

## New perspectives on Kanaganahalli site

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### *Abstract*

*Kanaganahalli (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE- 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE) is a Buddhist archaeological site located on the left bank of Bhima River, in Karnataka. The site was discovered in 1989 and it was excavated by the Bangalore Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India. The main monument from the site is the Great Stupa, known from the inscriptions as Adhālaka-Mahācaitya. This paper first aims to provide a re-elaboration of the archaeological analysis of the monument, based on the available data, in order to define the structure and chronological features of the Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya. A specific attention is given to the symbolic value of the monument, explored through the juxtaposition of real and perspectival architectural elements. In particular, the study underlines the importance of the railing (vedikā), and of the pillars (stambhas). These two elements, recurring both in the real architecture and in the decorative apparatus of the Mahā Caitya, contribute clearly in defining real and imaginary spaces that characterize the monument. Finally, in order to understand the complexity of the structure of Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya and to remark its importance in the Buddhist overview of the time, the contemporary Saidu Sharif Stupa, located in the Swat Valley, is taken into account and used as comparative paradigm.*

**Keywords:** Kanaganahalli, Mahā Caitya, illusory architecture, Saidu Sharif, vedikā.

### **1. An overview of the site**

Kanaganahalli site, together with the archaeological areas surrounding the village of Sannati, constitutes one of the largest and most ancient Buddhist complexes excavated in Deccan. Situated in the western region of Karnataka, Kanaganahalli is located approximately 5 km east of Sannati, on the left bank of the Bhima River, a major tributary of the Kṛṣṇa River (Fig. 1).

The site was discovered in 1989 and subsequently investigated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), specifically by the Bangalore Circle, between 1991 and 1993. However, systematic archaeological documentation of Kanaganahalli only started in 1996-1997, culminating in an initial excavation report by the ASI.

Kanaganahalli represents a significant Buddhist archaeological site, centered around a monumental stūpa, identified in epigraphic records as the “Adhālaka-Mahācaitya”<sup>1</sup>. The monument’s chronology spans from its foundation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, to its abandonment around the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, due to a confluence of socio-cultural, environmental and tectonic factors (Poonacha 2013). Furthermore, the abandonment of Kanaganahalli may be contextualized within the broader recession of Buddhism across the region. This transition appears to be supported by the progressive introduction of Śākta cults, the presence of which is evidenced in proximity of Sannati.

The monument reached its historical and artistic apogee during the Sātavāhana period (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE). This dynastic affiliation is not merely speculative, but is strongly confirmed by an extensive *corpus* of epigraphic and iconographic evidence found in direct association with the Mahā Caitya (Zin 2018; Hinüber, Nakanishi 2014). The site’s longevity was thus driven by continuous institutional and aristocratic patronage, conducted both by the *saṃgha* (monastic community) and the local aristocracy.

## **2. An archaeological analysis of Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya**

The excavation of Kanaganahalli site was based on standard practices of Indian archaeology. Thus, the area was divided into a grid system of 36 squares (10 x10 m), with the Mahā Stūpa at the center of the survey area. However, the excavation was concentrated on 16 of these squares, covering a total area of 1600 m<sup>2</sup> and reaching a maximum depth of 2.5 m.

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<sup>1</sup> The original name of Kanaganahalli Stupa is mentioned in some inscriptions found at the site. One example comes from a slab of the pseudo-*pradakṣiṇāpatha* (Hinüber, Nakanishi 2014: n. 8, p. 31; Tournier 2020: 879); another one is from a covering slab of the northern *āyāka* (Nakanishi, Hinüber 2014: n. 3, p. 42; Tournier 2020: 880-882).

Despite consultations with, Prof. Dr. O. von Hinüber, Prof. A. Drocco and Dr. S. Baums, the meaning of adhālaka remains obscure. However, based on a statistical analysis of Gāndhārī and Brāhmī inscriptions, I suggest it represents the monument’s proper name rather than a toponym. This can be supported by the frequent appearance of monument names as compounds, such as *Mahāpriya-ārāma* (Falk 2010: 94), *Sodaśpaviharāmi* and *Uthaliemaṃmi vihavami* (CKI 1112- <https://gandhari.org/>), *gavhrathuba* (CKI 135- <https://gandhari.org/>), *gathuthuba* (CKI 172, 249- <https://gandhari.org/>), *Gramathuvami* (CKI 175- <https://gandhari.org/>), *mahathuba* (CKI 334- <https://gandhari.org/>), and *mahagandhakutivihara* (Lüders 1993: 102, no. 989).

The decision to extend the excavation into the core of the monument became necessary to evidence its internal structure and to identify its primary construction phase. This data, which have been determined on the base of the data collected by the ASI (Poonacha 2013) in the excavation report, has been implemented and synthetically reformulated by the author, determining six distinct Macro-phases, which trace the development of Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya to better define the architectural changes concerning the monument:

### ***2.1 Period I, layer IV (Macro-phase 1): the foundation***

This represents the earliest structural stage, testified by a hemispherical *tumulus* of soil and rubble, encased within undecorated limestone panels—a reminiscent of ancient megalithic graves. This archaic stūpa featured a reconstructed diameter of approximately 16 m and a height of 7.5 m, covered by limestone slabs measuring 1 m in height and 1.96 m in width, which likely constituted the original drum (Poonacha 2013: 163). Findings from the archaic phase are often found out of their original context and reused in later structural stages. Notable among these is a sandstone lion capital, which shares stylistic affinities with the pillars of Bharhut and the edict columns of Aśoka.

### ***2.2 Period II, layer III-I (Macro-phases 2-4): the Sātavāhana Era***

As documented in the excavation reports (Poonacha 2013), following the archaic period represented by Macro-phase I, the Kanaganahalli Stūpa reached its mature phase (Periods 2 and 3). Period II marks the site's flourishing and it can be divided into four developmental phases:

#### *Phase I (Macro-phase 2):*

Dated by coins and inscriptions to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Key interventions included the expansion of the Stupa and the covering of the lower drum with limestone panels, representing Buddhist narratives and floral motifs. A significant inscription for dating this phase is the one mentioning the 16th regnal year of Chhimukha Sātavāhana (c. 36 BCE), which identifies him as a former vassal of the Śuṅgas (Hinüber, Nakanishi 2014: n. 3, p. 28)<sup>2</sup>. In

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<sup>2</sup> A recent reading of this inscription was published in 2025 on *Dharmalekha.info* by V. Tournier (<https://dharmalekha.info/texts/INSKnI00003>).

addition, a critical element from Macrophase 2 regards the circumambulatory corridor (*pradakṣiṇāpatha*). The fact that the uprights (*stambha*) of the sacred enclosure (*vedikā*) rested upon a layer lower than the slab floor, suggests an intermediate constructive phase, during which the stupa was probably already enclosed by an archaic *vēdikā*.

*Phase 2 (Macrofases 2-3):*

During this stage, the monument was expanded to a diameter of 24 m and it adopted a cruciform axial plan, defined by four platforms (*āyākas*) oriented toward the cardinal points. These platforms were intended to align with the cardinal directions, but they exhibited slight astronomical deviations; for instance, the northern platform is deviated approximately 15° N-NW. Consequently, the entrances were similarly offset from true astronomical North. The decorative program added in this phase, included portraits of rulers such as Sātakarṇi and Vāsiṣṭhiputra Puḷumāvi (II), along with animal friezes used as middle bands. An inscription on a floor slab dates these innovations to the 35th year of Puḷumāvi's reign (c. 126 CE) (Hinüber, Nakanishi 2014: n. 8, p. 31; Tournier 2020: 879).

*Phase 3 (Macrophase 4a):*

During the reign of Vāsiṣṭhiputra Siri Sātakarṇi (132-138 CE), the stupa underwent a major expansion. This included the reconstruction of the four *āyāka* platforms and the widening of the *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, characterized by a limestone pavement (0.06-0.08 m thick) built upon a uniform layer of lime, pebbles, limestone chips and river sand. The *vedikā* was rebuilt using reclaimed materials from earlier phases. The platforms were decorated with narrative scenes of Śākyamuni Buddha's life and surmounted by *buddhapādas* (Buddha footprints) and octagonal pillars.

*Phase 4 (Macrophase 4b):*

This final constructive phase introduced colossal sculptures of the Buddhas, positioned both on the platforms and along the circumambulatory path. On the *āyāka*, these seated Buddha figures were flanked by stone pillars. In this phase the *chattras* were also positioned.

### **2.3 Period III, layer 0 and surface (Macrophases 5–6): decline and abandonment**

This phase (Macrophase 5) is characterized by the partial demolition of the monument and its decline, leading to total abandonment of the site (Macrophase 6).

Even if the loss of Sātavāhana political power and the rise of competing religious cults reduced the patronage practices over Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya, the most widely accepted cause for the site's destruction is seismic activity (Poonacha 2013).

Archaeological evidence supports this: the layers covering the ruins contain high concentrations of lime and mortar, indicating that the decorative *apparatus*, originally placed on the dome with these materials, collapsed suddenly. Over time, the site was reclaimed by vegetation and its stone materials were occasionally scavenged for local reuse.

### **3. Real architecture: structure and decorative *apparatus* of Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya**

Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya shares structural affinities with contemporary Buddhist structures most notably the Amaravati stupa in Andhra Pradesh. However, it distinguishes itself thanks to the rigorous organization of sacred space and the sophisticated iconographic elements that decorate the monument.

The structure of the stūpa consisted of three primary components (Fig. 2):

- The lower drum with a diameter of 23.68 m
- The upper drum, measuring 21.70 m in diameter
- The hemispherical dome (*aṇḍa*), which originally supported a *harmikā* (now lost) and a parasol (*chattrāvalī*) (Poonacha 2013: 64-65).

During its second evolutionary phase, four *āyāka* platforms were added to the lower drum (Poonacha 2013: 66). Measuring 3.60 m in length and 1.25 m in width, these projections were oriented toward the cardinal points.

The decorative *apparatus*<sup>3</sup> of both drums and the *āyāka* platforms consisted of figurative panels demarcated by vertical pilasters. These were

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<sup>3</sup> In her 2018 volume, “The Kanaganahalli Stupa: An Analysis of the 60 Massive Slabs Covering the Dome”, Monika Zin identifies and describes the narrative scenes depicted on

supported by distinct architectural members: cornices in the case of the lower drum, and “collar stones” for the upper drum.

While *āyāka* platforms are diagnostic features of stupas within the Kṛṣṇa Valley tradition, Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya is distinguished from other monuments across the Subcontinent by its colossal Buddha sculptures. In its final phase, these statues were positioned atop the platforms. On the southern and western *āyāka*, they stood before uncarved panels. Furthermore, two seated anthropomorphic Buddha figures occupied the eastern and northern platforms. These platforms also supported octagonal pillars (*āyāgathambas*), reaching approximately 4.50 m in height. These pillars featured square bases (0.58 m per side) adorned with carved Buddhist motifs and donative inscriptions. Unfortunately, the only extant pillars are those located at the eastern *āyāka*, which likely served as the primary entrance to the Mahā Caitya (Poonacha 2013: 71).

The architecture and decorative *apparatus* of Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya is summarized in the following table (Table. 1).

<b>Position</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Decoration</b>	<b>Figured elements</b>	<b>Comparisons</b>
<b>First body (lower drum)</b>	Band A	Inscriptions	-	-
	Register A	Figured pilasters with figures against shaft	Life scenes of Śakyamuni Buddha, worship of the <i>caitya</i> , <i>dharmachackra</i> , <i>Nāga</i> <i>Muchilinda</i> , <i>vṛikshachaitya</i> ( <i>Ficus religiosa</i> ), il <i>Nāga-bandha-chaitya</i> , representantion	Bharhut

the panels of the Mahā Stūpa upper drum, establishing correlations with contemporary artistic traditions in the Subcontinent. Zin’s methodology relies on the direct identification of these reliefs with Buddhist Jātaka literature, utilizing both visual cues and associated epigraphic labels. Furthermore, she proposes a complete reconstruction of the covering slabs of the upper body and a stylistic analysis that helps in dating them.

		of contemporary <i>vihāras</i> stupas and reliquaries		
	Unsculpted band B	Inscriptions	-	-
<b>False <i>pradakṣiṇāpatha</i></b>	Cornice (lower part)	Railing motif		
	Cornice (upper part)	Inscriptions	-	
<b>Second body (upper drum)</b>	Band C ( <i>collar stones</i> )	-	-	-
	Register B	Railing motif	-	Sanchi Mahā Stupa
	Band D	Inscriptions	Graffiti	-
	Register C	Persepolitan pilasters	<i>Jātaka</i> , life scenes of Śakyamuni Buddha, donors' portraits.	-
	Band E	-	Flying ducks	Bodhgayā
	Register D	Persepolitan pilasters	<i>Jātaka</i> , life scenes of Śakyamuni Buddha, donors' portraits.	-
	Band F	Inscriptions	-	-
	Band G ( <i>collar stones</i> )	-	Zoomorphic representations	Butkara I, structure 14 and 17

Table 1 - Structural and decorative elements of Kanaganahalli Stupa.

#### **4. Illusory architecture: the role of the *vēdikā* and its representation within the monument**

The reproduction of actual architectural elements within the decorative program of Kanaganahalli Mahā Stūpa represents a significant matter. The term perspectival architecture refers to instances where elements depicted

within the panels assume a functional architectural role<sup>4</sup>. These elements facilitate a spatial deployment on a perspectival plane, extending the viewer's perception beyond the physical boundaries of the monument's actual space. In Kanaganahalli, the decorative *apparatus*, mainly represented by sculpted panels, replicates two distinct architectural forms: the *stambhas* and the *vedikā*.

On the one hand, the pillars depicted in the upper and lower drum panels serve to demarcate narrative scenes. This strategy is used also in other contemporary Buddhist sites, such as Saidu Sharif, where the scenes of the main frieze are separated by Gandharan-Corinthian semi-columns (Olivieri 2022: 43).

On the other hand, the reproduction of the *vedikā* within the decorative *apparatus* is particularly noteworthy, as it transcends mere physical separation (Faccenna 2004: 318): traditionally, the *vedikā* functions as a sacred enclosure that delimits the stūpa from the profane world. The space between the *vedikā* and the stūpa constitutes the *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, where devotees accumulate merit by walking clockwise around the monument.

Looking at Kanaganahalli Mahā Caitya, three distinct representations of the *vedikā* are identifiable: the physical *vedikā* surrounding the Stupa, the cornice situated between the lower and upper drums and register B of the upper drum panels. Further references to the *vedikā* appear on the bases of sculptures depicting the Buddhas and around the *āyāgatambhas*. Beyond their aesthetic role, these three tiers define an “illusory architecture” that influences and defines the devotee's spiritual experience:

#### ***4.1 Tangible Space: the physical enclosure***

The real *vedikā* surrounding the monument separates the sacred area from the external environment (Fig. 3). Within this enclosure, devotees accessed the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* through gateways (*torāṇas*) each located in correspondence of the cardinal points.

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<sup>4</sup> The application of perspective to create illusory effects is not exclusive to Buddhist art in Kanaganahalli; significant parallels, already studied and well defined, can be found in the Italian artistic tradition of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, across both architecture and painting. Within this context, two distinct methodologies of illusory perspective may be identified: “Prospettiva di sottinsù” (Amoruso, Sdegno, Manti 2019) and “Prospettiva solida” (Trevisan 2001; Thürlemann 2000).

#### **4.2 Imaginary Space: the intermediate cornice**

Located between the lower and upper drums, this cornice depicts a false-railing sharing the structural characteristics of the real enclosure. It consists of *vedikā-stambhas* (pillars) connected by three *sūci* (crossbars) (Fig. 4). The pillars are decorated with circular medallions containing full-bloom lotuses, while the crossbars represent zoomorphic elements and garlands.

While this *vedikā* is structurally a decorative element, it serves as an architectural one by delimiting a second and higher *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, which was physically inaccessible due to the lack of stairways. The upper *pradakṣiṇāpatha* represents a liminal space where the devotee, through imaginative effort, could make a transition from reality toward the transcendental dimension, depicted on the covering slabs of the second drum. In fact, this space served as a clear boundary, separating the observer from the esoteric realm witnessed in the upper registers (D and E).

#### **4.3 Transcendental Space: Register B**

Register B is the lowest register of the panels covering the upper drum and it represents an entirely illusory *vedikā* (Fig. 5). Even being part of the decorative *apparatus*, this *vedikā* maintains its protective function, distancing the observer from the figures represented in the upper registers. Unlike the lower drum panels, which often depicts generic Buddhist imagery, the upper drum representations focus almost exclusively on the aristocracy, the Buddha, and Bodhisattvas. The vertical pillars of register B share the same decorative features of those ones composing the cornice and the real *vedikā*. However, in register B the *sūcis* and the *uṣṇīṣa* are left plain.

The hierarchical arrangement of the *vedikā* from register B reveals two critical insights (Fig. 6):

- Kanaganahalli Stupa was designed as a metaphorical transition from the terrestrial to the transcendental dimension.
- The local kings and Emperor Aśoka were placed on a similar ontological and hierarchic level with Bodhisattvas.

Therefore, the reproduction of the railing in Register B serves as a spiritual exercise. It allows the devotee to “encounter” these metaphysical personalities while maintaining a symbolic and physical distance, reinforcing the sacred hierarchy of the Buddhist *cosmos*.

## **5. Kanaganahalli and Saidu Sharif: a comparative analysis on *vedikās***

A comparative analysis of the Stūpa in Saidu Sharif I and the Mahā Caitya in Kanaganahalli reveals a common interest for the use of perspective and illusory architecture. In particular, both sites are characterized by the use of multiple *vedikās* (both real and illusory) which helps in delimiting the sacred space and have an influence into the devotee's experience. However, the two sites diverge significantly in how they combine structural form and decorative function (Faccenna 2004; Iori 2018).

The archaeological site of Saidu Sharif I is located in the Swat District of northern Pakistan, within the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, southeast of an ancient urban center identified in Chinese sources as Mengjieli (Iori, Olivieri 2016). Systematic excavations were conducted by Domenico Faccenna in 1963 and continued with intermittent phases until 1982. The comprehensive findings were subsequently published in a four-volume series (Callieri 1989; Faccenna 1995; Noci, Macchiarelli, Faccenna 1997; Faccenna 2001). The monastic complex was constructed upon two artificial terraces: the upper terrace housed a quadrangular monastery organized around a central courtyard, while in the lower terrace was placed the main Stūpa. The site's chronology spans from the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE—a period historically categorized as Saka-Parthian.

Saidu Sharif Stūpa (Fig. 7) lays upon a square podium (20 x 20 m) standing 3.32 m high, with a northern access point characterized by a double staircase. A *vedikā* composed of white talc-schist, surrounded the podium and extended along the lower staircase as a handrail. The four corners of the podium were originally surmounted by lion-capital columns reaching 13.75 m in height. A *pradakṣiṇāpatha* 2.30 m wide, extends around the Stūpa at an elevation of 2.2 m from the podium surface. The second tier of the Stūpa, accessible via a secondary staircase, was adorned with a continuous narrative frieze, depicting the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. The scenes were separated by Gandharan-Corinthian pilasters and arranged chronologically, giving a didactic function to the monument.

The monument also featured an accessory register decorated with a false *vedikā*. Both registers were executed in green chlorite-schist and surmounted by carved acanthus-leaf cornices. According to Olivieri (2022: 52), this frieze was visible from the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* level and the base of the podium. However, the false railing remained hidden from viewers at ground level, obscured by the real *vedikā* surrounding the podium. This

creates a sophisticated perspectival play: the false railing projects a space that appears horizontal and concentric—encompassing an inner railing, a colonnade, and the stūpa. In this design, a false niche represents a “false door” to an internal space that the devotee can only access through imagination (Olivieri 2022).

In the case of Saidu Sharif, the false *vedikā* is executed as a real architectural element, utilizing vertical pillars and interlocking crossbars, as it occurs in the structural railings that traditionally enclosed Indian stupas (Fogelin 2003: 144-146). Thus here, we observe an architectural element performing a decorative function: its primary purpose is to delimit an imaginary space, serving as a visual threshold to the transcendental realm. Furthermore, the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* in Saidu Sharif remains a tangible, accessible space for the devotee, positioned between the physical railing of the podium and the illusory railing of the drum.

On the contrary, in Kanaganahalli, the relationship is inverted: the false *vedikā* located at the base of the second-drum panels is not a three-dimensional structure but a carved decorative relief. However, this decorative element performs an architectural function by delimiting a real space, corresponding to the upper *pradakṣiṇāpatha*. Unlike Saidu Sharif, this upper corridor in Kanaganahalli, though physically present, was rendered inaccessible by the deliberate omission of staircases. Thus, in Kanaganahalli, the inaccessibility of the upper corridor suggests a rigid symbolic hierarchy, where the space closest to the ‘transcendental’ registers was visible but physically forbidden.

In both instances, the false *vedikā* acts as a liminal mediator: whether through the architectural realism of Saidu Sharif, or the symbolic carvings of Kanaganahalli, the railing serves to distance the observer from the sacred figures of the upper registers, forcing the devotee to bridge the gap between the terrestrial and the divine, through an act of spiritual imagination.

## **6. Conclusions**

This article aims to bring a new light on the socio-historical value and archaeological history of Kanaganahalli Great Stupa.

Firstly, the archaeological data related to the Great Stupa collected in the archaeological report by Poonacha, were made clear and above mentioned. This latest archaeological analysis results in a new reading of the archaeological history of the monument, represented by five Macro-phases. These Macro-phases serve to clarify the structural

development of the monument, from its foundation to its eventual abandonment, shedding light on its chronology and on its importance over the time.

Secondly, a complete analysis of the Great Stupa of Kanaganahalli was provided, making a distinction between real and illusory architecture. This distinction is pivotal for deciphering the monument's symbolic function, as evidenced by a sophisticated decorative apparatus that reflects a highly coherent artistic program. The strategic use of architectural elements within the Stupa's ornamentation facilitates a spatial deployment on a perspectival plane, effectively extending the viewer's perception beyond the physical constraints of the structure.

In particular, it was evidenced the importance assumed by the *vedikā*, an element repeatedly reproduced on different decorative elements composing the Stupa. The *vedikā* emphasizes the monument's verticality while guiding a gradual transition from the exterior to the interior. The interplay between physical and imaginary *vedikās*, defining both literal and conceptual corridors, establishes a symbolic boundary between the devotee and the esoteric figures depicted on the upper drum, a border that can only be overcome through a spiritual exercise.

This article has presented a brief attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the monument, bringing together the individual elements that characterize and compose it, in order to promote an overview of the Kanaganahalli Stupa and at the same time better understand elements characterizing other Buddhist monuments from the surrounding area. Despite the existing literature on the site, further interdisciplinary research remains essential to fully decode the functional and symbolic complexity of this extraordinary monument.

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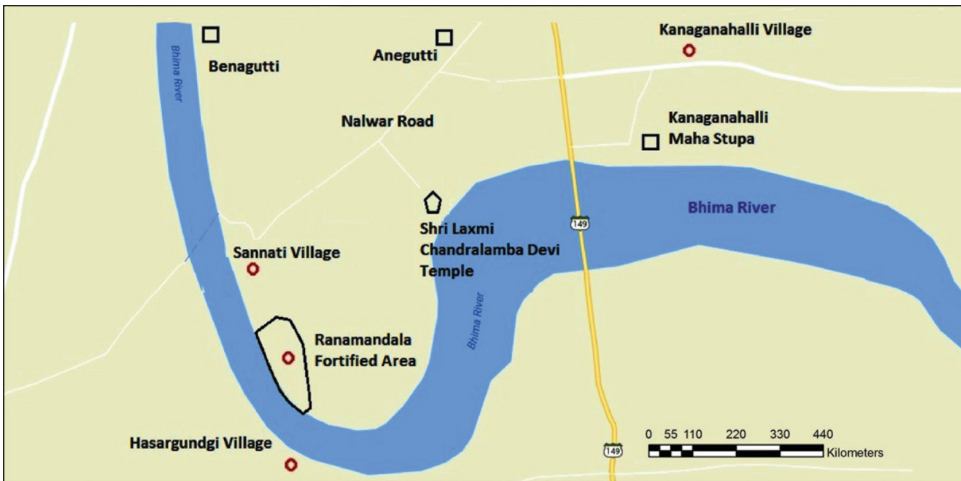


Fig. 1 - Buddhist archaeological sites nearby Bhima River  
(from Thakur 2021: fig. 1).

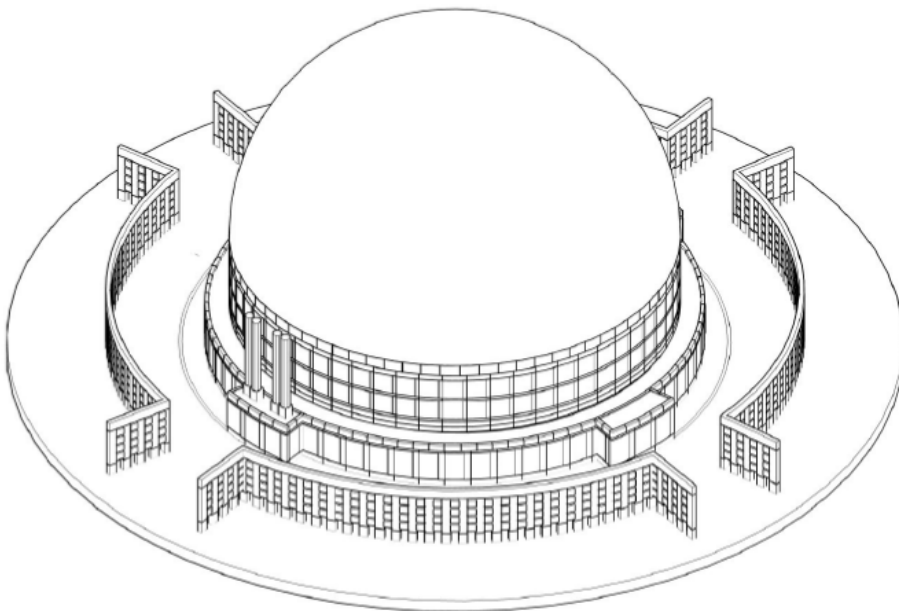


Fig. 2 - Kanaganahalli Great Stupa, axonometric projection, scale 1: 100  
(drawing by A. Adamo and M. Prota).



Fig. 3 - Vedikā of Kanaganahalli Stupa  
(picture by: C. Luczanits).



Fig. 4 - Kanaganahalli Stupa cornice  
(picture by: C. Luczanits, revised by the author).



Fig. 5 - Kanaganahalli Stupa, Register B  
(picture by: C. Luczanits, revised by the author).

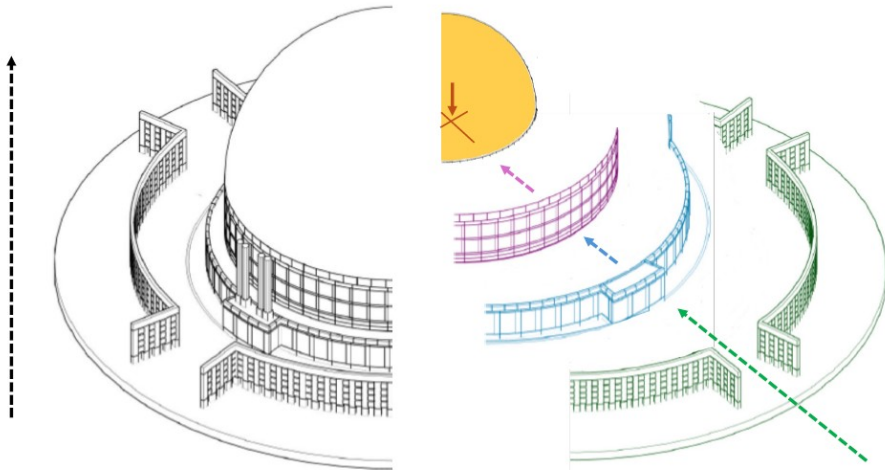


Fig. 6 - Illusory architecture of Kanaganahalli Stupa  
(drawing by L.M. Olivieri, not in scale).

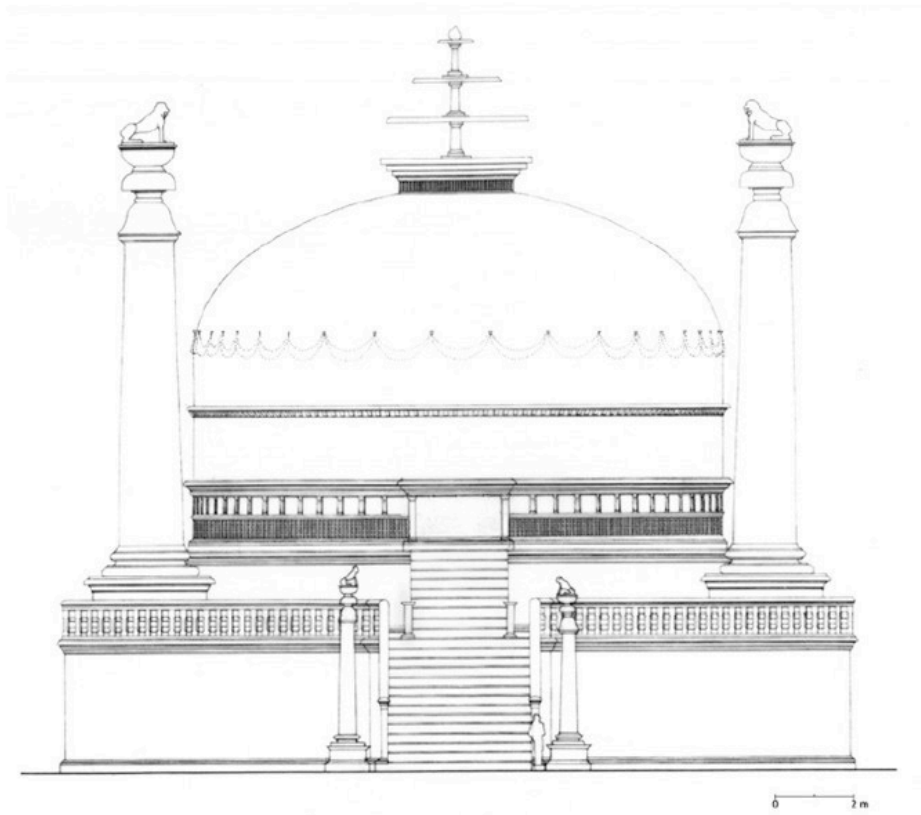


Fig. 7 - Saidu Sharif Stupa  
(reconstruction by F. Martore, from Olivieri 2022: pl. IX).