The Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, Bihar State, India

Maha, “great” + bodhi, “enlightenment or awakening”

- What happened there?
  - The bodhisattva Siddhartha’s meditation before the enlightenment
  - The attack of the demon Mara, the bodhisattva’s calling on the earth to bear witness to his merits, and the bodhisattva’s victory
  - The enlightenment (=the achievement of Buddhahood)
  - The events of the seven weeks after the enlightenment (the Buddha’s gazing unblinkingly at the tree, pacing up and down the jeweled walk, being protected from a storm by a serpent, etc.)

- Objects of devotion
  - Primary
    - The bodhi tree
    - The diamond throne (vajrasana = vajra, “diamond, diamond-like” [among other meanings] + asana, “seat, seated position”)
  - Secondary
    - The shrine of the unblinking gazing, the jeweled walk, etc.

- The temple’s primary architectural characteristics
  - Tall pyramidal towers with straight, not curved, sides
  - Tallest tower in the center, with four similar shorter towers around it at the corners
  - Tall cubical base

- The temple’s history
  - According to legend, Emperor Ashoka (reigned approx. 269-232 BCE) visited the site and established a shrine and the diamond throne there.
  - Some parts of a stone railing from about 100 BCE survive.
  - The Chinese pilgrim Faxian recorded a tower at Bodhgaya in the early 400s.
  - The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang recorded an elaborate towered shrine at Bodhgaya in the 630s. The corner towers were probably in existence by this time.
Inscriptions record that the Burmese performed repairs to the temple around 1100 and around 1300.

The decline and disappearance of Buddhism in India after 1200 left the temple largely untended.

British travelers began visiting the site around 1790.

The Burmese sent a mission to the temple in 1802, and another in 1875.

In the 1880s a joint British-Burmese effort completely restored the temple, disturbing or destroying much original material in the process.

- Models of the temple
  - Considerable numbers of small stone models of the Mahabodhi were made in 1000-1200.

- Architectural copies or evocations of the temple
  - In Burma: at Pagan (approx. 1200-1250) and Rangoon (19th-20th century)
  - In Thailand: at Chiang Mai (1455-1470) and elsewhere (20th century)
  - In Nepal: at Patan (approx. 1550-1600)
  - In China: at Beijing (1473, 1748) and Hohhot (1732)
  - And elsewhere, 20th century

The Pala dynasty in northeastern India and Bangladesh, approx. 750-1150

- Sculpture  Important in relation to the Mahabodhi: the Buddha image in the position of touching the earth to bear witness to the bodhisattva’s merit, as he overcomes the demon Mara. This position is called bhumisparsha (bhumi, “earth” + sparsha, “touching”) or maravijaya (Mara + vijaya, “victory”)
- Architecture  Little survives, but votive stupas show the appearance of architectural stupas

For further reading:


Huntington, Susan L., and John C. Huntington. *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*. Dayton, Ohio: Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, 1990.