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# ARCHAEOLOGY OF EARLY BUDDHISM

LARS FOGELIN

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# Introduction: Archaeology and Early Buddhism 1

Archaeologists have a long, problematic relationship with religion. From the beginning of the discipline, many of the largest and most impressive archaeological remains have had obvious religious function and significance to people in the past. It is also clear that ancient religions often bore little resemblance to religions practiced today. At times, archaeological interpretations have been little more than fanciful reconstructions, with religious monuments serving as elaborate Rorschach tests for archaeologists carrying their own religious baggage. Thus, early researchers of the Maya saw a peaceful kingdom ruled by astronomer-priests in the jungles of southern Mexico (Morley 1946; Thompson 1950) and ignored evidence for bloodletting, warfare, and human sacrifice. Stonehenge has served as the foil for almost every interpretation of religion imaginable, ranging from human sacrifice to alien encounters. When dealing with the origins of world religions, particularly Christianity, archaeologists have often worked to confirm that events in written scripture actually occurred (see Insoll 2001). This process was made all the easier by the assumption that these events had actually happened, so the only real purpose for archaeology was in finding where they had taken place.

As the discipline of archaeology developed, with a corresponding increase in the demands for rigorous archaeological interpretations and scientific reasoning, a new approach to the archaeology of religion emerged—avoidance. This approach was most articulately advocated by Christopher Hawkes in his "ladder of inference" (Hawkes 1954, 162):

> If material techniques are easy to infer to, subsistence-economics fairly easy, communal organization harder, and spiritual life hardest of all, you have there a climax of four degrees in reasoning.

In essence, Hawkes's position was that religion is a particularly unbounded, immaterial aspect of human life. Reconstructions of past religions could not be anything but fanciful reconstructions and should therefore not be attempted in the first

place. Archaeologists, he argued, should focus on what they were good at—the environment, economy, and other more materially grounded phenomena. This position was later taken up by Lewis Binford and other processual archaeologists (but see Fritz 1978; Renfrew 1985; and Marcus 1998 as some notable exceptions). While the rhetoric of Binford (1962) suggested that everything in the past was fair game for archaeological inquiry, in practice processual archaeologists focused on the interaction of people with their environment. Where religion was addressed, it was typically understood in simplistic terms, as regulating peoples' interactions with the environment or serving to legitimize elite power.

All of this began to change in the 1980s with the development of postmodern archaeology (referred to within the discipline as post-processual archaeology). Among the central tenets of this movement was that previous research had overemphasized issues regarding subsistence, economy, and the environment. In contrast, post-processual archaeology was interested in more ideological issues, with religion among them. Despite this newfound interest, even some proponents of post-processual archaeology have recognized that specific methods for investigating religion were slow in developing (see Insoll 2004, 76–84). Post-processual archaeology expressed an interest in studying religion but, with some exceptions (see chapter 4), lacked the tools to fulfill it.

Over the last twenty years a number of new approaches to the archaeology of religion have developed. These can be roughly grouped into two categories. The first is an outgrowth of processual archaeology, taking seriously the idea that past religions could be investigated through the construction of interpretive methodologies for the identification of the material remains of religious practice. This approach has been most clearly articulated by Colin Renfrew (1985, 1994), particularly in his studies of the sanctuary of Phylakopi on the Greek island of Melos. In this study Renfrew developed a list of specific material criteria to determine if a specific set of rooms were, or were not, a center of religious activity. He then compared the material remains found in the rooms with his criteria and determined that a religious or ritual explanation was most likely. Since this original study, Renfrew and others have continued to develop and refine their methods within an overall approach they refer to as cognitive archaeology (see Renfrew and Zubrow 1994).

A second approach toward the archaeology of religion focuses on more theoretical issues regarding religion, arguing that a fundamental misunderstanding of what religion actually is has hobbled archaeological inquiry (see Insoll 2004). Research in this vein has focused on mining other disciplines (e.g., cultural anthropology, sociology, and religious studies) for more sophisticated understandings of religion, and examining their implications for archaeology. These new theoretical perspectives



have often been applied to examinations of iconography, ethnohistory, and historical sources. I address the value of these perspectives in greater detail in chapter 4.

From my point of view, both recent approaches to the archaeology of religion have tremendous value and potential. The development of the archaeology of religion requires both a greater theoretical sophistication and more developed material sensibilities. I do not see this as a radical position. I have no doubt that almost all archaeologists interested in religion would agree. The two categories of research presented above do not translate into categories of archaeologists. Renfrew is interested in broader theoretical issues, just as Insoll attempts to develop archaeological methodologies. The difficulty for all concerned is bringing these two approaches together. In my own research I have found ritual to be an effective bridge between the materials I typically come across as an archaeologist and the broader theoretical concerns that orient my interest in religion.

## Ritual

> Ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool. . . . It is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do.
>
> —WALLACE 1966, 102

The principal difficulty in the study of ancient religion is the identification of something as immaterial as belief or faith. When religion is viewed as a collection of myths, origin stories, and ethical principles, there is little in the material world that can be used to investigate it. Admittedly, archaeologists regularly come across iconographic elements depicting gods or similarly religious themes. But what are we to do with them? We might find depictions of what appear to be divine turtles, for instance. As for the significance of the turtles—it is almost impossible to say without some other, nonarchaeological, source to rely on. The solution to this problem is the recognition that religion is not simply something that people think, but is also something that people do (see Fogelin in press b for an expanded discussion of this point). Ritual is religiously motivated action, and these actions can and do leave material traces of their practice. If people sacrifice for their gods, archaeologists can identify the sacrificed materials. If people congregate to engage in worship, archaeologists can identify the spaces used to congregate in. As will be discussed in greater length in chapter 4, rituals are typically regularized and repeated affairs. Thus, the material traces will often be added to, and made more distinct, with each performance.

Not all rituals are religious. Nor are all religious ideas or principles enacted through rituals (see Bell 1997 for an excellent review of ritual). That said, the

archaeological investigation of ritual can serve as a foundation upon which understandings of past religions can be constructed. These understandings can, in turn, be analyzed in terms of existing theories concerning the nature, function, and form of religion.

These interests brought me to Thotlakonda, an Early Historic Period (c. 300 B.C.–A.D. 300) Buddhist monastery in north coastal Andhra Pradesh, India. My research at Thotlakonda Monastery is situated within broader anthropological approaches to ritual. In my investigations I examine religion, as it was practiced, within a dynamic social structure of competing concerns in daily life. The challenge of my work is the identification of the material consequences of religious practice. To this end, I focus on architecture and landscape. While I am interested in religious symbolism, I also consider the implications of the physical layout of architecture on social interactions among ritual participants. These interactions are shown in patterns of visibility and through principles derived from Western and non-Western theatrical design. My approach links religious and other architectural spaces within a regional landscape of meaning and interaction. I employ architecture to derive the social implications of spaces, and landscape to link them within a larger social context. Though the focus of this book is on Early Buddhism in South India, it is my hope that the methods and approaches I present here will have value for archaeologists working in a wide variety of geographic and religious contexts.

## Early Historic Period Buddhist Monasteries

Since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, the study of Early Buddhism has combined investigations of early Buddhist texts and archaeological remains. The twentieth century brought new approaches and insights to the study of Early Buddhism. To simplify the range of earlier interpretations of Buddhist monasticism, two different approaches to their broader social role can be identified. The first sees monasteries as retreats where monks could, as Brown (1965, 13) stated, "conduct their observances undisturbed by the distractions of any human environment." This position, or some variation on it, was also suggested by Fergusson and Burgess ([1880] 1988), Cunningham ([1854] 1997, [1876] 1962, [1892] 1998), Basham (1967), Lamotte (1988), and others. Using Buddhist monastic texts as a guide, these scholars believed that monasteries were centers for extended meditation and religious learning.

By the 1960s, with an emphasis on materialism, a new interpretation of Buddhist monasticism began to emerge. Again to simplify, this approach saw monasteries as economically oriented and actively engaged in broader social relations. In the work of Romila Thapar (1966, 2002), Buddhism was viewed as fostering trade by breaking down caste barriers that had formerly limited the ability of merchants and traders to interact. This economic approach was extended by subsequent scholars such as Ray (1986, 1989), Lahiri (1992), and Heitzman (1984, 1997). In Ray's early work, she argued that Buddhist monasteries played an active role in organizing and promoting trade, both as consumers and direct facilitators. Heitzman, and to a lesser degree Ray, suggested that Buddhist monasteries were also actively engaged in promoting agricultural production, serving as the nuclei of agrarian communities on the peripheries of developing states.

When comparing the newer and older interpretations of Buddhist monasticism, an interesting contrast is formed—religious disengagement versus economic engagement. What follows is an argument for a third permutation—religious engagement. In this I do not mean engagement in terms of Buddhist doctrine, but in the practice and conduct of daily ritual. I argue that this ritual role in society has been underappreciated in the existing scholarship on Early Historic Period Buddhist monasticism. An element common to all of the previous discussions of Buddhist monasticism is that they are based upon a combination of Buddhist texts and archaeological excavations of the monasteries in isolation (for an exception, see Shaw 2000, 2002). Yet most previous interpretations of the social role of monasteries make claims to the broader social context in which monasteries were found. My research over the last two years in Andhra Pradesh has been oriented toward investigating and evaluating all of these potential roles for Buddhist monasticism by directly examining the local context of a single monastery.



## Thotlakonda Monastery

The Buddhist monastery of Thotlakonda is located sixteen kilometers north of the modern city of Visakhapatnam in north coastal Andhra Pradesh (see figure 1.1). Sitting on a low hill overlooking the Bay of Bengal, it is one of three monasteries in the immediate area. The closest monastery, Bavikonda, lies on an adjacent hill less than two kilometers from Thotlakonda (Prasad 1993, 1994). Thotlakonda was excavated between 1987 and 1991 by the Andhra Pradesh Department of Archaeology and Museums (hereafter APDAM) (Sastry, Subrahmanyam, and Rao 1992). The excavators dated occupation of the site between the second and third centuries B.C. through the second or third centuries A.D.

Between November 2000 and March 2001, and again in January through March 2002, I directed a program of systematic archaeological surface survey in the area immediately surrounding Thotlakonda with a team of Indian graduate students (Fogelin 2003b, 2003c, 2004, in press a). After six months of fieldwork over two years, we surveyed 7.3 square kilometers and identified 328 archaeological features, including walls, terraces, reservoirs, and a *stupa* (a Buddhist ritual structure). In the floodplain below the hill we found a large non-monastic settlement. The

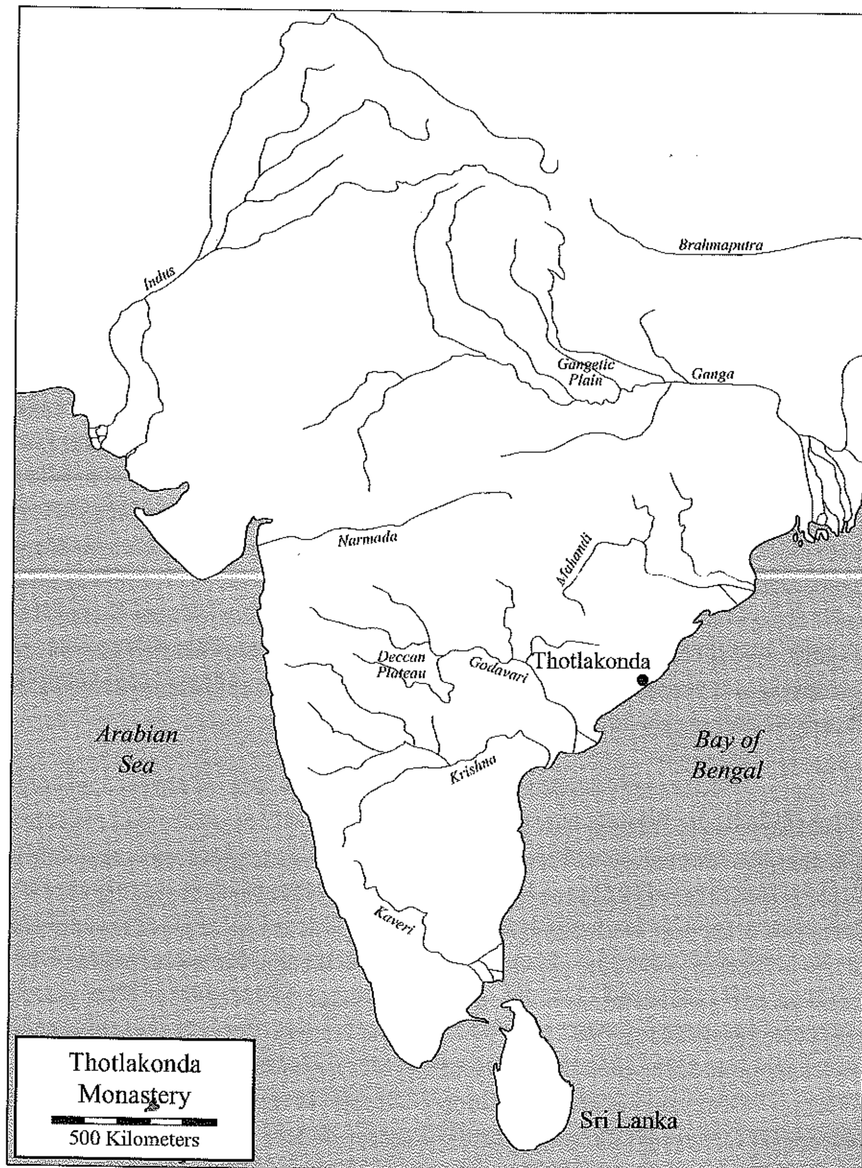


*Figure 1.1. The location of Thotlakonda in South Asia.*

most numerous sites identified were small cairns constructed of natural boulders. These cairns constituted a large mortuary landscape covering the hill on which Thotlakonda was found and several neighboring hills. Throughout the survey, a large number of ceramics were collected and analyzed, with similarities between the assemblages at different sites used to establish the ties between the different sites.



The goal of my research was to examine the relationship between Buddhist monks and laypeople during the Early Historic Period by directly examining the local context of these monasteries—to investigate the smaller, non-monastic archaeological remains that surround a single Buddhist monastery in conjunction with an examination of the monastery itself. My studies of Thotlakonda's architecture and landscape suggest that the monastery and local populations were actively engaged, both economically and ritually, with each other. Ritual ties are shown in the creation of a public worship space at the monastery and of paths leading to it. The ritual ties are further shown in a complex mortuary landscape combining the memorials of both monks and nuns scattered across the nearby hills.

In contrast to the emphasis on ritual interaction with the laity, there is also ample evidence for monastic isolation. This is shown in an architecturally isolated cloister at the heart of Thotlakonda, and its location on top of a hill, distant from any non-monastic settlements. The divergent roles of the monastery (ritual engagement versus religious isolation) created a tension in its broader social role. This tension was most clearly shown in the monastery's economic relationships with local populations.

Day-to-day support of the monks at Thotlakonda required the substantial movement of food and other resources to the monastery. A variety of mundane tasks were performed for the monks by laborers, most likely from the local villages. The relationships between the monks and the labor force that supported their lifestyle were strongly ambivalent. Through patterns of architectural separation, interaction with the laborers was kept to an absolute minimum. For the most part, the laborers worked outside the monastery walls, out of sight of the monks in the monastery. Further, the primary point of contact between the two groups, the refectory, was architecturally isolated from the rest of the monastery.

## An Outline of This Book

This book is intended to serve several audiences—each with its own interests and background knowledge. I expect that archaeologists who study South Asia will be particularly interested in the results of my fieldwork and the specific conclusions concerning Thotlakonda Monastery. Further, I want my discussions of Thotlakonda and the methods I employ to serve as a case study for the archaeological investigation of religion and ritual for archaeologists who work outside of South Asia. Finally, I hope this book will demonstrate the value of recent archaeological approaches for historians of South Asia and Buddhism. For this final group, this book is intended to illustrate how archaeology can be more effectively employed in a collaborative investigation of ancient Buddhism.

I have written this book with these different audiences in mind. The chapters on South Asian history and Buddhism are written for those with little or no

background in either. I provide more background on archaeological methods than most archaeologists would ever want to read. Discipline-specific jargon is avoided whenever possible, or clearly defined when unavoidable. Specialists in archaeology, South Asian history, and Buddhism are likely to find portions of some chapters overly simplistic. I ask that readers have patience in these sections. Many of the archaeologists have never heard the name Ashoka, just as some historians cannot tell the difference between an excavation unit and a hole in the ground. I am a committed convert to the cause of cross-disciplinary studies. I have gained tremendously from Buddhologists who patiently explained (and re-explained) the simplest concepts of Buddhist doctrine. For my part, I have tried to remain enthusiastic when asked to show how a small fragment of pottery can inform the study of past societies. Cross-disciplinary studies require a bit more background than discipline-specific studies, but the conclusions are strengthened by the collaboration.

Given the disparate sources employed, the arguments presented in this book often combine information from widely separated chapters. Ideas and arguments from earlier chapters are only completed in later chapters when other lines of evidence are considered. Throughout the text I indicate in what chapter, and in what way, particular points will reappear. Chapters 2 and 3 review the existing scholarship on South Asian history and Buddhism, respectively. In chapter 4, I examine the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in my archaeological analyses of religion and ritual. Chapters 5 and 6 present the archaeological background to north coastal Andhra Pradesh in general and Thotlakonda Monastery specifically. Chapters 7 and 8 synthesize the information from the preceding chapters to address the specific social context and underlying social tensions of Thotlakonda Monastery. I conclude the book with a discussion of the implications of this research on current understandings of Early Buddhism and the archaeological investigation of religion.

In the end, the picture of broader social relations developed for Thotlakonda Monastery is messier than typical depictions of early Buddhist monasticism. My interpretation more closely resembles the practice of modern Buddhist monasteries, with all of their conflicting roles and idiosyncrasies. By moving investigations beyond the monastery walls, my analyses emphasize the tensions, conflicts, and complex ritual relationships between the monks at Thotlakonda and the lay Buddhists who engaged, both economically and spiritually, with them. Rather than the idealized monastery of Buddhist literature, my analyses focus instead on the practice of Buddhist monasticism, with all of its inconsistencies and tensions intact.

## Some Terms and Definitions

Several terms require clear definitions at the outset. The first of these is "Early Buddhism," a phrase that is even found in the title of this book. As used here it is intended to be a substitute for the term "*Hinayana* Buddhism." Literally, *Hinayana* translates as "lesser vehicle" and refers to the earliest forms of Buddhism that existed in South Asia. This was not the term used by early Buddhists themselves; it was applied by later *Mahayana* (greater vehicle) Buddhists as a somewhat derisive label for those who preceded them. In the academic literature of Buddhist studies, *Hinayana* also became a term used to describe the later forms of Buddhism found in Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia. The use of *Hinayana* for these later forms of Buddhism was predicated on the idea that these forms of Buddhism, particularly those found in Sri Lanka, had undergone less change (or corruption) than the *Mahayana* Buddhism of Central and East Asia.



As will be discussed at greater length in chapters 2 and 3, I am skeptical about whether Sri Lankan Buddhism is a better model for Early Buddhism than any other form of Buddhism. There is ample reason to suspect that it has gone through as many profound changes as any other Buddhist tradition. Almost all Buddhist sects claim that their teachings represent the original words of the Buddha. From my perspective, I see no reason to privilege one *a priori*. For this reason—in addition to negative connotations of *Hinayana*—I prefer to use the term Early Buddhism. Further, the focus of this work is on Early Buddhism in South India. Thus, my conclusions do not necessarily have direct relevance to Early Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It is my hope that these analyses have value there, but I will leave it to those who have a greater knowledge of that material to make this determination.

Early Buddhism, in the sense used here, would date from the time of the Buddha (as early as the sixth century B.C.) through the second or third centuries A.D. It should be noted, however, that the terminal date is extremely fluid. The process in which *Mahayana* Buddhism developed is exceedingly complex and existing academic understandings of it contested (see Schopen 2000). It is likely that some Buddhist sects adopted *Mahayana* practices more quickly than others. Even within individual sects, some practices changed quickly while other practices continued to follow earlier forms. Thus the boundary between Early Buddhism and *Mahayana* Buddhism is permeable and likely indefinable.

There are also numerous difficulties in establishing the dates of origin of Early Buddhism. This is partly due to problems dating the life of the Buddha (see chapter 3), but also from the lack of any significant archaeological evidence for Buddhism prior to the third century B.C. (see Coningham 2001). Buddhism almost certainly existed prior to this, but in terms of this archaeological study, little or nothing can be said about it. Rather than trying to reconstruct an "original" Buddhism, here I focus on the earliest forms of Buddhism for which archaeological evidence can be obtained—a period beginning in roughly the third century B.C. and ending sometime in the second or third century A.D.

South Asian historians and archaeologists may have already noted another term that needs further explanation—the *Early Historic Period*. Traditionally the Early Historic Period refers to a time in the Gangetic Plain in northern South Asia to

which many of the earliest written sources refer, a period beginning in about the sixth century B.C. and ending in the third or fourth century A.D. (but see chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of these historical sources). This term has been applied to South India, but here the earliest historical sources can only be said to date to the third century B.C. (see chapter 2). Given the South Indian focus of this work, I use the later date to mark the advent of the Early Historic Period. I only use the earlier date when specifically addressing the Early Historic Period in northern South Asia.

Throughout this book I make use of numerous Sanskrit terms. I define each of them as they come up. Most refer to either specific elements of Buddhist architecture or Buddhist religious concepts. I also employ various technical terms in the archaeological analyses. These terms, too, are explained in language that a nonspecialist can understand. For convenience, I also provide a glossary at the end of this volume.