

Case 6: Harvard's *Bronze Reliquary with Jātaka Tales*



Should I donate my Buddha-body?

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Warming Up:

Take a look at the three reliquaries presented immediately below in Figures 1-3. Make a short list of the common features between the three reliquaries. Then, take a second look and note any aspects distinct to particular reliquaries. What kind of relic do you think these objects held?

Prime Suspect: *Bronze Aśoka Reliquary with Jātaka Tales*, Harvard Art Museums 1930.105

Stats:

Interior Inscription: “The King of the Wuyue Kingdom, Qian Hongchu, reverently commissioned the 84,000 treasure pagodas. Recorded in the Yimao year (955).”

Height: 13.2 cm

Base Width: 8.1 cm

Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Collection

1. Interior of acroteria: meditating Buddhas
2. Exterior of acroteria: guardian king figures
3. Garuḍa bird atop column
4. Jātaka tales (solid cast bronze)
5. Seated meditating figures



Fig. 1

Accomplice 1: *Leifeng Pagoda Silver Repoussé Āśoka Reliquary*

Stats:

Ca. 975

Height: 33.5 cm

Base Width: 12 cm

Unearthed from the uppermost “Heaven’s Palace” portion of the Leifeng Pagoda ruins
Zhejiang Provincial Museum Collection

1. Finial with five “dew-collecting dishes”
2. Exterior acroteria: scenes from the Buddha’s life
3. Jātaka tales (silver openwork)



Fig. 2

Accomplice 2: *Huiguang Pagoda Iron Aśoka Reliquary*

Stats:

Dated by inscription to the 965 reliquary distribution of Qian Chu

Height: 17.2 cm

Base Width: 10 cm

Unearthed from Huiguang Pagoda

Zhejiang Provincial Museum Collection

1. Interior acroteria: standing Buddha above seated figures
2. Exterior acroteria: scenes from the Buddha's life
3. Jātaka tales (cast iron openwork)



Fig. 3

Problem Set

- What kinds of relics did these reliquaries contain and how did they function as objects?
- What is the significance of the *jātaka* tale decoration on the body of our reliquary?
- How are the various themes of the decorations related on the reliquaries?
- Why do you think there are differences in the decoration and construction methods of the Harvard reliquary versus other surviving examples?

This Week's Case

Last week when exploring Harvard's spirit jars, we encountered the origins of Buddhist artwork in China. This week, in tackling our *Bronze Reliquary with Jātaka Tales*, we jump nearly 600 years to a period already beyond the mature development of Buddhism in China. While our case will focus primarily on stories directly associated with our reliquaries and the materiality of the objects themselves, there is a great deal of Buddhist terminology and belief systems intimately woven into the reliquaries. For that reason, take a moment to scan over the following descriptions of important individuals and definitions relevant to our Harvard reliquary. If you find yourself confused by a term as you move through the case study, be sure to refer back to these lists and don't hesitate to explore further on your own if you are intrigued by any of the philosophical or doctrinal aspects of Buddhism introduced this week. Several introductory texts of Buddhism have been included in the **Tools for Further Exploration** section.

Key Players:

Aśoka—lived 304-232 BCE, united the lands of modern-day India under the Mauryan Empire and ruled 269-232. Known as a devout Buddhist ruler who collected the scattered relics of the Buddha and had them distributed in 84,000 bejeweled reliquaries.

Qian Chu 錢俶—lived 928-988 CE, ruled 947-978 as king of the small Wuyue Kingdom 吳越國 (907-978) in southeastern China. Allegedly was instructed by a monk to construct 84,000 reliquaries and write sūtras to atone for the sin of killing innocents in the suppression of a rebellion. Over 20 inscribed and dated examples of these reliquaries survive, including the Harvard reliquary.

Liu Sahe 劉薩荷—Buddhist layman of the Eastern Jin period (317-420) who underwent a near-death experience. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin, see below) appeared before him and warned that he would be reborn in hell unless he sought out the reliquaries of Aśoka and prayed before them. Thereafter, he became ordained as the Buddhist monk, Huida 慧達, and discovered the most famous Aśoka reliquary in China.

Genkai 元開 (722-785)—Japanese monk who went on a pilgrimage of China with his teacher, Jianzhen. Recorded a detailed textual description of the earliest example of an Aśoka reliquary with *jātaka* tales. His description has since been used to identify the *jātaka* program on all such reliquaries.

Terms to Know:

Buddha/Buddhism—“The Buddha” generally refers to the mythic-historical figure of Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in Kosala Kingdom near present day Nepal and died at the turn of 4th c. BCE. “Buddhism” refers to teachings expounded by Siddhartha Gautama as the proper path to enlightenment, which he obtained using his own methods after failing under the instruction of other masters of his time. Main tenets of the religion include the “Four Noble Truths”: recognition that the world is a cycle of suffering, recognition that the suffering has a root, recognizing that desire is the root of suffering, and recognizing that there is a path out of the suffering. The “Eightfold Path,” expounding compassion and appropriate conduct in eight walks of life, was taught as the original method for breaking free of the phenomenal cycle of suffering. The act of giving was considered as one of the most effective modes of correct conduct. Buddhism grew to become a truly interregional religion—spreading across present day India, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and other areas.

bodhisattva—Originally a term indicating an individual who had set their mind on achieving enlightenment. Later came to designate those who achieved enlightenment but chose to stay in the phenomenal world to help other beings along the path to enlightenment. One of the most popular bodhisattvas of East Asia, Avalokiteśvara or Guanyin 觀音 (“Sound-Observer”), could be called upon by name to manifest and save individuals from worldly harm.

relic/reliquary—From the Greek for “remnant,” indicates the body, portion of a body, contact trace, or memento of a sacred individual. In the case of the Buddha, his body was cremated upon his death. The relics discovered within his ashes were divided and distributed throughout the kingdoms so as to avoid conflict over his final resting site. A reliquary is the vessel, often heavily ornamented, used to house a sacred relic but can be found in many shapes, sizes, and levels of decoration.

stūpa—A type of Indian burial mound that originally served as a tomb and was used for housing the relics of the Buddha. Later also used to commemorate other sacred individuals. Its vertical construction served as the blueprint for the development of pagoda architecture in East Asia.

sūtra—The sermons or teachings of the Buddha. These works are collected, along with exegesis and other texts, into the comprehensive volumes of the Tripiṭaka or Buddhist canon.

jātaka—A tale, similar to Western fables, concerning actions occurring in the previous lives of the Buddha. As Buddhism grew as a religion, it was believed that some incarnation of the Buddha had existed in all previous generations and would exist in eras to come. As such, a large body of tales developed to recount these past and future existences. Often didactic in nature, with a conclusion explaining whom the characters of the tale became in future incarnations. Similar to *avadāna* which correlate past deeds to present incarnations; however, *avadāna* do not necessarily pertain to lives of the Buddha himself.

acroteria—Term designating architectural decorations situated on a flat base (acroter) at the top of a pediment in classical architecture. Here, used to designate the four vertical ornaments found on the upper portion of the reliquaries.

Setting the Stage—Relics of the Buddha

Our journey begins this week not with the life and teachings of the Buddha but, rather, at the final moments of his life in the phenomenal world. We jump right into the point at which the Buddha chose to enter into his final enlightenment in the formless realm—necessitating his “death” or departure from the physical realm. In his 80th year, the Buddha recognized that he would remain a crutch for his followers so long as he continued to teach and make himself available in the world. To encourage self-reliance and spur his devotees on the path to their own enlightenment, the Buddha resolved to make his final departure and notified his closest disciples. The reaction amongst his disciples varied in accordance with their own level of religious attainment—those who were furthest along recognized that the Buddha’s “death” was in fact a celebratory moment of his passing into final enlightenment, while those less advanced wept and mourned his departure.

Amongst the final preparations for his physical body, the Buddha asked that his corporeal remains be cremated and that any remaining relics following the cremation be interred in a burial mound (stūpa). Alas, when news of his passing swept across the eight regions of the realm, the rulers of the various kingdoms were all quite distraught. Yet, as they mourned, they also made preparations to retrieve the remains of the Buddha for worship in their own kingdoms. Each king raised an army and headed to the cremation site to do battle for the right to be the final stewards of the Buddha’s relics.

Happily, the disciples of the Buddha were able to come to a bloodless solution to the seemingly violent impasse between the kings. They hired a non-Buddhist by the name of Drona to come adjudicate the proceedings. Drona divided the relics into eight equal parts—one portion to be sent back with each of the seven kings and one to remain at the site of the cremation. At each final resting location, a stūpa was raised to inter the relics and provide a physical site for pilgrimage and worship. However, after several centuries, these stūpas began to fall somewhat into disarray and a new pious Buddhist came to the rescue of the original relics...



Fig. 4:
Great Stūpa at Sanci
Ca. 3rd c. BCE
Madhya Pradesh, India
-The oldest stone
structure in India,
allegedly dating to the
rule of King Aśoka
(see below). Said to
house the relics of the
Buddha.

King Aśoka and his Reliquaries

Many eons ago, a small boy by the name of Jaya was so eager to show devotion upon encountering the Buddha that he offered up a handful of dirt in the name of his faith. Seeing the boy's potential, the Buddha predicted that Jaya would one day be reincarnated as a great king that would spread Buddhism across the land. It is said that the boy was later born as King Aśoka, the great sovereign who found his way to the Buddhist path and united nearly all of India under the Mauryan Empire. As an expression of his devotion, Aśoka had seven parts of the deceased Buddha's original body gathered, divided, and re-distributed throughout his kingdom within 84,000 bejeweled reliquary stūpas—enough for any town with a sizable population. Because of this pious act and the benevolence of his reign, King Aśoka became the exemplar of Buddhist rule throughout East Asia. Many later rulers sought to emulate him, solidifying their own kingship by reenacting Aśoka's search for and redistribution of Buddhist relics.



Fig. 5: Aśoka-style Reliquary
Silver repoussé, Musée Guimet

Leaping forward 1,200 years, King Qian Chu of the Wuyue Kingdom in southeastern China enacted one of the most famous distributions of relics modeled after Aśoka. Under Qian Chu, the Wuyue Kingdom fashioned itself as the foremost regional patron of Buddhism in China. Records from the period state that Qian Chu became ill in 954 as punishment for the sin of killing innocent victims during the suppression of a rebellion. A monk prescribed that he build stūpas and copy sūtras in order to regain his health. In the subsequent year, Qian Chu did indeed order the production of reliquary stūpas—each containing its own copy of a sūtra. Both early and later texts corroborate the construction of these reliquaries and describe their appearance. This evidence is confirmed by nearly two-dozen of reliquaries unearthed in the 20th century that are directly identified in inscriptions as belonging to Qian Chu's distribution of relics.

Through its inscription, our *Bronze Reliquary with Jātaka Tales* enters the picture as one of these reliquaries. But what can its decorative program, construction, and relationship to other examples reveal about its purpose and history?

The details concerning our main historical player, King Aśoka, are recounted in an Indian text dating from the 2nd century CE by the name of the *Aśokāvadāna*. The mythic biography follows his origin story as the pious Jaya, the violent solidification of his reign, and his subsequent Buddhist reawakening. Special attention is given to Aśoka's most important act of devotion—the collection and redistribution of the Buddha's relics. The deed is explicitly mentioned at the outset of the myth when it is foretold that Jaya will become the builder of stūpas. It also marks the point when Aśoka transitions from his role as a fierce warrior-king to an enlightened Buddhist ruler. The accomplishment is divided into two sequential parts: the retrieval of the Buddha's relics from their original stūpas and their re-division into 84,000 bejeweled reliquaries that were subsequently interred in shrines throughout the realm. The bifurcation of the myth was crucial to later rulers, who fashioned their own reenactments of the legend as a two-part process of collection and redistribution.

King Aśoka's legacy left a lasting impression on East Asia that is well documented in historical sources and well studied in contemporary scholarship. The first recorded Chinese reenactment of the reliquary legend focused on the search for and retrieval of relics. During the Eastern Jin period (317-420), a Buddhist layman, Liu Sahe, underwent a near-death experience and witnessed a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The Bodhisattva warned him that he was doomed to be reborn in hell and that the only way out of his fate was to search out the stūpas built by King Aśoka, repenting his sins before them. Following this close call, Liu Sahe became ordained as a monk and went in search of the Aśoka stūpas. During his travels, he discovered what would become the most famous Aśoka reliquary. The reliquary, approximately one-and-a-half feet tall, done in metal openwork with a suspended bronze chime, and decorated with holy figures, appeared out of the ground while emitting the ethereal tinkling of bells. Records show that in 537, a pagoda and temple were constructed at the site to house the reliquary, and the area became known as the Aśoka Monastery.



Fig. 6: King Aśoka Monastery
Ca. late 3rd century, CE (restored in the 1980's)
Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China

As both an important monastic site and the origin of the Aśoka-style reliquary in China, the Aśoka Monastery is crucial to understanding later reenactments of the relic redistribution. An early detailed description of the Aśoka Monastery's reliquary was recorded in travel records compiled by the Japanese monk, Genkai, in 779. Attempting to return to Japan on a missionary expedition, Genkai and his master were washed ashore on the Chinese coast. Luckily, the two men took refuge at the Aśoka Monastery. They recorded a description of the famous reliquary:

...It is purplish-black in color, and its engravings are most extraordinary. On one side is the story of Prince Sattva; on the second is that of giving the eyes as alms; on the third, that of the disposal of the brain; on the fourth, that of the ransom of the dove. The top did not have 'dew-dishes' and inside was a suspended bell.¹

As we will discover, this record has been used as the basis for identifying all later Aśoka reliquary decorative programs. The jātaka stories described by Genkai are far more precise than those found in earlier Chinese records and match the archaeological evidence unearthed in the 20th century...or do they?

The Reliquary Distributions of King Qian Chu

Although examples survive from as late as the 13th century, the largest extant corpus of Aśoka-style reliquaries date from the reign of King Qian Chu of Wuyue. The histories and Buddhist records of the time describe the rule of Qian Chu in detail. They create a narrative following in the footsteps of King Aśoka—painting the picture of a ruler that committed the sin of killing innocents but was awakened to Buddhism by a concerned monk. To atone for his misdeeds, Qian Chu was ordered to commission reliquary stūpas and write out Buddhist sūtras—which he is proven to have done based on surviving reliquaries from his reign that were made in 955 (like our Harvard reliquary) and 965.

From a socio-political standpoint, King Qian Chu and the Wuyue Kingdom had a great deal invested in Buddhist worship. From its inception, the Wuyue Kingdom situated itself as a great regional patron of Buddhism in order to counter restrictions that had been placed on the Buddhist laity in the wake of widespread rebellions in 845. Qian Chu and other Wuyue kings used Buddhism as a diplomatic tool to reinforce their stature within their own kingdom and amongst their more powerful neighbors. They became an oasis for true believers of Buddhism and, in doing so, also promoted religious immigration to their state.

Based on inscriptions, the surviving reliquaries come primarily from two separate distributions occurring in 955 and 965 that reflect periods of uncertain diplomatic relations for the Wuyue Kingdom. Considered from this historical angle, Qian Chu's reenactment of the Aśoka legend can be seen as a means of asserting his kingship during uncertain times by associating himself with the rule of King Aśoka and the divine body of Buddha. Whether out of calculation or religious devotion, Qian Chu exploited this kingly connection on multiple occasions...but is there a relationship between these troubled times and the decorative variation found on the reliquaries themselves?

The Physical Reliquary

Having taken a look at the major players in the saga of the Harvard *Bronze Aśoka Reliquary*, we gained familiarity with the mythic origins of Aśoka-style reliquaries and the historical circumstances of surviving examples from King Qian Chu's reign. When first introduced to the objects, we saw that, despite sharing a similar design, there are distinctions between the surviving reliquaries in several key areas. Referring back to our three reliquaries, it is obvious that they are made of very different metals: bronze, silver, and iron. Additionally, they are constructed through different techniques: solid casting (bronze), openwork casting (iron), and hand-hammered openwork (silver).

However, an element that remains remarkably consistent across all surviving reliquaries is the presence of four jātaka stories decorating the main body of the pieces. As we saw in our key words section, jātaka are morality tales relating the previous lives of the Buddha when he was incarnated in human form or as other various creatures. Consider the summaries of the following four stories that Genkai identified on the reliquaries:

Mahāsattva jātaka

One afternoon, the young Prince Sattva rode out with his two elder brothers. Entering into a lush valley, they came across some tiger cubs suckling vainly at their starving mother. Too weak to feed herself or her cubs, the mother lay dying upon the grass. Distressed by the sight, the three princes discussed with one another what they might do to save the tigress. The two elder brothers prepared to ride back to the palace to fetch some meat for the creature. Distraught, Prince Sattva recognized that the ride would waste too much precious time and that the tigress would be dead upon their return.

Feigning illness, Prince Sattva begged off his brothers and stayed behind with the tigress. He made up his mind to save the creature with his own body. Stripping off his clothes, he lay down before the tigress. However, in her weakened state, the tigress was unable to bring herself to kill Prince Sattva. Recognizing her plight, Prince Sattva broke off a piece of bamboo and, climbing to edge of the valley, plunged the sharp end into his neck. As his lifeblood flowed out, he dove from the edge of the valley and landed in a broken pile at the foot of the tigress. Smelling the blood of the dead prince, the tigress devoured his body and was revived.

Seeing the bones of their brother upon returning, the two elder princes knew immediately what had occurred. They rode back to the palace to notify their parents. Mourning deeply, the king and queen erected a stūpa at the spot and had their son's bones interred within. Thereafter, it became a holy pilgrimage site.



Fig. 7: *Mahāsattva jāataka*
Mogao Cave 254, south wall, ca. 475-490 CE

Śibi jāataka

The great King Śibi sat one day reflecting upon his accomplishments. Despite having ruled with wisdom and achieved peace within his realm, he lamented the brevity of human life and wished that he might yet give more of himself and reach a greater level of attainment. Hearing his thoughts, the gods immediately manifested a hawk and a dove. Plunging to earth, the hawk chased the dove in an attempt to catch and devour it. The dove entered through the window of King Śibi's chamber and begged that the gracious King protect him from the pursuing hawk. Taking pity, Śibi promised to do so.

However, when the hawk arrived, he demanded that the dove be turned over, lest he himself die of starvation. At a loss, the King offered up anything that might satisfy the hawk's hunger while sparing the life of the dove. The hawk demanded equal weight of Śibi's own flesh to exchange the life of the dove. To the horror of his ministers, Śibi agreed to the bargain and had a knife and scales set before him. The dove was placed on one-half of the scale, and King Śibi began to slice his own flesh to balance it. Alas, no matter how much he cut, the scale refused to move. His ministers begged Śibi to stop, but he refused. Finally, he cast his entire body onto the scales and, at last, they balanced. Admiring his selflessness, the gods appeared before Śibi and made him whole again. King Śibi rededicated his life to helping those throughout the world before departing for heaven in his old age.



Fig. 8: *Śibi jātaka*
Mogao Cave 254, north wall, ca. 475-490 CE

Candraprabha jātaka

King Candraprabha was a wise king who, having achieved peace throughout his realm, was eager to continue giving to the world in any capacity possible. Calling together his vassal rulers, Candraprabha amassed the wealth of the kingdom and allowed beggars and those in need to take whatever they wished. His compassion, which inspired admiration amongst his subjects, aroused the jealousy of a minor king. This king sent notice throughout his realm that he would award his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone that could bring him the head of King Candraprabha. A greedy ascetic took up the challenge and traveled to the court of Candraprabha.

Upon arrival, the man beseeched the King for the donation of his head. Ignoring the protests of his family and ministers, King Candraprabha was excited by the opportunity to give of his own body. Tying his long hair to a tree in the royal gardens, a sword was brought and the King's head was to be severed from his body and presented to the ascetic. The nature spirit imbued within the tree was outraged by the request of the ascetic and knocked him down with a branch. However, King Candraprabha expressed his wish to move forward on the path to enlightenment by making the donation. His head was thereby separated from his body and given to the ascetic. The ascetic and the jealous king both died shortly thereafter when their hearts burst from the shame of their misdeeds. Deeply impressed by the King Candraprabha's devotion and heart of compassion, the gods sang out praises as he passed into enlightenment.

Fig. 9:
Candraprabha
jātaka
Mogao Cave 275
North wall
Ca. 421-429 CE



The Quick-eyed King jātaka (also known as the *Śibi jātaka*, as its protagonist is also King Śibi)

One day, the great King Śibi was reflecting upon his rule from his capital of Ariṭṭhapura. Although he was a wise and beneficent king, when he considered the gifts that he had bestowed upon the populace, he wished that he might give something more. King Śibi had yet to give directly from his own body, and so he vowed that, if called upon, he would give of his own flesh and blood.

Thereafter, the King was riding upon his royal elephant when a decrepit, elderly ascetic approached his retinue. Blind, the man stated that he had heard of King Śibi's promise and had come to beg for the King's eyes so that he too might know the feeling of sight. Hearing the old man's wish, the King was overjoyed and ready to have his eyes removed on the spot. However, persuaded by his ministers, the King returned to his palace with the old man and a surgeon was called upon to make the transplant.

Applying an anesthetic, the surgeon carefully removed the first eye and placed it in the socket of the old man. Despite the pain, both men were delighted at the gift, and the surgeon continued with the transplant of the second eye over the protests of the court ministers. Now blind, the King thought nothing of his own predicament but his heart filled with joy having given of his own body. Impressed by the King's compassion and devotion, the gods praised King Śibi and his eyes grew back within their recently emptied sockets.

Do they match?

Having now explored a brief sketch of the four stories identified by Genkai as the reliquary decoration and seen some examples from other contexts, try to match them to the image comparisons that you find in Figures 10-13. Are some scenes easier to identify than others? Do they all match perfectly? What is the thematic relationship between the stories and how is this theme important to their inclusion on the reliquary?

Figure 10:
Jātaka on the Leifeng and
Harvard Reliquaries

- 1a. Beast, Leifeng reliquary
- 1b. Beast, Harvard reliquary



Fig. 11: Jātaka on the Leifeng and Harvard Reliquaries

1a. Dove, Leifeng reliquary

1b. Dove, Harvard reliquary

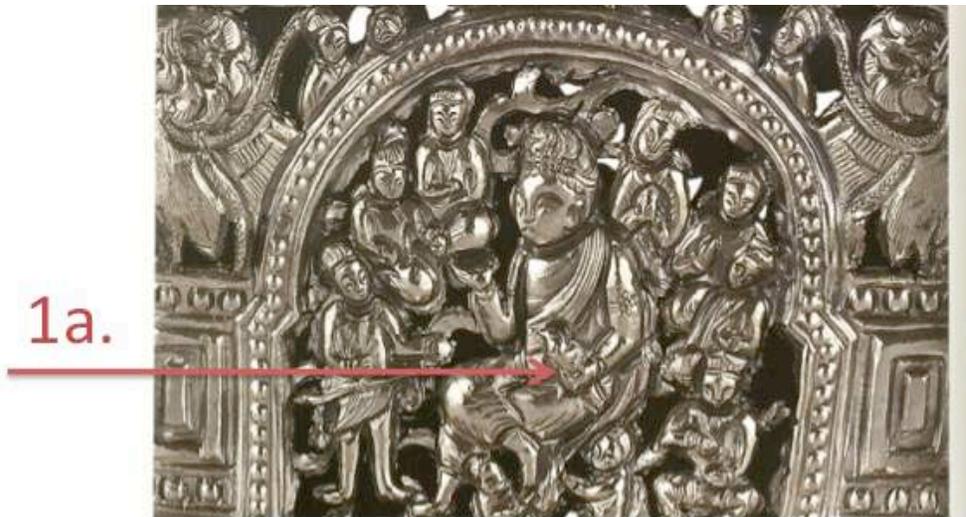


Fig. 12: Jātaka on the Leifeng and Harvard Reliquaries

1a. Tree and raised sword, Leifeng reliquary

1b. Tree and raised sword, Harvard reliquary



1a.



1b.

Fig. 13: Jātaka on the Harvard (1) and Guimet Museum Reliquaries (2)

Harvard Reliquary

1a. Deceprit begging figure

1b. Beast

1c. Beast

Guimet Reliquary

2a. Lion or other beast

2a. Lion or other beast

2c. Jackal or other beast



A Tale of Two Buddha Types: the Story of the Acroteria and Base

While the jātaka programs are quite similar, the main point of decorative departure between the reliquaries is the scenes found on the four acroterion. Turning first to the Harvard reliquary, one finds on the exteriors of the acroteria a sum total of eight standing figures generally identified as guardian figures. On the interior of the acroteria are seated buddhas meditating within niches.

Fig. 14: Interior and Exterior of Acroteria, Harvard Reliquary

1. Seated monk
2. Guardian figure



In comparison, the iron and silver reliquaries differ significantly in their acroteria decoration. The most complete model appears on the silver reliquary found within the ruins of Leifeng Pagoda. Acts from the birth and youth of the Buddha are stacked in two registers on each face of the acroteria. The scenes lead up to the Buddha's enlightenment but show no episodes from his later life.ⁱⁱ

Fig. 15: Interior and Exterior of Acroteria, Huiguang and Leifeng Pagoda Reliquaries

Huiguang Reliquary

- 1a. Standing, preaching Buddha
- 1b. Pre-enlightenment life story of the Buddha

Leifeng Reliquary

- 2a. Standing, preaching Buddha
- 2b. Pre-enlightenment life story of the Buddha



As seen in Fig. 15, there are also distinguishing features between the buddhas on the interior of the acroteria in our examples. Unlike the seated buddhas on the bronze reliquary acroteria, the interior buddha figures on the silver and iron examples are standing—raising their hand in a gesture of instruction with small adorant figures situated above and below. It seems as though a distinction is being made between the actions of the two types of buddhas, perhaps meditating on the one hand and teaching on the other? What do you make of these distinctions?

Apart from the differences between the two types of buddhas on the interior of the acroteria, there is one final area where a distinction is made between buddhas on the Harvard reliquary versus our other prime objects. In Fig. 16 below, we can see that the Harvard bronze reliquary has only three seated meditating buddhas on the base of the pedestal. However, when we compare this to the cast iron reliquary from the Huiguang pagoda, there are clearly four meditating buddhas. This dichotomy holds true between all bronze reliquaries dated to 955 (like our Harvard reliquary), which feature three buddhas, and all reliquaries of other materials from 965 or later that feature four buddhas. It is possible that the four seated buddhas make reference to the four primary meditative states in Buddhist practice, but there is little obvious explanation for the selection of three figures on our reliquary. Do you think there is any significance behind this distinction?



Fig. 16:
Meditating Buddhas on base of Harvard (above)
and Huiguang (below) reliquaries





Fig. 17: Relic vial from Leifeng Pagoda reliquary

The Bodies of the Buddha

One final important consideration when exploring our prime suspects for the week concerns their contents. You may recall from the historical records of King Qian Chu's reliquary distributions that he was ordered to write sūtras and include them in the reliquaries that he subsequently sent throughout the land. Indeed, it appears that this was the case with Qian Chu's original distributions—a copy of a text known as the *Sūtra on the Precious Chest* was included in each piece. In fact, a sūtra could function perfectly as a relic in this context, as it was generally considered that the Buddhist teachings were representative of one of the three primary "bodies" of the Buddha. Buddhist texts were considered to be the Buddha's "Dharma Body"—that is, his ineffable, formless body.

In contrast, our first accomplice, the silver reliquary from the Leifeng Pagoda, contained an object of a different sort. Rather than a scripture, a small precious vial containing a physical relic was uncovered within the reliquary. The pebble-like jewels contained within were thought to be actual remnants of the Buddha's worldly body. Now, considering the differences between the Harvard reliquary and the silver and iron reliquaries, do you think any explanation might be found in the different contents?

Reflecting: Coming to Terms with our Case

In this case, we have taken the Harvard *Bronze Reliquary with Jātaka Tales* and explored the historical context of the object. We learned of the circumstances concerning the collection of the Buddha's original relics upon his cremation, King Aśoka's later conversion to Buddhism and redistribution of the relics, and King Qian Chu's 10th century re-embodiment of King Aśoka through his own reliquary distributions to which our Harvard reliquary dates. We have explored the jāataka stories allegedly decorating the main body of our prime suspects and also seen some of the discrepancies in decoration and construction between the various surviving examples. Now, as you formulate your own ideas about our object for the week, revisit the following questions:

- Why would the designer of the reliquaries select these particular jātaḱa tales as the main decoration? What is the common theme and why does this matter to Buddhism? Furthermore, do the tales all seem to match the visual evidence perfectly?
- Why do you there think there are differences in the decorations and construction methods of the bronze Harvard reliquary versus the other surviving examples?
- How does the decorative program function as a complete unit?
- What did the reliquaries contain and how did the reliquary itself function as an object?

The resource materials below can be used to assist you in building your response case and will help you on your path to new discoveries.

Tools for New Discoveries:

Translations and Descriptions of Jātaḱa and Life Story Tales

Cowell, E.B., ed. *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. London: Luzac and Company for the Pali Text Society, 1957.

Bell, Alexander. *Didactic Narration: Jataka Iconography in Dunhuang*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000.

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Related Objects and Images

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Endnotes

ⁱ Translation adapted from Shi Zhiru, “From Bodily Relic to Dharma Relic Stūpa: Chinese Materialization of the Aśoka Legend in the Wuyue Period,” in *India in the Chinese Imagination*, ed. John Kieschnick (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 93. For information concerning the original text and its author, see also Alexander Soper, “Contributions to the Study of Sculpture and Architecture III: Japanese Evidence for the History of the Architecture and Iconography of Chinese Buddhism,” *Monumenta Serica* (1940): 641-642.

ⁱⁱ For a general description of and breakdown of the life story episodes (some of which are found here), see Patricia Karetzky, *The Life of the Buddha: Ancient Scriptural and Pictorial Traditions* (New York: University Press of America, 1992).