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**On Maṇḍalas**

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# The Maṇḍala at Ellora / Ellora in the Maṇḍala

## Introduction

This paper originated as the introductory contribution to a conference on the maṇḍala as an exemplar of the ways Buddhism moved and evolved through Asia in the eighth to tenth centuries. I was asked to set the context for the conference, working from the evidence at Ellora, the case most familiar to me and one which, I will argue below, suggests that a constellation of beliefs and practices surrounding the maṇḍala was already influencing the layout and use of certain Buddhist sites in India as early as the seventh century. During the conference and while editing this paper for publication, I was challenged to clarify the interrelated methodological issues of treating images (and sites) as "texts" and extrapolating from the presence of maṇḍala-like images that esoteric practices took place at a particular site.

The first issue has to do with the appropriateness and utility of interpreting visual images as texts. Historians of religion, with access to written texts and observations of ritual behavior, may have differing opinions about the validity of deriving meaning from what is seen or, more often the case, from what is seen when it is only loosely connectable to what is known from a written or observed tradition. For art historians, images are commonly treated both as "texts" that can be explicated and "read," and also as evidence that reflects and / or amplifies evidence from written traditions. As W. J. T. Mitchell elegantly describes the assumption underlying this interplay, "the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself."[1] Among art historians of South Asia, there may be disagreement about which texts to connect to particular images, but not about the appropriateness of using visual and written texts "dialectically."[2] I would argue that we have to start with what

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1. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 43.
2. For instance, in a recent and influential debate about aniconism and emblems in early Buddhist art, Susan Huntington and Vidya Dehejia interpret visual evidence in strikingly different ways. Yet, while they critique the interpretative

is known and, in the case of Ellora, what we can know most about is the visual evidence. To explicate this material requires interaction with a textual tradition and whatever strands of the historical record and practice seem most probably to be connected. This should be an interactive process; visual evidence is analyzed until a pattern seems to emerge. The pattern can be checked with known documents or other sites for possible correlations. Ideally these will come from the same or a similar milieu. And, the more complicated the pattern of repetition among sites or sites and texts, the greater the likelihood that a similar pattern of meanings underlies them.[3] If relationships seem to appear, identifications of images and their positions can be tried out. If the "tests" do not work, the images can be examined again to see whether a different pattern might emerge and, simultaneously, additional documents or sites can be sought for alternative identifications.[4] At the same time, there are limitations to this approach. For instance, if esoteric Buddhism was practiced at Ellora, not all of its meaning would have resided in the sculptures themselves, or even in a written textual tradi- tion. Some of the knowledge necessary to worship there would have been passed on orally and that tradition, invisible as it may be, would also be part of the larger "text" of the site.[5]

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context of this material over the past century, as well as one another's approaches, they both work from a double assumption that, on the one hand, early Buddhist texts can be used to identify and explain the subject matter of the images they discuss and, on the other, that if we adopt the right approach, the "narrative" content of the images is sufficient for us to decode their meaning. See Susan L. Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism," *Art Journal* 49.4 (1990): 401-408; Vidya Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multiva- lence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991): 45-66 (see particularly p. 51); Susan L. Huntington, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems: Another Look," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992): 111-156 (see particularly, pp. 124-125).

3. This methodology is not exclusive to a Buddhist or South Asian context; see Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: the Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park, Penn.: 1987) 2-3. In this case, too, text and image rarely come from precisely the same time and place.

4. This can go in contrary directions. While further exploration of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition might reveal a written text that better matches or "explains" Ellora than the scheme I discuss here, searching the considerably later Tibetan tradition would force anachronistic connections that may have no historic validity.

5. The question was raised during the conference, whether there was physical evidence of esoteric rituals at Ellora, for instance, traces of smoke on the ceiling where ritual fires would have been lit. Inside the shrines, there is considerable

If we accept viewing images as texts in this broad sense, then we can focus on the second question, whether we can postulate from the visual evidence of a maṇḍala (assuming there is agreement that a particular image or groups of images *is* a maṇḍala) at a site, that esoteric or tantric Buddhism was practiced there.  As I will discuss below, Ellora is a particularly challenging place because of the absence of evidence other than its layout and sculptures themselves.  The presence of maṇḍala-like groupings of images provides the possibility of making analogies to better documented places.  However, it became clear during our conference discussions that we should not expect point-by-point coherence in the application of maṇḍalas, even when we are certain that maṇḍalas were used at particular places.  Instead, esoteric iconography and practice seem to have been applied in a more "modular" fashion, elements chosen to meet the needs of a specific time and place.  Still, the overall patterns—that I have used the con-cept of the maṇḍala to represent—seem to have been similar from place to place.

Although this paper may not resolve these questions, I hope that by bringing them to the surface, other scholars will be inspired to contribute to their solutions.  Many loose ends may continue to remain untied, and many analogies may defy logical proof.  However, our conference's discourse across the various cultures in which Buddhist took root generated new insights that would not have occurred without this kind of intellectual travel across boundaries.  Challenging places like Ellora will become comprehen-sible if we can continue to compare, contrast, stretch and test our means of interpretation.

*Historical Context*
In 806, as the well-know story goes, the Japanese monk Kūkai returned home from China, after two and one-half years of esoteric training in the T'ang capital of Ch'ang-an.  For presentation to his emperor, Kūkai carried

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smoke damage.   In the halls outside the shrines, most plaster has fallen away and with it, traces of smoke.   Without archaeological dating, which has not yet been attempted to my knowledge, it would be difficult to determine whether the shrine smoke was contemporary with use of the caves, or accumulated later by the non-Buddhists known to have frequented the site.   For instance, the 1278 *Līlācaritra*  describes the visit to the caves by the famous Maharashtrian saint Cakradhāra who used them as a place of refuge; see S. G. Tulpule, ed., Mhai Bhat, *Līlācaritra*, vol. 1 (Nagpur and Poona:  1964): 22-26, 44.  I am indebted to the late Professor Tulpule for directing me to these passages and for his assis-tance in reading them.

hundreds of text scrolls, many statues of Buddhist deities, ritual objects, and numerous maṇḍalas, including the *Vajradhātumahāmaṇḍala* and the *Mahākaruṇadhātumaṇḍala*. These would form the core of Shingon Buddhist teachings and practice, revolutionizing temple layouts and linking them closely to the official activities of the Heian court.[6]

At the other end of the Buddhist world, finishing touches on the largest and last of the great Buddhist cave temples had been completed at Ellora seventy-five years earlier. There, at the ritual center of the rising Rāṣṭrakūṭa empire, a three-tiered temple was filled with Buddhist sculptures, arranged in unique, maṇḍala-like patterns brought, perhaps by an Indian "Kūkai" to Ellora around 700. By the early 800s, the nearby Kailāsa temple was completed under Rāṣṭrakūṭa patronage, even larger than its Buddhist and Brahmanical predecessors and equally unique in its use of the rock-cut site to express an iconographic vision. With such wonders, Ellora attracted visitors and worshippers from India and abroad who, witnessing worship in the extraordinary Hindu and Buddhist shrines, might have been as astonished as modern visitors at the sagacity and power of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas to support "state-of-the-art" temple building for not one, but two major religions of their time.[7]

Unfortunately, apart from the sites themselves and inscriptions recording the expansion and political and economic life of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas, little primary evidence for their activities exists. In the absence of direct evidence, the legendary—and admittedly rudimentary—image of Kūkai, laden with maṇḍalas, provides a seductive analogy for the way an individual, under official auspices, could have physically imported new ideas about iconography and practice to Ellora and initiated the creation of new structures to house those precious images.

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6. Chikyo Yamamoto, *History of Mantrayana in Japan* (New Delhi: 1987): 37. David Gardner's paper at the conference decoded the mythic aspects of this story.

7. The Kailāsa project was reportedly a source of amazement to its own artisan. In the Baroda plates of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Karkarāja, it was put this way:

> . . . a temple, the architect-builder of which, in consequence of the failure of his energy as regards [the construction of] another such work, was himself suddenly struck with astonishment, saying, "Oh, how was it that I built it!"

(R. G. Bhandarkar, "The Rāshtrakūṭa King Kriṣṇarāja I and Ēlāpura," *Indian Antiquary* 12 [1883]: 229.)

While we have other records of the transmission of Buddhist texts, Kūkai's, because it is an idealized version, offers a much fuller account of the role that maṇḍalas played in the movement of esoteric Buddhism through Asia in the eighth and ninth centuries.[8] Even when the myth is stripped away, we know that they were crucially important and precious, displayed in temples throughout the Buddhist world (some of which were constructed specifically for worship prescribed in these sūtras). But they were just part of a complex of material items and knowledge that were requisite to the transmission of esoteric Buddhist teachings. So, when we look at a very different kind of place, like Ellora, where all we have *are* the maṇḍala-like iconographic programs of the temples, we should use the "Kūkai analogy" in exploring the visual record to determine if it might reveal traces of individual action and royal support similar to the pattern of Kūkai's accomplishments.

As an official visitor to the T'ang capital, Kūkai was able to study with Hui-kuo, a key teacher who was, himself, part of a direct line of transmission of Vajrayāna teachings from India. The three great teachers of this line—Śubhākarasiṃha (637-735), Vajrabodhi (671-741), and Amoghavajra (705-774)—all taught both the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* and the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrahasūtra*, and were responsible for introducing them in China.[9] Śubhākarasiṃha, who studied at Nalanda, was also an official emissary, carrying the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* to Ch'ang-an in 716 at the invitation of the T'ang emperor. It was under one of his disciples that Hui-kuo studied this sūtra, and he is traditionally thought to have studied the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrahasūtra* under Amoghavajra, a disciple of Vajrabodhi, who brought that sūtra to China in 720.[10] We know, of course, that these teachers were concerned not just about text transmission but about initiating disciples, properly setting up maṇḍalas, and ultimately, with the efficacy of the rituals they conducted to support the ruler and the state.[11]

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8. The widely repeated story of Kūkai's accomplishments should not be accepted at face value, as Charles Orzech convincingly demonstrated in "Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayāna in China," *History of Religions* 29.2 (1989): 87-114 and in his paper at this conference.

9. Orzech, *ibid.*: 90-93, argues that both sūtras, and maṇḍala traditions, were promulgated together by all three teachers.

10. Minoru Kiyota, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles: 1978): 17-19.

11. Orzech, op.cit. 91, n. 6.

International travel was a significant factor in these transmissions. Śubhākarasiṃha and Vajrabodhi, who may both have been from Central India originally, and Amoghavajra, were reputed to have traveled extensively, in India and southeast Asia, to gain advanced experience in esoteric practices. It seems evident that, in the seventh and eighth centuries, there was no single seat of esoteric knowledge; world-famous teachers circulated throughout India, and ambitious practitioners traveled widely from within India and from abroad to seek them out.[12] Kūkai's story is, then, emblematic of an idealized pattern for the transmission of esoteric teachings in Asia. An official monk / traveler is eager to collect texts and maṇḍalas from abroad; his findings are of great interest to his ruler, who believes that esoteric Buddhist rituals can help ensure the safety and health of the state. He makes contact with a top teacher of the tradition, creating a legitimate line of succession, and transmission of carefully translated texts, but he also creates something new—an original synthesis— to be practiced in his homeland. This pattern followed a precedent going back centuries, for international travel to gather the highest and most current Buddhist

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12. Although later than the period of Ellora and this conference, medieval Tibetan texts are the richest source on the history of tantric Buddhism. It is in this literature that we find traces of a link, through Saraha, between Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra) and Orissa. Saraha was the teacher of Nagarjuna, the teacher of Nagabodhi, who was Vajrabodhi's teacher; Vajrabodhi was supposed to have been born in Central India around 670. See André Bareau, "Der Tantrismus," *Die Religionen Indiens, II: Buddhismus, Jinismus, Primitivvölker* (Stuttgart: 1964) 173; Alex Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras* (New York: 1973) 13-14, argues for later dates for these individuals. In various accounts, Saraha is said to have been born in Vidarbha, performed a *mahāmudrā* ritual there, and converted the people; H. V. Guenther, *The Royal Song of Saraha* (Seattle: 1969) 4-12; Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya, trans., *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India* (Simla: 1970) 102-106. Saraha, elsewhere called Rāhula, is also connected to Orissa where a seventh- or eighth-century inscription refers to a Rāhularuci, a *mahāmaṇḍalācarya* and *paramaguru*; A. Ghosh, "Khadipāda Image Inscription of the Time of Śubhākara," *Epigraphia Indica* 26 (1942): 247-248; S. C. De, "The Orissan Museum Image Inscription of the Time of Śubhākaradēva," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 1949* (Allahabad: 1950) 66-74. Even if the Tibetan texts and inscriptions do not refer to the "historic" Saraha, they demonstrate that, at least in the later tradition, it was believed that tantric Buddhism was pursued and taught in the region abutting the Rāṣṭrakūṭa domain and the one from which more parallels to Ellora's iconography appear than from any other region. For a more extensive discussion, see Geri H. Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala, The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora* (Albany: 1993) 16-17, and 133-134, notes 92-97.

teachings, linked directly to the original texts and instruction in India itself. Disseminated both by land and sea, esoteric Buddhism in the eighth to tenth centuries was an international movement, capable of transfer from one country to another within a single generation. The pace of the exchange, and the concern for accurate translation and practice, might suggest on one hand, that if we found two places where the same teaching was propounded, we should see similar visual evidence of it. On the other hand, the ideal also provides for creative adaptation to local circumstances, so we may find that this "mandala" of esoteric centers was loose, indeed, capable of creative adaptations to local contexts.

These travels and transmissions should also be considered within the broader context of a developing "world system." Although monks had traveled by land and sea to view sacred places and collect texts for centuries, with the advent of Islam and the rise of the T'ang dynasty in the early 600s, the motivations for and pattern of land and ocean voyages shifted and expanded, linking India, Southeast Asia and China in a network of increasing economic as well as religious exchanges.[13] By the ninth century, Arabic geographical accounts show in detail the growing knowledge of routes between the Persian Gulf to India and on to China.[14] Whether transcontinental or oceanic, these routes drew together international communities of traders and others. In these centuries, there clearly was not the kind of economic system that developed in the next millennium but, as Chaudhuri has suggested, on some levels and in some ways people in the "Indian Ocean civilisations" (Islam, India, Southeast Asia, China) considered themselves to be part of an "entire structure."[15] The adaptation of related teachings of a world religion in three of these four civilization areas (and in Japan, to add a fourth relevant to Buddhist culture) depended on the connections being made by more secular travelers within this "structure." Thanks to Arabic geographers and historians, we have detailed eyewitness accounts of these activities. They give us a glimpse of a nascent "world system," which not only contained esoteric Buddhism, but may have been just the right medium in which it could develop and expand.

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13. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (London: 1985) 44.

14. In such works as the *Relation of China and India* (851) and Ibn Khurdadhbih's *Book of Roads and Provinces* (846-85); see Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization*, 49-50.

15. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: 1990) 48.

Foreign enclaves were, for example, welcomed on the west coast of India, it has been suggested, because of the Brahmanical aversion to maritime travel. As "Hindu" empires grew from the ninth century onward, these enclaves and the trade contacts they brought, became increasingly important.[16] From this point of view, there was interaction with a wider world and developments on the Indian subcontinent cannot be viewed in isolation even if most internal records seem to be inward-looking. So, for instance, in the ninth century the Rāṣṭrakūṭa empire was recognized as one of the four imperial formations of the medieval world, even as this dynasty described itself only in terms of its Indian conquests and territories. The king, one of whose titles was Vallabhārāja, appears as "Balhara" in an Arabic list of four great kings in the world, together with rulers of China, Greece, and the Arabs. His capital was at Mankir, that is Mānyakheta or Malkhed, known to be the Rāṣṭrakūṭa capital in the ninth century.[17] The Balhara was considered by these writers to be the greatest of the kings of al-Hind, able to maintain his position in the face of numerous threats from surrounding, lesser rulers.[18] Arabic geographers noted the Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings' wealth, displayed in the capital, filled with thousands of elephants, and adorned with an "idolhouse" containing twenty thousand idols made of a variety of precious materials.[19] The exotica of India's royal and religious presentations was "world class," at least from an Arab point of view.

By this time, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas dominated India from the Ganges valley south and west to Gujarat, across the Deccan, and south again to Kanci. Their wealth may, in fact, be linked to the expansion of Islamic trade with India.[20] They likely benefited, at least indirectly, from the resources accrued from trade along the coasts and, as one source reports, "no king had more friendship for the Arabs."[21] Yet, this system is not evident in Rāṣṭrakūṭa epigraphic records, typically inward-looking and concerned with the more traditional matters such as royal donations and military campaigns. So, we might be tempted to conclude that from the inside looking out, this "world system" was not apparent or important to the Rāṣṭrakūṭas. However, both the Buddhist temples that were created in the early years of their

16. Andre Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1 (Leiden: 1990) 68-69, 101.
17. Quoted from Sulayman, merchant, A. D. 851, in Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge: 1990) 213-215.
18. Wink, op. cit. 304-305.
19. From the *Kitab al-Fihrisht*, *ibid*. 305-306.
20. *Ibid*. 308.
21. *Ibid*. 306.

rise to power, and their Brahmanical temples, like those described in Mus-
lim geographers' accounts, exhibit through new scale, style, and iconogra-
phy a claim to transregional authority, the Kailāsa temple for instance refer-
ring to earlier Kailāsas constructed by Pallava and Cālukya rulers in the
south.[22]  To the extent that the Pallavas, Cālukyas, or Rāṣṭrakūṭas had
dominion over the coasts of the Deccan, this authority was ultimately con-
nected—if only through trading diasporas—to the expanding world system
of the Indian Ocean.  And, it was in this system that esoteric Buddhism as
an international movement was to thrive, perhaps directly supported by
rulers who sought its special help in securing their power.  From this point
of view, developments in the Indian subcontinent cannot be viewed in iso-
lation even if most internal records seem to be inward looking; there was
interaction with a wider world that, if only indirectly, related to what was
happening within India.[23]  This was, then, the broader context in which
maṇḍalas were moving and changing.

*Meanings of the Maṇḍala*
As a pretext for this conference, the maṇḍala served as a tangible symbol of
the depth and complexity of the exchanges and transformations we hoped
to explore.  Often considered "diagnostic" of the presence of a certain
"stage" of Buddhism, they have been defined in myriad ways.  In the
Tibetan tradition, maṇḍalas were grouped into those made of powdered
colors, those painted on textiles, those formed by meditation, and that
formed by the human body.  In a different kind of scheme, they were clas-
sified as five types:  receptacle, causal, means, path, or fruit maṇḍalas.[24]  In

22. A Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription in Ellora Cave 15 describes Dantidurga as having
made the Cālukya king Vallabharāja (Kīrtivarman II) his tributary; James
Burgess, *Report on the Elura Cave Temples and the Brahmanical and Jaina
Caves in Western India*, Archaeological Survey of Western India, vol. 5 (1882;
rpt., Varanasi:  1971) 88, verse 23.  Various elements of style and iconography
in the Kailāsa temple appear to have been derived directly from the Virupakṣa
temple at Pattadakal, itself patterned in part on the Kailāsanātha temple at Kanci
(see D. Chatham, "The Stylistic Sources and Relationships of the Kailāsa Temple
at Ellora," [diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1977] for a detailed dis-
cussion).  See Malandra, op. cit., 9-10 and notes 42-50 for a fuller discussion of
the relationship of early Rāṣṭrakūṭa history to Ellora.
23. Wink, op. cit. 225.
24. Alex Wayman, "Reflections on the Theory of Barabudur as a *Maṇḍala*,"
*Barabudur, History and Significance of a Buddhist Monument,* eds. Luis O.
Gomez and Hiram W. Woodward (Berkeley:  1981) 146-149.  The latter classi-
fication is found in Vajravarman's commentary, the *Sundarālaṁkarānāma,* on

appearance, they are generally symmetrical or even geometrically arranged groups of images, organized in order of (and to guide) worship for those initiated into the proper way of "reading" them. The point of using mandalas is to engender enlightenment, through proper initiation and ritual practice. They are, thus, sacred ground, which an initiate approaches in carefully orchestrated steps, and into which the gods are invited to descend; they are "the whole universe in its essential plan, in its process of emanation and reabsorption."[25] They are, in other words, as conceptualized the Shingon tradition, the seat of realization of specific Buddhist insights: "a mandala is what gives birth to all buddhas . . ."[26]

Mandalas conceived as diagrams could be extended into a visualization of concrete architectural space and, thus, were transformed into actual temple architecture and sculpture, as I have argued Ellora was.[27] The universe-in-a-mandala may thus be described and represented as a palace and, conversely, the mandala as a whole is conceived as being located in a *kūṭāgāra*, a three-storied eaved palace resting on top of mount Sumeru.[28]   Such mandalas would contain layers or galleries, in which reside numerous manifestations of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities, whose arrangement and numbers vary from mandala to mandala. These group ings have been collected in iconographic lists in such texts as the *Mañjuśrī-mulakalpa, Sādhanamālā, Nispannayogāvalī* and the *Kriyāsaṃgraha*, and might be associated with specific teachers and / or schools.

The mandala becomes a kind of sacred ground and as such, can confer advantages even to the uninitiated. Thus, in the Tibetan tradition, the question was asked rhetorically:

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the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-tantra.* Vajravarman was possibly a contemporary of Atiśa, who brought tantric Buddhism to Tibet in 1042 after study in the tantric school at Śrīvijaya. *Ibid.,*140-141.

25. Guiseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (New York: 1970) 23.

26. This according to the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* and Śubhākarasiṃha's commentary on it; see Adrian Snodgrass, *The Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas in Shingon Buddhism* (New Delhi: 1988) 120.

27. This was not an exclusively Buddhist phenomenon. Dennis Huston has argued that a Vaiṣṇava mandala was applied to the architectural form and iconographic program of the 770 C. E. Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Kanchipuram; see his "Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa in Theology and Architecture:  A Background for Śrīvaiṣṇavism," *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies,* 2.1 (1993): 139-170. I am grateful to Charles Orzech for bringing this study to my attention.

28. For instance, the *Nispannayogāvalī* specifically describes the *kūṭāgāra* on Sumeru as housing mandalas with the main deity in the center.

If someone were made only to enter the mandala and not be conferred initiation, what would be the advantage? [The answer given was:] If one takes the refuge vow and beholds the mandala of faith, there is the advantage that he becomes purified from sins accumulated for many aeons and plants in his stream of consciousness . . . the disposition . . . of becoming in future times a receptacle fit for entering the profound *mantra* path.[29]

In this, the mandala functions as a *tīrtha* does; I will return to this point.

But, is it sufficient to observe that Barabudur or Ellora are "like a mandala?" On what basis might we postulate that a monument is a mandala? Which one? If we cannot name it, does that weaken the analogy? Does the presence of a mandala ensure that esoteric Buddhism was practiced at that site? What more complex ranges of practice does their presence suggest? Are there alternative analogies or models that would be more productive in explicating what gave such sites as these their particular forms?

*Ellora: A Case Study*

Ellora is a fitting case study because at no other Indian site of this period is evidence for sculpted mandalas so well preserved as early as it was there. Yet, it has fallen into cracks between or overlapped the boundaries that appear in standard historical and art historical accounts of this period and has been generally missing from discussions of early tantric Buddhism and its art. Much of what we see at Ellora has its roots in its history at Ajanta, Aurangabad and other cave temple sites. But, there is also much that was new to the Deccan, and was connected more to places like Sirpur, Sanci, Bodhgaya, and Ratnagiri in Orissa. Moreover, iconographic features among all suggest a transregional diffusion of a teaching or teachings that shared a core of common belief, across various dynastic and geographical boundaries.[30]

Best known as a major Brahmanical site and *tīrtha*, Ellora is located near Aurangabad, in the "cave temple" region of western Maharashtra, about 150 miles northeast of Bombay. As a *tīrtha*, it was relatively easy to get to, accessible for centuries by a land route still in use today. Bus, train, and air

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29. It is worth remember Wayman's caution, that ". . . there is no revelation of the mandala just by exhibiting it, or by the disciple's mere seeing it" (*The Buddhist Tantras* , op. cit. 59).

30. Detailed background, discussion, and illustrations of the points made here can be found in Malandra, op. cit., passim.

travel have made it even more accessible to the tens of thousands of mod-
ern-day tourists and devotees who visit each year.

The Kailāsa temple has overwhelmed first impressions and serious study
of Ellora, but there is much more—thirty-four Brahmanical, Jain, and Bud-
dhist caves in all, dating from the late sixth to the early tenth century. It
was significant enough, as a Brahmanical site, that it appears in the litera-
ture of the emerging Islamic world system, in the travelogue of the ninth-
century traveler, al-Masudi (contemporary with, if historically unconnected
to Kūkai), who noted:

> . . .the great temple named Aladra [Ellora], where Indians come on pil-
> grimage from the farthest regions. The temple has an entire city dedicated
> to its support and it is surrounded by thousands of cells where devotees
> consecrated to the worship of the idol dwell.[31]

From the early eighth century, the *tīrtha* was visited by Rāṣṭrakūṭa leaders,
long before Kṛṣṇa I took credit (in the 812 Baroda plates) for constructing
the Kailāsa temple. They used it as a ritual capital even before they
assumed all the titles of empire, and continued to use it as such at least until
they moved their capital south to Malkhed (Mankir of Arab geography). In
plates issued at Ellora in 742, Dantidurga recorded his worship at
*guheśvaratīrtha* in connection with a gift of a village. The *tīrtha* also has a
place in the Puranic lists of *jyotirlīṅgas* where *śrāddha* should be per-
formed and, later, it appears in a list of 50 *śākta pīṭhas*. Local legends
provide a paradigm for Śaiva worship at Ellora. In one version, a *liṅga*
arises from the "lake" at Elapura, a place where worship will absolve con-
flict and sin. In a medieval Marathi story about queen Maṇikāvatī and the
king of Elapura, even accidental worship—bathing in the tank there—alle-
viates suffering caused by sin. In gratitude for this expiation, which
answered Maṇikāvatī's prayers, she had an entire temple to Śiva con-
structed, perhaps the Kailāsa excavation itself.

We might expect patrons of rock-cut architecture on this scale in such a
numinous place publicly to claim and bequeath the credit for such an
extraordinary expenditure of time, funds, and human resources. Yet, not
atypical for monuments of this period, what could be read of the only in
situ dedicatory inscription does not refer explicitly to Rāṣṭrakūṭa patronage
or practice at the site. As noted above, their patronage was only briefly

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31.   C. Barbier de Meynard, ed. and trans., *Maçoudi—Les Prairies d'Or:
Muruj-ul-Zahab*, vol. 4 (Paris: 1865) 95-96.

acknowledged in the Baroda plates issued in the early ninth century in Gujarat.

The Kailāsa and other Rāṣṭrakūṭa caves were not, however, the first Brahmanical excavations at Ellora. Cave excavation began in the late sixth century; one of its earliest caves dedicated to the worship of Śiva, and most similar to the great cave temple at Elephanta.[32]  So, when Buddhist teachers, practitioners and patrons moved to Ellora around 600, they were locating their worship at a Brahmanical site, a *tīrtha* "on the rise." And, somewhat later, during the late seventh and early eighth centuries when the Rāṣṭrakūṭas were forming their empire, the Buddhist community was also experiencing change.  That this change may have included a considerable increase in support is suggested by the increased scale and complexity of Cave 11 and 12, created during in the early 700s. Without external evidence, the changes at the site itself are our best indication of a Rāṣṭrakūṭa connection to the changes in Buddhism expressed at Ellora.  Similarly dramatic changes in China and Japan, initiated with the support of royal houses concerned about expansion and stability, suggest such a connection. Moreover, this was the time frame in which Islamic merchants and armies were just beginning to expand the systems in which goods and ideas circulated in Asia, and that included the continuous movement of monks back and forth to India from China and Southeast Asia to study and teach new esoteric texts and practices.

The juxtaposition of Buddhist and Śaiva (and later Jain) shrines shows that Ellora's space was considered sacred in more than a Brahmanical context.  Just as the Kailāsa temple refers explicitly to another sacred place (suggesting a regional transposition of Maharashtrian for Himalayan sacrality), so it is possible to consider that as a Buddhist site, it came to suggest a similarly monumental transposition; Ellora for Bodhgaya. (Later, the Jain community was to define it as its own *tīrtha*, making an explicit analogy between Caranādri and Kailāsa.[33]) I will return to this point later.

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32. Recent excavations have revealed foundations of what appears to be an even earlier Hinayana establishment in the vicinity of the caves; this was reported by the Xinhua News Agency, New Delhi (October 24, 1994), reference via Internet; thanks to Richard Lariviere for sending me this notice.  The layering of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna temples at the same site is well known in Maharashtra: Ajanta, Aurangabad, Nasik, Kanheri, and Karle are among the most well-known examples of this phenomenon.  Until now, Ellora has been the exception with its exclusively, and relatively late, Mahāyāna / esoteric temples.

33. In the donative inscription dated 1234-35, on an image of Pārśvanātha in Ellora's Jain excavations, the donor is said to have made ". . . many huge images

But, despite its later fame and the weighty evidence of the Buddhist caves themselves, we have no direct evidence to identify patrons or teachers. Unlike many earlier cave temple sites, where donative inscriptions in situ help locate them fairly precisely in time and dynastic affiliation, Ellora's Buddhist caves are anonymous. It has appeared to be, therefore, lacking historical, religious, and historiographic importance. It has been treated as marginal and derivative, as "the end of the line" by most art and religious historians, who have typically looked to eastern India to explain changes in style, iconography, and sectarian affiliation that we can observe in other parts of the subcontinent. This is connected to the even broader tendency many historians have had to see decline and deterioration in the religion, art, and politics of late classical and early medieval India. Such work as Wink's *Al-Hind* and Inden's *Imagining India* are helpful counters to that attitude, offering fresh explorations of the economic / cultural / political and ritual context of religious monuments and objects. But even here, the importance of Brahmanical establishments in the creation of "scales of forms" over-shadows what are viewed as waning Buddhist activities.

Contrary to these opinions, Ellora embodies considerable, significant change. It appears to be on a kind of boundary where transitions in iconography, and then style, occurred. At Ellora we see the culmination of a millennium-long tradition of rock-cut Buddhist architecture in India. At the start of the 12-cave Buddhist sequence around 600 C. E., style, iconography, (and, by extension, teachings) derive in part from other nearby sites. But, by the end of the sequence, around 730 C. E., more is different than similar. Techniques, stylistic, thematic and iconographic idioms were in place to be applied there; then new idioms were introduced in a "traditional" style. And, finally, in its last Buddhist temples, new style *and* iconography appear, spanning different cultural zones. At this point, no later than 700, we cannot understand it by treating it purely as a regional site. The traditional rock-cut environment was shaped—in places unevenly, experimentally, incompletely, to house a new kind of sect and practice, with as many connections outside as inside the region.

Given the limitations in the historical record, I would argue that we should simultaneously treat Ellora as a text about itself, possessing an internal logic, but also as part of a larger system. If its former "marginal

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of the lordly Jinas . . . and converted the Charanādri thereby into a holy *tīrtha* just as Bharata [made] Mount Kailāsa [a *tīrtha*]"; James Burgess and Bhagwanlal Indraji, "Elura Inscriptions," *Inscriptions from the Cave Temples of Western India* (Bombay: 1881) 99-100.

status" is put aside, significant new internal and external connections appear that do in fact suggest explanations for much about the site. We still may not be able to name patrons or teachers and the results may not be neat correlations to other kinds of sites and texts, but the results will ultimately be more useful than the more common, linear search for forced correlations between a known text and site that can be equally frustrating. And, looking outward, Ellora's meaning can be placed in a network (a more fanciful "mandala") extending from the Buddhist caves within a Brahmanical *tīrtha*, to other early esoteric sites in central India, to the wider range of places connected by monks and traders traveling through the Buddhist world system of the eighth century and onward.

Ellora's Buddhist temples followed patterns used for centuries in the western caves, the typical layout including a *caitya* (cave with monolithic stūpa) and several other excavations that served as worship, study, or residence halls. Here there is only space to bracket the earliest and latest manifestations of the mandala as a simple, repeated, geometric arrangement of buddha and / or bodhisattva images within their architectural enclosures. The earliest at Ellora is worth noting briefly, to highlight continuities and changes even in the early 600s, and to anticipate what was to happen a century later.

Cave 6, like most of the early shrines, is a single-level temple. Its wide entrance hall is filled with pillars, and not much else, empty cells lining the side walls. In this cave, the only sculpture is found in the shrine and its antechamber. There, four stunning images are carved: Bhṛkuṭī and Avalokiteśvara to the left of the shrine door; Maitreya and Mahāmāyūrī to the right. The bodhisattva *dvārapālas* follow convention in iconography, style and location. But, these female figures are the earliest to display the precise iconographic elements that clearly identify them. They are found in several other of the seventh-century caves, and would be part of a much more complex group of female figures in Cave 12 (to which I will return), an indication that they were important, and original, members of Ellora's earliest mandala.

Inside the Cave 6 shrine, a small seated Tārā image was carved directly to the left of the door. The left and right walls are each filled by a nine-buddha mandala carved in shallow relief. The buddha images are undifferentiated (they were painted, but the colors are not apparent today); all seated in *vajraparyaṅkāsana*, hands held in *dharmacakramudrā*. Below the left wall group are three worshippers; two are crowned and, with attendants and an elephant, it appears that they should be viewed as royal figures. Below the right wall group are seated images of Avalokiteśvara, Jambhala,

and Mañjuśrī (the earliest of the latter two at Ellora). The location of these maṇḍalas (on either side of a central buddha image) is similar to the location of relief maṇḍalas carved in a sub-shrine in Cave 12. They may also be connected to the ten, nearly three-dimensional buddha images carved in the left and right *maṇḍapa* galleries of Cave 2, from the mid-600s, and to the nine buddha images carved in niches along the left and right *maṇḍapa* walls of the third floor of Cave 12; and to the two groups of nine small buddha images carved at ceiling level in the antechamber of that cave. But, as a group, these nine buddhas have not been precisely matched with groups known from other sites or written texts.

The central shrine image in Cave 6, on the back wall, is a *dharmacakra-mudrā, pralambapādāsana* buddha, similar to many at earlier Buddhist sites throughout the western caves, attended by two chowrie-bearing bodhisattvas. And numerous "architectural" and stylistic motifs are so similar to those of the earlier Brahmanical caves that it could be argued that the same workshop produced this Buddhist cave and that, therefore, it dates from around 600. This shows how traditional style, and a key image, could be embedded in a new iconographic framework.

If we "fast-forward" to look at Ellora's latest Buddhist cave, it will be apparent how much had changed in a century. Cave 12 is a three-level excavation, everything executed on a larger scale than in Cave 6. One approaches through a thick screen wall across a large, bright forecourt. A shallow stairway leads up through two entrance pillars into a dark *maṇḍapa* filled with pillars and lined with small, empty cells. On the left rear wall of the *maṇḍapa* is the first of the Cave 12 eight-bodhisattva relief maṇḍalas. Two others were carved in the cell that leads to the stairway up to the second level; and two more are carved on either side of a buddha image in a subshrine between the first and second floor; making a total of five relief maṇḍalas in Cave 12. The bodhisattvas identities (according to objects being held) are similar in all, as is the central, *dhyānamudrā* buddha image.[34] They appear to be:

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34. See Malandra, op. cit. 75-79, for a more detailed discussion of these identifications.

| Maitreya *(nāgakesara)* | Samantabhadra (sword) | Kṣtigarbha *(kalpadruma)* |
|---|---|---|
| Avalokiteśvara | Buddha | Vajrapāṇi *(vajra)* |
| Sarvanivaraṇaviṣkambhin (banner) | Ākāśagarbha (bud / jewel) | Mañjuśrī (book) |

Cave 12 Relief Maṇḍala

Moving toward the shrine on the first floor, panels depicting *dhyānamudrā* buddhas were carved in large niches on both walls of the six-pillared antechamber. Outside the shrine door, seated images of Maitreya and Mañjuśrī were carved to the left and right, respectively. Inside the shrine, an image of Tārā was carved to the left the door (in the same position as the one in Cave 6); to the right of the door is an image of Cundā). On the left and right walls of the shrine are carved eight bodhisattvas, all seated in *lalitāsana*. Carved on the back wall, the main shrine image is a *dharmacakramudrā* buddha attended by two *nāgas*. Where attributes are preserved, we appear to have:

### BUDDHA

| Lokeśvara *(padma)* | Ākāśagarbha (frothy bud / jewel?) |
|---|---|
| Maitreya *(nāgakesara)* | [Vajrapāṇi?] |
| Samantabhadra (sword) | Mañjusrī (book) |
| Sarvanivaraṇaviṣkambhin (banner) | Kṣitigarbha *(kalpadruma* branch) |

Cave 12.1 Core Shrine program

The entrance to the second floor is through a cell, in which two more of the relief maṇḍalas are carved, which leads to a stairway up to a small front shrine, where the central *bhumisparśamudrā* buddha image is attended by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi. To the left and right of this image are the last two relief maṇḍalas; above the one to the right are images of Cundā, Tārā, and Bhṛkutī. On the right wall of this small shrine is a triad composed of Avalokiteśvara, accompanied by Jambhala and Tārā. It is note-

worthy that a large lotus medallion is carved on the ceiling of this shrine, a decorative motif typical of eighth-century Brahmanical architecture.

All sculptures on the second floor are located along the central front-to-back axis. The passageway to the *maṇḍapa* (another pillar-filled hall lined with empty cells) is framed, to the left, by an image of Avalokiteśvara flanked by Tārā and Bhṛkutī, and, to the right, an image of Mañjuśrī, flanked by four female deities. The shrine entrance, protected by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi leads, down two steps, to a relatively spacious shrine. Inside, to the immediate left is an image of Tārā; Jambhala is carved to the right.

Four standing bodhisattva images were carved on the left and right walls of the shrine; attributes (where preserved) suggest that this is the same group as in the relief maṇḍalas, and in the first and third floor shrines of the cave, with slight adjustments in position:

<div align="center">BUDDHA</div>

| Maitreya (stūpa in hair) | Mañjuśrī (book) |
|---|---|
| Samantabhadra (sword) | Lokeśvara (bud) |
| [Vajrapāṇi?] | Sarvanivaraṇaviṣkambhin (pennant) |
| Kṣitigarbha? | Ākāśagarbha (bud / jewel) |

Cave  12.2 Core Shrine program

Above the bodhisattvas to the left, at ceiling level, is a row of seven small *bhumisparśamudrā* buddha figures; above and to the right, is a similar group but with hands held in *dhyānamudrā*. The central shrine image, a *bhumisparśamudrā* buddha, is attended by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi. In front of the throne are images of Bhūdevi and Aparajitā, carved as if rising out of the floor.

The third floor of Cave 12 is an extraordinary creation, filled with light and major pieces of sculpture. Unlike the lower two levels, its *maṇḍapa* is lined with nine buddha images instead of empty cells. The two "central" ones on each side are seated in *pralambapādāsana*, hands held in *dharma-cakramudrā*. The remaining five are all seated in *vajraparyaṅkāsana*. The

*mudrās* of these five vary; taking them in clockwise order from the "entrance" in the front, left, they appear to have been: *dhyānamudrā, dharmacakramudrā, dharmacakramudrā, dhyānamudrā,*[35] *bhumis-parśamudrā.*[36] Along the rear *maṇḍapa* walls are two groups of seven buddhas; those to the left hold their hands in *dhyānamudrā*; trees above their heads distinguish them as the six past buddhas and the buddha of this age. Those to the right hold their hands in *dharmacakramudrā.*

The shrine antechamber is framed by female figures, as it was in Cave 6. But here, in the densest expression of the maṇḍala, there are twelve, unprecedented in the western caves (or elsewhere for the early eighth century). Distinctive iconographic details include a four-armed Cundā (third on the left); the three-pronged *vajra* of Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī (seated immediately to the left of the shrine door); the snake belt worn by Jāṅgulī (immediately to the right of the shrine door); the peacock of Mahāmāyūrī, second on the right; and the four arms and twisted *daṇḍa* of Bhṛkuṭī, fourth on the right. Such specific attributes help in identifying the group as the Dhāraṇīs who appear (in varying configurations, as described in later iconographic compendia) in maṇḍalas of Tārā, Dharmadhātu Vāgiśvara, and Mahāvairocana.[37] Above them, to the left, at ceiling height are nine *bhumisparśamudrā* buddhas; to the right, nine *dhyānamudrā* buddhas.

Inside the shrine, Tārā and Jambhala again protect the front wall on either side of the door. Four standing bodhisattvas are carved on the left and right walls, holding objects that identify them as the same group in the lower levels and in the relief maṇḍalas:

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35. This is a correction; in Malandra, op. cit. 86, it is erroneously listed as *bhumisparśamudrā*.

36. It is tempting to read these five as representations of the five *Dhyāni* buddhas: Mahāvairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitāyus, and Amoghasiddhi, but what is preserved of the *mudrās* doesn't support this differentiation. (We would expect, instead, to find *dharmacakramudrā* for Vairocana; *bhumisparśamudrā* for Akṣobhya; *varadamudrā* for Ratnasambhava; *samāhitamudrā* for Amitābha; and *abhayamudrā* for Amoghasiddhi.) Still, this is a close as Ellora's iconography seems to come to a five-Buddha system; otherwise, there seems to be a rather strong emphasis on triads of various sorts.

37. It is worth noting that locally, a compositional precedent for visually similar female groups existed in the sixth- and the eighth-century Brahmanical caves, where groups of *saptamātṛkā* images, are commonly found.

BUDDHA

| Maitreya (stūpa in hair) | Mañjuśrī (book) |
|---|---|
| Samantabhadra (sword) | Ākāśagarbha ? |
| [Kṣitigarbha?] | Sarvanivaraṇaviṣkambhin (banner) |
| Vajrapāṇi? | Lokeśvara |

Cave 12.3 Core Shrine program

Above them, at ceiling level on the left and right, are groups of seven bud-
dhas, hands of all held in *dhyānamudrā*. The central shrine image is, again,
a *bhumisparśamudrā* buddha, with images of Bhūdevi and Aparajitā
carved on the floor in front of the throne.

What does this condensation of Ellora's "text" tell us? Looking in
overview at the relief *maṇḍalas*, while their locations suggest that they were
not part of the original programs of the cave, their content—eight dif-
ferentiated bodhisattvas surrounding a *dhyānamudrā* buddha image—con-
nects them directly to the bodhisattva programs in the Cave 12 shrines (and
to the slightly earlier Cave 11). The kernel of the concept was there from
the beginning, but the content changed quite dramatically over the century
and a quarter of Buddhist activity. Carved in shallow relief, they were also
"unfolded" into the three-dimensional space of the cave shrines, in which
groupings of eight bodhisattvas frame the central buddha image: the "top"
row becomes the left shrine wall, the "bottom" row the right wall, and the
"center" row is the rear wall, containing the main shrine image.[38] The

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38. The question has been raised, why "unfold" rather than simply rotate the
maṇḍala from a vertical to a horizontal position? Implicit in this is the broader
question of how literally a maṇḍala concept or diagram would have had to be
transposed into a sculpted medium to be comprehensible and useful for ritual.
At Ellora, a more literal transfer would have had the effect of placing the Buddha
image in the center of the shrine instead of on the rear wall, making it possible
physically to circumambulate it. There is, of course, evidence from the Bhūdevi
and Aparajitā images that sculptors could carve images in three dimensions.
Moreover, behind the Buddha throne in the Cave 12.3 shrine, rough cutting sug-
gests an attempt to prepare a small *pradakṣinapatha* (although the image would
still have been essentially on the back wall, not in the center of the shrine).

group as a whole, if identifications based on correlating attributes with those found in later iconographic texts are correct, corresponds generally to lists such as those found in the *Sādhanamālā*, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. Unfortunately, such overlapping similarities prevent us from identifying Ellora's the eight bodhisattva group with any one text.

The central shrine images should also contain important information. As do two of the three key shrine images in Cave 12, shrine images of the second floor of Cave 11, and many of the small "intrusive" images in the two latest caves depict the Buddha holding his right hand in *bhumis- parśamudrā*. It is commonly viewed as the emblem of Śākyamuni or Akṣobhya (as contrasted with the *dhyānamudrā* in the relief mandalas which, as with certain forms of *dharmacakramudrā*, signifies an image of Vairocana). This gesture has layers of meaning, but on the most basic level, it symbolizes the event of the Buddha's enlightenment, which took place at Bodhgaya. It appears that Ellora's creators did not want to leave this interpretation in doubt: many of the main shrine images in Caves 11 and 12 include sculptures of Bhūdevi and Aparajitā, rising from the earth in front of the throne; Bhūdevi attesting to the Buddha's integrity as he faced Māra's attack; Aparajitā trampling on the back of a male figure, representative of the "evil beings" she slaps into submission with a hand raised in *capeṭamudrā*.[39] These images condense the lesson to be learned about the power of enlightenment and of the Buddha himself. They are unique and strikingly early at Ellora. Similar, although later, images have been found in eastern India, including Bodhgaya itself, and Ratnagiri in Orissa.

The precision of Ellora's compositions strongly suggests that worship in the shrines could have been viewed as a substitution or transposition of worship at Bodhgaya—not an unreasonable expectation at a site that was

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However, this circumambulatory was not completed and in the other late-seventh and early eighth-century shrines, convention seems to have dictated that most images be carved on the walls of the shrine even when, as in Cave 8, a circum- ambulatory passage was excavated around the shrine.

39. This connection was suggested to me initially by Janice Leoshko. It is doc- umented in D. C. Bhattacharyya, "The *Vajravālī-nāma-maṇḍalopayika* of Abhayākaragupta," *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honor of R.A. Stein,* ed. M. Strickmann (Brussels: 1981) 74-75. In the *Sādhanamālā*, Aparajitā is por- trayed trampling Gaṇapati; she is the destroyer of all wicked beings. M.-T. de Mallmann, *Introduction à l'Iconographie de Tantrisme Bouddhique* (Paris: 1975) 245-246 and figs. 189 and 190. One hand appears to cup a breast; the texts say that the left hand rests on the heart, holding the sacred thread and mak- ing the gesture of danger, *tarjanīmudrā*.

also to carry Brahmanical prayers to heaven as effectively as pilgrimage to Mount Kailāsa can. This may be linked back to conceptualizations of the maṇḍala, which could be viewed as "an ideal Bodhgaya, an 'adamantine plane,' that is, an incorruptible surface, the representation of the very instant in which is accomplished the revulsion to the other plane, in which one becomes Buddha."[40]

Buddhist Ellora thus exemplifies the attitude expressed in the later medieval period by a Maharashtrian saint who advised, "stay in Maharashtra because every place worth going to is there."[41] The Rāṣṭrakūṭas in effect brought to Ellora every place worth going to. Transformations and interaction of geography, politics, and religion combined to create a powerful regional tīrtha, part of a universal sacred system to which architecture, sculpture, and religious practice refer. The patrons and teacher(s) respon-sible for this extraordinary transformation of the site must have been thinking in what we might call transregional terms; terms in which most historians and art historians have not viewed it.

What might have been on the margin was *made* the center. But, who brought it, and from what school? A search in traditional written sources has revealed only partial, or general connections. The relief maṇḍalas might suggest a connection to the teachings of the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*. But the central shrine images, so clearly Śākyamuni, may be better seen as connect-ing Cave 12 to teachings of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra*, centered on Mahāvairocana / Śākyasiṃha. But in this, the five-buddha system is well developed, as it is not at Ellora. Instead, emphasizing Śākyamuni, attended by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi, Cave 12 may simply reflect an earlier teaching similar to what was classified in the Tibetan tradition as *kriyātantric* Buddhism (as reflected in a text like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*), that foreshadows what would become differentiated in later tantric tradi-tions. There are no perfect matches from the known literature; comparisons as above can suggest certain parallels. But Ellora, relatively early, predates these later systemizations. It gives us a glimpse, still difficult to interpret, of the expression of one such system in a very early form.

*Other Early Expressions of the Maṇḍala at South Asian Buddhist Sites*
Ellora, unique as it is, is not an isolated case where esoteric Buddhism was expressed in a cave temple format, although it is the earliest to exhibit such

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40. Tucci, op. cit. 86.
41. Quoted in Anne Feldhaus, "Maharashtra as a Holy Land: A Sectarian Tradi-tion," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 49 (1986): 544.

systematic, extensive tantric influence. Traces of tantric iconography have been identified at several sixth or early seventh-century sites in the western caves, ranging from Kanheri on the coast just north of modern Bombay, to Nasik in the ghats west of Ellora, to Aurangabad, just miles away from Ellora, and likely the site most closely connected to it in time as well as space. Aurangabad, whose latest caves probably date to the late 500s, may exemplify an even earlier form of tantric Buddhism than does Ellora, as John Huntington argued in a 1981 article. He hypothesized that Caves 6 and 7 were expressions, respectively, of the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadhātu-maṇḍala* and the *Vajradhātumaṇḍala*. He argued that, if Śubhākarasiṃha and Vajrabodhi were known to have transmitted the teachings of both sūtras which include these maṇḍalas, then it is likely that they were expounded together somewhere earlier in India, as they would be later in China and then, in Shingon Buddhism. He, therefore, looked for a site that might display both.[42]

He noticed that, although the central buddha images in the shrines at Aurangabad display a generic *dharmacakramudrā*, like buddha images throughout the western caves, buddha images in the small subshrines display *dhyānamudrā* and *dharmacakramudrā*. These he connected to the *mudrās* of buddhas in the *Garbhadhātumaṇḍala* and the *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala*, respectively (in the latter, the *mudrā* is actually *bodhyaṅgi-mudrā*. This group of three buddha images is, in Huntington's argument, the "key" to the cave's program. He described the bodhisattva figures, Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi, as corresponding "exactly to the *Mahāvairo-canasūtra* . . . in that the two halls of the bodhisattvas Vajrapāṇi and Padmapāṇi flank the central eight-petal lotus hall and manifest the *Prajñā* and *Karuṇā* of the buddha Vairocana." Unfortunately, he was not able to draw out systematic correspondences; instead, he found, for instance, that the central buddha image seems resolutely to be the traditional *dharma-cakramudrā pralambapādāsana* form. In Cave 7, which he hypothesized would represent the *Vajradhātumaṇḍala*, we might expect the *mudrā* to be *bodhyaṅgi*; that it is not, he said, must be "because this image type is so widespread in the western caves, they must be taken as generic images, not

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42. John C. Huntington, "Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāna Monument?" *Kalādarśana, American Studies in the Art of India*, ed. Joanna G. Williams (New Delhi: 1981) 47-55. The article was intended as a test of the comparative methodology; it hypothesizes an answer to, but does not definitively resolve the question of whether the connection of these two maṇḍalas actually took place in India, or whether it was a compilation formed somewhat later by esoteric teach-ers in T'ang China.

specifically different from those of Cave Six."[43]   He further read the remarkable, if iconographically general, group of female images in Cave 7 as portrayals of *prajñā*, pointing out that sixteen of thirty-two deities in the *Vajradhātumaṇḍala* are female. Given Aurangabad's relatively generalized iconography such close analogies are difficult to confirm. Moreover, although it is clear that certain iconographic and stylistic idioms were transferred to Ellora, the overall program of these caves was not. Instead, at Ellora, just a few years later, iconographic elements become much more clearly differentiated, and programs are laid out in very different ways. This is not suggestive of a comprehensive teaching, comparable to Shingon, that would have been readily transferred from site to site. Instead, we would have to argue that the teachings of two rather different maṇḍalas went on in the same geographical area in the space of one or two generations.

Important sites exhibiting similar teachings also developed in eastern Orissa and south to Andhra where, according to several strands of tradition, tantric masters traveled and taught. Located on the periphery of the traditional Buddhist heartland, each preserves unique variations and even innovations in Buddhist art during the period when Buddhist missionary activity also carried these ideas to Southeast and Eastern Asia. Among these, Ratnagiri provides more iconographic parallels to Ellora than any other site.

Located on a tributary of the Mahanadi River (which connected coastal Orissa to interior centers like Sirpur, which also shares certain iconographic elements with Ellora), Ratnagiri was developed as a major monastic and temple site from the mid-eighth century. There, thirteen of sixteen large-scale buddha images are portrayed in *bhumisparśamudrā*, one including an image of Aparajitā defeating Gaṇapati. Ellora's eight-bodhisattva maṇḍala is also strikingly similar—in content, not style or format—to the *aṣṭabodhisattvamaṇḍalas* carved on steles at Ratnagiri (three-dimensional images of such groups are also found at the nearby sites of Lalitagiri and Udayagiri). Moreover, the iconography and location of Jambhala and Tārā as shrine protectors, are more like those at Ellora than anything else we can find in Maharashtra.[44]

These, and many other similarities (but not identities) strongly suggest that the eighth-century Orissan sites shared elements of a common teaching

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43. *Ibid.* 50.
44. See Malandra, op.cit. 16, 21, 70, 76, 97-98, 106-107, 111, 115-116, 121, for a detailed discussion of these parallels.

with Ellora, despite differences in political regime, artistic culture, and history of Buddhist development in their respective regions. Nancy Hock, locating Ratnagiri in the Indo-Tibetan tantric tradition, has made the case that the earlier *bhumisparśamudrā* buddhas were intended to represent the more or less historic Śākyamuni (as distinguished from Akṣobhya, the focus of more advanced tantric teachings, also depicted with hands held in this position).[45] Although the specific text describing the configuration of images at Ratnagiri has not yet been recovered, she has shown that the pantheon of deities found there seems most like that described in relatively early tantric texts such as the *Mañjuśrīmulakalpa*, classified as a *kriyātantra* in the Tibetan canon. This Mantrayāna system is distinguished from the later, *anuttarayoga* system, practiced later at Ratnagiri, represented by horrific deities quite different from the benign images of the earlier stage.[46] The new buddha image, certain female deities, and the proliferation of bodhisattva images that we find in Ellora's latest Buddhist caves 11 and 12 have counterparts in Ratnagiri's earlier stage, although style, emphasis, and placement differ considerably. Iconographic parallels can also be drawn to images from sites along what was the even more extended margin of the Buddhist world, as missionaries carried these teachings to places such as Sahlihundum in Andhra Pradesh and Candi Mendut in central Java (where the eight bodhisattvas, Jambhala and Hārītī, Cundā, and Bhṛkutī images offer striking similarities to Ellora's "core" maṇḍala, even while the central image is a *dharmacakramudrā* buddha).

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45. Nancy Hock, "Buddhist Ideology and the Sculpture of Ratnagiri, Seventh Through Thirteenth Centuries (India)," diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987, 1-33. David Snellgrove also makes this distinction, in *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. 1 (Boston: 1987) 117-152.

46. Hock 68-69; A.K. Bernet-Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art* (Cambridge, 1959) 40-41 and Plates 58-61; N. J. Krom, "De bodhisattvas van den Mendut," *Bijdragen tot de tall-, land- en volkenkunde, door Koninklijk Bataviaasch Gennotschapp van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, vol. 74 (1918): 419-427; J. L. Moens, "De Djandi Mendut," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land, en Volkenkunde, door Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 59 (1921): 529-600. Lokesh Chandra, "Borobudur as a Monument of Esoteric Buddhism," *South East Asian Review* 5 (1980): 17-21, compares this iconography with the *Garbhadhātumaṇḍala*, but also sees a connection to the iconography of the *Durgatipariśodhanāmaṇḍala* where, he says (p. 18) the Vairocana image also displays *dharmacakramudrā*.

*Conclusion*

Among these and many other places, Ellora appears to reflect esoteric Buddhism on the cusp of change, at a relatively early point. If it was geographically peripheral from the point of view of the great university at Nalanda, it was central in that it more than "kept up with the times." We might even say, in aspiring to be the "Bodhgaya of the south" it erased, in sense, the geographic and sectarian boundaries that separated them.

How far do these selective comparisons get us in understanding who was responsible for what happened at Ellora? Although the maṇḍala is a clear link throughout Ellora's Buddhist development, its content had changed radically by the end of the seventh century. The teachings represented in Cave 12 are not the same as in the earlier caves. And, the new ideas were carved in a new style. So, new teacher / teachings, new artisans. Where did they come from? Taking iconographic details as primary evidence, the answer would appear more likely to be Orissa than eastern India, or a place that sent teachers to Orissa and the Deccan. Certainly, legends about esoteric teachers who reportedly came from, or preached in the Deccan, suggest but cannot prove this scenario. This was, after all, during the time when teachers like Śubhākarasiṃha and Vajrabodhi were active in India and then in China.

One way to imagine how this happened is in the context of the pre-imperial "opening" of the Deccan in which the early Rāṣṭrakūṭas appear to have been engaged. The regional and national references in the iconography at Ellora are not, then simply evidence of a dynastic change. They could be seen as part of the activities the Rāṣṭrakūṭas engaged in to forge the character of their new empire. We could see them, already worshipping at the nearby *tīrtha*, endorsing if not actively supporting the creation of new Buddhist temples at the most active center in their region. A "cutting edge" (if, now, anonymous) teacher would have been recruited to Ellora, or a local monk could have been sent out to study with such a person, linking this region to the growing international network of esoteric teachers and sites. If the ambitious Rāṣṭrakūṭa leader took a more personal interest in these developments then Cave 12 and its maṇḍala might indeed have been as central to the official activities of this new empire, as the movements of monks supported by emperors were to the north and east in Java, China and Japan. This analogy suggests that, just as Kūkai built on already existing juxtapositions of beliefs, in support of Buddhism and the Heian empire, so we might imagine Buddhism at Ellora as a century-old tradition *primed* for the advent of new ideas in support of a newly broad-thinking dynasty. Ellora's "Kūkai" may well have gone out to seek them, returning, as Kūkai

himself did, to create an original, local synthesis of new and old concepts and practices.