

Scenes of the Life of the Buddha

In this small sculptured plaque, the central seated Buddha image is surrounded by representations of seven of the standard set of eight scenes of the Buddha's life and the events of the seven weeks after the Buddha achieved Enlightenment. Immediately on either side of the central Buddha are bodhisattvas, presumably Maitreya and Avalokiteshvara.

This plaque suggests the complexity of cultural relationships among various parts of the Buddhist world in the period from 1000 to 1200. Plaques quite similar in arrangement, symbolism, size, and material have been found in northeastern India, Sri Lanka, and Tibet. Many have also been found in Myanmar (Burma). Some scholars have assumed that all (or most of) the plaques of this type were made in Myanmar. Some plaques have inscriptions on the back in Tibetan (including this one) or Chinese, however. The easiest way to explain this fact would be to say that the plaques were made in northeastern India for the many Buddhist pilgrims of various nationalities who came to worship at the holy sites of the Buddhist homeland.

Burmese art of this period has strong connections with the contemporary Buddhist art of northeastern India. Also, Burmese pilgrims were significant patrons of Buddhist art and architecture in northeastern India, and their tastes and preferences may sometimes have made themselves felt. It is also possible that Indian or Indian-trained artists worked in Burma in this period, so clearly the question of where such plaques were made will never be easy to answer.

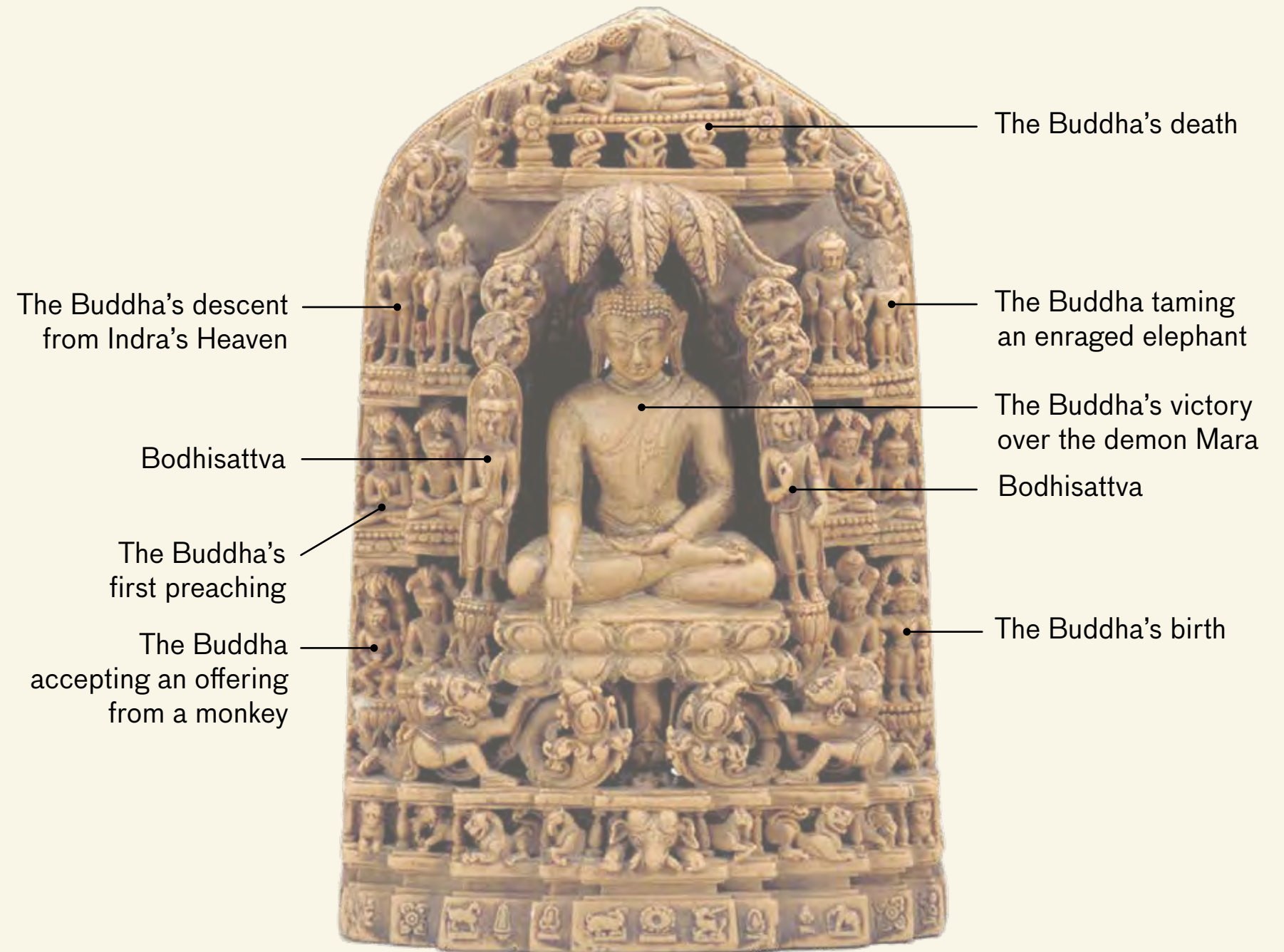
Scenes of the life of the Buddha

1000–1200

India; Bihar state

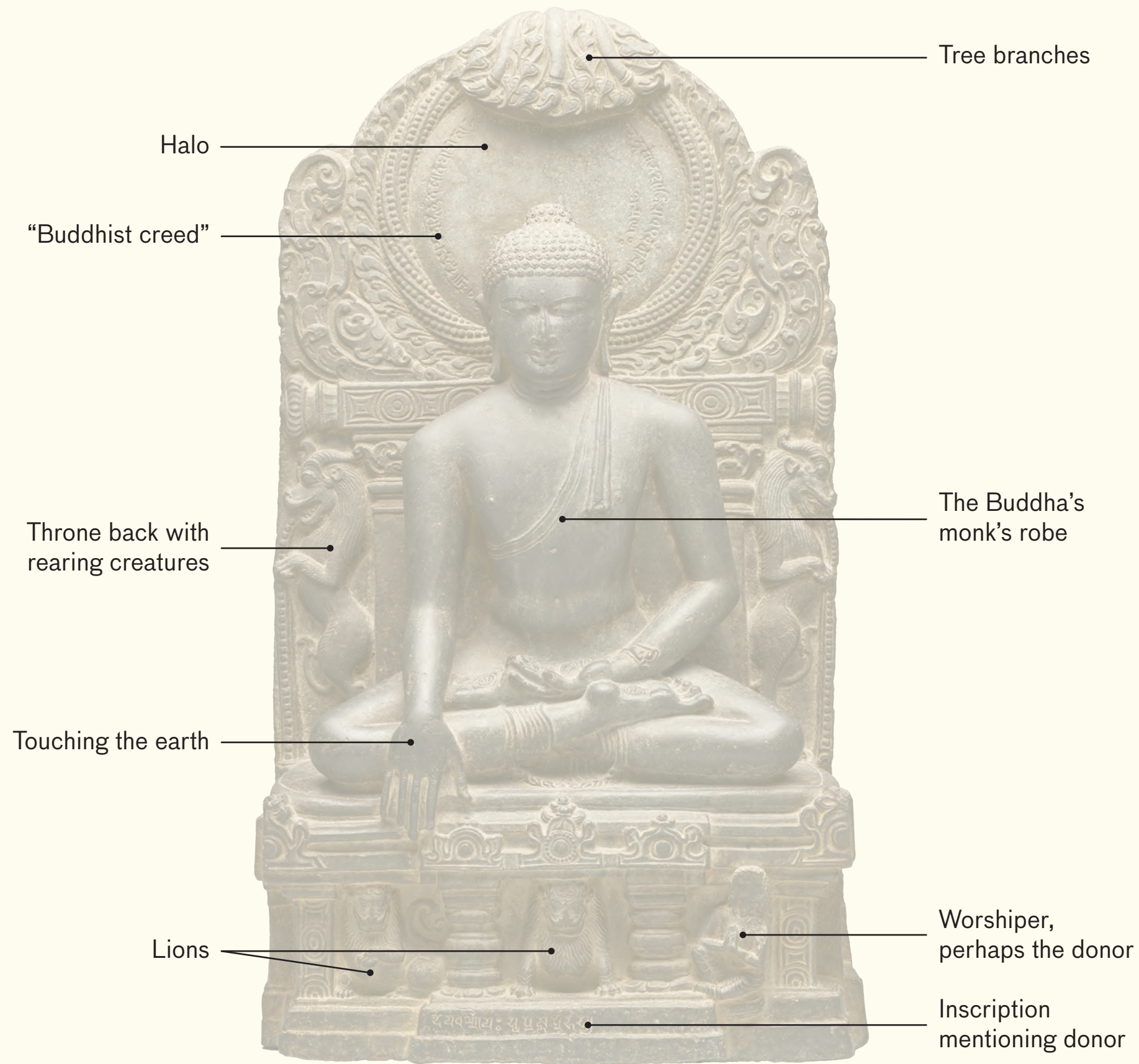
Stone (pyrophyllite)

Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council, 1991.224



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The Buddha triumphing over Mara



The Inscriptions

The upper inscription is the "Buddhist creed," which infuses the image with the Buddha's teachings:

The Buddha has explained the cause of all things that arise from a cause. He, the great monk, has also explained their cessation.

Lower inscription:

This is the pious gift of senior monk Prajnaprabha.

Niches

A wall of this gallery is filled with niches, each containing an image of a deity. In eastern India in the period of the artworks in this gallery, temples—both Buddhist and Hindu—had similar niches on their walls. Many images were made in more or less standard sizes to fit into niches of corresponding sizes.

On the back of the wall in the middle of the gallery you will see a large photo of the niches on the Mahabodhi Temple. It is one of the only temples in eastern India from a thousand years ago to have survived to the present.

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