

CATHERINE BECKER:

Shifting Stones, Shaping the Past: Sculpture from the Buddhist Stūpas of Andhra Pradesh.

xxi, 321 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN 978 0 19 935940 0.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X15001214

The state of Andhra Pradesh in South India abounds in ancient Buddhist sites, some of which have attracted the attention of art historians and historians over many decades. Amaravati has been the special focus of attention, not only because of its exquisite limestone sculptures but also because of its tumultuous history in colonial and post-colonial times which culminated in the reduction of the stūpa to a non-descript mound. The important achievement of this book lies in its detailed, even-handed analysis of how images have given meaning to such sites in ancient as well as modern times. The first part of the book examines the sculptures of the early centuries CE found at Amaravati and at other sites such as Nagarjunakonda and Phanigiri. The second part discusses twentieth- and twenty-first-century developments at Amaravati and Hyderabad. It is not just a descriptive “then” and “now” story but rather a cultural biography of images and sites. Throughout, the focus is on the powerful role of visual narratives, how they are conceived and experienced, the meanings they express and acquire, and their dynamic impact across time.

Becker emphasizes that ancient visual narratives were much more than artistic embellishment; they had potent religious functions. As the sculptural record of Amaravati (second/third century) is scattered and fragmentary, she sensibly focuses on a few select stones and carefully reconstructs the stories they tell. She looks especially closely at certain reused drum slabs. The highlight of this part of the book is an interesting, detailed analysis of the devotees and devotional acts depicted on slabs which have representations of stūpas. Becker argues quite convincingly that the central issue in these reused slabs was not a shift from aniconism towards the worship of the Buddha image but a new emphasis on the stūpa as a site and object of devotion. The frequent representation of meta-stūpas (stūpa slabs with sculptural representations of stūpas) in the sculptural reliefs confirms this change.

Becker draws attention to innovative practices such as “framed narratives” – that is, the insertion of the narrator in the visual rendering of well-known Buddhist stories, as in the case of the Man in the Well. She argues that the visual narratives collectively made the stūpa a faith-inducing object, showing devotees a variety of paths towards Buddhist piety, merit-making, even enlightenment. More specifically, she argues that these and other narrative sculptures were geared towards creating *prasāda* in devotees and pilgrims, involving both a mental transformation and a desire to give generously. There are, of course, difficulties in ascertaining how precisely visual narratives were experienced by devotees, and there must have been significant variations in this regard. This is evident from the fact that many pious pilgrims and even monks at Buddhist sites today are often disinterested in and unaware of the details of the artwork around them.

The chapters dealing with more recent times include a detailed discussion of the colossal Buddha image at Hussain Sagar lake in Hyderabad, an image which reflects the deployment of an idealized understanding of Buddhism and Andhra Pradesh’s ancient Buddhist past in order to create a sense of Andhra identity and pride. But in spite of the intentions of the political masters, Becker points out that an image of this kind can never elicit a single or unified response, and that the colossal Buddha has become a religious subject without a devotional community, *almost*

an icon, even *almost* an individual. She draws attention to how the inspiration of this image can be traced to various possible sources including ancient Andhra art, the Sarnath Buddha, the Aśoka cakra, South Indian temple architecture, the Aukana Buddha in Sri Lanka, the Gommateśvara image at Sravana Belgola, and a more general penchant for colossal images of all hues in contemporary India.

The book talks about how the ancient Buddhist sites of Andhra are currently being marketed by the state government as attractive tourist destinations. It examines how tourist brochures have constructed a fantasy of Andhra Buddhism, promising spiritual progress to visitors, in a manner that tries to appeal to Indian and international Buddhist pilgrim-tourists. Becker also undertakes a detailed documentation of how Amaravati was transformed in the course of the performance of the Kalachakra ceremony here by the Dalai Lama in 2006. We see how alterations to the stūpa, and the area and activities around it have, over the years, led to the creation of a landscape marked by a hybrid, international Buddhist idiom. While discussing these developments of the recent past, the author succeeds in maintaining a scholarly rigour, both in terms of the questions she asks and in her analysis.

Naturally questions remain: What about the period between the third century and more recent times? What about the relationship between the Buddhist establishment and the Śaiva Amareśvara temple nearby, which has been a thriving religious establishment for many centuries? How has the privileging of Buddhist elements in Andhra's ancient heritage led to the erasure of other histories? How does pan-Buddhist solidarity intersect with more specific Buddhist identities such as those of the Tibetan diaspora and the Indian neo-Buddhists, and what is the precise role of these different Buddhisms in the modern reinvention of ancient Buddhist sites? Becker's book shows how Buddhist sculpture and monuments have always been important elements in the creation of new kinds of communities and identities. The fact that the new capital of the recently bifurcated state of Andhra Pradesh is going to be built near the site of ancient Amaravati will create a modern city in which Andhra's ancient Buddhist past will, no doubt, be given pride of place.

Upinder Singh
University of Delhi

BRIAN COLLINS:

The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice.

(Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture.) x, 230 pp. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015. \$24.95. ISBN 978 1 61186 116 7. doi:10.1017/S0041977X15001238

The Head Beneath the Altar is Brian Collins' first book, yet it demonstrates a ripe scholarship seldom found in first publications. Collins belongs to a small group of young scholars that are reading closely the intricate and often labyrinthine Vedic literature and other Indian sources. He does this not only in light of the primary and secondary literature on Indian sacrifice, but drawing from "sidelong glances into Christian theology, contemporary philosophy and Greek, Iranian and Scandinavian literature" (p. 3). *The Head Beneath the Altar* is part of the series edited by William A. Johnsen on violence, mimesis and culture which was born out of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. This international association engages critically with René Girard's theory on violence and religion, which attempts to explain sacrificial violence, and ultimately