

Fragments: ubiquitous, memorable, and vulnerable
A photo-essay on medieval Buddhist art from Odisha
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Fig. 1: View of the archaeological remains of the main stupa-complex on Ratnagiri hill, Jajpur dist, Odisha. Photo by author, 2017.



Fig. 2: Views of the fields surrounding Ratnagiri hill, Jajpur dist., Odisha. Photo by author, 2017.



Fig. 3: Doorway to main shrine with seated Buddha, circa late 8th century, Khondalite, Shri Madhavapura mahavihara (“great monastery”), Udayagiri-1. Photo by author, 2016.



Fig. 4: Bodhisattva sculptures, ca. 9th century, Khondalite, repositioned by the ASI to the porch of Monastery 1, Ratnagiri Archaeological Site. Photo by author, 2017.



Fig. 5: Seated Buddha in Bhumisparsha mudra (earth-touching gesture), ca. late 9th century, Khondalite, Shri Simhaprastha mahavihara (“great monastery”), Udayagiri-2. Photo by author, 2012.

In 2012, I was first introduced to the fragments of a Buddhist past, unearthed in the hinterland of the modern-day state of Odisha, on India's eastern coast. A two-hour car ride from the capital city Bhubaneswar took me to the archaeological remains atop low hills at Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri. An astonishing amount of architectural and art vestiges were discovered here: a great stupa which was renovated more than once, brick foundations of monasteries cased with stones carved in lively detail, stone bas-relief sculpted images that towered over me and colossal Buddha images uniquely constructed by placing stone upon stone. The abundance of material was unexpected, but pleasantly surprising. The canon of Indian Buddhist art I was familiar with was comprised largely of finds from the historically prosperous Gangetic Plain, and in this narrative Odisha's remains were overlooked.



Fig. 6: An excavated Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara sculpture on site, ca. 9th century, Khondalite, Udayagiri-1, Jajpur dist., Odisha. Photo by author, 2017.

Many independently carved, colossal stone images in a reddish-brown locally available stone, Khondalite, stood out against the lush green landscape at these sites. They were once part of shrines which attracted ritual objects such as lamps, flowers, food, bells, and fragrant pastes. Devotees venerated these protectors with folded hands, chanted mantras and prostrated to show respect. Even when devoid of devotional contexts, the imposing stature and corporeality impart these stone images a sort of living presence. While the large scale of these sculptures was perhaps their most prominent feature, it was overshadowed by minute discussions of the iconographic attributes of particular Buddhist divinities, such as how many arms they had or what they were holding. Studying these particular symbols was important in its own right. But the questions which stayed with me for years were: why are these stone sculptures so large? Did their scale hold any meaning for makers and viewers? How were these sculptures significant for medieval Buddhist communities' desires and imagination? Culling out information from volumes of archaeological reports and papers, poring over archival photographs and carefully studying Google Earth images gave me some fragmentary but precious clues about where they were originally placed.



Fig. 7: Sculpture gallery facing central courtyard at the Indian Museum, Kolkata, with two Bodhisattva sculptures from Lalitgiri on left corner. Photo by author, 2017.



Fig. 8: Basuli Thakurani temple, Buxi Bazaar, Cuttack, Odisha. Photo by author, 2016.



Fig. 9: Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (ca. 9th century) in worship at Solapua Ma temple near Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, Odisha. Photo by author, 2016.



Fig. 10: Main shrine with Marichi, Chintamani Avalokiteshvara and Manjusri/Vajrapani, ca. 11th century, Chlorite, Ma Marichi Temple (also known as Khuntia temple), Ayodhya, Odisha.

While several Buddhist sculptures remain on these archaeological sites, a few were far removed from their intended home. Pursuing these fragments took me to various locales. A majority of found images were protected by the Archaeological Survey at museums adjoining archaeological ruins, or at the State Museum in Bhubaneswar. Few others had piqued the interest of colonial collectors and were carried further, eventually finding a permanent place in museums, for instance, at Patna and Calcutta in the nineteenth century. In small villages, chance rediscovered images were respectfully placed on altars in shrines and small temples. Some of them are beautified with filigreed silver crowns and ritually enlivened with applied silver eyes. The bodies of others were heavily covered with a neon orange colored ritual paste in small temples for local communities. Some images had found a place in temples with colorful facades in busy bazaars with narrow twisted lanes. These fragments of a thriving sculptural tradition in medieval Odisha were unruly, yet they raised fresh questions about artistic innovation and thinking.



Fig. 11: Stone sculptor Lalit Kumar Maharana giving finishing touches to a colossal granite sculpture of Hanuman (with an unfinished colossal seated Buddha carved in Khondalite in the background), Sudershan Crafts Village, Bhubaneswar. Photo by author, 2018.

Who made these sculptures? Did one sculptor work on an image or did many hands shape it? Why were these sculptures made in the first place? Who looked at them and how? In premodern India, makers rarely left traces of their process, and even their names remain largely anonymous. We know little about individuals who encountered these sculptures, although it is likely that they were both monastic and lay. The evidence of artistic thinking and innovation is presented in the sculptures themselves. Moreover, Odisha is known for its thriving communities of traditional sculptors, giving us a rare chance to tap into living archives of embodied knowledge in the analysis of artistic practices which have been sustained for over a thousand years in this region. The sculptors I interviewed in Bhubaneswar and Puri were diffident to talk about their craft, it seemed to be part of their everyday life. Even though fragmented, colossal sculpted forms in stone are an integral part of cultural history and memory in Odisha today.



Fig. 12: Dislocated colossal Buddha head centrally displayed at a sculpture gallery, Ratnagiri Site Museum, Photo by author, 2017.



Fig. 13: Hand carved polyresin replica of disembodied Buddha head (from Ratnagiri) within portal of Monastery 1, Ratnagiri, placed at the entrance of Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneshwar. Photo by author, 2018.

If Buddhist materials from Odisha’s past remained to be better understood in the narrative of Indian Buddhist Art history, stone fragments stand as emblems of its rich Buddhist heritage. At the Ratnagiri Site Museum, dismembered from its body and unconnected to its original function, an exquisitely carved circa ninth century stone Buddha head finds pride of place. This monumental but disembodied sculpted stone image is both an obvious choice and an odd fit as an object that cites Odisha’s ancient Buddhist connection. It is reproduced frequently in other materials, becoming the “face” of Odisha's Buddhist past, in photographic reproductions and in translations into modest materials at public installations such as the State Museum and Airport at Bhubaneswar.



Fig. 14: Portable, so-called “votive” stupas cemented to platforms and safeguarded in an enclosure with barbwire, Ratnagiri archaeological site. Photo by author 2016.

In my travels it became clear that these fragments of Odisha’s Buddhist past are vulnerable to steady looting and smuggling today. In the decade of my research on this region, several rare sculptures from unprotected archaeological sites and temples in Odisha have gone missing. This situation appears to have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. All this points to an increasing knowledge of the economic value of antiquities from Odisha that has fueled the underground art market and the illicit trade of Odishan antiquities. The unchecked steady loss of art-historical remains will leave a rich body of material disjointed and disembodied, erasing clues to understanding the latest stages of Buddhist practice in South Asia.