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Beyond Textual and Visual “Versions”

The Story Cluster of the Six-Tusked Elephant Bodhisattva

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Introduction

Buddhist narratives, in particular *jātakas* (stories of the Buddha’s past lives), are commonly found in Indian literature and art, and often we find what appears to be the same story in multiple textual forms as well as depicted visually at one or more of the early Buddhist *stūpa* or cave sites. Past scholarship on such stories exhibits two main tendencies: Firstly, scholars have often sought to trace the development of the story, positing earlier or original forms from which various “versions” or “variants” were created. Secondly, where visual evidence comes into play, a lot of attention has been paid to seeking a textual source for each visual depiction, or at least finding the textual “version” most closely allied to the image.

While such studies can offer valuable insights into the development and spread of both stories themselves and the ideas and values they contain, the notion that early Indian stories are best studied as “versions” or “variants” of one another is potentially problematic. As leading narratologist A. K. Ramanujan

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noted long ago, to talk of versions or variants can and often does imply an original invariant narrative (Ramanujan 1991, 24–5). Yet in most cases, such a narrative is impossible to find, since stories circulated orally as well as in textual and visual forms no longer extant. The evidence we have for each *jātaka* story rarely suggests a single point of composition followed by the variant versions of other authors and artists. Instead, we have different tellings in different texts of varying provenance, and visual depictions that are often earlier than any of the extant textual evidence and which sometimes differ from the textual narratives in important ways.

The chapters in this volume so far have amply demonstrated the importance of viewing narratives in their broad visual and verbal context, and of not privileging textual evidence in either identifying, dating or “explaining” visual narratives. In this chapter we focus on a specific aspect of this broader relationship between visual and verbal narratives, by offering a model for exploring and understanding the relationship between different instances of what appears to be the same or similar story. Our starting point is a series of basic questions: What do we mean when we call a story a “version” of another story, and is this a helpful way to think of the relationship between textual stories? To what extent is it helpful to think of visual *jātakas* as “versions” of textual *jātakas*? Might we gain more from viewing them on their own terms? How can we best understand the relationship between different depictions, and between visual and verbal narratives? Addressing these questions leads us to offer our own model for dealing with the complex relationships between visual and verbal *jātaka* stories: the notion of story clusters. In turn, this concept has the potential to open up new understandings of the uses of and attitudes towards *jātaka* stories in Indian Buddhism.

In order to make our argument we will focus on one particular story, that of the (usually six-tusked) elephant-king Bodhisattva¹ who gives away his tusks to a hunter. This makes a good case study in part because of the sheer number of narratives available in Indian textual and visual forms. The variations also prompt rich ways of thinking differently about how visual and verbal narratives inter-relate. After some investigations into the “versions” of this story – first textual, then visual – we offer our new model of story clusters and explore some of its implications for our understanding of Indian *jātaka* stories.

¹ In general, we use “Bodhisattva” throughout this chapter to refer to the Buddha (Śākyamuni or Gotama, the Buddha of our time) in a past life. We use the Pali form, Bodhisatta, only when discussing Pali texts.

The *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva

If you wander around the great *stūpa* of Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, you will find several *jātaka* stories depicted on the elaborately carved gateways. On the southern pillar of the western gateway, for example, you will find a celebrated image of a *jātaka* story in which the Bodhisattva is a monkey king who makes his body into a bridge in order to save his troop from a human king, before giving a sermon to the latter. On the opposite pillar a similar-sized image depicts the *jātaka* of Sāma (P.) or Śyāma (Skt), in which the Bodhisattva looks after his blind ascetic parents, until he is shot by a king. The story of the Bodhisattva's birth as the extraordinarily generous prince Vessantara (P.) or Viśvantara (Skt), long acknowledged as one of the most important *jātakas* of the Buddhist world, occupies both faces of the entire lower architrave on the northern gateway. And on three separate architraves on three separate gateways we find the *jātaka* of Chaddanta (P.) or Ṣaddanta (Skt) – the six-tusked elephant who gives away his tusks to a hunter who (according to some stories at least) has been sent by a human reincarnation of the elephant's jealous former wife (Figure 6.1).²

The three depictions do not offer a narrative sequence; each is a separate depiction, and two of them appear to simply present a single scene: elephants, including at least one with six tusks, surround a central tree. The third depiction (on the southern gateway) has some discernable narrative content, moving left to right: the elephants frolic in the lotus pool, then the hunter, visible on the right with his bow and arrow, takes aim at the king of the elephants.

The presence of three separate images of this story at a site where only five *jātakas* have been identified likely reflects the system of patronage and sponsorship that allowed the site to be constructed. There is, after all, no clear logic to the arrangement of images at Sanchi: various scenes from the Buddha's final and past lives are depicted, along with scenes of *stūpa*-worship, images representing past *buddhas*, and scenes of magical animals. It is possible that the space was divided up and sold off to merit-seekers, and each patron was able, relatively freely, to choose what would be depicted in their allotted space.

This system of patronage might explain why three separate depictions of a single story are found here, but it does not explain why this particular story was so popular that it appears to have been chosen by multiple patrons. And Sanchi is not the only evidence of the story's popularity, for it makes an impressive number of appearances in early Buddhist texts and art.

² Additionally, on the railing surrounding *stūpa* one of Sanchi we find a medallion depicting a six-tusked elephant. Whether or not this image was intended to depict the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant is an open question.



Figure 6.1. *Jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant on three Sanchi gateways.

Top: Northern architrave, photograph courtesy of James Hegarty.

Middle: Southern architrave, photograph by Anandajoti Bhikkhu, CC-BY-2.0.

Bottom: Western architrave, photograph courtesy of Flavia Zaghet.

As early as 1895, Léon Feer noted – in an article for the *Journal Asiatique* – the presence of five distinct textual versions of the story, namely, the Pali *Chaddanta-jātaka*, a Pali tale in the commentary to *Dhammapada* verses 9–10, the Sanskrit (and Tibetan translation of the) *Ṣaddantāvadāna* of the *Kalpadrūmāvadānamālā*, and two Chinese stories, in the *Zabaozang jing* (T203) and the *Liudu ji jing* (T152).

The starting point for Feer’s analysis, and perhaps the best-known textual story of the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva, is the *Chaddanta-jātaka*, number 514 of the great Pali *jātaka* collection called the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. The opening narrative of this *jātaka* is set at the time of Gotama Buddha, with a young nun remembering a previous rebirth in which she was an elephant queen. After the Buddha sees her animated reaction to this memory, he smiles and begins to recount the rebirth to the *saṅgha*. In this story, the Bodhisatta is reborn as the king of a large herd of elephants living by Lake Chaddanta in the Himalayas. He is described as being white and either having six tusks or two tusks emitting

rays of six colours – the Pali version is curiously ambivalent on this point.³ One day while frolicking in the forest, he strikes a great Sāl tree in full bloom, causing flowers, green leaves and pollen to fall upon one of his two elephant queens, and dry twigs, dead leaves and red ants to fall upon his other elephant queen. The latter is thoroughly unimpressed by this event and begins to despise the elephant king. On another occasion, while bathing in Lake Chaddanta, the jealous elephant queen sees the elephant king presenting a lotus flower to the other elephant queen, which infuriates her. After giving alms and flowers to a group of *paccekabuddhas*, she makes a fervent aspiration to be able to take revenge on the elephant king. Following this, she starves herself to death and is reborn as a human in a royal family. After becoming a queen, she recalls her former life as an elephant and manages to convince the king to send a hunter to kill the elephant king and bring back his tusks. The hunter, we are later told, is none other than a previous rebirth of Devadatta, the infamous monk who attempted to murder the Buddha on several occasions. After a long journey the hunter finds the elephant king and, dressing up as an ascetic with an ochre robe, he shoots the elephant king with an arrow. Out of respect for the attire of the hunter, the Bodhisatta elephant king does not retaliate. After learning the reason for the hunter’s attempt to kill him, he kneels down so that the hunter can reach his tusks to saw them off. Despite his best efforts, the hunter is unable to do so and the elephant king takes the saw in his trunk and cuts them off himself. Shortly afterwards he dies and, when the hunter returns to the human queen, she is so upset at the sight of the tusks that she dies of a broken heart.

Feer took the *Chaddanta-jātaka* as the benchmark for his comparison with other narratives, yet it is worth noting that even the small collection of related textual tales that he identified offers challenges around inclusion and relation. To begin with, the *Dhammapada* commentarial narrative bears far less resemblance to the others, with its focus almost exclusively on Devadatta’s attempt to trick the Bodhisattva-elephant by wearing false robes. Without any gift of tusks or multi-life romantic entanglement, we might question whether this is really a “version” (or, to use the terminology explained in Chapter 1, “narrative”) of the Chaddanta story at all. Meanwhile Feer also discussed, in the opening section of his article, several other stories that contain an elephant-hero, and/or which include the motif of false wearing of robes, but which he did not consider to be “versions” of the Chaddanta story. The entangled nature of these various narratives will be discussed further below.

³ While the verses describe him as having six tusks, the prose usually – but not always – describes him as having two tusks emitting rays of six colours. Differences between verses and prose in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* are common, with the verses considered to be an older tradition (see Appleton 2010, especially chapter 3).

Alfred Foucher added three more textual versions to the comparison in a book chapter in 1911 (revised and translated into English in 1917), namely, in the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*,⁴ which is known from Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation (T201), rendered into French by Huber (1908, 403–11), in the Chinese *Dazhidu lun* (T1509), and as a single verse summary in the *Lalitavistara*. Foucher also considered multiple visual depictions: at Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, Gandhara, and twice at Ajanta, in an earlier and a later cave. A careful study of these different occurrences of the six-tusked elephant helped Foucher to advance a theory relating to the chronology of the different versions of the story.

Besides these eight narratives identified by Feer (1895) and Foucher (1911/1917), we are now able to add an additional 14 textual narratives. (For a list of the textual occurrences of the story with full details, see the Bibliography.) In the Pali *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* there are two additional related stories, the *Kāsāva-jātaka* and *Sīlavanāga-jātaka*. Also in Pali, we find a short passage in the *Milindapañha* and a related story about a Bodhisatta who will become a future Buddha in the *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā*. In Sanskrit, we have the *Hasti-jātaka* in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā*, a rather similar account in plot to the Pali *Chaddanta-jātaka*, though very different in style. Also in Sanskrit is the *Ṣaḍdantāvadāna* of the *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*, which is a shorter and slightly modified version of a story of the same name in the *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā*. In Chinese, there are versions in the *Mohe sengqi lu* (T1425) and the *Za piyu jing* (T205). The story appears in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, extant in Tibetan and Chinese (T1448). There are also Tocharian and Uighur narratives, and brief references to the heroic elephant in celebrations of the Bodhisattva’s deeds including the Khotanese *Jātakastava* and the Mahāyāna *Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra*. To the visual depictions we can add those at Goli and Kanaganahalli. In addition, the seventh century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang mentions a *stūpa* site near Varanasi associated with the story:

Not far from the pond is a stupa at the place where the Tathāgata, in the course of practicing the deeds of a Bodhisattva, was a six-tusked elephant king. A hunter who wished to obtain its tusks disguised himself in a monk’s robe and drew his bow to catch the elephant. Out of respect for the robe, the elephant king extracted its tusks and gave them to the hunter. (Li Rongxi, trans. 1996, 198)

Because of all these occurrences, the story of the generous six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva provides an ideal case study for an exploration of the relationship between *jātaka* texts and images in Indian Buddhism. As such, we will

⁴ Lüders (1926, 17–27) argued that this work was most likely initially called the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* or *Kalpanālamkṛtikā*, yet the Chinese translator did not understand this title and changed it to the *Sūtrālamkāraśāstra*.

be using the story to frame this chapter, and to explore how we might study stories both within textual sources, and across the boundary between textual and visual *jātakas*.

Textual “versions”

So far we have traced 22 textual versions of the story of the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva. Each varies in its length, style, theme, pattern of narrative elements and plot architecture, and the ways in which the stories relate to one another also vary. For instance, the *Hasti-jātaka* found in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā* has the same basic plot architecture as the *Chaddanta-jātaka*, with essentially the same storyline events in essentially the same sequence and involving essentially the same characters. Yet as soon as one reads these two narratives side-by-side, some major differences are immediately apparent. Firstly, this telling is considerably less gruesome and less tragic than the Pali version – the elephant king pulls his tusks out and they then regrow, and neither the elephant king nor the human queen dies. Secondly, the *Hasti-jātaka* is composed in ornate Sanskrit *kāvya* and is mainly in verse, while the *Chaddanta-jātaka* is composed in relatively unadorned Pali and is mainly in prose. Thirdly, the *Hasti-jātaka* begins and ends by praising the perfection of forbearance and is therefore quite literally framed by this concern, whereas the *Chaddanta-jātaka* is not explicitly linked with any particular perfection. Instead the *Chaddanta-jātaka* begins and ends by highlighting multi-life connections and providing several rebirth identifications. Indeed we are told that, through listening to the past-life story she is intimately connected with, the young nun who was once the jealous elephant queen achieves liberation. In contrast, the *Hasti-jātaka* gives only one rebirth identification, that of the Bodhisattva, and shows little concern for multi-life connections. These parallel versions therefore appear to serve different purposes. In the case of the *Hasti-jātaka*, a major purpose seems to have been to entertain a highly educated audience with a fine example of Sanskrit *kāvya*, complete with beautiful and lucid visual imagery, similes, alliteration, the employment of a wide variety of metres, etc. The narrative belongs to a consciously structured and unified work, with each story presented as an example of the Bodhisattva’s practice of one of the six perfections in his path to buddhahood, in this case the perfection of forbearance, so this telling more explicitly emphasizes the Bodhisattva’s practice of the perfections.

Different to either of these is the *Sīlavanāga-jātaka* of the Pali *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. This narrative begins by describing that once the Bodhisatta was reborn as a white elephant king living in the Himalayas. He sees a man lost in the forest, who we are later told is Devadatta in a previous rebirth.

Taking pity on him, the elephant king provides him with food and leads him out of the forest and back to the road. Later, learning that ivory is highly sought after in the city market, he travels back to the Himalayas and asks the elephant king for some ivory, to which he agrees and kneels down so that the hunter can saw off his tusks.⁵ The man then sells this but, greedy for more, returns to the forest and successfully requests that the elephant king give more ivory, which he again sells. A third time he returns and saws off the stumps of the tusks, but, when leaving, is swallowed by the earth which is unable to bear such terrible behaviour. The plot architecture and theme of this story are somewhat different to the *Chaddanta-jātaka*. While the *Sīlavanāga-jātaka* is focused on Devadatta and his multi-life lack of gratitude and remorse, the *Chaddanta-jātaka* is focused on the jealous elephant queen and her subsequent regret. Indeed, it is a matter of debate as to whether we should categorize these as parallel versions; however, they are very clearly related and might be thought of as belonging to a family of stories.

A reconsideration of the most helpful methodological lens through which to view related stories such as these was prompted by our creation of an online database of *jātaka* stories in Indian texts and art (<https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk>). This project was led by Naomi Appleton and funded by a 2017 Philip Leverhulme Prize, with Chris Clark taking the lead in creating and populating the resource during 2019. One of the main purposes of the database was to link similar narratives in different texts and images. The analysis of textual parallels, and perhaps to a lesser extent visual parallels, has long been a major methodical approach used in Buddhist studies and thus we originally intended to link similar narratives using a “parallel stories” feature. The process of judging whether or not a story is a parallel version of another story naturally raised the question: What exactly constitutes a parallel? A number of different types of parallels are apparent, including (1) parallels within a single text; (2) parallels between different texts ascribed to the same Buddhist school, often belonging to different genres; (3) parallels between texts ascribed to different Buddhist schools; (4) parallels between texts and images; (5) parallels between different images found at a single artistic site; and (6) parallels between images found at different artistic sites. By no means is this an exhaustive list, but it does indicate a number of possibilities open to us when we look for and analyze parallels. So, what do we mean by parallel versions? Different kinds of parallels often require different sets of criteria, but in the case of narrative stories in texts, we are primarily referring to a strong similarity in the plot architecture of two or more stories, that is, central storyline events in roughly the same sequence with roughly the same characters. Other elements seem less important in determining whether or not we can call two or more stories

⁵ It is not stated how many tusks the elephant king has in this story.

“parallel versions”, for example, names of characters and places, length of story, literary style, language and even themes.

However, the more we worked on the question of what constitutes a parallel story, the more we realized that the concept would not produce particularly helpful data queries for our relational database. In the case of the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva, about half of the total number of related textual narratives would fail to be classed as “parallels”, since their plot architecture is simply too divergent. If we only think in terms of parallel stories, we miss an important aspect of narrative literature, namely, the tendency for groupings of stories that do not fit the relatively narrow definition of a parallel but are obviously related in some way. In addition, it was unclear how best to link visual and textual *jātaka* narratives, since a direct relationship is rarely apparent, and visual sources often provide different details or emphases to the texts so often pointed to as their “source”. As the project progressed, we decided upon a different concept for linking the narratives, both within textual forms and across the divide between verbal and visual: the notion of “story clusters”.

In order to better understand complex story families, we drew inspiration from Ramanujan’s work on the many and varied tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He offers a wonderful metaphor to explain their formation, namely, a large pool of signifiers “that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships” which each author dips into “and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context” (Ramanujan 1991, 46). This approach challenges the potential implication that a parallel version is a variant of an invariant original exemplar and also allows us to consider more expansive definitions of related stories. It also fits quite nicely what we see in this family of stories about an elephant and his tusks, in that each of these tellings contains a unique and select group of signifiers from a larger pool.

Ramanujan’s pool of signifiers helps us to think through all the possible characters or motifs that might be drawn upon.⁶ We believe that a helpful extension of this idea is the notion of “story clusters”, which groups existing “crystallisations” that have come out of the pool. The notion of a story cluster differs from that of a parallel in a number of ways. Firstly, it is a more inclusive concept that is able to group together related stories that may not necessarily qualify as parallel versions due to their divergent plot architectures. Secondly, story clusters are better able to map the overlapping intertextual complexities

⁶ In some ways this approach resonates with the motif-index approach of Stith Thompson and other folklorists. However, motif-index analysis has a tendency to subdivide narratives into very small elements in a way that ignores specific cultural settings. Our own approach, building on Ramanujan, seeks to account for motifs and characters shared within a particular cultural setting, as well as the other forms of intertextuality (and intervisuality) that are so commonly found in our materials.

evident in large collections of stories, such as the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. It is important to note that not all narratives are best viewed as original “crystallizations” taken directly from the fluid pool; some appear to be deliberate responses to existing known stories.⁷ Story clusters can allow us to appreciate conscious intertextuality alongside other examples of narrative relationship, without implying any search for an “original” text.

The notion of clusters is deliberately flexible, with stories able to belong to more than one cluster, and larger clusters divided into smaller sub-clusters. For instance, within the overall cluster of stories we have identified concerning the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva, we have two clear sub-clusters, namely, (1) stories describing the multi-life bonds of a jealous queen and (2) stories describing a self-motivated hunter in robes (not involving a jealous queen). Within this overall cluster of stories concerning the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva, there are additional stories that are unaligned to either of these two sub-clusters. Beyond this, some of these stories also belong to a separate cluster in which a queen dreams of an unusually coloured animal whom a hunter is sent to kill. Some of these stories also belong to yet another cluster of stories in which a man or animal is convinced by his wife to obtain a part of the Bodhisattva’s body, such as his tusks or heart. Meanwhile we might usefully consider another cluster to be stories of Devadatta’s ingratitude, and this would include several stories which do not mention elephants at all (Table 6.1).

If we start to look at individual signifiers, yet another picture emerges. For instance, in the *Chaddanta-jātaka* the human queen states that she dreamed of a white six-tusked elephant, which echoes passages in which queen Mahāmāyā dreams of a white six-tusked elephant prior to the Bodhisattva’s final birth (Lefmann 1902, 55; Gnoli 1977, 40). Similarly, in both the *Chaddanta-jātaka* and related *Sīlavanāga-jātaka* the elephant king states that the tusks of omniscience are much more valuable to him than his actual tusks, which echoes a statement in the *Sivi-jātaka* (499) in which the Bodhisattva states that the eye of omniscience is much more valuable to him than his actual eye. In the *Zabaozang jing* (T203), we find a passage in which the elephant king appears to refer to uprooting his tusks as a parallel process to uprooting the three poisons

⁷ It is worth noting that Ramanujan’s model could be criticized for failing to account for the frequently conscious and explicit intertextuality evident in vernacular *Rāmāyaṇa* stories, which often respond quite directly to Vālmīki’s classic text or other authoritative tellings. Examples of this are discussed in the *Many Rāmāyaṇas* volume in which Ramanujan’s chapter appears. Indeed, his model may well apply more easily to a genre such as the *jātakas*, where there is far less evidence of authors responding to established or authoritative texts.

Table 6.1. Clusters of stories in texts

text	language	six tusks?	jealous queen?	hunter in robes?	hunter is Devadatta?	weapon(s)	elephant helps remove tusks?	major theme
<i>Sub-cluster one: Jealous queen</i>								
Chaddanta-jātaka	Pali	Y	Y	Y	Y	poisoned arrow and saw	Y, saws them off	multi-life bonds
Hasti-jātaka	Sanskrit	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, pulls them out	forbearance
Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā	Chinese	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, pulls them out	compassion and generosity
Liudu ji jing	Chinese	Y	Y	Y	Y	arrow	N	morality
Mūlasarvāstivāda-vīnaya	Tibetan, Chinese	Y	Y	Y	?†	poisoned arrow	Y, pulls them out	compassion and generosity
Ṣaḍdantāvadāna	Sanskrit	Y	Y	Y	Y	poisoned arrow	Y, levers them in	multi-life bonds
(Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā)							a rock	
Ṣaḍdantāvadāna	Sanskrit	Y	Y	Y	Y	poisoned arrow	Y, levers them in	multi-life bonds
(Kalpadrumāvadānamālā)							a rock	
Tocharian version	Tocharian	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, pulls them out	multi-life bonds
Uighur version	Uighur	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, pulls them out	compassion and generosity
Zabaozang jing	Chinese	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, breaks them against a tree	multi-life bonds
Za piyu jing	Chinese	Y	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	Y, cuts them off	multi-life bonds

<i>Sub-cluster two: Self-motivated hunter in robes</i>									
Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā	Pali	N	Y	Y	spear	N			Devadatta wearing false robes
Kāsāva-jāta	Pali	N	Y	Y	unspecified	N			Devadatta wearing false robes
Mohe sengqi lu	Chinese	Y	Y	N	poisoned arrow	N			hunter wearing false robes
Xuanzang's Da Tang Xiyu ji	Chinese	Y	Y	N	arrow	N		Y, pulls them out	hunter wearing false robes
<i>Unaligned stories</i>									
Dasabodhisattuppatikathā	Pali	N	N	N	saw	Y			act of homage by a Bodhisatta
Da zhidu lun	Chinese	Y	N	N	poisoned arrow	N		Y, levers them in a rock	compassion and generosity
Jātakastava	Khotanese	Y	N	N	unstated	N		Y, pulls them out	generosity
Lalitavistara	Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan	N	N	N	arrow	N		N	compassion and generosity
Milindapañha	Pali	N	N	Y	unstated	N		N	Devadatta's rebirth status
Rāṣṭrapālāpariprcchā	Sanskrit	N	N	N	poisoned arrow	N		N	forbearance
Śīlavanāga-jāta	Pali	N	N	Y	saw	N		N, but he kneels down	Devadatta's ingratitude

† The summary by Panglung (1981, 44–5) does not mention Devadatta; however, we have not accessed the Tibetan or Chinese full text to confirm that he is not identified with the hunter.

or unwholesome roots, which might be seen as a related motif.⁸ There are hundreds of other such passages that join together – at times disparate – parts of Buddhist literature to create complex networks of ideas in which any given passage is likely to resonate with several others, creating multiple layers of meaning.

Visual “versions”

The notion of clustering together stories on the basis of their shared “signifiers” is also helpful when exploring visual *jātakas*. It offers us something rather different to the more traditional approach, which tends to emphasize chronology, to seek textual sources for images, and to use the more readily datable material evidence of artistic sites to shore up the dating of texts.

This more standard approach to studying texts and art as applied to the six-tusked elephant story is well exemplified by Foucher’s 1911/1917 study, in which he matched certain images with certain textual versions. In particular, he highlighted a key movement in the story from those versions in which the hunter saws off the elephant’s tusks (with or without the elephant’s help) to those in which the elephant pulls his own tusks out, in which Foucher notes the elephant is usually shown with only two tusks, rather than six. The two depictions in the Ajanta caves help to illustrate this movement, for the earlier depiction, in cave ten, has a clearly six-tusked elephant and a hunter with a saw of some sort. In the later depiction, in cave 17, the hunter bows as the elephant pulls his two tusks out. As Foucher argues, this change reflects a textual shift, with the likely innovation traced to what he refers to as the *Sūtrāḷāṅkāra* (now identified as the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*).⁹ In a neat little argument, Foucher also demonstrates that this shift could explain the apparent disagreements between the earlier verses and later prose of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* narrative of the story, not least with respect to how many tusks the elephant is said to have.

⁸ The passage is translated by Chavannes (1934, 102) as, “Par ce don de mes défenses, je souhaite à l’avenir de sauver tous les êtres vivants des défenses (qui sont les armes) des trois poisons”. Janine Nicol has suggested (in personal communication) that this is an attempt to mirror a somewhat different pun in the Chinese, in which the words for “sprouts” (of the three poisons or unwholesome roots) and “teeth/tusks” are homophones, but it is a reference to the “sprouts of the three poisons” within the written text. Either way, this story appears to use the image of uprooting to connect the removal of tusks and the removal of the obstacles to *nirvāṇa*.

⁹ More recently scholars agree that the cave 17 depiction of the story relies upon Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā*: see Zin 2017, which also offers more general comment on the need to re-evaluate the role of visual evidence in Buddhist studies scholarship.

In establishing the shifting textual presentation of the story and its influence on the art, Foucher helps us to understand some aspects of the history of this tale, and as such his contribution is very valuable. However, his approach stops short of addressing questions of motivation or significance; he is uninterested in the reasons behind the shifts in the story or how they may have been perceived. For example, why was it decided to depict this story a second time in a neighbouring cave at Ajanta, but with different details? Did people see it as the same story, and if they did, what did they make of the conflicting presentation? Did some people view it as a different past life that had some similar aspects? Or was the second image seen as a corrective to an earlier erroneous depiction? Did anybody actually care, apart from the artists and patrons, what exactly was depicted? Could anybody even see the story’s details in the dark of the caves? How did the users of the caves interact with the images painted within them? What – in sum – was the point, of depicting this story at all, let alone twice?

Many of these questions are doubtless unanswerable, given the limited evidence at our disposal, but that should not stop us asking them. If we follow an approach that moves beyond notions of chronology, influence and “versions” then we may at least see some hints at what is going on. In order to do this, we need to first identify the “signifiers” that make up the visual pool for this story, acknowledging that these may be different from the ones most prominent in textual narratives. We can then explore how the depictions cluster with one another, as well as with textual occurrences, and what this might tell us about the significance of the story.

Consider the Indian depictions of the story listed in Table 6.2. Some interesting things are immediately apparent. Firstly, the idea of respecting men in robes, which appears to be important to textual occurrences of the story and wider resonances in, for example, the *Dhammapada* and other *jātakas*, seems not to be important in the art. In no image is there a clear sense that the hunter is dressed in robes, and in many it is clear that he is not.

Secondly, the question of whether or not the Bodhisattva helps the hunter seems important. In almost every depiction we see the elephant helping, either by lowering himself to a more accessible height, gripping the saw in his trunk, or – in Ajanta cave 17 – using his trunk to pull his tusks out.

Thirdly, many depictions, though by no means all, show the human queen’s regret as a central feature, and several also include the gift of the lotus to the elephant queen that led to her multi-life jealousy and desire for revenge. Thus the multi-life animosity of the queen seems to be a concern for the artists, as it is for several of the textual occurrences. These important scenes were depicted in both the Ajanta occurrences, for example, and can also be seen in prominent position in this depiction of the story across three dome slabs at

Table 6.2. Visual depictions of the story in India

Image	How many tusks?	Gift of lotus?	Death of queen		Hunter in robes?	Weapon?	Elephant helping?	Tusks presented to queen?		Estimated date
			elephant?	elephant?				Type	Type	
Bharhut	6	N	N	N	N	bow and arrow and saw	kneels	N	single roundel	2nd c. BCE
Sanchi north	6	N	N	N	N	none		N	architrave, scene of elephants	1st c. BCE
Sanchi west	6	N	N	N	N	none		N	as above	1st c. BCE
Sanchi south	6	Y	N	N	N	bow and arrow		N	architrave, multiscenic	1st c. BCE
Kanaganahalli	6	Y	?	?	N?	saw	kneels	Y	three panels on stupa dome	1st–2nd c. CE
Amaravati	elephant has 2; hunter carries 4 then presents 2	Y	Y	?	?	bow and arrow and saw	kneels	Y (second roundel)	two roundels	2nd c. CE
Ajanta cave 10	6	Y	Y	N	N	saw		Y	Painted mural	2nd c. CE
Goli	2	Y	N	?	?	saw	holds saw with trunk	Y (separate scene)	relief, frieze	2nd–3rd c. CE
Karamar, Gandhara	2	N	N	N	N	bow and arrow	kneels	Y	relief, stair riser	late 3rd c. CE
Ajanta cave 17	2	Y	Y?	N	N	bow and arrow	pulls them out	Y	Painted mural	5th c. CE

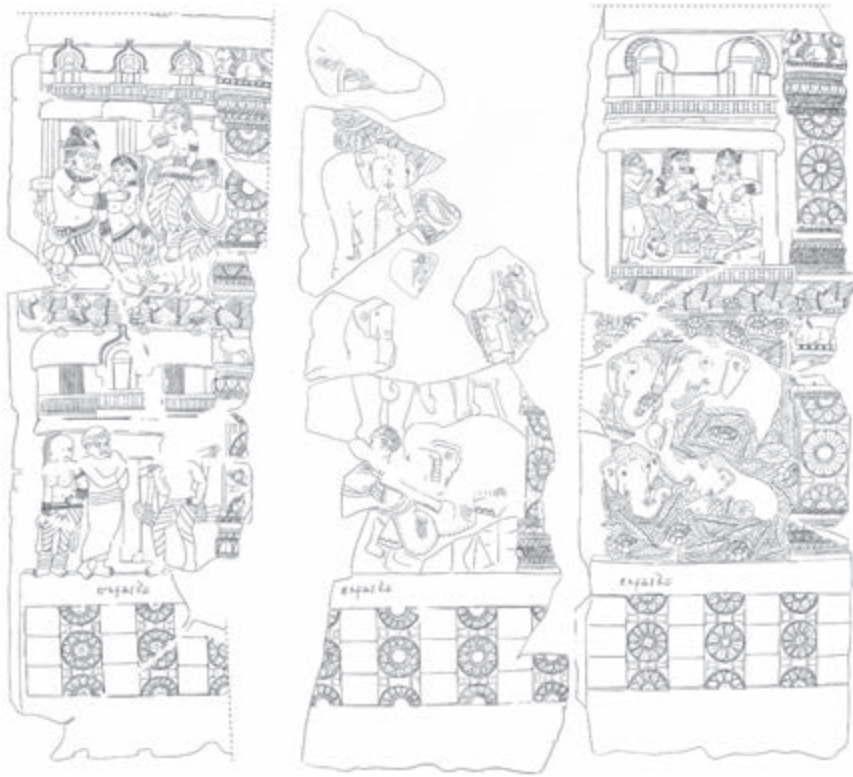


Figure 6.2. Three Kanaganahalli dome slabs depicting the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant. Line drawings by Monika Zin, reproduced with permission from Zin 2018.

Kanaganahalli (Figure 6.2). Likewise in a relief from Goli, again the scene involving the human queen is important, if separate.

The inclusion of the queen is also important at the ancient site of Amaravati. Here the roundel that shows various scenes from the elephants’ adventures is well known, and functions as Vidya Dehejia’s example of a “synoptic narrative” in her landmark article on modes of visual narration (Dehejia 1990, 384). She helpfully maps out the six different scenes shown within the single image; however, this roundel really needs to be viewed alongside a second one, which shows the other half of the story (Figure 6.3). Here the human queen faints as she is presented with the tusks by the hunter. The inclusion of this aspect of the story really adds a different dimension to the way we view the meanings that the story of the six-tusked elephant might have had for artists, patrons and users of sites.

These patterns in the elements chosen for emphasis may give us some insight into the potential reasons for depicting the story. One of the intriguing

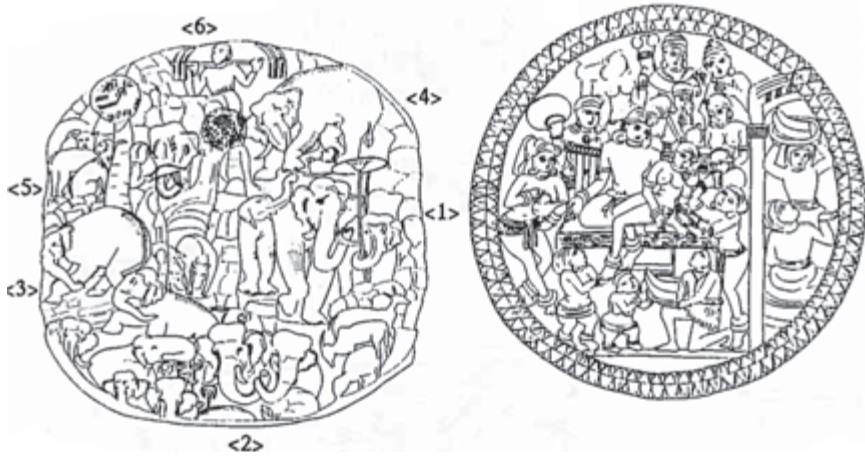


Figure 6.3. Two Amaravati roundels depicting the story. Line drawings reproduced with permission from Schlingloff 1999–2000, volume 2: 22.

limitations of visual narratives is that they offer little instruction about why a story is told or what effect it does (or should) have on an audience. In contrast, the textual sources for this story often provide a reason for the story's inclusion. Broadly speaking the reasons fall into three categories: (1) illustrating multi-life bonds (particularly that between the Bodhisattva and the elephant/human queen in the story) and the dangers of multi-life animosity; (2) illustrating the perfections or virtues of the Bodhisattva (though with different associated virtues in different texts); (3) illustrating the importance of respecting the robe. A fourth possible rationale, depending on which stories you count as being part of the cluster, is the ingratitude of Devadatta and/or his false wearing of robes.

Of these reasons, the visual narratives would appear to address the first two only. The multi-life message is underscored by the frequent inclusion of the gift of the lotus (which causes the elephant queen's jealousy), and the human queen fainting at the sight of the tusks being brought by the hunter. And the general awesomeness of the Bodhisattva-elephant is highlighted in those images that explicitly show him helping the hunter. The other associations – with robes, or with Devadatta – are harder to discern.

This is just one story of the many in circulation, but nonetheless it is worth noting that both multi-life karmic bonds and the Buddha's perfections are key to our understanding of *stūpa* sites in early India. As Jonathan Walters explored in an important book chapter in 1997, the rise in *stūpa* devotion appears to be linked with the idea that all devotees are tied to the Buddha through the

sorts of complex karmic networks that are often demonstrated in *jātaka* and *avadāna* literature. The presence of the Buddha, as a perfected being, is ensured by the relics enshrined in the *stūpa*, but also potentially through images of him, or images of his relics and *stūpas*. And as Brown (1997) argued in the very same volume, *jātaka* images are often inaccessible – far overhead or in dark caves – suggesting that their presence may have little relation to narrative readings, and much more to do with making the Buddha present, and/or manifesting the qualities of buddhahood, such that they function as part of the nexus of relic–image–text that plays out in such interesting ways throughout the Buddhist world.

Taking this into account might give us another perspective on the reasons why visual depictions of the six-tusked elephant story often foreground multi-life bonds and the Bodhisattva’s ability to transcend these through his perfect compassionate generosity. As discussed more fully in the introduction to this volume, visual narratives may have a different *raison d’être* to textual narratives, and need to be studied on their own terms. Visual narratives may also draw on other visual narratives, without reference to textual narratives at all, thereby reproducing visual elements deemed important at particularly influential sites. In other words, there may be a different “pool of signifiers” for visual narratives to the pool we have for the verbal narratives of the “same” story.

This sort of analysis might help us to understand the site with which we began our exploration of the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant, namely Sanchi. Two of its images in particular (on the northern and western gateways) have no real narrativity in their depiction, and instead simply depict a six-tusked elephant in an idealized landscape with a number of other elephants. There is perhaps a hint at a multi-life bond, in the figure of an elephant turning away from the herd in the top left of each image: Could this be the offended elephant wife? How are we to understand these two images, with their rather more limited selection of signifiers from the six-tusked elephant pool?

The first thing to bear in mind is that the six-tusked elephant itself has wider associations with virtue and power, both within and outside Buddhist contexts. As noted above, the elephant that enters Māyā’s side in her dream – and that marks the conception of the Bodhisattva in his final life – is often described as having six tusks (though it is not depicted as such at the early Buddhist sites, as far as we have been able to ascertain). Airāvata, the divine elephant of the god Indra or Śakra is also white and six-tusked in some sources. Indeed, this association is found in the textual versions. In the *Liudu ji jing* (T152), when the king asks about the existence of a six-tusked elephant, one official replies, “If we could get it, Śakra would [also] come here” (T3 No. 152 17b6-7, trans. Nicol). In the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*, the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva is explicitly described as “pareil á Airāvata” (Huber 1908, 403), “like Airāvata”. Of

course, the Bodhisattva-as-elephant is no ordinary elephant, and this is symbolized by his additional tusks but also by the fact that he is white in colour. Indeed, the six tusks may themselves be a way of communicating in stone the special nature of the king of the elephants, who cannot necessarily be distinguished by his white colour in every media.

Perhaps at Sanchi the six-tusked elephant Bodhisattva is emblematic of the Buddha and his virtues and powers, even without narrative content. The images may be viewed according to Flavia Zaghet's notion of the "spotlight narrative" (as discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume) in which the image serves to remind the viewer of a story enough to ensure that they recognize the need to honour the protagonist, the Buddha.

The notion of sacred place may be important too. The Sanchi depictions all include a magnificent central tree, perhaps that described in the Pali *jātaka* as being situated beside Lake Chaddanta in the Himalayas, at the foot of seven magical mountains. Landscape is important in this story – at least in some of its textual occurrences – as is the presence of either *pratyekabuddhas* (solitary or independent *buddhas*) or *munis* (sages or seers), both of which are indicative of renunciatory bliss. So perhaps these apparently monoscenic depictions at Sanchi are bringing some of the sacrality of that far-distant Himalayan region to the site. After all, other sacred sites are also depicted at Sanchi, including the deer park that is the site of the first teaching, and several scenes of *stūpa* worship or pilgrimage.

And finally, we must acknowledge the possibility that the reason we see the six-tusked elephant depicted so many times at Sanchi is – at least in part – that donors and artists enjoyed elephants! There are, after all, numerous other elephants carved onto the gateways. Would visitors be able to tell that some of the elephants have six tusks instead of the usual two? Given the distance from the ground, they might not be able to tell the difference between the two apparently monoscenic Chaddanta-jātaka architraves and others that show a tree of awakening being worshipped by animals and other beings. Indeed, maybe these images don't depict the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant at all, but simply depict elephants worshipping a tree that represents a past *buddha*; the apparent variation in the trees, potentially indicating different past *buddhas*, would support such an interpretation, though the hint at the she-elephant leaving the herd in the top left corner of each of these two architraves would indicate otherwise.

We have no way of accessing the intentions of the artists and patrons, nor of accessing the responses of early visitors, but perhaps that doesn't matter. Whether or not people see or recognize him, a king of elephants literally watches over them as they come and go through these magnificent gateways. This effect relies very little on matching up the image with a textual narrative, and much more on the interaction between different visual repertoires,

as well as broader concerns around what makes a site such as Sanchi a potent place to visit.

Conclusion: Pools and clusters

This brief exploration of the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant has barely scratched the surface of the many sources available to us. However, even this short reflection has, we hope, demonstrated the value of studying textual and visual narratives side by side, and of asking rather different questions of them to the questions about versions, chronology and textual sources that have tended to be asked in the past. In particular, the combination of Ramanujan’s “pool of signifiers” approach with an inclusive and flexible clustering of the resulting visual and verbal “crystallizations” allows us to explore what was deemed important to the communities producing and using the stories.

With a story cluster such as the *jātaka* of the six-tusked elephant, in which multiple stories all interlink in interesting ways, trying to decide which story is a “version” or “parallel” can be challenging in the extreme, and the results are somewhat arbitrary delineations that exclude narratives with only limited shared material. While a story cluster must also have a boundary, and this may be no less arbitrary, what it offers is a more inclusive approach to the narratives, leaving porous boundaries through the possibility of belonging to multiple clusters. Hence, a story may be clustered with others that laud the compassionate gift of tusks made by a magnificent six-tusked Bodhisattva elephant, and may also be clustered with others that decry the false wearing of monastic robes; or others that include the multi-life entanglement between an elephant king and his jealous wife; or those in which a queen dreams of a special-coloured animal whom a hunter is sent to kill; or it may belong in just one of these clusters. The resulting Venn diagram of clusters opens up avenues for exploration and research, rather than closing them down.

Paying attention to the underlying pool from which the various aspects were taken also opens up new avenues of research, by following these signifiers into other narratives and clusters and into the wider Indian religious and narrative landscape. Examining the choice of what is drawn from the pool also allows us to see what specific resonances and values were important to the different storytellers and compilers. As already demonstrated in the previous chapter by Mace, exploring a narrative in its visual, textual and physical context can reveal much about the creators and users of the narrative and what they deemed important.

Ramanujan’s “pool of signifiers” also helps to remind us that visual narratives deserve to be studied on their own terms, and not simply as depictions

of verbal narratives. Visual narratives may have had their own visual pool, in part influenced by details from verbal narratives, but in part influenced by other visual narratives, as well as by the opportunities and limitations of media and resource. Exploring the choices that artists made can therefore help us to understand more than simply what “version” they were working with; their choices tell us about what made the story important to themselves and their sponsors.

The notion of story clusters then helps us to bridge the gap between verbal and visual narratives, since it is flexible enough to include a variety of manifestations. Bringing stories together in this way avoids any implications of the primacy of textual narrative, allowing visual and verbal to sit side-by-side as equally interesting examples of narrative. As argued in Chapter 1, a better understanding of visual *jātakas* can shed light on how we understand textual *jātakas* as well as vice versa.

We cannot fully understand the *jātaka* genre – or indeed other genres that exhibit similar plurality – without taking into account the various forms in which the genre was present. These forms are material and visual as well as textual, and a proper exploration of how they relate to one another requires more than identifying a textual source for a visual (or other textual) version. We need to consider the many and complex ways in which characters, themes, values, motifs, and aspects of plot interact, within and across the boundaries of media, and what the implications of these choices were for the compilers and artists of Indian Buddhism.

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