



ARTICLE

The immobilised elephant at Dhauli

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The elephant at Dhauli, site of Aśoka Maurya's inscriptions, is the earliest Indian monumental sculpture. Aśoka reigned between 270–235 BC and the Dhauli elephant is dated c. 257 BC. Only the elephant's forefront is sculpted; about half of the animal's bulk remains within the rock (Figure 1). One art historian claims that Emperor Aśoka is in the vanguard presenting himself to the people of Kalinga.¹ Usually, however, the Dhauli elephant is considered symbolic of the Buddha. The well-known story that Māyā dreamt that Siddhārtha entered her womb as a white elephant motivates this view; to wit *śeto* (i.e. *śveta*), 'the white one', is inscribed at the end of the 6th Rock Edict.

I wondered whether there was any connection, though centuries later, between the Dhauli engaged elephant and the frequent use of the elephant on the Gandhāran carved Buddhist throne legs that I analysed in my article 'Fancy Footwork: Furniture Patterns Going to and from Gandhāra', *JRAS* 31, 4 (2021), pp. 647–91. Through the kindness of the editors, I have been allowed space in a later issue of the journal to state my findings, which—to my good fortune—were not published in 2021. For in the meantime, evidence came to my attention that has the potential to question both the symbolism and the intended (or lack of) movement of the Dhauli elephant: is he emerging from, or captive within, the rock—or neither?

Early descriptions in Tripiṭaka texts do not mention that the Bodhisattva entered the side of his mother's womb as an elephant. Reference to Māyā's dream, seen first in the second century BC Bharhut roundel, is not yet in the Dīghanikāya (II.14, 23–26).² Nor does Ananda (in the Majjhima Nikāya II.12) mention the elephant in describing how the Bodhisattva entered his mother's womb.³ But in a pre-Aśokan Vināya passage on the Nālāgiri elephant, the Buddha speaks of himself as 'Elephant', using the term *nāga*.⁴ Whereas the identity of the Buddha as an elephant is evoked by this passage, hordes of invading royal war elephants would have been keenly remembered in the area in 257 BC.

Dhauri, a city in Kalinga, felt their destructive crush. Aśoka conquered Kalinga, described in Rock Edict 13, with the help of powerful war elephants.⁵ Having precisely

¹ Niharjan Ray, in *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*, (ed.) K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, 2nd edition (Delhi, 1967), p. 371.

² Oskar von Hinüber, 'The Buddha as a Historical Person', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019), pp. 231–64; in particular, pp. 239–40.

³ Giovanni Verardi, 'The Buddha-Elephant', in *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 6 (Papers in Honour of Francine Tissot), (eds.) E. Errington and O. Bopparachchi (Kamakura, 1999/2000), p. 69, fns. 5 and 8.

⁴ Reference kindly supplied by Oskar von Hinüber: *mā kuñjaro nāgaṃ āsado dukkhaṃ hi kuñjata nāgamāsado*, Vin II 195, 28*: "You must not, elephant, attack the elephant (i.e. the Buddha) for attacking the elephant means suffering" (H. Hendriksen).

⁵ Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings. An Environmental History* (Chicago, 2015), pp. 128, 196–202.



Figure 1. The elephant at Dhauli.

omitted this edict at Dhauli, Aśoka would hardly have wanted the full animal's bulk dominating the scene. It does not. A deliberate segmentation divides the elephant into two conflicting spheres: form vs. formless; visible vs. invisible; emerging vs. trapped. The elephant has been immobilised. It can only be conjectured whether the colossus proclaims that the leader for peace (Buddha or Emperor) is at the forefront, and the trapped instrument of conquest is at the rear. Visually, the division conjures up unshakeable stability.

Gandhāra's use of the elephant in furniture legs was influenced by Roman prototypes; perhaps their smooth integration was due to the pronounced and prolonged position of the elephant as symbol of royalty in Indian culture and art. Unknown (perhaps unlikely) is whether the important royal elephant, first rendered at Dhauli, might have had some lasting impact.