Spatial Expressions of Socio-Political Relations:
An Investigation of the Palace and *Stūpa* in Early Historical India

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I·

The Mauryan empire is widely recognized as one of the first documented attempts to establish a polity encompassing considerable parts of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The distribution of Aśokan inscriptions, which has been examined by a number of scholars, has often been used to demarcate the spatial extent of the empire, and this in turn has been extended to argue that it included a number of regions with disparate social formations, economies cultures, languages, religious beliefs etc. (e.g., Thapar, 1987). The degree to which the empire was centralized, and the nature of centralization have been viewed as problematic in this context. In other words, there has been a growing focus on the nature of the Mauryan state from perspectives which do not view centralization as a natural outcome of evolutionist tendencies. There have also been attempts to explore the connection between the Mauryan and the post-Mauryan phases not simply in terms of a decline or collapse of centralization or 'downfall' but in terms of a more complex process of political transformation.

If one accepts that the Maūryas both attempted to create and presided over a relatively complex polity one can then ask questions about the extent to which they may have attempted to deliberately impress their presence on the landscape, to render the imperial agenda visible. That empires deploy a variety of strategies of representation is widely recognized. Also recognized is the fact that such representations are, for a number of reasons, idealized. As important, as has been pointed out by Root (1979) in the context of the Achaemenid empire, such representations are only superficially borrowings from contemporary or earlier traditions: the imperial agenda is realized in weaving together a range of cultural traditions. It is also conditioned by the nature of representative units available or recognized, immediate political issues,

dynastic interests, and possibilities of physical execution.

At one level, the Aśokan inscriptions, on rocks and pillars located at strategic points, provide an obvious visible representation of the empire. Yet, these remain unique—while the pillars may have been part of a wider symbolism (e.g., Irwin 1973), by and large Aśokan inscriptions do not seem to have been imitated in form or content subsequently.

At another level, the inscriptions themselves provide information on construction—of rest houses and wells, and of the planting of trees, and the enlargement of a *stūpa* (e.g., Major Pillar Edict VII, Major Rock Edict II, Nigalisagar Pillar Inscription). We will return to the *stūpa* later, but apart from this, the other activities were not necessarily an imperial monopoly.

It is in this context that I explore, first the way palaces were envisaged in the early historical context, and juxtapose this with notions of the *stūpa*.

II

For the present, the discussion on the palace is based on three kinds of evidence; that derived from prescriptive texts, in this case exemplified by the *Arthaśāstra*, the description of Mauryan royal practices ascribed to Megasthenes, and the evidence provided by Aśokan inscriptions. I focus in particular on the extent to which the palace is viewed as part of a public or private domain. It has been suggested that in early monarchies this distinction is often blurred, and that this then provides one means of identifying the king (who is regarded as a super householder) with male heads of households, creating an impression of common, shared interests. In the early Indian situation, while the notion of the king as householder was assiduously cultivated, the space of the palace was conceived to be relatively distinct.

The *Arthaśāstra* (Bk II) incorporates some of the earliest detailed prescriptions regarding the construction of forts and palaces. The term used for forts, *durga*, is significant, literally meaning difficult to approach. In other words, that defined a monument as a fort was its inaccessibility. The very existence of such a structure which could be seen from outside but to which access was strictly regulated if not well-nigh impossible for most people, would have defined those who routinely resided in it in identical terms. However, it is not the isolated, remote fort on which the *Arthaśāstra* concentrates, but on royal structures which are defined as intrinsic to the larger settlement.

This is evident in the attempt to locate the palace, referred to as the

antaḥpura, in terms of the city consisting of eighty-one squares (fig 1). The *antaḥpura* was to be located to the north of what was defined as the *vāstuhṛdaya,* literally the heart of the settlement, which in turn, was to be occupied by a variety of shrines.

The *antaḥpura* itself seems to have been conceived of as a microcosm, consisting of nine squares (fig. 2), with the squares surrounding the nucleus being designated for a variety of functions. Within the *antaḥpura,* the enumeration begins from the north-east and proceeds clockwise. The *antaḥpura* was to be surrounded by other settlements, which are enumerated in the same order.

A number of features are significant about this construction. Each square was conceived as the site of certain specific, specialized activities or as the location for specific resources. On another level, almost none of the squares was constructed as a self-sufficient unit. For instance, if one considers an activity such as the manufacture of weapons, this would have required access (minimally) to squares 3, 4 and 5; revenue transactions would have involved squares 3 and 8, and so on. In other words, the central blank square is in fact envisaged as dominant, controlling access to and regulating activities along its entire periphery. The *antaḥpura* thus emerges as the locus for specific kinds of production, for the accumulation of a variety of resources, as administrative and ritual centre, as well as the royal residence.

At least some structures such as the store-house are envisaged as being constructed of stone, baked brick and timber, and these would probably have distinguished the *antaḥpura* from other dwelling places, as would the fact that it would have had a very complicated lay out. What is also interesting is that within the framework of the *antaḥpura* would have provided visibility for the edifice, but not for its inhabitants.

Another model for the palace is offered in the first book of the *Arthaśāstra* (I.20). While this is less detailed, it emphasizes the need to delimit the precinct by erecting a wall (*prākāra*) or digging a most (*parikhā*). Access to the residential area, the *vāsagṛha,* was to be concealed, through labyrinths, for instance.

Three zones are envisaged within this structure—at the rear, and first in order of enumeration are the women's quarters (the *strīniveśa*), an area for childbirth and the sick (the *garbhavyādhi saṁsthā*), and a garden, including a source of water (*vṛkṣodakasthāna*). Beyond was the area reserved for the *kanyā* and the *kumāra* (i.e., the princess and the prince) and in the foreground were areas designated for *alaṁkāra,* probably the royal toilet, *mantra* or consultation, the *upasthāna* or the assembly, and the *kumārādhyakṣasthāna* for ministers or officials in change

of princes (fig. 3). While I have represented these zones as concentric circles, they can be envisaged as squares as well.

It is possible to view this scheme as providing us with the contents of the blank square of the *antahpura*, moving from the private to the more public areas. The most private zone would have been open only to the king and his kinswomen or womenfolk, while even in the third zone public access would have probably been restricted to the *upasthāna*, the assembly where the king was supposed to meet those who had come on business. Once again, there is no explicit provision for the display of the royal person or the royal residence, or even parts of it.

Another exclusively royal monument envisaged was a kind of zoo (*mṛgavana*). This combined the preoccupation with the safety of the royal person with an attempt to locate the king *vis-à-vis* nature—what is suggested is a forest which is regulated if not regimented. The only trees which were to be permitted to grow were those which bore sweet fruit, the only bushes were to be thornless ones, wild animals were to be permitted once their teeth and claws had been broken. Apart from this, there were to be shallow pools (presumably to prevent the king from drowning) and tame animals. While this can be viewed on one level as a safe pleasure garden for the king, it could also represent an attempt to construct an understanding of kingship as being intrinsic to the taming of the wild, of domesticating the undomesticated or even undomesticable. As a complement to this, the king was also expected to establish another *mṛgavana* on the frontiers or outskirts of his realm, where all animals were welcome. Presumably, the king was expected to establish rather than enter it.

Turning to Megasthenes' account, we have more information on the lifestyle of the king than on the palace. This may be due to the accidental survival of some fragments of his text as opposed to others, but it may also have been due to the fact that the Seleucid ambassador may not have had access to the *antahpura*. What we have then is probably a combination of observation and hearsay.

According to Megasthenes, the king was surrounded by women guards within his residence, while male soldiers were posted outside the gates. To an extent, this corroborates the provision in the *Arthaśāstra* for the women's quarter at the core of the royal residence. At the same time, Megasthenes perceived this core to be fraught with tension. The king could apparently be killed by his female guards. While he was expected to spend his days in wakefulness, his nights were only slightly more restful, as he had to keep changing his bedrooms in order to

forestall conspiracies. It seems as if eternal vigilance was the price of kingship.

On another level, Megasthenes provides information on the occasions when the king appeared in public. These appearances are located outside the context of the palace, and include going to battle, going to deliver judgment or hear cases, going to sacrifice and going on the hunt. What we find is an emphasis on the personal visibility of the king in distinctive situations when he would have been fulfilling unique roles. Besides, the act of showing/seeing the king was carefully structured. The hunt, for instance, was clearly stage-managed—the king was apparently surrounded by female and male guards, and shot at his targets from a platform. The pressures to be visible must have been particularly strong on the king, as any prolonged period of invisibility would have probably generated suspicions that he had succumbed to the snares of the *antahpura*.

To some extent at least, the agenda of the Aśokan inscriptions needs to be located within this context—the physical presence of the inscriptions was meant to represent and render visible the emperor, and in so far as they were read or heard, the voice of the emperor would be audible as well. In other words, apart from their content, the form of the inscriptions seems to have been devised as a strategy to circumvent the problem of visibility and accessibility. What is interesting is that although the ruler attempts to appear before his subjects, the subjects were not expected to take any initiative in establishing such contact—the only people permitted to reach him, whether he was in his *orodhana* or harem, *gabhāgāra* or inner apartment, *vaca* or pasture, being transported or in the garden (*vinīta, uyāna*) were his reporters, the *pativedakas* (Major Rock Edict VI). Thus, while the presence of the king was extended in a variety of ways, access to him continued to be regulated.

Ruins of what appears to have been a pillared hall were recovered from Pataliputra. While this was probably part of a palace structure, it would not necessarily have been accessible to ordinary subjects, and was probably meant for an exclusive audience.

One of the reasons why the Mauryan royal residence may have been deliberately inaccessible probably had to do with the specialized kinds of production, including the production of weapons, which may have taken place there. One can then view the early historical palace as a structure where access to specific areas was open to a range of specialists—administrative, professional, including crafts-persons. But both the number of such personnel, and their roles within the palace

were probably strictly regulated. The spatial complexity of the palace probably reflected the complex but at the same time carefully coordinated relationship between the king on the one hand and such specialists on the other.

For people with no specific business, however, (who would have constituted the vast majority of the population) access to the palace would have been virtually impossible. It is in this situation that the development of other forms of representing royalty and establishing relationships between the ruler and ruled assumed importance, which was evidently worked into the understanding of the Aśokan *stūpa*, explored below.

There is another dimension to the palace as a socio-political unit. The regulation of the king's public dealings, and the restrictions on members of his household achieving direct contact with the public may have been a device to contain intra-familial tensions, which are recognized as routine, for instance in the *Arthaśāstra*. The project of rendering the king (and the king alone) visible in contexts outside the domestic may have been a means of preventing other members of his household including recalcitrant queens and princes from gaining access to at least some of the channels of communication. Yet this had its limitations, especially in a situation where princes were frequently deployed as provincial governors and where royal marriages were viewed as occasions for establishing strategic alliances. As such, the king could neither claim nor achieve a total disjuncture from his household.

To some extent, this ambivalence towards the royal lineage is reflected in Aśokan inscriptions as well. While the ideology and terminology of the inscriptions require detailed analysis, even on a superficial level, it is significant that the king portrays himself as almost *sui generis*, mentioning no ancestors. Yet, at the same time, he leaves instructions for his descendants, who are, in many cases, expected to maintain his *dhamma* in perpetuity (e.g., Major Rock Edict IV).

III

It is in this context that the construction of *stūpas* acquires significance. The evidence on funerary mounds which one can recover from the surviving fragments of Megasthenes' account is, as often, somewhat ambivalent. One fragment states that the Indians did not erect funerary monuments, depending on other, verbal forms to memorialize the dead. In another fragment, Megasthenes is quoted as stating that 'the tombs are plain and the mounds raised over the dead lowly.' What one can

suggest, tentatively, is that the pre-Aśokan Mauryan state does not seem to have been involved in raising monuments to the dead in general and erecting *stūpas* in particular, a viewpoint which is corroborated, to an extent, by the negative evidence of the *Arthaśāstra*.

The ascription of the construction of *stūpas* to Aśoka is a common theme in some sections of the Buddhist tradition, and at least some of these ascriptions are evidently corroborated by the archaeological record. For the present, I will focus on Hiuen Tsang's accounts of Aśokan *stūpas*, which are possibly the most detailed and specific, and explore the implications of *stūpa* construction not in terms of their rich and complex philosophical symbolism, but in terms of possible architectural/ artistic representations of socio-political configurations.

Hiuen Tsang's account of his travels through the subcontinent have provided the basis for a number of attempts to locate the specific settlements he mentions as well as the details of the architectural structures he mentions. Such attempts have constantly run into problems of identifying sites, working out the equations between Chinese and Sanskrit/Indian names, the distances traversed by the monk, etc. For the moment I would like to set these aside and examine the descriptions of *stūpas*, Aśokan and other, provided, grouping such references into four broad zones, (a) encompassing the north-western part of the subcontinent, (b) the north-western Gangetic valley, (c) the north-eastern Gangetic valley, and (d) other Buddhist sites, mainly in the southern and western areas of the subcontinent.

There are obvious problems in the enterprise. Counting *stūpas*, which is a necessary preliminary, is hazardous, as very often the pilgrim is vague; there are some, a few, hundreds, or even thousands of *stūpas* attributed to different sites. I have somewhat ruthlessly restricted the count to *stūpas* which are individually described or located, even though this has its limitations.

One can identify references to approximately seventy-six *stūpas* in the north-western zone, extending from the Oxus valley to the Punjab and Sind. Of these, as many as thirty-one, i.e., more than a third, were attributed by the pilgrim to Aśoka. Other rulers connected with *stūpa* building include Kaniṣka, who figures only in this zone, with three *stūpas*, the builders being unspecified in thirty-three instances, and identified with a range of human and supernatural categories in others. Thus, slightly less than half the *stūpas* in this area were ascribed to royal patrons.

The second noteworthy feature is the location of *stūpas vis-ē-vis* settlements. As many as fifty-eight *stūpas* in this area are located outside or on the outskirts of sites; only two being placed within the settlement,

the location being unspecified in nine cases. Almost all the Aśokan *stūpas* are located outside settlements. Related to this, *stūpas* tend to be clustered around settlements—there are very few references to single, isolated *stūpas*, although here counting becomes more hazardous and impressionistic, as distinctions between regions and individual settlements are not always clearly drawn.

Hiuen Tsang appears to have been only concerned with the external appearance of the *stūpa*. This is specified, more often than not, in terms of height, mentioned in twenty-one of the seventy-six cases. Of these, thirteen are identified as Aśokan *stūpas*, ranging from fifty to three hundred feet, is ascribed to Kaniṣka and the cowherd, and located at Purushapura. Other features occasionally mentioned include stone and/or wood carving, and supernatural attributes including lights, fragrance etc. These are mentioned in connection with only four Aśokan *stūpas*. In other words, while *stūpas* identified as Aśokan may have imposing physically, they were not necessarily the most potent in terms of sacral symbolism.

This possibility is strengthened if we turn to what evidently provided Hiuen Tsang and the tradition within which his work is embedded with the key element for defining *stūpas*—i.e., whether or not they contained relics, and/or whether they were otherwise associated with 'events' in Buddhist history—either drawn from the Jātakas or from the lives of various past and future Buddhas. While both relics and past associations were literally invisible in the context of the *stūpas*, it was their actual or attributed presence which evidently distinguished *stūpas* from other monuments, and also provided a basis for distinguishing amongst *stūpas*. In other words, *stūpas* were a means of bringing the imperceptible within the realm of perception. Interestingly, of the sixteen *stūpas* which are distinguished as containing the bodily relics of the Buddha and/or his disciples, only six are identified as Aśokan. Most Aśokan sites are defined as commemorating sites where various events described in Buddhist legendary stories were enacted, whereas such identities remain unspecified in two cases. This does suggest that *stūpas* identified as Aśokan were probably viewed as combining sacral and political meanings somewhat differently from those which were not so identified, in which sacral connotations predominated.

In the second zone, ranging from Mathura to Sravasti, one can identify fifty-eight *stūpas*. As in the previous area, only two *stūpas* (including one Aśokan), are located within settlements. In all, eighteen *stūpas* are identified as Aśokan, four are attributed to others, and the makers are unspecified in as many as thirty-six cases. In other words,

there is a shift, although not a drastic one, in proportions, with specifi-
cally royal monuments dropping to less than a third, and identifying
stūpas in terms of builders is in itself viewed as less significant.

What is more, the outer appearance of the *stūpas* seems to command
even less attention. Only two *stūpas* (both Aśokan) are identified in terms
of height, both two hundred feet, and are thus less monumental than
the structures referred to earlier. Physical descriptions are confined to
adjectives like small, large, ruined, old, etc., and are only provided for
thirteen *stūpas*.

At another level, while the proportion of *stūpas* supposedly
containing relics increases (nineteen in all, about a third), the
proportion of Aśokan *stūpas* associated with such attributes decreases
(three out of eighteen, i.e., one-sixth as opposed to one-fifth in the
previous zone). Once again, most of the Aśokan *stūpas* (fourteen out of
eighteen) tend to be associated with 'events' from Buddhist history rather
than with the corporal remains of the Buddha or his disciples.

Turning to the third zone, which corresponds to an extent with the
heartland of Buddhism, we find references to approximately one
hundred and fifty *stūpas*. Here, the proportion of *stūpas* located within
settlements evidently increases slightly (twelve references). This is not
surprising, given that some sites such as Bodh Gaya, Kusinara or Lumbini
derived their importance primarily from associations with what was
understood to be the biography of the Buddha. What is also probably
not surprising is the relative decline in the number of *stūpas* attributed
to Aśoka and/or other royal patrons or individual or specific patrons. A
total of thirty-two *stūpas* are attributed to Aśoka (approximately a fifth)
with two more being ascribed to other kings. Thus, most of the *stūpas* in
this area evidently derived their significance from sacral rather than
secular associations.

Approximately a fifth of the *stūpas* (thirty) attract attention on
grounds of physical appearance, including height, size, ruined condition,
etc. These include eleven Aśokan *stūpas*. In terms of proportions, we
encounter a decline in the number of *stūpas* thus designated in
comparison with those of the north-west zone, for instance. In other
words, external features are viewed as less significant than in the north-
western zone and are clearly not regarded as central in defining the
monument as a *stūpa*.

Sixteen *stūpas* in this area were thought to contain relics. Of these,
only five were recognized as Aśokan. Most other Aśokan *stūpas* were
conceived of as associated with Buddhist history in less tangible forms.

The proportion of Aśokan *stūpas* increases dramatically in the fourth

zone, although there is a sharp decline in the number of *stūpas*. Here, as many as eleven out of twenty-two of the *stūpas* are ascribed to the emperor. Except for one case, all the others seem to be located on the outskirts of settlements. Physical details are provided for eight *stūpas*, including three Aśokan ones, which include the standard reference to a hundred feet high structure. What is interesting is that at least two other *stūpas*, one in Kalinga, and the other in Andhra, are identified as being a hundred feet high and of stone. Only one *stūpa* (not Aśokan), is associated with the relics of a disciple of the Buddha, the rest being identified in terms of associations with Buddhist history. In other words, we seem to have here a region where *stūpas* were envisaged, once again in terms of relatively secular associations, as in the north-western area, and where religious connotations were relatively weak.

It is obvious that Hiuen Tsang's account was not meant to provide us with a detailed survey of all the *stūpas* in existence in the subcontinent during his visit. Nevertheless, it is probably useful insofar as it yields a general understanding of the material and/or intangible significance attached to *stūpas*. However, there is a problem in contextualizing this understanding. Were *stūpas* perceived only in the terms which run through Hiuen Tsang's description or were other perceptions possible?

There is also the problem of locating such understandings in spatial and chronological terms, i.e. of historicizing them. It is unlikely that all the *stūpas* Hiuen Tsang identified as Aśokan were actually erected by the emperor. Archaeological evidence suggests that Mauryan *stūpas* were relatively simple structures, certainly not distinguished by their height. However, the attribution of *stūpas* to Aśoka may have had to do with an implicit recognition of such structures as owing their origin and continued existence to a conjunction of political and religious concerns. As we have seen Aśokan *stūpas* were represented, more often than non-Aśokan ones, in terms of external attributes such as height. While this may not have been literally accurate, it was probably a commentary on the kind of power which could be represented by such symbols.

At another level, the fact that most *stūpas*, Aśokan and other, were seen as being located on the outskirts of settlements, is significant. Except for a few cases, these were not perceived as dominating settlements, although they were connected to them. In other words, *stūpas* seem to be monuments which could qualify the nature of the settlement without being overtly integrated within it, and as such could be multivalent in ways in which more obviously central monuments were not. This, and the fact that *stūpas* were seen as clustered together would have distinguished them from other monuments. While Hiuen Tsang

evidently envisaged and understood this clustering in terms of a density of Buddhist associations, the archaeological record of sites such as Sanchi would suggest a more complex combination of secular and overtly religious factors as resulting in a conglomeration of *stūpas*.

At another level, it is interesting that Aśokan *stūpas* were more often than not identified as commemorative rather than as containing relics. Thus while Hiuen Tsang was familiar with the story according to which Aśoka had collected all the relics of the Buddha and redistributed them in eighty-four thousand *stūpas* throughout his realm, he implicitly did not believe it to be literally true. For him, while Aśokan *stūpas* were seen as connected with Buddhist history, they were not seen as literally embodying that history to the same extent as some other *stūpas*.

Almost all Hiuen Tsang's Aśokan *stūpas* lie within what would be recognized as parts of the Mauryan empire, often in areas which can be thus identified through the spatial distribution of inscriptions. However, what is perhaps more significant is the proportion of Aśokan *stūpas* which are attributed to the north-western zone and the areas of the subcontinent south of the Gangetic valley. While many of these may not have been Aśokan (conversely Aśoka may have constructed or refurbished some of the anonymous monuments of the Ganga valley) their attribution to the emperor may have been due to a tacit recognition of such monuments as symbols of political power and aspirations, combined with religious zeal. What is also noteworthy is that both were areas where strong, though not identical, regional polities emerged in the post-Mauryan period.

IV

Sanchi (not visited by our pilgrim) provides an interesting example of a Mauryan/post-Mauryan *stūpa*. Its location was strategic, given the proximity to the thriving city of Vidisha, at the junction of important routes running from western to northern India. However, it does not seem to have been explicitly sacred or Buddhist. In fact, as is well-known, Buddhist tradition associates Aśoka with the region in a romantic story, linked with a local woman whom the king evidently married, and who was regarded as the mother of the royal offspring, traditionally recognized as the missionaries sent to Sri Lanka. If anything, this represents the weaving together of regional, imperial, and Buddhist sacral traditions, and these seem to be evident in the monumental representations as well. Here, as elsewhere, while the core of the *stūpa* may be Mauryan, the *stūpa* and adjoining areas were evidently rebuilt

time and again over centuries. We have here the typical clustering of structures: a massive central *stūpa* and Aśokan pillar surrounded by subsidiary *stūpas*, remains of monasteries and other structures, and evidence for the relics of some of the chief disciples of the Buddha, if not of the Buddha himself. Obviously, such a monument could be viewed as an emblem of the power of the rulers who had contributed to its construction and implicitly or explicitly left their mark on it. At the same time, it would have had sacral associations as well, and the rich sculptural motifs which adorned it could have conveyed a range of meanings to the pilgrim/visitor.

If one looks at the archaeological record, one of the most striking features, at one level, is the constant rebuilding and embellishment of *stūpas*. Thus, at Amaravati, for instance, the core of the *stūpa* is allegedly Mauryan, while the more visible remains were associated with the Sātavāhanas and the Ikṣvākus.

The socio-political configuration implicit or possibly explicit in and around any *stūpa* was complex. At the core were the relics consisting of a mixture of literal and symbolic precious substances, representing somewhat paradoxically the Buddha or his disciples, and their transcendence over death, impermanence and temporality. In other words, although located in space and time, the *stūpa* derived at least part of its power from its symbolic representation of transcendence over both dimensions.

Yet this core was carefully concealed within a structure, the dome-shaped *stūpa*, more often than not allegedly constructed by kings, and topped with obvious symbols of royalty such as the *chatra*. What would have been visible was a monument which was associated, rightly or wrongly, with a king. Thus, kings would be regarded as preservers and perpetuators of the sacred, and consequently intrinsically linked with it.

At another level, the encompassing or enlargement of an existing *stūpa* would probably have meant an appropriation and/or supersession of pre-existing associations. This seems to be typical of *stūpas* associated with the *dhammarāja* (Taxila and Sarnath, for example). As suggested by Marshall (1951), both the Buddha and Aśoka could be viewed as archetypal *dhammarājās*. Thus, at one level, one can view the construction of *stūpas* by Aśoka as signalling this connection. At the same time, the very appropriation of the space and structure purportedly connected with the Buddha would had been a means of presenting an under-standing of his power as subject to appropriation and reworking. While Aśokan *stūpas* may have marked the initiation of this process, later rulers

who avowedly or implicitly imitated him would in turn have been literally and symbolically annexing both the models of the *dhammarāja* and probably modifying it in other ways as well.

While *stūpas* were clearly envisaged as monuments which were meant to be visible, they were also monuments which were to be visited. Such visits would not have been haphazard or random. It is likely that they would have been structured in time, focusing on especially sacred days, and the visit would have been spatially structured along the *pradakṣiṇa patha* as well. Thus, a visit to a *stūpa* would have been carefully contextualized. In the absence of a regular tradition of courtly appearances (the *darbār*), such monuments would have rendered the royal presence visible in implicit and occasionally explicit ways.

Part of the reason why *stūpas* were evidently regarded as powerful symbols which were subjected to constant reworking was their funerary character, freezing a moment of what was, at one level, an elaborately constructed rite of passage, in this case associated with an immeasurably venerable personage, the Buddha. At the same time, *stūpa* building lent itself to reworking, as it involved a number of more or less inter-related decisions or actions—choosing where a *stūpa* was to be located, justifying the choice, deciding what it was to be made of, and how large or small, what kinds of railings, stairs, gateway, embellishments etc. were to be employed. As such a range of interventions was possible.

While the major initiative in constructing the central mound of the *stūpa* appears to have been royal, non-royal persons could and evidently did inscribe their presence in the environs of the *stūpa* if not in or on the *stūpa* itself. This is evident in railings, pillars, coping stones, occasional gateways, with their inscriptions and decorations drawn from a range of motifs, symbols, and traditional lore. While these were visually and physically less imposing than the *stūpa* itself, they would have provided a commentary on it, offering scope for reinterpreting or reinforcing its symbolism. Insofar as such imagery and representations were generated by categories other than royalty, they could be viewed either as supportive of the royal enterprise or as encroachments on the space marked out as royal or sacral, or more commonly perhaps, as ambivalent and a bit of both. In any case, they would have complicated understandings and appreciations of the space of the *stūpas* in a variety of ways.

At least some *stūpas* would have marked the creation of new ritual sites or centres, insofar as their location could not be directly justified in terms of the geography associated with the life of the Buddha. Such location may have permitted innovation, but may have lacked the

resonance associated with the traditional centres of Buddhist biography. Nevertheless, as the examples of Sanchi and Amaravati suggest, these could be developed and could survive for centuries.

I would suggest that this element of survival has to do with the *stūpas* providing a unique and valuable space for specific kinds of socio-political interaction. It provided a space where the royal presence was perceptible if not obviously visible. As such, people visiting or even seeing a *stūpa* from the distance, as they passed in and out of settlements, would have been reminded about the presence of a powerful state, capable of erecting a structure, which was imposing if not awe-inspiring.

At the same time, the rich associations of the *stūpa*, evoking notions of sacrality, transcendence, Buddhist history, would have enriched notions of royalty with such connotations. At another level, the fact that *stūpas* could be constantly revoked and reinscribed, often literally, meant that such structures, and the meanings read into them could both continue and change. In other words, the *stūpa* provided a medium of expression which was both powerful and flexible. From this perspective, locating specific *stūpas* and tracing their histories through the archaeological record from the Mauryan to the post-Mauryan period can provide us with insights into the emergence of regional polities which can then be viewed in terms of a shift in levels of centralization rather than as indices of disintegration.

Most *stūpas* (e.g. Sanchi and Sarnath) were surrounded by monasteries and/or nunneries. This conjoint location and its social implication require investigations. The relationship between renouncers (the typical inhabitants of such institutions) and the laity on whose support they relied was obviously complex. Working out the details of such relationships can enrich our understanding of the socio-political realm of the *stūpa*.

If the spatial organization of the palace represented certain crucial socio-political connections and disjunctures, that of the *stūpa*, with its focus on a multi-vocal sacred symbol, permitted a more diffuse definition of such relations. Here, while an attempt was made to infuse political bonds with an element of sacrality, these were, at the same time, structured along different lines. What is more, the very reworking of the architecture of the *stūpa* provided scope for expressing alternative political possibilities. In that sense, *stūpas* function as loci for representing changing socio-political relations during the transition from the Mauryan empire to the subsequent emergence of regional polities.

FIG. I: SCHEMATIC LAYOUT OF A ROYAL SETTLEMENT
(The antahpura or palace is almost but not exactly central)

				ANTAH-PURA				
				VASTU-HRDAYA				

FIG. II: THE ANTAHPURA AND ADJOINING SETTLEMENTS

3	**7**	**8**	**1**	**1**
4 DEITIES OF THE CITY AND KING, BLACKSMITHS, JEWELLERS, **BRAHMANAS**				
	WAREHOUSE, MEDICINE STORE	TREASURY, STALLS FOR CATTLE, HORSES	PRECEPTOR, CHIEF PRIEST, SACRIFICE, MINISTER	
WORKERS IN WOOL, THREAD, BAMBOO, LEATHER, ARMOURERS, **SUDRAS**	**6** VEHICLES, CHARIOTS	**9** KITCHEN, ELEPHANT- STALLS, STORE-ROOM, GRANARY	**2**	PERFUMERS, FLOWER SELLERS, SELLERS OF ARTICLES OF TOILET, **KSATRIYAS**
	5 STALLS FOR ASSES AND CAMELS, WORKSHOPS	**4** STORE FOR FOREST PRODUCE, ARMOURY	**3** STORE HOUSE, RECORD ROOM, WORKER'S QUARTERS	
2 GRAIN DEALERS, CRAFTSPERSONS, MILITARY CHIEFS, SELLERS OF FOOD AND DRINK, PROSTITUTES, MUSICIANS, **VAISYAS**				

FIG. III: THE ROYAL RESIDENCE
(Numbers within brackets indicate order of enumeration within text)

(1)
SPACE FOR ADORNMENT

SPACE FOR THE PRINCESS
AND PRINCE

(1)
WOMEN'S QUARTERS

(2)
SPACE FOR CHILDBIRTH,
FOR THE SICK

(3)
GARDEN, WATER

(4)
SPACE FOR
OFFICIALS
DEALING
WITH THE
PRINCE

(2)
SPACE
FOR
DISCUSSION

1

2

3

(3)
SPACE
FOR
ASSEMBLY
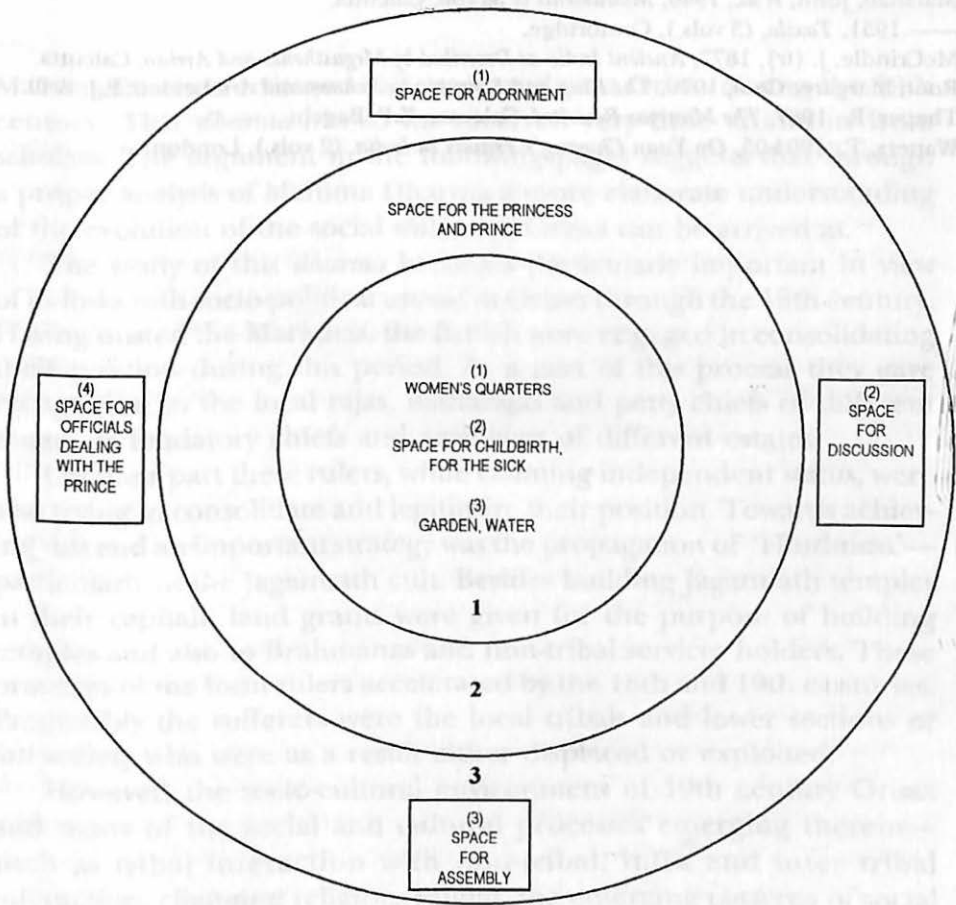
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