

ACM WONDERS

Suitable for ages 13 and up

ACM

STELE

About 1,500 years old.
Conscientiously carved
using limestone during the
Northern Qi dynasty
(550–577) in China.

Background Information

The upper section of this stele shows Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, meditating under a canopy of snakes. In the middle are two seated Buddha figures performing the *abhaya* (above) and *vitarka* (below) mudras (symbolic hand gestures). Each is flanked by disciples and bodhisattvas. This stele was originally set in a cave temple.

Notice the lions at the bottom. The “Marks of a Great Man” seen on many sculptures of the Buddha include an immense torso and a powerful jaw, traits which metaphorically compare him to a lion. Images of lions are common in Southeast Asia as symbols of Buddhism.

The material used here – limestone – contains minerals, mostly calcite, and is usually off-white or grey. Fossils are often found in it. This sculpture has a subtle range of colour and a rough surface. Limestone, used as a building material in many cultures, is so soft that the tools used to shape limestone are similar to those used to sculpt wood. Limestone is more difficult to polish than marble, another common material for sculptures and buildings, but is also less expensive.



Stele
Limestone, height 119.5 cm
Asian Civilisations Museum
1999-00057

LET'S DISCOVER

Locate this stele in the Ancient Religions Gallery, and learn about different Buddhist symbols and the significance of lions in Buddhist art.

FUN FACT

In Buddhism, the lion is a symbol of strength and protection. The Buddha is often referred to as the "Lion of the Shakya clan", and his teachings are said to be like a lion's roar, because it frightens listeners into practising his lessons. Lions protect the Buddha and are found as sculptures at entrances to many Chinese Buddhist temples. These creatures are sometimes called "fu dogs" in the West.

GLOSSARY

Abhaya mudra – A hand gesture that signals fearlessness, peace, and protection.



Bodhisattva is a being who has attained enlightenment, but delays entry into nirvana in order to help others attain it.

Stele – A stone slab or pillar bearing an inscription or design, serving as a monument or marker.

Vitarka mudra – A hand gesture that represents the Buddha teaching.



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LET'S LOOK CLOSELY

Use these guidelines to discover details about this object.

1. **LOOK** closely at how the lions are positioned. What does their pose tell you about them? What are the traits of a person who is compared to a lion? Which animal are you most like?
2. Buddhism originated a long time ago in India. It later spread to China and other areas. It is said that lions were brought to the imperial palace in China during the Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220). **IMAGINE** you were a court official seeing a lion for the first time. **DESCRIBE** what you see and how you feel to someone living far away by writing a letter, or even a poem.
3. This stele was originally set in a cave temple. **SEARCH** online for some cave temples in Asia. What are some famous ones? Why might temples have been created inside caves?

CREATE AT HOME

Continue the experience at home by doing these activities. Tag us @ACM_SG for a chance to get your creation featured.

4. **CARVE** a lion from a bar of soap using a butter knife and toothpicks (be careful not to hurt yourself). What was challenging or fun about it?

Sculptures created from limestone are more subject to weathering and erosion. **DISCUSS** with a friend or family member why limestone is used for sculptures if it is not as durable as other materials.



Let us know what you think about our ACM Wonders activity cards through a survey here.