

Elephants in Gautam Buddha's Life, Jātaka and Their Depiction in Sculptures and Paintings

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2500 years ago, a prince born in the Shakya clan, enlightened the world with new thought. Prince Siddhārtha left his family and kingdom behind to follow a path of an ascetic to achieve *Bodhi*¹. After attaining “Bodhi” he preached *Ashtāngmargā*².

The Buddha was born as Siddhārtha, son of Śuddhodana, who was the chief of the Shakya clan. Dating of Buddha's lifespan is uncertain; but many scholars have dated it to circa 563 BCE to 483 BCE. Siddhārtha's mother Māyādevi gave birth to him in a grove at Lumbini while travelling to her parent's home. Śuddhodana invited some Brahmin Scholars to predict his future. They told Śuddhodana that his son had 32 marks of a great man and in the future he will either conquer the world or renounce it. Then Śuddhodana kept Siddhārtha in a closed palace surrounded by luxury and pleasant things. Siddhārtha married a young woman, Yaśodharā, and they had a son named Rāhula.

However one day, Siddhārtha saw four sights that completely shattered him. He saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic. After seeing these four people he realized that, the whole world was full of suffering and renunciation was the only path. One night he left his family and went in search of truth. He went to many teachers and scholars, but he was not satisfied.

He started practicing rigorous penance on his own. He survived *Māra*'s³ attack and while sitting under *Bodhivrikshā*⁴ on the day of full moon, he attained Bodhi. He advised to follow the middle path and pursue *Ashtāngmargā*. He travelled a lot, to spread his Dhamma. He gained many followers and he formed the *SaEgha*⁵.

At the age of 80 he announced that he was near to his *Mahaparinirvana*⁶. When he came to Kushinagar, where he ate some food and fell sick. With this ailment he reached Mahaparinirvana.

Although none of the works belonging to the Buddhist literature were compiled during the lifetime of Gautam Buddha; early disciples of Buddha made collection of few speeches and sayings by the Buddha.

Buddhist literatures consist of Tripimaka. These Tripimaka contained Gautam Buddha's teachings. They contained the rules to be followed and described what the behavior of Bhikshus and Bhikshunis should be. This literature is written in the Magadhi language. As per research scholars, this literature

¹ Heritage Insights, Owner, M'blem Digital and independent researcher, Pune, India.

² Heritage Insights, IT Professional and independent researcher, Pune, India.

was compiled, in 3rd Century BC. These Tripimakas were written over a period of time. After Mahaparinirvana of Gautam Buddha, his disciples organised many *SaEgītis*⁷ in which this literature was edited and compiled.

Tripimaka consists of Vinaypimaka, Suttapimaka and Abhidhammapimaka. Vinaypimaka contains the rules to be followed by disciples. Suttapimaka contains sermons given by Gautam Buddha. Abhidhammapimaka, mostly preached Dhamma. Among these, Vinayapimaka is the oldest literature.

After Gautam Buddha's mahaparinirvana, his disciples began to spread Bauddha Dhamma, by telling stories about Gautam Buddha's life. They told stories of Buddha's previous births, which are called Jātaka tales.

There are several references in these stories. In many Jātaka, it is mentioned that *Bodhisatva*⁸ was born as an elephant. In many Jātaka stories, the Elephant appears as a main character. Stories about Gautam Buddha's life are found in various Buddhist literatures like Jātaka Ammhakathā and Mahāpadānsuttā. These stories were very popular in those times. These stories are depicted in the form of sculptures and paintings at various Buddhist monuments.

The first event is about Gautam Buddha's birth. As the story goes – In Kapilvastu, there was festival in month of Ashādha. This seven day festival, ended on Poornima - the day of full moon. During this festival all citizens of Kapilvastu drank wine, but Māyādevi did not. On the day of Poornima, she made several donations to the poor and handicapped. Then she spent time listening religious discourses, till late into the night. When she fell asleep, she dreamt. In her dream four Dikpālas carried her to the Himalaya. They put her down in a land of beautiful surroundings. Then goddesses bathed her with holy water and perfumes. She was dressed in beautiful clothes and precious ornaments. Then they put her to bed, with her head towards the east. Then a white elephant came from the golden mountain with a white lotus flower in its trunk. The Elephant took three turns around her and then he entered into her body from the right side of her waist, impregnated her.

While observing these sculptures, various monuments depict the scenes differently.

In the vedika of Bharhut Stupa, Māyādevi is shown sleeping on a bed with attendants in deep sleep. Elephant is prominently shown in this sculpture. (ref. Fig. no. 1, Plate 1). At Sanchi we found this scene on East Gateway – north pillar. Here Māyādevi is sleeping and Elephant is shown in the corner. (ref. Fig. no. 2, Plate 1). At Amāravati we see many attendants around Māyādevi and we see iconic depiction of Elephant on the top of the sculpture. (ref. Fig. no. 3, Plate 1). We found this story painted at Dambulla, Sri Lanka in Raja Maha Vihara. Sri Lankan postal department released a

³ Enlightenment

⁴ Noble Eightfold Path

⁵ Māra is demon who attacked with his military on Gautam Buddha while he doing his meditation

⁶ Pipal Tree under which Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment

⁷ Group of followers

⁸ Death of Gautam Buddha

stamp depicting this painting. In this painting, Māyādevi is shown sleeping in the palace and Elephant is seen beneath. (ref. Fig. no. 4, Plate 1). The human figures in the sculpture from Mardan, Pakistan (formerly part of Gandhar Kingdom) have Greek influence on them. (ref. Fig. no. 5, Plate 1). This event is painted at Kizil caves in China. The painting is not clear but from the *sketch*⁹ we can see the Gandhar influence on it. (ref. Fig. no. 6, Plate 1)

After attaining Bodhi, Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon to *Panchavargiya Bhikshu*¹⁰ in *Mrugdāv*¹¹. He started preaching and visited many places giving sermons. This is known as *Dharmacakrapravartana*¹².

Gautam Buddha was an epitome of Silence and Kindness. During his journeys, he came across many learned scholars as well as the illiterate and lowbrows. A person, Devadatta and four youngsters from Shakya clan, the one to which Gautam belonged to; met him, seeking admission to Buddha Dhamma. The kindhearted Buddha granted admission and followership to Devadatta and the young men.

Although a follower of Buddha, Devadatta was full of jealousy and greed. He was jealous of Gautam's popularity and respect. The scheming Devadatta went to *Rajgrih*¹³ and met Prince Ajātashatru, the son of the king Bimbisar. Prince Ajātashatru got impressed by Devadatta's speech and miracles. Devadatta was eager to become chief of the SaEgha. The power hungry young prince and the greedy, conniving Devadatta thought off a plan to eliminate the king and Gautam Buddha. However, while attempting to murder his father, the prince was captured by king's men. The old and wise King, Bimbisar, patiently listened to his son and learnt about his wish. Bimbisar gave away his kingdom to his son. Later, the new King Ajātashatru imprisoned his father and killed him.

As per the plan, soldiers were sent to eliminate Gautam Buddha but the effort was in vain. In a second attempt on Gautam's life, Devadatta pushed a boulder onto Gautam when he was taking a stroll near Grudhrakut Mountain. Gautam survived the assault with a minor leg injury. Devadatta was persistent in his attempts to kill Gautam Buddha.

Once Gautam Buddha had visited Rajgrih. Devadatta came to know of this and ordered the caretaker of *Hastishala*¹⁴ to drive an elephant and attack Gautam Buddha. In the loving presence of Gautam Buddha; Nālāgiri, the intoxicated elephant bent on his knees in respect.

This episode is also sculpted and painted at various monuments.

In cave 17 at Ajanta, this scene is painted. But the painting is in a very bad condition. In the sketch¹⁵ we can see the furious elephant has stormed through the palace gate. In the second part of the painting the illustration showing Gautam Buddha kept his right hand on the head of the elephant and

⁹ Religious conference

¹⁰ Gautam Buddha in his previous birth

¹¹ Schlingloff D.– Ajanta, Handbook of Paintings, Vol. 2, p. 57

¹² Gautam Buddha's five companions

¹³ Dear park near Varanasi, present Sarnath

¹⁴ Turning the wheel of dharma

¹⁵ Ancient capital city in Magadha

he humbly bows on Gautam Buddha's feet. (ref. Fig. No. 1, Plate 1). In the Amāravati sculpture the scene is depicted in a single panel showing the elephant attacking and humbly touching his head to the feet of Gautam Buddha. (ref. Fig. No. 2, Plate 1). At Borobudur it is sculpted in low relief, depicting Gautam Buddha wearing a headgear and Elephant leaning on his feet. (ref. Fig. No. 1, Plate 3). It is depicted in many Gandhar sculptures (ref. Fig. No. 2, Plate 3) too, found among the sculptures at Sanchi, Nagarjunkonda, Goli and Sarnath.

Suttapimaka consist of five parts, the fifth part that is called Khuddaknikāya. Jātaka Katha Sangraha is a part of Khuddaknikāya.

Jātakas are the stories of Gautam Buddha's previous births, where he appears as Bodhisatva in either human or animal form.

Since ancient times there was a practice of storytelling in India. These stories were popular among the people. To spread the Dhamma, Buddhist monks created Jātaka stories prescribing the moral code of conduct.

Jātaka stories are in 22 parts or Nipāta consisting of 547 stories, however there is a difference of opinion among researchers about the exact numbers of stories.

In many Jātaka stories Gautam Buddha born as an Elephant is the main character. These popular stories are found in many sculptures and paintings.

In all these Jātaka stories, Sīwalnāga Jātaka, Dummedha Jātaka, Kāsāva Jātaka, Kakkatā Jātaka, Latukika Jātaka, Māti-Posaka Jātaka, Chaddant Jātaka; Gautam Buddha was born as Elephant. In Mahilāmukh Jātaka, Abhiha Jātaka, Tittira Jātaka, Dubalkammha Jātaka, Virocana Jātaka, Alīncitta Jātaka, Indasamāngotta Jātaka, Susīma Jātaka, SaAgāmāvacara Jātaka, Upāhana Jātaka, Somadatta Jātaka, ChullahaAsa Jātaka and Vessantara Jātaka Elephant appeared as the main character.

Amongst all these stories two are very popular, Chaddanta Jātaka and Vessantara Jātaka. These are sculpted at Bharhut, Sanchi, Amāravati, Sarnath, Nagarjunkonda, Goli, Mathura and Ganadhar sculptures. All Jātaka are carved on Terracotta Plaques in Ananda Temple at Pagan-Myanmar. They are also found painted at Ajanta-India and Kizil caves-China.

Chaddanta Jātaka

In this story, Gautam Buddha was born as a leader of a herd of elephants, eight thousand strong. The herd lived near Lake Chaddanta in Himalaya. He was eighty-eight cubits high, one hundred and twenty cubits long. He had a trunk like a silver rope, fifty-eight cubits long, and his tusks were fifteen cubits in circumference, thirty cubits long, and emitted six-coloured rays. He was pure white, with red feet and face. Chaddanta, the elephant king, with his following of eight thousand elephants, lived in the golden cave during rains. In the hot season, he stood at the foot of the great banyan tree, welcoming the cool breeze coming over the water.

He had two queens, Chullasubhaddā and Mahāsubhaddā. Chullasubhaddā was always jealous of Mahāsubhaddā. Once someone told Chaddanta, “The great *Sāl*¹⁶ grove is in flower”. So Chaddanta went to the Sal grove, along with his queens, for *Sālkridā*¹⁷. They were under a Sal tree. Both the queens were standing facing in opposite directions. Chaddanta with all his might shook the tree. As a result, flowers, green leaves, dry twigs and dry leaves and red ants started falling. Flowers and green leaves fell on the queen Mahāsubhaddā who was facing in the direction of wind whereas the twigs, dry leaves and ants fell on Chullasubhaddā who was facing in other direction. Thought Cullasubhaddā, “He let fall on his dearest wife flowers and pollen and fresh stalks and leaves, but he dropped a mixture of dry twigs, dead leaves and red ants on me. Well, I shall know what to do!” Her ill feeling towards Chaddanta was aggravated.

Once Chaddanta was bathing in the lake. An elephant found a lotus with seven shoots. He gave it to Chaddanta. He sprinkled the pollen on his forehead and presented the flower to the queen, Mahāsubhaddā. On seeing this, her rival said, “This lotus with seven shoots he also gives to his favourite queen and not to me,” and thus boosted the grudge against Chaddanta.

One day, Bodhisatva was dressed with luscious fruits, lotus stalks, with the nectar of the flower, and was entertaining five hundred *pacceka buddhas*¹⁸. Cullasubhaddā offered the wild fruits she had, to the Pacceka Buddhas, and she put up a prayer to the effect: “Hereafter, when I die, may I be reborn as the royal maiden, Subhaddā in the *Madra*¹⁹ king’s family, and on coming of age may I attain to the dignity of queen consort to the king of Benares. Then I shall be dear and charming in his eyes, and in a position to do what I please. So I will speak to the king and send a hunter with a poisoned arrow to wound and slay this elephant. And thus may I be able to have brought to me a pair of his tusks that emit six-coloured rays.” Thenceforth she took no food and pining away in no long time she died, and came to life again as the child of the queen consort in the Madra kingdom, and was named Subhaddā. And when she was of a suitable age, married to the king of Benares. And she was dear and pleasing in his eyes, and the chief of sixteen thousand wives. And she recalled her former existences and thought, “My prayer is fulfilled; now I will have this elephant’s tusks brought to me.” As per Subhaddā’s wish the king of Benares called all hunters from his kingdom. After looking at all the hunters, Subhaddā, spied amongst them one that was an ugly, hulking fellow, named Sonuttara, who had once been an enemy of the Bodhisatva. And she thought, “He will be able to do my bidding,” She asked Sonuttara to kill Chaddanta and brought his tusks. He agreed and asked her to narrate about Chaddanta.

Then Subhaddā gathered all appliances, put them in a big sack, and gave it to Sanudatta. After seven years, seven months and seven days, Sanudatta reached the dwelling-place of the Chaddanta in the manner related above, took note of his dwelling-place and dug a pit there, thinking, “I will take my stand here and wound the lord of elephants and bring about his death.” He prepared a pit to hide.

¹⁶ Elephant stable

¹⁷ Schlingloff D.– Ajanta, Handbook of Paintings, Vol. 1, p.437

¹⁸ *Shorea robusta* commonly known as Sāl or Shal

¹⁹ A famous festival of Flowers of Sāl Tree in Bihar

Then on the next day, Chaddanta came for a bath. At that time, a hunter came in front of Chaddanta and asked him to give his tusks. Chaddanta recognizing that this was the work of Cullasubhaddā, he bore his sufferings patiently and thought, “She does not want my tusks; she sent him because she wished to kill me”. Then he asked hunter to cut his tusks. Then hunter took a saw to cut his tusks. Then the hunter climbed up the trunk of the Chaddanta, pressing it with his feet as though it were a silver rope, and stood on his forehead. Then he inserted his foot into his mouth, and striking the fleshy part of it with his knee, he climbed down from the beast’s forehead and thrust the saw into his mouth. The Great Being suffered excruciating pain and his mouth was full of blood. However, the hunter could not cut the tusks. So Chaddanta helped the hunter cut the tusks. The Great Being handed over the tusks to the hunter and asked, “How long were you coming here?” “Seven years, seven months, and seven days.” “Go then by the magic power of these tusks, and you shall reach Benares in seven days.” And he gave him a safe conduit and let him go. And after he had sent him away, before the other elephants had returned, he was dead.

The hunter came to Banares and gave her the tusks, saying, “Be assured that he is dead: here are his tusks.” She received the tusks adorned with six different coloured rays on her jewelled fan, and, placing them on her lap, gazed at the tusks of one who in a former existence had been her dear lord and she thought, “This fellow has come with the tusks, he cut from the auspicious elephant that he slew with a poisoned shaft.” And at the remembrance of the Great Being she was filled with such a great sorrow that she could not endure and heartbroken, she died that very day.

At various monuments this story is sculpted beautifully. In the scene depicted in a single panel at Bharhut in which Chaddanta shown with his six tusks. Behind him Mahāsubhaddā standing with the flower on her head. Hunter Sanudatta is also depicted (ref. Fig. No. 1, Plate 4). The sculpture at Goli display the hunter cutting the tusks of Chaddanta with the saw (ref. Fig. No. 2, Plate 4). At Sanchi the scene is illustrated in three architraves at three different gates. This story is sculpted at South Gateway, rear side, middle architrave; On North Gateway rear side, top architrave and South Gateway, rear side, middle architrave. Chaddanta is depicted four times in these panels. Twice near the central Banyan tree, one with the sporting amidst lotuses and one standing alone as the target of hunter (ref. Fig. No. 3, 4, 5, Plate 4). This scene is painted with minute details at Ajanta, in cave no. 17. The various incidents from the story are illustrated like - the herd of Elephants bathing, Chullasubhaddā offering flowers to Pacceka Buddha, death of Chullasubhaddā, the King of Banares ordering hunters to bring tusks of Chaddanta, hunters aiming arrow towards Chaddanta, Chaddanta tearing his tusks with his trunk, hunter carrying tusks to the royal palace, the queen fainting after looking at tusks (ref. Fig. No. 1, 2, 3 Plate 5).

Vessantara Jātaka

The second story is about a prince Vasantara a great donor. King Sivi the emperor of the *Sivi Kingdom*²⁰ living in Jetuttara city had a son named Sañjaya. He married the princess of Madra

²⁰ Pacceka buddhas or Pratyekabuddhas are said to achieve enlightenment on their own, without the use of teachers or guides, according to some traditions by contemplating the principle of dependent origination.

kingdom, Phusatī. Bodhisatva was conceived in her womb. While she was pregnant she started giving donations. At the same time there was no end to the king's revenue.

One day while passing along the road named Vessa, the pains started and she gave birth to a baby boy. The Bodhisatva came from his mother's womb free from impurity, open-eyed, and on the instant holding out his hand to his mother, he said, "Mother, I wish to make some gift; is there anything?" She replied, "Yes, my son, give as you will," and dropped a purse of a thousand pieces into the outstretched hand. As he was born while travelling through Vessa, they named him Vessantara. On this day, a female flying elephant brought a young one, esteemed to be of lucky omen, white all over, and left it in the royal stables. Because this creature came to supply a need of the Bodhisatva, they named it Paccaya.

Once there was a severe draught in *Kālinga*²¹. The king of Kālinga followed rigorous penance for rain. But he could not bring about the rain. Then he asked his citizens "I pledged myself to virtue, and seven days I kept the holy-day vow, yet I could not make the rain come: what is to be done now?" They replied, "If you cannot bring the rain, my lord, Vessantara in the city of Jetuttara, King Sañjaya's son, is devoted to charity; he has a glorious elephant and wherever he goes the rain falls. Send brahmins, and ask for that elephant, and bring him hither." The king agreed; and assembling the brahmins he chose out, eight of them, gave them provisions for their journey, and said to them, "Go and fetch Vessantara's elephant."

They came to Vasantara and asked for an elephant. Vasantara gifted the elephant to them. The citizens of Jetuttara came to know this incidence and they got angry. King understood that they want to kill Vessantara and he told them "I will throw him out of my kingdom"

Vessantara left Jetuttara along with his wife Maddi and his two children. He also gave away his wealth. They lived on Vamka Mountain.

Once Jūjaka, a greedy Brahmin came to Vamka Mountain and asked Vasantara to donate his children. Vasantara happily gifted his children to Jūjaka. When Maddi arrived back at the hermitage she was surprised and horrified when she did not find her children. Finally, when she learned what her husband had done, she fainted, right into the arms of Prince Vasantara. Seeking to test the limits of Prince Vessantara's generosity, the god *Sakka*²² transformed himself into an ugly Brahmin and appeared before Prince Vasantara. "May I have your wife?" he asked. And so Prince Vasantara, seeking to become perfect, gave Maddi to the ugly Brahman who was Sakka in disguise.

Then, after a brief earthquake as the cosmos exhibited its wonder at such generosity, Sakka returned to his own form, and stood before Prince Vasantara, blue in colour, tall, strong, and handsome. He returned Maddi to Prince Vasantara. And he tricked Jūjaka into leading the children back to the Jetuttara palace, where King Sañjaya, learning that Prince Vasantara had freely given the

²¹ Punjab province of Pakistan

²² Sivi Kingdom was located somewhere in Rajasthan. But there were many different opinions.

royal children to Jūjaka, shook his head and paid Jūjaka a hundred elephants and a hundred horses and great mounds of silver and gold to buy them back.

The evil Brahmin Jūjaka was very greedy and very gluttonous —the exact opposite of Vasantara— and with his new wealth he bought a great deal of food. He ate and he ate and his stomach grew bigger and bigger until it exploded, and then he descended into hell.

Finally, promised by Sakka that he had attained perfection and would be born in his next life as Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha, Prince Vasantara led his wife Maddi back to the palace at Jetuttara and became the king of the kingdom of Sivi, which worked out better this time because Sakka sent a rain of precious gems that fell from the sky and filled the palace so that Prince Vasantara could freely give great wealth to all who asked..

At about same time, Peccaya the elephant was politely returned by the people of Kālinga, who had more rain than they wanted, which brought great joy both to Sivirattha and to Peccaya, who was glad to be back.

We find this story sculpted at Bharhut, Sanchi, Goli, Amāravati, Lonad as well as Gandhar and Mathura Sculptures and painted at caves of Ajanta, Kizil-China.

In Bharhut sculpture the incidence of Vesantara donating Elephant is sculpted (ref. Fig. No. 1, Plate 6). At Sanchi this Jātaka is depicted with detail on the rear sides of bottom architrave of North Gateway. The story starts from right side of the central section showing Vesantara sitting on Elephant. Donation of Elephant is also depicted. The scene of leaving Jetuttara with his wife and two children shown on left side in which Maddi shown carrying her daughter on her hip. The story continues on the rear side showing different incidences like they living in hermitage in forest, Vesantara gifting his children to Jūjaka, gifting Maddi to Sakka and finally re-union of the family and their journey back (ref. Fig. No. 2, Plate 6). We found this Jātaka depicted in many Far East countries like Thailand and Myanmar (ref. Fig. No. 3, 4, Plate 6).

These are the major events and stories in which ‘Elephant’ appears. As they are very popular we found them either sculpted or painted at various monuments.

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References

Bhagwat D. Siddhārtha Jātaka

Kosambi D. Bhagwan Buddha

²³ An early kingdom in central East India comprised Odisha and some part of Andhra Pradesh and Chattisgarh.

²⁴ Sakka or Shakra is king of all gods.

Kosambi D. Buddhililar Sangaraha

Kosambi D. Jātaka Katha Sangrah

Schlingloff D. Ajanta, Handbook of Paintings

Winternitz M. History of Literature

Dange S. Bauddha Dharma Ani Tatwadnyan

Sanchi, World Heritage Series, Archeological Survey of India

Ajanta, World Heritage Series, Archeological Survey of India

Plate 1

Māyādevi's Dream



Fig. 1 Sculpture at Bharhut Stupa



Fig. 2 Sculpture at Sanchi Stupa on East Gateway



Fig. 3 Sculpture from Amāravati
Kolkata Museum



Fig. 4 Postal stamp released by Sri Lankan
postal department



Fig. 5 Gandhar Sculpture from Mardan,
Kolkata Museum



Fig. 6 Painting in the Kizil Caves, China

Plate 2

Devedatta's Revenge

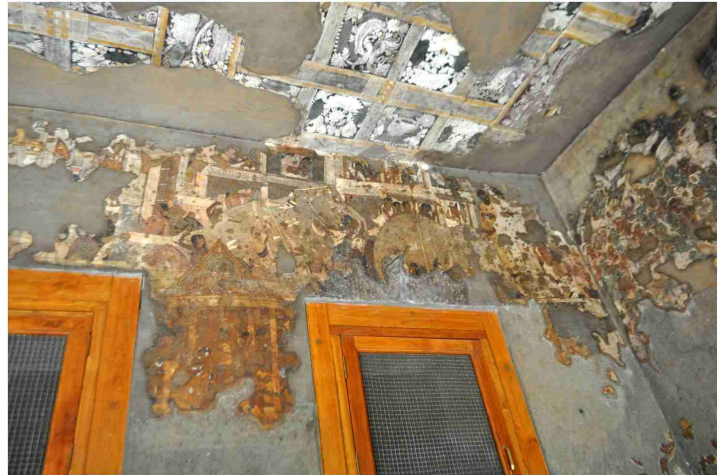


Fig. 1 Scene painted at Ajanta Cave no. 17



Fig. 2 Sculpture from Amāravati Stupa, Chennai Museum

Plate 3

Devedatta's Revenge



Low relief sculpture at Borobudur



Gandhar Sculpture showing the Buddha subduing the elephant Nalagiri,
Takht-i-bahi Museum, Pakistan

Plate 4

Chaddanta Jātaka



Fig. 1 Sculpture at Bharhut Stupa



Fig. 2 Sculpture at Goli



Fig. 3 Scene from North Gateway top architrave, Sanchi



Fig. 4 Scene from West Gateway bottom architrave, Sanchi



Fig. 5 Scene depicting hunter and Chaddanta, South Gateway, middle architrave, Sanchi

Plate 5

Chaddanta Jātaka



Fig. 1 Scene in cave no. 17



Fig. 2 The herd of Elephants bathing, scene of Sālkridā

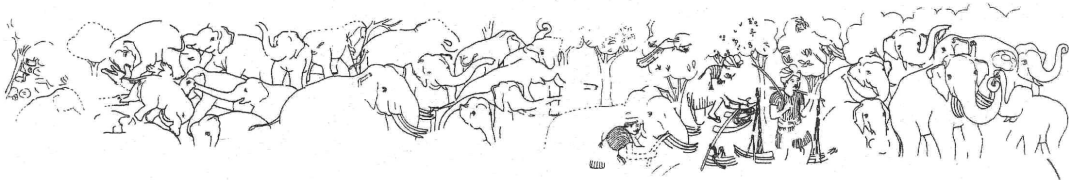


Fig. 3 Hunter cutting tusks



Fig. 4 Fainted queen after looking at tusks