric circuits, affirming the relic's central symbolic location within the cosmos. These routes established a sacred pace where architecture choreographed ritual piety, enabling repeated physical contact with the enshrined relic.

No less significant is the tiered spatial organization radiating outward from the relic chamber. The relic, placed at the center of the stupa or shrine, was the final *axis mundi* — the religious fulcrum of the monument. Encircling this holy core, increasing zones of cult activity were organized, from circumambulatory walkways to open courts and monastic compounds. This stratification reflected Buddhist cosmological hierarchies as well as permitted gradations of ritual accessibility for both monks and laity.

The incorporation of relic shrines into viharas and chaitya further stretched their ritual and spatial functions. In Ajanta, the interior of viharas developed to comprise central shrines, thus combining devotional attention with monastic residential existence. This changed the lives of hybrid spaces in which monks and lay individuals could engage themselves with relic worship simultaneously, highlighting the inseparability of devotional life and monastic practice.

In Southeast Asia, the spatial rationality expressed itself monumentally at Borobudur, where the entire monument is a mandala. Pilgrims there proceed step by step through concentric terraces, and each circumambulatory area advances them step by step towards symbolic centre and higher planes of spiritual illumination. In contrast to enclosed sanctuaries of Ajanta or drum-shaped stupas of Sanchi, Borobudur projects spatial hierarchy on a grand, cosmic scale, turning circumambulation into an odyssey of enlightenment.

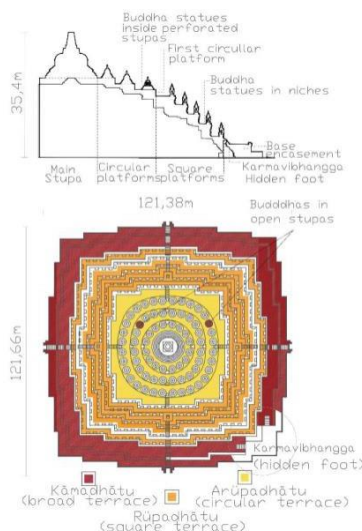


Figure 5: Borobudur stupa. [23]**4.2 Symbolism & Iconography**

Buddhist monument study proves that relics played the core role in producing sacred significance, which directed both iconography as well as artistic programs. At all sites, relics served as the chief focus of reverence, directing the adjacent iconography and symbolism. At Sanchi, gateways encircling the stupa are adorned by benefactor, animal, and auspicious symbol carvings, to enhance sanctity within and a multi-levelled visual interest for the faithful.

At Amaravati, railings and gateways are dominated by reliefs with the Buddha's life and Jataka narrative scenes. These reliefs encircle the relic as central axis of ritual and didactic importance, illustrating how enshrined relics regulated Buddhist art's thematic agenda. The axis mundi, inscribed through vertical architectural elements, represents a pervasive symbolic motif. The relic chamber in the center, harmika, and chattras constitute a vertical arrangement which visually and ritually grounds the divine space. Analytical contrast of Amaravati and Sanchi shows meticulous balancing of these elements so that the relic is in the hierarchical and visual center of the monument. At Borobudur, the concentric platforms and central stupa continue to illustrate the application of vertical and radial symbolism, in which axis controls circumambulatory circulation and signifies the cosmic order.

Aniconism in early Buddhist art is another persistent pattern. At Sanchi, the Buddha is iconographically represented indirectly by footprints, the stupa itself, and Bodhi trees, highlighting their symbolic middleman of presence. Amaravati subsequently adds a mixture of aniconic and anthropomorphic imagery, in which the figure of the Buddha is present alongside relic-related motifs. Comparative analysis indicates that the changes reflect regional and chronological differences in visual strategy. However, at all times, the enshrined relic has the most symbolic value.

It proves that relics dictated narrative attention, visual hierarchy, and symbolic signification in Buddhist monuments. In regions and periods alike, patterns uniformly reveal that relics were not marginal but contributory to the sacred meaning inherent in architectural and artistic schemes. Variations in stress—Sanchi on ritual symbolism, Amaravati on narrative reliefs, Borobudur on mandala-based cosmic representation—demonstrate how relic reverence governed both regional adaptation and continuity in Buddhist practices of iconography.

4.3 Comparative Synthesis Across Regions

Comparative study of Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, and Borobudur highlights regional variations and continuities of how relic veneration shaped Buddhist architecture. In India, focus was on the stupa as reliquary mound and symbolic microcosm. At Sanchi, design centered on ritual circumambulation around the relic, whereas Amaravati extended the same interest with narrative reliefs, projecting the visual dimension of relic worship. Ajanta illustrates an adaptive transformation, in which the relic cult was integrated into monastic settings, bringing together residential, educational, and devotional uses.

In contrast, in Southeast Asia, Borobudur illustrates the ways in which the relic cult was reinterpreted on a grand monumental scale. Rather than an enclosed reliquary, Borobudur exteriorized relic symbolism in its mandala-like terraces, producing a universal diagram of Buddhist cosmology. In this case, enshrining relics was not merely the focus but the imbedding of the very precepts of relic veneration in the architectural path of ascent, mirroring Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna ritual cosmologies.

The oppositions are instructive. Indian monuments emphasized narrative and proximity — in relief sculpture at Amaravati or in enclosed chaitya sanctuaries at Ajanta — while Borobudur emphasized

scale and the ability to transcend. Circulation patterns are also different: Ajanta's linear inward movement is set against Borobudur's large-scale circumambulation upwards. However, everywhere, there are remarkable parallels: the stupa continued to be the focus of sacred space; relics held ritual centrality fixed; and spatial arrangement responded to both cosmological symbolism and ritual use.

Accordingly, regional shapes differed, but the symbolic purpose of relic veneration as the religious and spatial center of Buddhist architecture was a principle that united, maintaining continuity through cultural and geographical dissimilarities.

5. Conclusion and Future Work

Four cases were looked at with an eye for generalised lessons offering similar conclusions and thus increase validity. This research has exemplified the way relic veneration was at the very core of Buddhist architecture, affecting its design, symbolism, and spatial organization. From the Cases of Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, and Borobudur, we notice how the enshrining practice of relics imparted significance and ritual function to these structures. At Sanchi, the circumambulatory passages positioned the stupa at the center of veneration. Amaravati superimposed levels of narrative reliefs, making the monument a reliquary and visual record of Buddhist narratives. Ajanta illustrated how shrines were incorporated within monastery rooms so monks and travelers could pray. Borobudur transformed the idea, though, into a cosmic chart on an enormous scale, guiding pilgrims along a symbolic journey of enlightenment. Though each site is a reflection of local sensibilities and aesthetic prerogatives all have one thing in common: the relic as the religious center of sacred space. This tension of stability and diversity indicates how relic cult was not a fixed tradition but an adaptive source of creativity. In the future, it would be possible to research other regional locations in Southeast Asia, so that we can find out if the same thing happened in other settings as well. Utilizing digital tools like 3D reconstructions it could further enhance the understanding of how the pilgrims experienced these places in practice.

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