

## **Primary Sources and Asian Pasts**

# **Beyond Boundaries**



Religion, Region, Language and the State

Edited by  
Michael Willis, Sam van Schaik  
and Lewis Doney

## **Volume 8**

# **Primary Sources and Asian Pasts**



Edited by  
Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Cecil

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# Preface

The present book is the outcome of an international conference held at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden in August 2018, organized by the editors within the framework of the European Research Council (ERC) Synergy project Asia Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language, and the State. During the five days of presentations and conversations, the scholars in attendance from Europe, North America, and South Asia shared new research related to the cultural and political history of premodern Asia and explored historical intersections and parallels in modes of state formation, religion, economy, and cultural production in South and Southeast Asia in light of patterns from adjacent regions – the ancient Mediterranean, ancient Near East, and East Asia.

Visiting scholars also experienced some of the rich collections of primary historical sources held in Leiden's renowned museums, libraries, and archives. On the third day of the conference, participants were introduced to the South and Southeast Asian materials at the Museum Volkenkunde by Francine Brinkgreve, curator of Insular Southeast Asia. Professor Marijke Klokke (Leiden University) provided an introduction to the special exhibition on Indonesian bronzes and discussed the production and transmission of the remarkable portable images. In the afternoon, Doris Jedamski and Maartje van den Heuvel guided visitors through a display of some of the University Library's extensive special collections, with highlights including the massive copper plates of the South Indian Cola dynasty, manuscripts of Indonesia's expansive epic *La Galigo*, and the earliest images of the Borobudur in the form of rare daguerreotypes.

The conference united a diverse group of scholars working in the fields of history, archaeology, religion, anthropology, art history, classics, and philology in an effort to explore new perspectives and methods in the study of primary sources from the premodern world. Our inquiries converged around topics such as inscriptions and textual sources, material culture and environment, the role of narrative in crafting ideologies, and religious landscapes and monuments. Deepening the discussions that animated the conference event, the present book adopts a more focused geographical perspective, looking specifically at primary sources bearing on premodern South and Southeast Asia.

Although they are not included in the present work, other papers that have enriched the thinking behind this book were presented by Dániel Balogh (British Museum), Lucas den Boer (Leiden University), Robert Bracey (British Museum), Charles DiSimone (Universität München), Lewis Doney (Universität Bonn), Anna Filigenzi (University of Naples), Benjamin Fleming (City University of New York), John Guy (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Gergely Hidas (British Museum), Nathan

Hill (SOAS), Tom Hoogervorst (KITLV), Lidewijde de Jong (University of Groningen), Nirajan Kafle (Leiden University), Divya Kumar Dumas (University of Pennsylvania), Robert Leach (University of Zurich), Mark Miyake (SOAS), Jason Neelis (Wilfrid Laurier University), Leslie Orr (Concordia University), Richard Payne (University of Chicago), Sam van Schaik (British Library), Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden University), Jonathan Silk (Leiden University), William Southworth (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam), Nico Staring (Leiden University), Judit Törzsök (EPHE/Sorbonne), Vincent Tournier (EFEO), Miguel John Versluys (Leiden University), Michael Willis (British Museum), and Yuko Yokochi (Kyoto University).

We would like to thank Kristen De Joseph for her valuable editorial assistance.

We dedicate this book to the memory of Janice Stargardt, who unfortunately passed away before its publication. Janice was a major contributor to the Asia Beyond Boundaries project from its inception and was an engaging and lively presence at the Leiden conference. Her groundbreaking work on the archaeology of Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar at the early Pyu site of Sri Ksetra, helped to define a field and will be of lasting value.

Leiden, April 2020

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Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Cecil

## Primary Sources and Asian Pasts: Beyond the Boundaries of the “Gupta Period”

Stone inscriptions, manuscripts, monuments, sculptures, ceramic fragments: these are just some of the primary sources for the study of premodern Asia. How might scholars chart new directions in Asian studies following these historical traces of past societies and polities? To address this question, this book unites perspectives from leading scholars and emerging voices in the fields of archaeology, art history, philology, and cultural history to revisit the primary historical sources that ground their respective studies, and to reflect upon the questions that can be asked of these sources, the light they may shed on Asian pasts, and the limits of these inquiries.

This volume contributes to a more expansive research aim: the research initiative *Asia Beyond Boundaries: Politics, Region, Language, and the State*, a collaborative project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) from 2014 to 2020. One of the core aims of this ERC project has been to rethink and revisit established scholarly narratives of premodern social and political networks in early South Asia. In doing so, the scholars involved considered how complex trajectories of cultural and economic connectivity supported the development of recognizable transregional patterns across Asia, particularly those patterns that have been commonly regarded as “classical.” Anchored in “Gupta Period” South Asia – a remarkably productive period of cultural and political change that extended from the fourth to the sixth century CE – *Asia Beyond Boundaries* situates the innovations of these centuries within the broader South and Southeast Asian ecumene through the integration of archaeological, epigraphic, art historical, and philological research.

While the research initiative of the *Asia Beyond Boundaries* project occasioned both the conference and the volume inspired by it, the current publication also looks beyond it. Situating the “Gupta Period” and South Asia in a broader context, the present volume expands upon some of the core research questions that animate the larger project by considering what primary historical sources may tell us about the premodern world. To challenge traditional boundaries and create a more capacious view of Asian studies, varied sources, methods, and perspectives are joined in conversation. This introduction frames the volume’s contributions in light of advances in adjacent fields, augmenting the core methodologies long established as the strengths of each regional discipline as traditionally conceived – philology, archival research, archaeological excavation, field research, etc.

## 1 The “Gupta Period”: Established Paradigms and New Questions

The “Gupta Period” is a commonly invoked heading used to designate not only an historical period, but also a high point of premodern South Asian culture. It has become synonymous with terms like “classical” or “golden age,” a period in which artistic production flourished and great works of literature, science, philosophy, architecture, and sculpture were produced, presumably under the patronage or influence of the Gupta rulers and their associates. Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, for example, in their much-used textbook, *A History of India*, begin their discussion of “the classical age of the Guptas” as follows: “Like the Mauryas a few centuries earlier, the imperial Guptas made a permanent impact on Indian history.”<sup>1</sup> A. L. Basham makes an even bolder valuation in his introduction to Bardwell Smith’s *Essays on Gupta Culture*: “In India probably the most outstanding of [ . . . ] periods was that of the Gupta Empire, covering approximately two hundred years, from the fourth to the sixth centuries A.D. In this period India was the most highly civilized land in the world [ . . . ].”<sup>2</sup> Despite looming large in the historiography of early South Asia, the term “Gupta Period” is imprecise since it fails to distinguish the influence of the Gupta rulers as historical agents from the extra-Imperial influences and networks that contributed to the cultural and political developments of this period.

In the study of religion, the fourth to sixth centuries have been understood as critical, since they marked the advent of the temple and image centered religious practices that have come to define Brahmanical Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> Identifying these developments exclusively with the Guptas overlooks, however, the temples of Nagarjunakonda, built in the late third century, and the image centered religious practices of Buddhism in the Deccan in the late second and early third century CE.<sup>4</sup> In the field of South Asian art history, Gupta period sculpture is viewed as “classical,” a term used to characterize a naturalism and restraint in ways of

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1 Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 54.

2 Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Essays on Gupta Culture* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 1.

3 The early history of these practices has been traced in textual and material sources in Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual. Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

4 H. Sarkar and B.N. Mishra, *Nagarjunakonda* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1966); K.V. Soundarajan et al., *Nagarjunakonda (1954–60). Volume II (The Historical Period)* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2006); Elizabeth Rosen Stone, *The Buddhist Art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994).



representing human and other natural forms that distinguishes the works of these centuries from the extravagance of later medieval or baroque forms.<sup>5</sup> Yet attempts to categorize what constitutes Gupta art face significant challenges since the contributions of the rulers to material culture are confined largely to coins, while their allies, the Vākāṭakas, are credited with developments in architectural and iconographic forms that defined the period.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while “Gupta Period” arguably serves as a convenient scholarly shorthand for an significant period of cultural production, it remains difficult to extricate the Guptas from the grandiose and romanticized estimations of their role in South Asian history.

Several studies in recent years have problematized elements of this periodization and the tendency of Gupta-oriented historiography to prize cultural and artistic production from fourth to sixth century North India over and against sources from later periods. Scholars working in the field of art history have voiced criticism of the historian’s propensity for the “golden age.” As Partha Mitter writes, “Despite the high level of civilization reached during the Gupta Era, the legend of its unique character was an invention of the colonial and nationalist periods.”<sup>7</sup> Like many colonial constructs, this legend is an enduring one. A recent exhibition held in Paris in 2017, for example, still invokes the “classical” and the “golden age” as synonyms for the Gupta Period.<sup>8</sup> For criticism of the golden-age paradigm

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5 The latest discussion is Robert L. Brown, “Gupta Art as Classical: A Possible Paradigm for Indian Art History,” in *Indology’s Pulse. Arts in Context. Essays Presented to Doris Meth Srinivasan in Admiration of Her Scholarly Research*, eds. Corinna Wessels-Mevissen and Gerd J.R. Mevissen (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2019), 223–244.

6 The remarks of Robert L. Brown on the topic “What is Gupta-period Art” exemplify well the challenges inherent in the use of dynastic nomenclature. Brown acknowledges the absence of evidence to support Gupta patronage for sculpture and temples, yet remains wedded to the term as description for an artistic style distinguished by its “idealized naturalism.” Robert L. Brown, “The Importance of Gupta-period Sculpture in Southeast Asian Art History,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia. Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 317–331. On stylistic developments in Gupta coinage, see Ellen Raven, “From Third Grade to Top Rate: The Discovery of Gupta Coin Styles, and a Mint Group Study for Kumāragupta,” in *Indology’s Pulse*, 195–222.

7 Partha Mitter, “Foreword: The Golden Age, History and Memory in Modernity,” in *In the Shadow of the Golden Age. Art and Identity in Asia from Gandhara to the Modern Age*, ed. Julia Hegewald (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2014), 11–26 (17). See also Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) on Western aesthetics in the analysis of Indian art. On the Guptas, see Gérard Fussman, “Histoire du monde indien: Les Guptas et le nationalisme Indien,” *Cours et travaux du Collège de France, Résumés 2006–2007, Annuaire 107ème année* (Paris: Collège de France), 695–713.

8 *L’âge d’or de l’Inde classique: L’empire des Guptas. Galeries nationales du grand palais, 4 avril–25 juin 2007* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2007).

in relation to the production of courtly poetry (Kāvya), one might quote Romila Thapar's gender-based study of the poet Kālidāsa's telling of *Śākuntalā*: "The choice today of the Kālidāsa version as almost the sole narrative is an endorsement of the views of both classical Sanskrit and Orientalist scholarship, which affirmed the superiority of the play and therefore the centrality of its narrative."<sup>9</sup> The editors' introduction to a recent collection of studies toward a history of *kāvya* literature echoes similar sentiments: "It is thus somewhat ironic that a later perspective has enshrined Kālidāsa as the first and last great Sanskrit poet, a changeless and timeless standard of excellence in a tradition that has steadily declined. One result of this stultifying presumption is that most of Sanskrit poetry has not been carefully read, at least not in the last two centuries."<sup>10</sup> As the words of these scholars make clear, the emphasis on the singularity of the Gupta period has often marginalized other forms and eras of cultural production.

While calling attention to the dubious hegemony of the "Gupta Period" in valuations of premodern South Asian history, the nature of the polity over which these rulers presided and the extent of the territories they controlled are also debated.<sup>11</sup> The vision of a universal sovereignty expressed in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta became a widely deployed political idiom, as has been convincingly shown in Sheldon Pollock's model of the "Sanskrit cosmopolis."<sup>12</sup> The legacy of this expression can also be observed in the historian's reference to the Imperial Guptas and their expansive empire. While a significant epigraphic event, Samudragupta's imperial claims and monumental media borrow from those of earlier rulers and, as such, participate in, rather than invent, public representations of sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Taking at face-value such expansive claims to power and sovereignty neglects the particular contexts in which these idioms were expressed and the specific local agents who employed them for their

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<sup>9</sup> Romila Thapar, *Śākuntalā. Texts, Readings, Histories* (1999; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, and Gary Tubb (eds.), *Innovations and Turning Points. Toward a History of Kāvya Literature* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>11</sup> The Gupta Period is of course not the only subject of debates regarding periodization in South Asian History. See, e.g., Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Bryan J. Cuevas, "Some Reflections on the Periodization of Tibetan History," in *The Tibetan History Reader*, eds. Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaeffer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 49–63.

<sup>12</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 239–243.

<sup>13</sup> For a general perspective, see Sheldon Pollock, "Empire and Imitation," in *Lessons of Empire. Imperial Histories and American Power*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore (New York: The New Press, 2006), 175–188.

own political purposes. It thereby subsumes under the general heading “Gupta” what is in fact a disparate range of historical agents, localities, and practices. Instead of a Gupta-centered imperial history, recent studies have emphasized the ways in which localized polities and rulers negotiated the political idioms of their day, challenged them, and created spaces for innovation.<sup>14</sup> The North Indian bias and Sanskritic paradigm that accompanies a Gupta-centered history of India also bears rethinking in light of the equally significant political and cultural formations in the South, such as those of the earlier Sātavāhanas, who used and supported the writing of Prakrit rather than Sanskrit, or the slightly later Pallavas, who took up Sanskrit as well as Tamil.<sup>15</sup>

Questioning the status of the Guptas in South Asian historiography – both in terms of the political formations associated with the recorded rulers of the dynasty, and the forms of cultural production associated with the period of their rule, has significant implications for our understanding of the transregional conception of the “Gupta period.” As mentioned above, Pollock’s hypothesis about the spread of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit-inflected cultural forms positions the Gupta rulers as critical influences in this process. In fact, the complex dynamics of transmission that led certain Indic forms of art, architecture, language, and religious and political ideology to be incorporated within the developing polities of Southeast Asia reveal equal affinities with developments in the southern regions of South Asia in addition to the Ganga-Yamuna doab that formed the ostensible heartland of the Gupta polity.<sup>16</sup> These processes of “Indianization” incorporate a broad spectrum of religious, political, and economic agendas, and much

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**14** See in particular Fred Virkus, *Politische Strukturen im Guptaereich (300–550 n. Chr.)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004). Although it appeared two years before *Language of the Gods*, Virkus’s study is not referred to by Pollock. See also Hans T. Bakker, *The Vākātakas. An Essay in Hindu Iconology* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), and, most recently, Elizabeth A. Cecil and Peter C. Bisschop, “Innovation and Idiom in the Gupta Period. Revisiting Eran and Sondhni,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, forthcoming.

**15** For the Sātavāhanas and the use of Prakrit, see Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes. Prakrit and the Language Order of Premodern India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); compare also Dineschandra Sircar, *The Successors of the Satavahanas in Lower Deccan* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1939). For the Pallavas, see Emmanuel Francis, *Le discours royal dans l’Inde du Sud ancienne. Inscriptions et monuments pallava (IV<sup>ème</sup>–IX<sup>ème</sup> siècles)*, vol. 1, *Introduction et sources* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institute Orientaliste, 2013) and vol. 2, *Mythes dynastiques et panégyriques* (2017), as well as Francis, this volume.

**16** On these connections see Parul Pandya Dhar, “Monuments, Motifs, Myths: Architecture and Its Transformations in Early India and Southeast Asia,” in *Cultural and Civilisational Links between India and Southeast Asia: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions*, ed. Shyam Saran (New Delhi: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 325–344; Julie Romain, “Indian Architecture in the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’: The Temples of the Dieng Plateau,” in *Early Interactions between South*

important work has been done, particularly in the field of archaeology, to locate the material evidence of these processes.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to tracing the emergence of early polities, archaeological work in mainland Southeast Asia has located dynamic networks of exchange via the maritime and overland routes – between the two shores of the Bay of Bengal and between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea – that linked these polities.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, the emphasis on economic ties has foregrounded the role of merchants and non-royal and non-priestly elites, social groups who find comparatively little emphasis in the historiography of South Asia, which has long been fascinated by royal personae and genealogy. Returning to the theme of primary sources may account, in part, for the different historiographical emphases that emerge when juxtaposing research trajectories in early South and Southeast Asia. Scholarship on the latter, in particular mainland Southeast Asia, has traditionally been more archaeologically driven and marked by an absence of early literary sources. South Asia, by contrast, preserves an overwhelmingly expansive corpus of Sanskrit texts. Study of these sources has long dominated the field, while developments in fields of archaeology of sites associated with the Gupta Period have been comparatively more modest.<sup>19</sup> This divergence in the availability and use of primary sources has

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and Southeast Asia. *Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 299–316.

**17** For a survey of theories of Indianization in Southeast Asia, see the introduction in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade, xiii–xxxi.

**18** The scholarship on these maritime links is extensive. See, e.g., several of the contributions in the volume of Manguin, Mani, and Wade cited in the previous footnote, Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and, most recently, Angela Shottenhammer (ed.), *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World*, vol. 1, *Commercial Structures and Exchanges* and vol. 2, *Exchange of Ideas, Religions, and Technologies* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). From the other direction (the Western Indian Ocean), the recent discovery of more than 200 inscriptions in the Hoq cave of Socotra provides fascinating insights into the religious identities of Indian sailors: Ingo Strauch (ed.), *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The Inscriptions and Drawings from Cave Hoq* (Bremen: Hempen, 2012); Ingo Strauch, “Buddhism in the West? Buddhist Indian Sailors on Socotra (Yemen) and the Role of Trade Contacts in the Spread of Buddhism,” in: *Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality: New Approaches*, ed. Birgit Kellner (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 15–51.

**19** This is not to imply that archaeology is not a developed field in South Asia. Significant archaeological work has been done in South India by scholars such as Kathleen Morrison and Carla Sinopoli, by Julia Shaw at Sanchi, and by Sila Tripathi and A.S. Gaur at port cities along the Konkan coast, among others. Given these important projects it is striking how few surveys and excavations of Gupta period sites in North India have been done. The reports for those that have been conducted, as for example at the site of Eran, remain unpublished. Studies of

often resulted in a misrepresentation of the dynamics of exchange – i.e. assuming a unidirectional flow of influence rather than recovering patterns of cultural reciprocity. And, as recent studies show, these imbalances have occasioned an overestimation of the “Gupta period” and its usefulness as a heuristic for engaging the Southeast Asian sources.<sup>20</sup>

## 2 Structure and Organization

Although many of the bodies of evidence surveyed in the articles that follow may be well known – e.g. the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, the Gupta frieze from Gaḍhwā, Faxian’s “Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms,” or the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta – and the site names familiar, this general familiarity does not imply a critical understanding. By contrast, the individual contributions show clearly that the very material and textual sources integral to the critical recovery of the “Gupta period” – broadly conceived – remain understudied and undertheorized. As a consequence of these serious lacunae in our knowledge, we posit that rethinking the Guptas, the cultural agents involved, the period in which they were active, and its reception history must start from the ground up. By returning to these texts, images, inscriptions, and sites with fresh questions, each of the studies included addresses overarching historical questions through a finely grained analysis of primary sources.

The book explores three related topics: 1) primary sources; 2) transdisciplinary perspectives; and 3) periodization.

*Primary sources:* All articles in this volume engage with primary sources – texts (manuscripts, inscriptions, but also genres or aesthetic modes of literary production), images, material artifacts, and monuments, as well as archaeological sites and landscapes. By focusing on primary sources in this way, we aim to expand the categories in which the study of premodern South and Southeast Asia has traditionally been divided – in particular, by troubling the binary of text-focused (philological) or archaeologically driven (centering around material objects and sites) modes of scholarship. Complicating the parameters of individual categories of sources (e.g. “texts,” “material objects”) and drawing

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the Gupta sites in North India still rely on the old survey reports of Alexander Cunningham (ca. 1800s).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Mathilde C. Mechling, “Buddhist and Hindu Metal Images of Indonesia. Evidence for Shared Artistic and Religious Networks across Asia (c. 6th–10th century)” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2020).

attention to the interconnections between different bodies of evidence opens up new spaces for dialogue between scholars with a particular expertise in one or more of these categories.

*Transdisciplinary perspectives:* In conceiving the sections of this book we have, as a consequence of our understanding of primary sources, identified categories that cross boundaries and intersect with each other in order to represent a plurality of perspectives (e.g. ritual, narrative, landscape, and so on). This arrangement allows us to highlight the ways in which scholars use sources and the kinds of questions we can ask of these sources. The organization of papers, combined with the theoretical framing of the introduction, works to make explicit some of the implicit working assumptions that have long guided the approaches to the sources on the basis of supposedly well-defined categories (texts, objects, etc.). Finally, we highlight the relevance of the individual articles beyond their traditional disciplinary associations in order to facilitate a “transdisciplinary dialogue.”

*Periodization:* In framing this volume, we also address issues of temporality and periodization. One aim of this discussion is to complicate the notion of the “classical age” or the “Gupta period” (which formed the specific temporal horizon of the original ERC project) by revisiting premodern sources. What is or has been the role of primary sources in categorizing “ages”? By contrast, how might classical sources also attest to the dynamism and innovative potential of a period? While classical modes of cultural production identified in sources of the Gupta period appear to be fixed or crystallized, the papers of this volume reveal highly adaptable, innovative, and dynamic modes of cultural production even within traditional idioms.

To create topical and thematic links between diverse bodies of textual and material evidence, the book is organized into three sections: 1) “Narrative Form and Literary Legacies”; 2) “Political Landscapes and Regional Identity”; and 3) “Religion, Ritual, and Empowerment.”

The section “Narrative Form and Literary Legacies” investigates the use of narrative to craft rhetorics of community and identity in the premodern world. The papers in this section are particularly concerned with the ideological dimensions of narrative, and accompanying questions of authorship, audience, and patronage. Destabilizing the association of narrative with textual or literary productions, these papers also consider how stories are told in material and visual representations, and consider the social lives of epic tales and characters as they are transformed by memory and reception history. To what extent did narratives serve as vectors for social change, as stages to contest norms, or as

tools to perennialize boundaries? How were narratives embedded in particular places and times? Alternatively, how did narrative forms and literary ideologies transcend spatial and temporal constraints?

This section includes the following four articles:

- James L. Fitzgerald, “Why So Many Other Voices in the ‘Brahmin’ *Mahābhārata*?”
- Peter C. Bisschop, “After the *Mahābhārata*: On the Portrayal of Vyāsa in the *Skandapurāṇa*”
- Laxshmi Rose Greaves, “The ‘Best Abode of Virtue’: *Sattra* Represented on a Gupta Frieze from Gaṛhwā, Uttar Pradesh”
- Hans T. Bakker, “The *Skandapurāṇa* and Bāṇa’s *Harṣacarita*”

The *Mahābhārata*, a founding epic of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, forms the entry point of this section. The four papers included here move beyond traditional scholarly approaches to narrative form by exploring the social, economic, and historical realities that motivated and informed literary production. Fitzgerald reads the *Mahābhārata* epic against the grain – that is, he focuses on supplemental narratives that depict life outside of the court of the Bharatas and their rivals – and, in doing so, uncovers a diversity of voices that challenge the text’s Brahminic ideology from within. These include some remarkably harsh critiques of brahmins and their behavior, reflecting different ideological registers within a single textual tradition that has undergone significant changes in the course of its composition and transmission. Bisschop, by contrast, looks beyond the *Mahābhārata* and considers the historical reception of the authoritative epic, in which one voice, that of its narrator, Vyāsa, has been co-opted by later authors. By tracing the translation of Vyāsa in new contexts, Bisschop reflects upon the strategies employed by religious communities to develop and expand upon the canon after the *Mahābhārata*, either by continuing the epic’s narrative frame or by producing entirely new authoritative religious texts in the form of the dynamic genre of Purāṇa.

The question of genre runs through all four papers in this section. Greaves’s paper alerts us to the fact that narrative exists not only in textual but also in visual form. It is well known that Indic cultural agents used visual narratives not just for embellishment but also for rhetorical and didactic purposes (as, for example, in the famous narrative reliefs from Sanchi). In her fresh reading of the imagery employed on the magnificent Gupta-period frieze from Gaṛhwā, Greaves provides a striking example of the communicative aspects of material form: the elevation and grounding of a ritual practice in a specific locale, through visual reference to the *Mahābhārata*’s characters and themes. The question as to how cultural agents work across different genres is taken up by Bakker, who speculates on the interrelationship, and the potential for mutual awareness, between

two texts, the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Harṣacarita*, belonging to two distinct literary genres – Purāṇa and Kāvya, respectively – but operating within a shared geographical and historical space. Recovering the interface between the two texts allows him to make better sense of some formerly obscure references in both texts. In doing so, Bakker brings together textual and material sources, showing, for instance, how a singular object (a Gupta-period seal depicting an enigmatic goddess) can be read in relation to the description of a gruesome place dedicated to the goddess at Kurukṣetra in both of these texts.

As presented by the authors, these papers give voice to an eagerness on the part of premodern cultural agents to engage with narrative form as a means to make authoritative claims. Such a claim may be expressed in oblique ways, as in the case of the non-brahmin voices studied by Fitzgerald, which ultimately, and somewhat dramatically, serve to promote the reactionary agenda of the epic. We can observe this process in a more manifest and radical way in Bisschop's paper, in which the Śaiva authors of the *Skandapurāṇa* portray Vyāsa, the narrator and composer of the *Mahābhārata*, as a Pāśupata devotee, a role unheard of in the previous tradition. The profound change in meaning of the *sattra* studied by Greaves, from an extended Vedic ritual to a charitable almshouse, likewise needed to be incorporated within a canonical framework to make the innovation credible. As argued by Greaves, this was achieved through the innovation of the artist(s) of the frieze, who depicted the *sattra*, perennialized in stone, in an imagined *Mahābhārata* setting. And when the poet Bāṇa evokes the goddess Sarasvatī in his description of the recitation of the Purāṇa at the start of his *Harṣacarita*, this serves, as Bakker argues in his contribution, to legitimize Bāṇa's role as a court poet through veiled allusions to his own legendary ancestry. Uncovering such claims of authority requires an act of reimagination on the part of the historian, who is by definition distanced in time and place from the contemporary setting in which such claims mattered and were accepted, or challenged. Much of the literary legacy of these premodern sources depends precisely upon the outcome of this historical process.

The section "Political Landscapes and Regional Identity" engages with recent scholarship on the development, expansion, and transformation of political landscapes. Combining the study of particular sites, [inter]regional economic networks, and imperial geographies, the papers of this section examine the ways in which interventions in the physical and built terrain served as a means of self-styling for rulers of imperial and regionally embedded polities. These studies also raise broader questions concerning the participation and investment of other social groups – e.g. religious specialists, artisans, merchants, and scribes – in shaping a regional identity. Moving between the disciplines of art history,



epigraphy, archaeology, and anthropology, these papers use objects, inscriptions, monuments, and physical terrain to access the development of economic, political, and social networks across regions. How were regimes of power articulated and contested spatially and over time? How might we approach disparate objects and sites as evidence of the interactions of humans with their environments over time? Can we conceive of these sources as materialized expressions of identity and community in the premodern world? And to what extent can the lived world of premodern agents be accessed through the surviving material evidence?

This section includes the following four articles:

- Max Deeg, “Describing the Own Other: Chinese Buddhist Travelogues Between Literary Tropes and Educational Narratives”
- Emmanuel Francis, “Imperial Languages and Public Writing in Tamil South India: A Bird’s-Eye View in the Very *Longue Durée*”
- Miriam T. Stark, “Landscapes, Linkages, and Luminescence: First-Millennium CE Environmental and Social Change in Mainland Southeast Asia”
- Janice Stargardt, “Sri Ksetra, 3rd Century BCE to 6th Century CE: Indianization, Synergies, Creation”

The section’s title takes its cue from Adam Smith’s *The Political Landscape*, a work that has raised fundamental questions about the spatial and sociopolitical organization of “early complex polities.”<sup>21</sup> While Smith’s book deals with the manipulation of space in different cultural contexts (Mesopotamia, Urartu, and the Maya state), the active constitution of a “political landscape” has been just as crucial to the various regional and subregional formations stretching across premodern Asia. As the papers in this section make clear, this landscape is not homogenous, but inherently plural and complex. Distinct “political landscapes” were carved out over long stretches of time, even as these frequently operated in a shared space and continuum of cultural and political discourse. While the framework of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” provides a certain explanatory model for organizing the rich available sources that evince a transregional adoption of certain Indic cultural forms and sociopolitical regimes, the papers in this section each address the inherent tensions between the universalist ideology that motivated the creation of empire, and processes of cultural integration that aimed to bridge both distance and difference.

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<sup>21</sup> Adam T. Smith, *The Political Landscape. Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Of the three sections in the book, the papers included under this heading address the widest geographic range and analyze the greatest variety of primary sources, both textual and material – including pilgrims’ records, ceramics, temple landscapes, hydrological systems, and inscriptions. A concern for regional identity within a world of increasing connectivity is key to all the papers in this section. Linked to the subject of genre explored in the previous section, Deeg shows how the travelogues to the land of the Buddha composed by Chinese pilgrims, while not forming a “genre” per se, nonetheless shared distinct features that made them recognizable to the “home audience” at the T’ang Court. Regional identity is carved out in these ideological constructions of foreign regions through literary descriptions of the land and its people as a foil to one’s own “homeland.” The following paper by Francis provides a *longue durée* overview of the imperial language formations in South India on the basis of inscriptions. That the insider/outsider perspective is not at all straightforward becomes particularly manifest from the example of the historical development of epigraphic Maṇḍipiravāḷam, in which Sanskrit words which were originally marked as such became assimilated to Tamil script.

The last two papers in this section address the vexed question of the formation of regional identities in the complex process of “Indianization.” Stark provides a perspective of environmental and social change in mainland Southeast Asia, with specific attention to the archaeological research carried out by her team in the Lower Mekong Basin in recent years. Stargardt presents some of the major findings of her excavations in the Pyu site of Sri Ksetra, arguing for a pre-existing network that facilitated the subsequent process of “Indianization.” Both papers engage with the formation of regional identity through the study of building practices, reminding us that spatial syntax can be just as, or even more, powerful than textual language in the formation of political landscapes.

The section “Religion, Ritual, and Empowerment” starts from the perspective that religion, ritual, and power in the premodern world were thoroughly enmeshed. The contributions investigate, more specifically, the various ways that a sense of empowerment created by and associated with objects, places, people, and rituals was integral to the expression and experience of religious authority. Examining texts, ritual practices, and the use of monuments and landscapes, each contribution treats processes and modes of empowerment realized through a variety of religious media. How and why did historical agents – religious specialists, rulers, and other actors – use and manipulate religious media to empower themselves, their lineages, and their regimes? How were practices and ideologies of empowerment co-opted, challenged, or subverted? And, perhaps most importantly, how did the potential of gaining power (ritual, political, or social) make religion persuasive in the premodern world?

This section includes the following four articles:

- Csaba Dezső, “The Meaning of the Word *ārya* in Two Gupta-Period Inscriptions”
- Bryan J. Cuevas, “Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling: A Tibetan Vajrabhairava Practice from Recently Recovered Manuscripts of the ‘Lost’ *Book of Rwa (Rwa pod)*”
- Amy Paris Langenberg, “Love, Unknowing, and Female Filth: The Buddhist Discourse of Birth as a Vector of Social Change for Monastic Women in Premodern South Asia”
- Elizabeth A. Cecil, “A Natural Wonder: From Liṅga Mountain to ‘Prosperous Lord’ at Vat Phu”

The papers in this section each address the subject of religion in relation to early Hindu and Buddhist communities, although not in explicitly theological terms or as a matter of belief. Religion here is not a category distinct from politics, society, or economy; rather, it is integrated within and informs political and social policies, gender norms, and engagements with place. In these ways, we can see the category of religion expanded and explored as a repertoire of political, social, and emplaced practices – although, it is important to note, these observations are not ones that the premodern authors, ritual specialists, and architects would have us see. Each of the authors reads against the grain and between the lines in an effort to contextualize their sources and, by doing so, subjects them to an analysis that critiques the social institutions that the sources worked to perennialize and support.

Dezső examines the religiopolitical rhetoric of some of the best-known Gupta inscriptions and reflects on the implications of the poets’ use of the term *ārya* – a Sanskrit term with a significant semantic charge: noble, worthy, and, in the case of the Gupta rulers, chosen by the Goddess of Royal Fortune herself. The use of this term to describe Skandagupta served to elevate, at least ideationally, an illegitimate son to the status of a god-like king and support claims to kingship through divine intervention. The power of language and the weaponization of powerful mantras by religious specialists form the subject of Cuevas’s article. Presenting editions and translations of recently discovered Tibetan manuscript sources of the *Rwa pod*, attributed to the enigmatic teacher Rwa lo tsā ba Rdo rje grags, Cuevas reflects on the tension in Tibetan Buddhist tantric tradition between the violent potential of ritual and the virtue of benevolence. Following Cuevas, Langenberg’s explication of Buddhist birth narratives similarly hinges on the power, and often violent power, of authoritative religious discourse. Here she examines the ways in which Buddhist canonical sources ostensibly designed to denigrate women and devalue their creative potential could, perhaps paradoxically, create both discursive and social spaces in which women could explore

roles outside of the restrictive “mother paradigm.” In the final paper of this section, Cecil returns to Sanskrit epigraphic texts, here from early Southeast Asia, and shows how the development of a royal religious culture centering on the God Śiva anchored the emergent Khmer polity. While attuned to the power of Sanskrit poetics, she argues that reading the epigraphic sources in the landscape contexts reveals the formative power of place and natural landscape features in these early expressions of “Hinduism.”

In their efforts to situate these religious ideologies and practices, the papers in this section specifically foreground the ways in which religion was a means of empowerment for individuals, institutions, and the norms they espoused – as, for example, in Dezsó’s discussion of the role of the Gupta inscriptions in political self-styling, Langenberg’s argument that repulsive birth narratives support the monastic ideal, and Cecil’s emphasis on politics as a spatial and material practice as evinced by the need for rulers to express control of and connection with the land. Accessing modes of empowerment in their respective sources reveals that these practices are plural and can also involve the empowerment of individuals and groups who are otherwise marginalized: women and sons lacking a legitimate claim to the throne. Rituals of empowerment, too, can have recourse to practices that push against established social boundaries and that involve the intentional transgression or subversion of accepted norms, as addressed clearly in Cuevas’s work. Finally, while rituals and modes of empowerment might typically rely upon the agency of human subjects, we also see the manipulation of natural places as a strategy for gaining power that recognizes non or more-than-human sources.

### 3 Conclusions

We began with the question of how scholars of premodern Asia might chart new directions in Asian studies by the study of primary sources in a transdisciplinary dialogue. The papers assembled here manifest a particular interest in discourses on material agency and object-based histories, dynamics of textual production, and modes of narrative analysis that read normative texts against the grain, as well as political and religious ecologies that situate sites and monuments in physical landscapes. Attention to these approaches permits new perspectives on cultural innovation and imagination using sources long deemed “classical” or “canonical.” In doing so, these papers engage with larger intellectual and methodological developments within the humanities and social sciences – the archival turn, new materialism, future philology, global history, and digital and

spatial humanities, to name just a few. For innovation and progress in the study of past societies, critical dialogue between specialists of the different disciplines and their primary sources is key.

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## **Part I: Narrative Form and Literary Legacies**



James L. Fitzgerald

# Why So Many ‘Other’ Voices in the ‘Brahmin’ *Mahābhārata*?

## 1 Introduction

Most scholars agree that the “Great Epic of Ancient India,” the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*), an epic story with a dynastic war over land and succession at its heart, manifests the influence of authors and redactors who were affiliated with the Brahmin traditions of ancient India.<sup>1</sup> The Brahmin traditions of India were a heterogeneous mix of intellectual traditions that were notionally centered upon the Vedas – ancient collections of orally transmitted poetry worshipping the Gods – and the employment of the Vedas in fire sacrifices directed to the Gods. But among the priestly families who knew and used the Vedas, different traditions branched out into a whole raft of ancillary concerns from phonetics and grammar to astronomy, philosophy, and statecraft. The minimal Brahmin ideal in ancient times was the priestly ideal – maintaining at least some part of the Veda in memory and conducting at least the most modest of the sacrifices – but it seems that even in the most ancient times, there were men who did not meet

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<sup>1</sup> The Brahminic religious cast of the *MBh* is so extensive that C. M. Bowra’s comprehensive comparison of heroic epics – C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952) – excludes it, for in the *MBh* “a truly heroic foundation is overlaid with much literary and theological matter” (p. v). For standard handbook accounts of the origins and composition of the *MBh*, and the role of Brahmins and Brahminic literature in it, see Edward Washburn Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 363–85; Moriz Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1908), 1: 311–25 and 387–442; and more recently and comprehensively, John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 19–21, 45, 132, 155–56, etc. For a brief account of the creation of the *MBh* in terms of the sociocultural politics of Brahminism, see James L. Fitzgerald, “Negotiating the Shape of ‘Scripture’: New Perspectives on the Development and Growth of the Epic Between the Empires,” in *Between the Empires*, ed. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 257–87, and James L. Fitzgerald, “No Contest between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*,” in *Epic and History*, ed. Kurt Raflaub and David Konstan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 103–21. For an extensive general discussion of the history of Brahminism in ancient India and the rise of Brahminic social and political ideology to the position of being the dominant discourse across most of India, see Johannes Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). Bronkhorst discusses Brahminic influences upon and authorial contributions to the *MBh* at the end of chapter 2, 233–40. See too James L. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women; 12. The Book of Peace, Part One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 100–42.

this standard, who were criticized for being “brahmins by birth alone.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to realize that the social reality of brahmins “on the ground,” as it were, was more complicated than thumbnail sketches of ancient Indian society might lead one to believe.

My understanding of the history of the *MBh* is that it descended from an older, non-Brahmin, oral epic tradition that told tales of the recurrent rivalries between the Bharata dynasty and the neighboring Pañcāla dynasty. I suggest the earlier form of our epic was simply the *Bhārata*, “the story of the Bharatas.”<sup>3</sup> Sometime around 500 to 400 BCE, the *Bhārata* story became a supercharged account centered upon a previously unknown, semidivine phratry of five heroes that was grafted into the Bharata family – the five sons of the king Pāṇḍu, the five Pāṇḍavas – who became alienated from the Kaurava phratry that treated them as interlopers. The Pāṇḍavas allied themselves with the Pañcālas through marriage, and then effected the defeat of the Kaurava Bharatas. The injection of the five semidivine heroes into the story was, I believe, the accomplishment of Veda-inspired brahmins entering somehow into the creation and dissemination of popular epic narrative. This new *Bhārata* story was told, in part, to ensure protection from the armed stratum of society for the inspired elite that claimed the ability to see and understand the Gods and other important unseen realities (e.g., *dharma*) – that is, the brahmins<sup>4</sup> – and secure that elite’s socioeconomic position in a world that was being radically transformed by the imperialism and cosmopolitanism of the eastern hegemon and by the successful new religious movements they sponsored (especially Jainism and Buddhism).<sup>5</sup> These religious movements rejected Vedic revelation and ritual and the brahmin advocates of those exclusive, esoteric

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 2 of Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won*, 109–240.

<sup>3</sup> See Fitzgerald, “No Contest between Memory and Invention,” 104–16, for a fuller account of my inferences and speculations on this matter. For quite a different understanding of the *MBh*’s history, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1–31 and 154–76; Hiltebeitel argues that the *MBh* was the work of a directed assembly of brahmins (a “symposium”) that spanned “at most [. . .] a couple of generations” (20).

<sup>4</sup> I write the anglicized “brahmins” when referring to actual people, the members of the first of the four canonical social groups as defined in Brahminic normative texts. (I merely transcribe the labels for the other three groups: *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras*). When I refer to generalized features of the society or culture of brahmins, I use the adjectives “Brahmin” or “Brahminic.”

<sup>5</sup> For comprehensive accounts of these political and cultural developments, see Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and G. M. Bongard-Levin, *Mauryan India* (New Delhi: Stirling Publishers, 1985).

texts and rites in favor of universal reasoning and one or another kind of “soul therapy” for individual persons.<sup>6</sup>

The eldest Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira, is portrayed in the epic as a pious student of brahmins, a patron of brahmins, and a favorite of brahmins. He is in fact, so infused with certain Brahminic values (particularly their adoption of the Jain ideal of “complete harmlessness,” *ahiṃsā*) that initially he refused to take the crown after he won the bloody, internecine Bhārata war. Yudhiṣṭhira was eventually persuaded that violent kingship was truly necessary when he was told the myth of the first great human king Pṛthu, who was fashioned – fully grown and fully armed – by a group of brahmins out of the right hand of the wicked king Vena, whom the brahmins had slain because, they said, he erased the distinctions between the four canonical orders of society (the four *varṇas*), a socio-economically threatening form of *varṇa* confusion (*varṇasaṃkara*).<sup>7</sup> Pṛthu paid obeisance to the brahmins immediately upon his creation and asked for their commands. The brahmins ordered him to be restrained in his behavior (*niyata*; no small point, as many stories of kings’ interactions with brahmins in the *MBh* emphasize);<sup>8</sup> also, to do what is Lawfully Right – that is *dharma* – in all circumstances; to be equitable toward all; to punish with force of arms those who violate *dharma*; and, lastly, to bend all his efforts to elevating the Vedas as maintained by Vedic brahmins (*MBh* 12.59.109–112). One of the central points of the *MBh* narrative is to charter Yudhiṣṭhira, the victorious new king of the Bharatas, as a new Pṛthu preserving *dharma* with force and protecting brahmins. This episode attests

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6 See the discussions “Newer Senses of Dharma: The Rise of the Yoga Discourse and Values of Social Harmony” and “The Double Crisis of Dharma Provoked by the Mauryans” in the introduction to my translation of the *Rājadharmaparvan* of the *MBh*’s twelfth book, the *Śāntiparvan* (“The Book of Peace”): Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*: 109–23.

7 The term *varṇasaṃkara* also refers to the inappropriate marriages of people of different *varṇas*: basically the word describes the general breakdown of the old Brahminic social and economic order. The story of Pṛthu is told to Yudhiṣṭhira near the beginning of his instruction in kingship after the war, in *MBh* 12.59 (see in particular stanzas 95–129): Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 309–11.

8 There is a pronounced strain of brahmin-led revolutionary violence in many of the epic’s supplemental narratives, numerous narratives representing the abuse of brahmins by loutish rulers, and a number of expressions of horror at *varṇasaṃkara*. One thematically based selection of these is analyzed in my paper, “The Rāma Jāmadagnya Thread of the Mahābhārata: A New Survey of Rāma Jāmadagnya in the Pune Text,” in *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature*, ed. Mary Brockington (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2002), 89–132. I have cataloged a longer list of them in an unpublished paper I read at a conference entitled “Whose Veda,” hosted by Prof. Vasudha Narayanan in Gainesville, Florida, in February 1996: “The Making of the King: Brahmin Resentment and Apocalyptic Violence in the *Mahābhārata*.”

to the *MBh* as a story based on Brahmin ideology and advancing the claims of brahmins to be the sole determiners of right and wrong in the polity and the society – claims that were certainly not generally accepted at this time. The teachings of the Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas and the edicts of Aśoka positively attest to the bare fact; the many Brahminic registrations of grievance over slights to Brahmin dignity and the many stories in the *MBh* demonstrating the power of brahmins attest to the pain felt as a result of it.

One of the principal ways that the distinctions between the canonical orders of society were felt by some to be subject to erasure in northern India about 400 BCE was the perceived maldistribution of patronage to unqualified brahmins of poor Vedic learning or low standards in selecting their ritual patrons; or, worse, the patronage of non-brahmins such as Buddhists or Jains. Properly educated brahmins believed that they had a monopoly on knowing and teaching *dharma* (and receiving patronage for doing so) and one of the main points in fashioning Yudhiṣṭhira as the new Pṛthu and setting him at the center of the *Bhārata* narrative was to propagate this vision of a society and polity headed by a king dedicated to and guided by brahmins. The only way an elite that produces no material goods can thrive, or even exist, without outright begging, is through a transfer of wealth to them effected by the armed stratum of society and the consequent honor and protection of them by the armed rulers. One of the goals of the *MBh* was to argue the world should have an honorable and secure place for brahmins – which was not at all a “done deal” in ancient northern India in 400 BCE – and it seems that the *MBh* was persuasive in this regard for significant portions of the subcontinent across the following centuries, given the widespread patronage of brahmins and Brahmin literary and intellectual pursuits across northern India,<sup>9</sup> and beyond, in the stressful centuries following the demise of the Mauryan empire and leading eventually to the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century CE.<sup>10</sup>

But while I think this gloss of the *MBh* as a reactionary document is true as far as it goes, the burden of my argument in this paper is that some of the

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<sup>9</sup> The two major manifestations of this support are the vast proliferation of the genre of *purāṇa* – see James L. Fitzgerald, “History and Primordium in Ancient Indian Historical Writing: *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* in the *Mahābhārata* and Beyond,” in *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 49–53 – and the voluminous support afforded to properly Brahminic disciplines (*śāstras*) and the composition of Sanskrit poetry. For an extended discussion of these latter expressions of what he has called the “Sanskrit cosmopolis,” see Sheldon Pollock’s *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See Fitzgerald, “No Contest between Memory and Invention,” 116–17 and Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won*, 404–12.

cosmopolitanism of the non-brahmin Mauryan emperors and the universalism of the Buddhist and Jain rivals of brahmins seeped into the epic – something that is evident from the very fact that the *MBh* includes a large number of supplemental narratives teaching *dharma* in one form or another that depict life outside the courts of the Bharatas and their rivals: life in the wilderness and in various kinds of sacred settlements that dot the wilderness, and life in towns and big cities. And though the majority of these stories present or examine the status and position of brahmins, they often do so in oblique ways, employ an unexpected diversity of voices, and include some harsh criticism of brahmins and Brahminism.

I shall take a sampling of these supplemental *dharma* teachings, noting particularly their settings and the casts of their characters. Perhaps befitting a culture with significant memories of nomadic transhumance, there are long journeys involved in many of these episodes: some of the discussions take place on the road, some even in the road, as my first examples show.

## 2 Mañki and *Mokṣadharmā* in the Town Square

I begin in the middle of the road in an unnamed city with the voice of Mañki,<sup>11</sup> an enterprising member of the third canonical order, the *vaiśyas*, the propertied producers of Brahminic society, not the armed, land-based rulers, the *kṣatriyas*. After failing at many ventures, Mañki sank the last of his wealth into a pair of young oxen only to watch them carried off in a freak accident. As Mañki led his two calves out for training, yoked together with a brace, they bolted impulsively into the town square and ran up on either side of a camel that was sitting on the ground. The irritated camel sprang to its feet under their brace, lifted the two calves off the ground and ran off with them – each of them bobbing on one side and the other of him like two ear baubles. Mañki was in absolute despair at first; but then he came to radical disaffection from the world, *nirveda*, and spoke movingly about no longer being the plaything of his desires. This hapless businessman-turned-philosopher underwent a spontaneous conversion to the *mokṣadharmā*, which is living with a view to one's release from the painful

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<sup>11</sup> *MBh* 12.171. References to the *MBh* are to its critical edition: V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, eds., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66); John D. Smith's electronic version of the critically constituted text is available at Professor Smith's website: "The *Mahābhārata*," *bombay.indology.info*, accessed November 1, 2019, <http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/welcome.html>.

contingencies of endless rebirth, all of which, of course, are based on one's desires and the actions one undertakes to fulfill them.

In our *Mahā-Bhārata*, the “Great, Full, or Universal” *Bhārata*, a number of brahmins espouse *mokṣadharmā* in various forms, and today we take for granted the *mokṣadharmā* belongs there. But the *mokṣadharmā* had no place in the original narrative of the *Bhārata* war. Also, the *mokṣadharmā* contains elements of strong antagonism to the ancient Vedic commitment to ritual action. Epic *mokṣadharmā* is a hybrid philosophy with roots in both the cosmic universalism of the Vedas and Upaniṣads – by which persons sought to align themselves with the underlying powers of the world – and the therapies of mind and soul used to escape the world by the non-Brahmin religions that were patronized by the eastern emperors. *Mokṣadharmā* did eventually become integral to much of classical Brahmin thought, *in part, it would seem, because of the prominence it came to have in the MBh*. It represents a slow leavening of Brahminism with the person-centered perspectives of the non-Vedic religious movements.

### 3 A Jackal Preaches *Sādhāraṇa Dharmas* to a Brahmin Laid Low

My next example comes from right down in the dust of the road.<sup>12</sup> A wealthy, arrogant *vaiśya* riding along in his chariot knocked a scrupulously ascetic brahmin off his feet. At first the brahmin was furious; then he despaired and planned to kill himself. He cried out, “I’ll just die. There’s no point in a poor man’s bothering to live.”<sup>13</sup> His cry of despair occasioned a lengthy sermon to him by a jackal who had witnessed his misfortune, a sermon pointing out to him that not only did he enjoy all the advantages human beings have over animals – such as being able to pick bugs off his body – he was, as a learned brahmin, in the top position among humans. The jackal encouraged him to complement his Vedic piety with some of the virtues of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*, that is, the habits and attitudes that are right for all people universally, such as self-control, non-resentment, contentment, kindness, and generosity – *universal dharma* as opposed to one’s *particular dharma*, *svadharmā*, that is set by one’s

<sup>12</sup> *MBh* 12.173.

<sup>13</sup> *MBh* 12.173.5–6.



situation in the world, especially one's sex and one's *varṇa*. The brahmin got up, dusted himself off, and praised the jackal's speech as wise.

This little colloquy also participates in the larger cultural tensions that concern us. While no one tradition or people has a monopoly on advocating kindness, generosity, and self-control – and these virtues *are* praised in some of the old Vedic texts – these habits of behavior were centrally emphasized by the non-Brahmin movements of the Jains and the Buddhists. The Jains in particular made the value *ahiṃsā* – which is “harmlessness in all aspects of one's behavior” – the paramount category for the ethical evaluation of all actions. Holding *ahiṃsā* to be the paramount value seems to have spread from them to the Buddhists and then to the brahmins and, all across the board, helped encourage the focus upon the subjective experience of individual persons that became one of the major threads of all the therapies pursuing release from suffering and rebirth.

After showing this brahmin being scolded – while in fact praising Brahmin hierarchy – this episode includes a coda that praises Brahminism pointedly while criticizing its learned critics, the “Naysayers,” *nāstikas*, those who explicitly deny the holiness of the Vedas and the effectiveness of Brahmin sacrifices. At the end of his pep talk to the brahmin, the jackal revealed that he himself had been a brahmin in an earlier life, but he had been a treasonous brahmin, a logic-chopping pedant, who spoke in public assemblies making arguments based on reason and criticizing Vedic religion and brahmins and their rites.<sup>14</sup> His current birth as an animal was the unwelcome fruit of that evil behavior. Of course, the rationalism and skepticism labeled evil here were often associated, in the Brahmin tradition, with Buddhist philosophy's criticism of Brahmin reliance upon transhuman revelations and rituals, as the Buddhists advocated the same radical disaffection from action as Maṅki's *mokṣadharmā*. This coda attests to the enduring ambivalence of the Brahmin tradition toward the new religions.

## 4 The *Ahiṃsā-Sadācāra* Pair

Promoting the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* came to be one of the major messages of the *MBh* in its central epic narrative as well as in these supplemental narratives. In both these realms of the text, *ahiṃsā* became emblematic of the whole set of norms. *Ahiṃsā* came to be an ethical hot point in Indian society because the old Brahmin ritual tradition sometimes prescribed the slaughter of animals and

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<sup>14</sup> *MBh* 12.173.45–47.

that practice became a toxic emblem of the Brahmin tradition for many. Two of the most interesting *dharm*a-instructions of the *MBh* are initially focused on attacking or defending the tradition and its sacrificing of animals. The attack comes from one Tulādhāra, a produce-merchant in the northeastern city of Banaras; the defense, from an unnamed butcher in the northeastern city of Mithilā. Both of these texts move from the matter of *ahiṃsā* to the fundamentally important philosophical principle of whether animal sacrifice does or does not invalidate the argument that the general behavior of the Brahminically loyal and pious community is to be considered a default standard for knowing what is right behavior, that is *dharm*a. The Brahminic tradition that theorized and systematized *dharm*a argued definitively that the behavior of the community of the pious, what was called the *sadācāra*, can be taken as an indication of what is *dharm*a generally, so long as it does not contradict anything explicitly prescribed in the text of the Veda or in the other normative texts of the learned Brahmin tradition. Our two episodes are further interesting because both of them – both the attack and the defense – use voices and arguments that stand squarely in the cosmopolitan world ushered in with the eastern empires of the fourth century BCE. That is, both of them come from and are addressed to people from well outside the narrow pathways of the strictly Vedic Brahmin tradition.

## 5 A Temporary Detour into the *Āpaddharma*

But before I turn to these stories, I will observe that the issue of whether the behavior of the community of the Brahminically pious is intrinsically normative is the source of another extremely important and related topic the *MBh* takes up and “discusses” in some of its most important stories of the road: the *āpaddharma*, *dharm*a for those times when, it is argued, the norms of *dharm*a behavior cannot be observed because of some exigency. This argument implies that the pious retain their status as human exemplars worthy of respect and, in the case of brahmins, patronage (*arhats*, to borrow a Buddhist term that the *MBh* does not use<sup>15</sup>), even when they may indulge in demonstrably substandard behavior.<sup>16</sup> There is a rebuttal to this kind of self-interested compromise,

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<sup>15</sup> The Brahminic term for one who is worthy to receive donations that will produce merit for the donor is *pātra*. I bring up the Buddhist term because the concept of worthiness lies upon its surface.

<sup>16</sup> See Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 152–64.

at least for brahmins, in the *MBh*'s exaltation of the saintly brahmin who refuses to abandon his *svadharma* of Vedic ritual and recitation in the face of severe economic hardship – the *uñchavṛttin*, one who survives by gleaning, whose *modus vivendi* frequently amounts to slow starvation. Besides a series of texts that argue the importance of the *āpaddharma* in the twelfth book of the *MBh*,<sup>17</sup> there is a set of three powerful road stories contesting these matters: two that advocate the acceptance of degraded brahmin behavior in exigent circumstances<sup>18</sup> and one that glorifies the uncompromising *uñchavṛtti* as the most excellent way for brahmins to live.<sup>19</sup> These stories are interesting and important, but they are more highly focused upon infra-Brahminical issues than those I am currently presenting and even a short reprise of them here will take us too far away from the themes of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* and the 'other voices' of the *MBh*. So I will present these road stories on the theme of *āpaddharma* in an appendix to the main paper and I turn now to the merchant of Banaras and the butcher of Mithilā.

## 6 Back to the *Ahiṃsā-Sadācāra* Pair of Stories

Both these stories are elaborately constructed multi-episode sermons. In the first of them, a typecast produce-merchant in Banaras, Tulādhāra (“one who holds a balance or scale”), delivers a scathing criticism of the practice of sacrificing animals to a somewhat hapless brahmin ascetic, Jājali, and then argues to Jājali that, because of such practices, the *sadācāra* cannot be taken as an indication of *dharma*. This attack occasioned another elaborately constructed narrative that offers a considered response to this attack, one that upholds the basic goodness of the *sadācāra* in general and in regard to animal sacrifices in particular. Taking the bull by the horns, so to speak, the text responding to the Banaras grocer is put into the mouth of a butcher in Janaka's city of Mithilā and preached to a pious Kauśika brahmin who is deficient in his adherence to the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*. Interestingly, both brahmins have traveled to the two cities from the hinterland, having had their virtue and their knowledge of *dharma* criticized by beings inferior to them – in terms of the Brahminically defined sociopolitical hierarchy – and having been urged in each case to seek out *dharma*-

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<sup>17</sup> Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 505–7.

<sup>18</sup> 12.139–140 (Viśvāmitra's eating of dog flesh during a famine and Bhīṣma's defense of it) and 12.162–167 (“The Story of the Ungrateful Brahmin”).

<sup>19</sup> 12.340–353 (“The Account on Gleaning as a Way of Life”).

instruction from men who were not brahmins. Also, both these brahmins are specially marked in the narratives by the way they treated animals: Jājali, the wilderness ascetic, had been kind to a family of birds, but the Kauśika, a village brahmin, had killed a she-crane that had pooped on his head while he recited the Vedas under a tree outside the village.

## 7 Tulādhāra-Jājali

In the first of these stories,<sup>20</sup> the brahmin ascetic Jājali thought he had done a wonderfully heroic deed when, with a kind heart, he had fostered a generation of sparrows nesting in the piles of uncut hair coiled on top of his head, as he stood perfectly motionless performing asceticism at the sea-shore. But then some local Rākṣasas told him that his paltry understanding of *dharma* would be expanded if he would journey to Banaras and take instruction there from the merchant Tulādhāra.

Tulādhāra is a *vaiśya*, but he is explicitly established as having mental powers commensurate with many Brahmin seers by a description of his clairvoyant knowledge of Jājali while the latter is traveling to Banaras for the purpose of interviewing him. Further details establish Tulādhāra as a city-dwelling produce-merchant conversant with the philosophy of *dharma*. He tells Jājali that the best actions are always those that do the least harm to other beings, and further, that always being solicitous of the welfare of others is the highest *dharma*. His own way of life conforms to these principles and is characterized by other virtues of both the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* and the *mokṣadharmas*.<sup>21</sup> He then launches into criticism of the principle that *dharma* can be known from the behavior of the community of the pious because those communities were observed to engage in various forms of cruelty, starting with the sacrificing of cattle and extending all the way to slavery.<sup>22</sup> He also makes the obvious, logical point that such a principle is circular.<sup>23</sup> The arguments in “The Dialog of Tulādhāra and Jājali” are complicated and sometimes opaque; the language is

<sup>20</sup> “The Dialog of Tulādhāra and Jājali,” *MBh* 12.252–56.

<sup>21</sup> *MBh* 12.254.1–20.

<sup>22</sup> Slavery is described at *MBh* 12.254.38cd: “Humans even exploit other humans by using them as slaves” (*mānuṣā mānuṣān eva dāsabhogena bhūñjate*).

<sup>23</sup> *īdṛśān aśivān ghorān ācārān iha jājale / kevalācaritatvāt tu nipuṇān nāvabudhyase* // 12.254.49. The word *nipuṇāt* (“because of cleverness”) is ironic: “Because you are so clever, Jājali, you fail to realize that these horrible cruelties are ‘normative forms of behavior’ here only because they are actually done.”

often elliptical; and the text has been subject to many perturbations, as Ian Proudfoot showed more than thirty years ago.<sup>24</sup> But it is one of the most interesting and important of the epic’s supplemental narratives because of the glimpse it gives us into the Brahmin tradition negotiating the complexities of imperial and postimperial cosmopolitanism. In the end, Jājali is converted to Tulādhāra’s views as the birds he had nurtured earlier now circled about his head and praise Tulādhāra’s ethical points to him – a constructed scene of good cheer and harmony among members of the hierarchical society and the animal realm that is a recurrent narrative emblem of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* the *MBh* has come to value.

## 8 The Butcher of Mithilā

All the same points can be made about the text that answers Tulādhāra-Jājali. That answering text is the “*Brāhmaṇa-vyādha-saṃvāda*” that is found in book 3 of the *MBh*. It was translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen under the title “The Colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter.”<sup>25</sup> While the word *vyādha* frequently does mean “hunter,” this story makes clear that the *vyādha* here is a butcher in the city of Mithilā, a commercial meat vendor who works in a slaughterhouse (*sūna*, 3.198.10) in the city, selling the flesh of various kinds of animals (venison, buffalo, boar [*mṛga*, *mahiṣa*, 198.10; *varāha*, 198.31]) – that he himself has not killed (198.31). It is quite clear that this text was constructed as a response to the Tulādhāra-Jājali text: it too begins with a pious brahmin’s encounter with a bird that reveals a defect in him – violent irascibility; this defect is pointed out by a social inferior, here a housewife who lectures him at length on *dharma* and sends him on a journey to Mithilā to take *dharma* instruction from a Brahminically loyal *śūdra* butcher there. Thus the birds, the pious but defective brahmins, the criticism of them from inferiors, their journeys from the hinterland to the cities, and, finally, the vesting of serious *dharma*-teaching authority with inferior men who embody the essence of the arguments they speak: these elements show that the texts really do form an intentional pair that demonstrates the Brahmin tradition’s high sensitivity to the criticism of its claimed monopoly

<sup>24</sup> Ian Proudfoot, *Ahimsā and a Mahābhārata Story: The Development of the Story of Tulādhāra in the Mahābhārata in Connection with Non-Violence, Cow-Protection and Sacrifice*, Asian Studies Monographs, New Series 9 (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> *MBh* 3.198–206. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 617–38.

on the teaching of *dharma*. The story of the Mithilā butcher's teaching of *dharma* is too rich and complicated to present all its significant details here, so I offer only a rapid review of its highlights.

First, its brahmin foil is orthodox and pious – he was doing his daily Veda recitation when a she-crane shat upon his head. The spontaneous rage that led to his killing the crane is a recurrent, if unfortunate, meme in the profile of ancient brahmins, as is his killing the offending bird with a baleful glance, a direct expression of the brahmin's inner power. He does immediately regret his burst of rage as he goes on his way into the village to beg his daily alms, but he fails to learn any lesson from the incident, as we shall see.

At a familiar house on his round, he encounters a housewife, who refuses to interrupt her serving her husband's meal in order to give the brahmin his alms. He berates her angrily for neglecting him, but, unlike the unfortunate crane, she lives and she answers him smartly. She defends herself with an emphasis upon her doing her *svadharmā* as a wife. She scolds him for being less than a good brahmin and preaches him a sermon that is an interesting mixture of *sādhāraṇa dharma* – self-control, mastering anger, *ahiṃsā*, etc. – and Veda-based practices, referring to the brahmin's *svadharmā*. She concludes by pointing out that *dharma* is often quite subtle and his understanding of it is rather deficient. (One of her points to him was, “Those who know *dharma* never kill women,” 3.197.42cd.) She directs him to travel to Mithilā for further *dharma*-instruction from a pious *śūdra* butcher there (3.197.30–44). The text now works hard to legitimate this butcher's piety and his authority: he does not kill or eat the meat he sells, and he engages in various forms of virtuous behavior (some of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*) as a means to counteract the evil of his hereditary profession. But most importantly, his piety toward his elderly parents is presented at length as a demonstration of his being a *dharmātman* person.

Just as the woman did earlier, the butcher defends his life as being his proper *dharma*, *svadharmā*. His proper work is part of the division of labor ordained by God (the system of the four social orders, the four *varṇas*) and it enables Vedic knowledge and royal government to effect the prosperity of the worlds. He is not at all resentful, and he never castigates anyone more powerful than himself (3.198.19–30). In making this general defense of Brahminic hierarchy, he strongly defends the king's use of violence (*daṇḍa*) for coercing everyone to perform his *svadharmā* – that is, preventing the mixing of *varṇas* in terms of who gets paid to do what – which, as said earlier, is one of the brahmins' principal complaints and the whole point of the hierarchy in the first place. As to the violence of the sacrificial ritual, it does not harm its pious performers as long as their motives are only to do *dharma*, and it enables the animals killed to get to heaven (3.198.55–68 and 199.6–9). He argues that *sadācāra*

is a legitimate way to know *dharma*, because – and this argument is remarkable – the community of the pious is generally characterized by their virtues and the *sādhāraṇa dharmas are the virtues that legitimate them*. Overall, his instruction to the brahmin is laced with exhortations to the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*. Furthermore, this *śūdra* butcher teaches *mokṣadharmā* as well, and at great length!

It was an ingenious stroke of rhetoric to fashion the authoritative voice in this story as an urban butcher from the lowest of the four Brahminic social orders – to use such a type in order to address the criticisms of people like Tulādhāra and subsequently present a comprehensive defense of the Brahminic social hierarchy and its reliance upon royal violence. The genius of the Mithilā butcher's defense of Brahminism becomes clear if we contrast it with another spirited defense of cow sacrifice that was put into the mouth of a cow about to be sacrificed (the *Gokāpiliya*, 12.260–62). The cow belonged to the old Vedic creator God Tvaṣṭṛ and it was king Nahuṣa, an ancient ancestor of the Bharatas, who planned to kill her. A number of the arguments made by our butcher in Mithilā are put into the mouth of Tvaṣṭṛ's cow, who is shown answering criticisms put by one of the emblematic sages of *mokṣadharmā* philosophy, Kapila.<sup>26</sup> As with the *śūdra* of Mithilā, this fanciful defense of Brahminic violence also co-opts the voice of a victim of orthodox ideology. Also, its constructing a mythic royal setting for the debate would seem to attest to the great force of the cultural energy coming from the cosmopolitan urban environment. The text featuring Tvaṣṭṛ's cow at the site of a Vedic sacrifice in a mythic time epitomizes the conservative tradition's occasional flat-footedness, its lacking *upāyakauśalya*, “persuasive skill,” to borrow another Buddhist term. The story of the butcher of Mithilā, on the other hand, shows the kind of Brahmin adaptability and skillful creativity that is characteristic of the transformation of the old *Bhārata* into the *Mahā-Bhārata*.

## 9 The Anchorage of the *Sādhāraṇa Dharma* in the Epic's Main Narrative

But what justifies our seeing this emphasis upon *sādhāraṇa dharmas* as genuinely part of the *MBh* proper and not just an occasional feature of the supplemental narratives? The answer is that the main narrative of our “*Great Bhārata*”

<sup>26</sup> Actually, it is the otherwise unknown ṛṣi Syūmaraśmi who speaks from within the cow, having entered into her when Kapila began criticizing the sacrifice.

features the *sādhāraṇa dharma* in some strategic ways, most of which revolve around embodiments of the God Dharma in the narrative, in addition to his embodiment in his son Yudhiṣṭhira. First among these is the *śūdra* steward of the Bharata court, Vidura, who is an actual incarnation of the God Dharma. Vidura has more to say of *dharma* at the Bharata court than any other figure in the main narrative. Second is a series of challenges presented to Yudhiṣṭhira by his father, the God Dharma, to test him at strategic junctures of the main narrative – exactly at points where Yudhiṣṭhira is conveying his brothers between life and death (which underscores the fact that the God Dharma is an alter ego of the Vedic God Yama, the God who conducts the dead from this world to the next). These tests are called *jijñāsās* – something that “seeks to ‘know’ or ascertain something”; it is the character of the terrestrial son of Dharma that is under scrutiny and it is what pleases his father, Dharma, as a result of these tests that tells us something important about the value perspectives of the *MBh* as a whole.

In the first of these tests (*MBh* 3.296–298), Dharma disguises himself as a spirit, a *yaḥṣa*, that presides over a marsh in the body of a *baka* (a long-legged wading bird that could be a crane, heron, or stork; in light of Yudhiṣṭhira’s later disguising himself with the name *Kaṅka*, “Stork,” in the Pāṇḍavas’ year of incognito, we should opt for “stork” here). Yudhiṣṭhira then solves a series of riddles the stork puts to him and is thus able to bring his four brothers back to life – the stork had taken their lives because they refused to submit to his authority. Having answered the stork’s riddles successfully – and without knowing the creature’s true identity – Yudhiṣṭhira is offered a series of wishes. In each instance, Yudhiṣṭhira makes choices that exemplify *sādhāraṇa dharma* virtues – generosity, kindness, loyalty. His disguised father is delighted and reveals his identity as the God Dharma, predicting that Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers will make it through their incognito year without being discovered. This encounter with the God Dharma occurs just as the Pāṇḍavas are about to enter into the stipulated year of total incognito – itself a kind of death. It is during this year that Yudhiṣṭhira, the terrestrial stand-in of the celestial Dharma, aka Yama, adopts the incognito name *Kaṅka*, “Stork,” a striking emblem of kingship as a lord over death.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The key to understanding Yudhiṣṭhira’s curious choice of name lies in the fact that the *kaṅka* bird is the largest animal feeding upon the carrion of the battlefield in the wake of the great Bhārata war on Kurukṣetra. Previously misidentified as a “heron,” the bird in the after-battle book 11 of the *MBh* (*The Book of the Women, the Striparvan*), the *kaṅka*, must be the Indian adjutant stork (*Leptopilos dubius*), for it is the only long-legged wading bird that feeds on carrion. Standing five meters tall, it is a gigantic and ugly bird that underscores the darker side of the king’s presiding over the violence of war and punishment – the fundamental



At the very end of the entire epic, Yudhiṣṭhira leads his brothers and their wife Draupadī on a march up to heaven (*MBh* 17.1–3). A dog trails after them (17.1.23, 32, 2.11, 26). After each member of his family drops dead in succession, Yudhiṣṭhira is left with just the dog. Indra, the king of heaven, climbs on his chariot to bring Yudhiṣṭhira into heaven bodily. But Indra will not allow the dog to accompany Yudhiṣṭhira, and Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to mount the chariot without the dog, because of its devotion to him. The dog then reveals himself to be Yudhiṣṭhira's father Dharma in disguise once again, and he tells his son that he has passed another test of his virtue by this demonstration of loyalty and kindness.

Yudhiṣṭhira faces one other such test upon entering heaven. There he finds his enemies – all the war dead of the evil Kaurava phratry – celebrating; but the members of his family, who have recently died on the journey to heaven, are all in hell because of their sins. Yudhiṣṭhira insists on joining his family and he journeys to the horrible hell where they are. When finally he encounters the members of his family, they take some comfort from his presence. He then excoriates the Gods, including his father, Dharma, and sends back the messenger of the Gods who had guided him there. But shortly after the messenger informs the Gods of Yudhiṣṭhira's final decision on the matter, all the Gods appear before Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas and the hell they are in suddenly turns into a paradise. The God Dharma points out to his son that this was a third test of his virtue and that his choosing to stay with his family members has completely purified him and qualified him for heaven. The stint in hell had been necessary for him because of his fatal lie during the war, when he told his guru Droṇa that Droṇa's son had been killed.<sup>28</sup> I would point out that this lie was not just a falsehood, but one directed against the social bonds at the core of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*.

So, Brahmin "liberalism" in the *MBh* was *not* a peripheral theme of the epic. It occurred on a number of fronts even as it often met with resistance. But it is present, the result of a complex Brahminism that has gone well beyond its Vedic core, that has absorbed and begun to cultivate the waves of thought that were emanating from outside the Brahmin tradition while it also capitalized upon themes found within itself.<sup>29</sup>

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reasons Yudhiṣṭhira was ambivalent about accepting the kingship conferred by the Pāṇḍava victory in the war. See James L. Fitzgerald, "Some Storks and Eagles Eat Carrion; Herons and Ospreys Do Not: *Kaṅkas* and *Kuraras* (and *Baḍas*) in the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (1998), 257–61, and Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*; in particular, chapters 16 and 22 of book 11, pp. 54–57 and 64–65.

<sup>28</sup> See *MBh* 7.164.60ff., esp. 93–110.

<sup>29</sup> Once again, a fuller account of these matters focused upon the idea of *dharma* is available in my *Mahābhārata*, 100–128.

## Appendix: Three ‘Road Stories’ of *Dharma* during *Āpad* (“Exigency”)

### Bhīṣma’s Defense of Viśvāmitra’s Eating Dog Flesh

A *MBh* story found in the *Śāntiparvan* (12.139, with commentary from Bhīṣma in 12.140)<sup>30</sup> makes use of violent caricature and scathing sarcasm to argue a liberal “situation ethics” against the conservative pandits of the *dharmasāstra*, the Brahminic science for determining right and wrong behavior. During a prolonged period of famine and widespread starvation, the brahmin Viśvāmitra, like many others, wanders far and wide in search of food. He ends up in a repulsive hamlet of dog-eating Caṇḍālas, a tribal people outside the orders of Brahminically conceived society. This story egregiously exaggerates the “otherness” of these people to paint Viśvāmitra’s violation to be as outrageous as can be imagined. As he moves about the hamlet, Viśvāmitra eventually spies meat hanging from the rafters of one “dog-cooker’s” hut. It is meat from the hindquarters of a dog, but this fact does not deter him any more than where he found it in the first place. The brahmin reasons that taking the property of a lower-order person during such a life-or-death crisis would not be theft. In spite of having dismissed the idea he might be a thief, he waits until the dead of night, when the Caṇḍāla is asleep, and sneaks into the hut to take the meat down.

But naturally the Caṇḍāla wakes up and a most interesting conversation ensues. The Caṇḍāla cites one argument after another from the *dharmasāstra* in order to dissuade Viśvāmitra from eating the meat: it would be a great sin and he would ruin the accumulated merit of his asceticism; he would be mixing standards of behavior not suited to his nature; etc. But of course Viśvāmitra has an answer for every argument: he insists that survival takes precedence over forbidden foods and he can purify himself later if he survives. They argue back and forth, over and over, with the Caṇḍāla quoting *dharmasāstra* to the brahmin and urging him to accept death by starvation. The brahmin answers with reinterpretations of what things might look like on the surface – like the dog here would be the equivalent of a deer, etc. – all to the effect that it would not be a very serious wrong (139.50–85).<sup>31</sup> In the end, Viśvāmitra eats the dog meat

<sup>30</sup> Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 534–44.

<sup>31</sup> Relying upon what the *MBh*’s philosophy of *āpadharma* calls *vijñānabala*, “the power of understanding,” to see *dharma* in apparent *adharmā* and vice versa. See my introduction to the *MBh*’s treatment of *āpadharma*: *Mahābhārata*, 152–64, especially 153–58.

and later purifies himself, eventually attaining full perfection in heaven (139.85–90). I should add here that there was never any suggestion that the Caṇḍāla had any self-interest in making these arguments: he wasn’t trying to hang onto his meat; he was simply piously suggesting the brahmin starve to death for the brahmin’s own good! Given the discussion of this incident that ensues in the next chapter (12.140), it is quite believable that this *dharmasāstra*-spouting Caṇḍāla was constructed simply as a straw man for the criticism of *dharmasāstra* proper, which that next chapter now makes. The whole episode smacks of satire, and no element of it more so than its putting the details of *dharmasāstra* punditry into the mouth of a “barbarian” whose repulsive qualities the text goes out of its way to emphasize.

This story is told to the new Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira by the wise sage Bhīṣma as one of several episodes arguing that the *dharmasāstra* is not just a matter of “black letter law,” but requires sophistication, interpretation, and adjustment to circumstances. When his pious, brahmin-sympathizing pupil Yudhiṣṭhira expresses astonishment at Viśvāmitra’s eating the dogmeat, Bhīṣma unleashes a stunning diatribe against the narrow-minded, “strict-constructionist” literalists of *dharmasāstra*. He calls them

enemies of Law [*dharma*] who steal the science [*śāstra*, *dharmasāstra*] and explain it as being harsh because they have nonsensical understandings of practical matters. They are the most wicked of men, these enemies of Law, who seek to live off of learning and lust for glory from every side. They’re completely unsophisticated (*aśāstrakuśalāḥ*), foolish men with half-baked ideas (*apakvamatayo mandāḥ*). They keep their eyes only on the wrongs that are taught in the *dharmasāstra* and thereby steal its teachings. Their understanding of *dharmasāstra* goes, “That is not right.” They make their own teachings known only by their criticism of the teachings of others. Having taken a mouthful of metal blades for words, they speak in sharp darts and arrows; they seem to have milked the cow of learning dry [. . .] The whole of *dharma* that is known is mocked by them as a fraud.<sup>32</sup>

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32 MBh 12.140.11–17, with paraphrase and translation interspersed: *parimuṣṇanti śāstrāṇi dharmasya paripanthinaḥ / vaiśamyam arthavidyānāṃ nairarthyat khyāpayanti te //11 // ājijivīṣavo vidyāṃ yaśāskāmāḥ samantataḥ / te sarve narapāpiṣṭhā dharmasya paripanthinaḥ //12 // apkvamatayo mandā na jānanti yathātatham / sadā hy aśāstrakuśalāḥ sarvatrāpariṣṭhitāḥ //13 // parimuṣṇanti śāstrāṇi śāstradoṣānudarśinaḥ / vijñānam atha vidyānāṃ na samyag iti vartate //14 // nindayā paravidyānāṃ svām vidyāṃ khyāpayanti ye / vāgastrā vākchurimattvā dugdhavidyāphalā iva / tān vidyāvānijo viddhi rākṣasān iva bhārata //15 // vyājena kṛtsno vidīto dharmas te parihāsyate / na dharmavacanaṃ vācā na buddhyā ceti naḥ śrutam //16 // iti bārhaspatam jñānaṃ provāca maghavā svayam / na tv eva vacanaṃ kiṃ cid animittād ithocyate //17.*

## The Louche Gautama Brahmin Commits a Crime beyond Expiation, But Is Forgiven with Kindness

Bhīṣma's defense of Viśvāmitra's violation of norms opens onto a more extreme possibility: the matter of brahmins who engage in scandalous behavior habitually, not merely in times of exigency. An example of this is the story of the louche Gautama brahmin (12.162–67).<sup>33</sup> Impoverished, this brahmin leaves his native village, wanders far and wide in search of alms, and ends up living among “barbarous” tribes and adopting their ways – eating meat, marrying among them, and so on (12.162.28–37). A proper brahmin from his native town encounters him there and upbraids him because of his debasement (162.39–49). The Gautama is ashamed and takes to the road, traveling toward the sea to start his life over again. Some misadventures befall him, but eventually, the exhausted Gautama brahmin chances to benefit from the protection and sumptuous hospitality of a magnificent “stalk-legged” bird (*nāḍijaṅgha*) living in a banyan tree – a bird named Rājadharmā (“King-nature,” suggesting as well “The Laws of Kings,” *rājadharmā*), perhaps another stork.<sup>34</sup> When the Gautama tells Rājadharmā he is searching for wealth, the bird promises him that he will make it back home with newfound riches. He directs him to go to a nearby king, Virūpākṣa, “Ugly Eye,” a wealthy and munificent king of Rākṣasas, flesh-eating, night-prowling monsters – seemingly another, though more qualified “othering” of “barbarians” one might meet on the road. When our derelict brahmin arrives at Virūpākṣa's opulent city, the king probes his status and determines he is a fallen brahmin.<sup>35</sup> He decides, nonetheless, to allow him to join the thousands of brahmins who are lining up to be fed on this full-moon day of Kārttika (12.163–165.9); of course, any and all brahmins accepting honor and food from a Rākṣasa would be regarded as brahmins in name only (*brahmabandhus*). The Gautama stuffs himself at the feast and then accepts the monster king's invitation to cart off as much gold as he can carry away, as do all the other brahmins there. He overburdens himself in his greed and struggles back to Rājadharmā's banyan tree, where the bird feeds him and shelters him again. But then he kills the bird so he will have food enough for his journey back home (12.166.3) – a striking inversion of the king's presiding over the life and death of his subjects. When the Rākṣasa king becomes aware of the Gautama's perfidious act of ingratitude, he sends his monstrous minions out to hunt the brahmin ingrate down and bring him back to his court.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 590–602.

<sup>34</sup> At the least, it is another allusion to the association of such birds with kingship.

<sup>35</sup> Thus not a worthy *pātra* for any pious observer of the *sadācāra* (see above, note 15).

They do so; Ugly Eye orders him killed, and he is. But, as Bhīṣma explains next to Yudhiṣṭhira, the one sin that cannot be expiated is ingratitude, and for that reason the Rākṣasa monsters, who would normally have had no compunction about eating the brahmin's carcass, refuse to do so – for the evil in that body cannot be removed even by his capital punishment (12.166.12–25).

But just as it seems the narrative has come to rest in justice, as Ugly Eye presides over the cremation of the recovered body of the stork Rājadharmān, the Goddess who is the mother of all cows, Surabhi, appears over the stork's remains, dripping milk on them, and Rājadharmān comes back to life. The God Indra then appears and explains that Rājadharmān had been cursed to suffer death because he had once failed to pay court to the God Brahmā: this is celestial code saying that a *kṣatriya* king had failed to honor brahmins and the Vedas. Following this karma-based explanation of Rājadharmān's being murdered by a greedy brahmin ingrate, Rājadharmān, now revived by the milk of motherly kindness, invokes the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*, forgives the ungrateful brahmin (addressing him as “my dear friend Gautama”) and requests that he be brought back to life. The Gautama is brought back to life, and Rājadharmān then sends him on his way home with all his gold. Rājadharmān pays court to Brahmā without fail from then on, but the Gautama brahmin returns home, produces two evil sons, and ends up in hell (167.5–15).

In this story, not even the *āpaddharma* can save the Gautama brahmin from the consequences of his laxity. The kindness of the *sādhāraṇa dharma* redeems him temporarily, but he remains impervious to its grace, though we can infer it elevated the wronged Rājadharmān.

## The Aloof *Uñchavṛttin*: A Brahmin Diametrically Opposed to the Louche Gautama

The story of the kind Rājadharmān's forgiveness of the louche brahmin (which occurs as the final text of the *Āpaddharmaparvan* collection in Bhīṣma's postwar instruction of Yudhiṣṭhira, just before Bhīṣma's *Mokṣadharmaparvan* collection begins) seems not to have sat well with everyone. It was answered with a glorification of the human emblem of stubborn brahmin scrupulosity and aloofness, the *uñchavṛttin*, “one who lives (just) by gleaned grains”<sup>36</sup> (which stands

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<sup>36</sup> That is, not performing rituals for clients, not teaching the Vedas to pupils, not accepting donations. The reason for such inaction is that he cannot secure the patronage of sufficiently worthy (pure) clients or donors. The Gautama brahmin (and others like him) had no such scruples.

as the final text of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*).<sup>37</sup> The *uñchavṛtti* seems to have been the most saintly figure of orthodox Vedic Brahminism during the hard times of the *MBh*'s development.<sup>38</sup> The *uñchavṛtti* is a brahmin householder who lives on the small amounts of grain he gleanes every day; that is to say, he is often close to starving to death because of poverty.<sup>39</sup> The *uñchavṛtti* brahmin lives this way because, even in the exigent circumstance of there being no sufficiently pure clients for his services or sufficiently pure donors to give him alms,<sup>40</sup> he refuses to adopt any livelihood other than his now-unremunerative priestly duties and Veda recitations. He will not abandon the *svadharma* of the orthodox brahmin and stoop to earning his livelihood by commerce or in the service of the king.

There are a number of glorifications of *uñchavṛtti* in the *MBh*,<sup>41</sup> but the story that occurs at the end of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* in answer to the tale of the louche Gautama brahmin is especially relevant to this discussion. In this story, a prosperous elderly brahmin, puzzled about the *dharma* he should observe in the final phase of his life, makes a journey – upon the considered advice of a brahmin friend – to consult an illustrious Nāga chief,<sup>42</sup> who is said to be eminently virtuous (in terms of *sādhāraṇa dharma*) and able to demonstrate the highest form of *dharma*.<sup>43</sup> It is not perfectly clear who this serpent-chief of

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<sup>37</sup> Thus the sixty-two preceding texts that make up the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* stand “book-ended” by the story of the louche Gautama brahmin and the glorification of heroic gleaning found at 12.340–353.

<sup>38</sup> See James L. Fitzgerald, “The Ethical Significance of Living by Gleaning (*uñchavṛtti*) in the Mahābhārata,” in *Release from Life: Release in Life. Festschrift Peter Schreiner* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 89–110.

<sup>39</sup> See the depiction of the gleaner brahmin and his family and their ascent to heaven as a result of great generosity in spite of their extreme poverty at *MBh* 14.93.2–82.

<sup>40</sup> This dilemma for the well-trained, pure brahmin makes clear why patronage directed to non-brahmins or poorly trained or impure brahmins was such a painful issue for the earnestly orthodox.

<sup>41</sup> For which, see Fitzgerald, “The Ethical Significance of Living by Gleaning (*uñchavṛtti*) in the Mahābhārata.”

<sup>42</sup> The Nāgas are typically conceived of as serpents inhabiting watery realms of the earth; there are a considerable number of literary and artistic representations of them. For a standard survey of these, one may consult J. Ph. Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore or the Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1926).

<sup>43</sup> The friend tells our unnamed protagonist, “Without fail, he will *show* you the very highest norm of action” (*sa te paramakaṃ dharmam namithyā darśayiṣyati*), 12.343.7cd. There is a recurring emphasis in this story on demonstration and seeing. While brahmins receive verbal instruction from different “inferiors” in the stories of Tulādhāra, the Mithilā butcher, and Viśvāmitra, that is not the case in this *uñchavṛtti* story: the brahmin’s quest for knowledge is completely satisfied by the Nāga’s recounting to him the marvel he had observed of an

the watery realm might represent in Indian sociopolitical history, but he is clearly someone below the brahmin in purity and, it would seem, outside the parameters of Brahminically conceived society altogether.<sup>44</sup> As this story praising the *uñchavṛtti* as the best way for a brahmin householder to live is also, implicitly, a rebuttal of the laxity of the Gautama brahmin and his testing the limits of *āpaddharma*, it might be fair to infer that the Nāga chieftain here is a ruler analogous to the Rākṣasa Ugly Eye, except that the Nāga is relatively noble and is not repulsive.<sup>45</sup> When the brahmin arrives at the Nāga's settlement, that headman is away performing his month-long corvée duty, pulling the chariot of the Sun God across the sky.<sup>46</sup> The brahmin guest is treated hospitably while he awaits the chief's return, but will take none of the food the Nāga's family offers him in hospitality.

The Brahminic ambivalence toward the Nāga and his kin extends to the story's revealing narrative of the brahmin's learning the highest *dharma*. When the Nāga returns, the brahmin tells him he wishes to receive instruction in *dharma*. But before the instruction actually gets underway, the brahmin asks the Nāga to tell him

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*uñchavṛtti*'s world-exit-journey (*gati*) into the sun. Is it significant that a story praising brahmin aloofness from compromising intercourse with rich and powerful would-be patrons allows the brahmin to be enlightened without the verbal transfer of knowledge that makes one a subservient pupil? I think this point holds at the level that matters, even though words were the actual mechanism by which the Nāga conveyed his demonstration (12.352.1cd: "Your words speak to my concern and they have shown me the path to take" [*anvarthopagatair vākyaiḥ panthānaṃ cāsmi darśitaḥ*]).

44 A marked feature of this story is its abundant attentiveness to the social interactions between all its interlocutors: between the brahmin and his brahmin visitor, between the brahmin traveler and the Nāga's wife and kinsmen, between the Nāga chief and his wife, and between the brahmin and the Nāga.

45 I would conjecture that both this Nāga lord and the Rākṣasa king Virūpākṣa in the Gautama story represent the leaders of semi-assimilated non-Aryan peoples of India somehow within the purview of the authors of the stories. The Nāga is depicted as well-educated in *dharma* (especially *sādharma* *dharma*), and the Rākṣasa monster as eager to gain the support and approval of brahmins. While Nāgas are sometimes regarded as divine or partly divine, *rākṣasas*, or *rakṣases*, "beings to guard against, watch out for," were ferocious, swiftly flying, flesh-eating, nocturnal monsters known in the most ancient strata of Sanskrit literature.

46 And if we suspect the Nāga chieftain and the Rākṣasa king represent non-Aryan polities and societies, we must also ask what sociopolitical organization might the Sun represent here? Whomever the Sun may represent here, the Nāga's compulsory service to him would seem to signify some kind of imperial formation. See F. B. J. Kuiper, *Varuṇa and Vidūṣaka: On the Origin of the Sanskrit Drama* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1979), 81–88, for notes on the ancient Vedic God Varuṇa as the lord of the subterranean watery realm and the Nāgas and Asuras and on that netherworld as an inversion of the empyrean realm of the Sun.

of any marvels he has witnessed while pulling the Sun's chariot. The Nāga answers by relating an amazing spectacle he has observed. An apparent second sun rose up from the earth, traveled through the sky and approached the Sun, who welcomed this ball of fire. The blazing second fire then fused its brilliance with that of the Sun (12.350.5–15). When questioned about this marvel by the Nāga, the Sun explained that the fireball was a person, a sage who had become perfected through living only on what he could glean (12.351.1–5). The brahmin is delighted and abruptly terminates his journey of instruction with this testimony of the Nāga's, without any further, formal, verbal instruction. The brahmin politely takes his leave and returns home, where he is initiated into the *uñchavṛtti* by the Bhārgava brahmin Cyavana (12.353.1–2), a kinsman of Rāma Jāmadagnya, the *MBh*'s recurrently ferocious enforcer of Brahminic safety and dignity.<sup>47</sup>

This tale in praise of the life of gleaning is a determined affirmation of Brahmin independence in opposition to a world rife with the temptations to compromise, such as those reported in the cases of Viśvāmitra and the Gautama brahmin! But though this assertion of Brahmin ambivalence and aloofness occupies a place of emphasis and honor in the received text of the *MBh*, our little tour in this paper attests overall to various indications of productive engagement and compromise between alert and adaptive members of the Brahmin tradition and the hurly-burly cosmopolitan world beyond their circles.

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47 See Fitzgerald, "The Rāma Jāmadagnya Thread."



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## After the *Mahābhārata*: On the Portrayal of Vyāsa in the *Skandapurāṇa*

Certain works of literature function as cultural hegemons. Their influence is so forceful that subsequent authors and literary traditions take their place only in relation to them. In the world of premodern South and Southeast Asia, the *Mahābhārata* claims such a commanding position. There is an element of truth in the bold, much-cited claim in the first and the last books of the text, that “What is found here concerning *dharma*, the proper making of wealth, pleasure and final release, is to be found elsewhere, too, O bull-like heir of Bharata; but what is not found here is to be found nowhere.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to its master narrative of the catastrophic war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, this status is to a large extent due to the epic’s complex frame structure, which allowed for the nesting and integration of numerous additional narratives and didactic episodes that could be continuously expanded.<sup>2</sup>

Composed after the *Mahābhārata*, the Purāṇas constitute the most prolific genre of Sanskrit literature, displaying similarities in style and technique, but also departing from the epic in significant ways, particularly in terms of religious ideology, orientation, and scope. Recent work on the *Skandapurāṇa* – a text that was long held to be lost, but identified in early Nepalese palm-leaf manuscripts

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1 *MBh* 1.56.33 = 18.5.38:

*dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha |*  
*yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kva cit ||*

The translation is that of John Smith, trans., *The Mahābhārata. An Abridged Translation* (London: Penguin, 2009). On the political status of the *Mahābhārata* in premodern South and Southeast Asia, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 223–258.

2 On the frame story in the Indian context, see Michael Witzel, “On the Origin of the Literary device of the ‘Frame Story’ in Old Indian Literature,” in *Hinduismus und Buddhismus. Festschrift für Ulrich Schneider*, ed. Harry Falk (Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987), 380–414.

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**Notes:** This article is number 12 in the multi-authored series *Studies in the Skandapurāṇa*. For an overview of the series, see: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/the-skandapurāṇa-project#tab-1>. Accessed January 8, 2020. Research for this paper has been supported by the Dutch Research Council (project no. 360-63-110) and the European Research Council (project no. 609823).

going back to the early ninth century CE – has brought to the fore the intricate layered history of Purāṇic text composition.<sup>3</sup> A textual tradition dating to the sixth to seventh century and associated with the burgeoning Pāsupata movement, the *Skandapurāṇa* advocates Śiva devotion and provides a Śaiva model for viewing the cosmos and its affairs. It integrates all other deities into an overarching hierarchical structure in which Śiva, paired with his devoted wife Pārvatī, reigns supreme. Particularly striking in this regard is the text’s inclusion of extensive new retellings of the myths of the three main manifestations of Viṣṇu worshipped around the time of the Gupta period: Narasiṃha, Varāha, and Vāmana.<sup>4</sup>

While the incorporation and appropriation of narratives detailing the exploits of Viṣṇu’s manifestations in a Śaiva text may hint at religious competition, the *Skandapurāṇa*’s engagement with these narratives first of all reflects a strategic awareness of the cultural importance of these myths. In order to capture the audience’s attention, the authors of this new Purāṇa had to engage with and address the narratives and deities that mattered to their intended audience. In a similar fashion, they had to find a way into the *Mahābhārata*, which provided the reference frame of the Brahminic lore in which they were operating. They did so in the very first chapter of the text, through the narrative frame describing the scene of the “original” telling of the *Skandapurāṇa*. In developing this frame, the authors of the text connect the first narration of the *Skandapurāṇa* to a central event in the *Mahābhārata* epic, namely the departure of Vyāsa’s son Śuka from this world. The inclusion of this frame story is revealing, because with it, the authors not only

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3 For a comprehensive study including the results of almost two decades of work on the critical edition, see Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa. Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

4 Note, however, that they are not called *avatāra* in the text. See introduction to SP IV, 6. As was first observed by Phyllis Granoff, the *Skandapurāṇa* introduces a significant new element to Viṣṇu’s demon-slaying manifestations: the god’s attachment to the form he has taken on after he has killed the demon. The *Skandapurāṇa* raises the critical question of what happens to Viṣṇu’s demon-slaying manifestation after he has done the job. The Narasiṃha episode, for example, shows him to be attached to his new man-lion form and Śiva, as the supreme God, has to intervene to make him return to his original form. Viṣṇu is assigned the task of slaying demons, while Śiva creates the circumstances that allow him to resume his true form afterwards. Śiva thus becomes the true savior – of both the gods, who need Viṣṇu to return to his original form, and Viṣṇu himself, who is not able to revert to his true form on his own. See Phyllis Granoff, “Saving the Saviour: Śiva and the Vaiṣṇava Avatāras in the Early Skandapurāṇa,” in *Origin and Growth of the Purāṇic Text Corpus. With Special Reference to the Skandapurāṇa*, ed. Hans T. Bakker, Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference 3.2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 111–138. The *Skandapurāṇa*’s treatment of Viṣṇu’s three main manifestations forms the subject of the PhD project “Counter-Narratives: Parallel Themes in Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Mythology,” undertaken by Sanne Mersch at Leiden University.

engaged with and responded directly to the authority of the great Sanskrit epic but, as I will argue, ultimately tried to surpass it.

## 1 The Introduction of Vyāsa in the Opening Chapter of the *Skandapurāṇa*

While Vyāsa is well known as the composer and narrator of the *Mahābhārata* – a character who, at the same time, plays a key role in the epic “behind the scenes”<sup>5</sup> – his position in the *Skandapurāṇa* is reversed. No longer the all-knowing narrator, in the *Skandapurāṇa* Vyāsa is the pupil of Sanatkumāra, the first-born son of Brahmā. In this case it is Vyāsa who asks the questions, while Sanatkumāra provides the answers.

From the very start, the *Skandapurāṇa* recognizes the authority of the *Mahābhārata*: when the sages are assembled in Prayāga to bathe in the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā, they ask the Singer of Ancient Lore (*paūrāṇika sūta*) to tell them about “the birth of the wise Kārttikeya, which equals the story of the Bhārata (*Mahābhārata*) and surpasses the Purāṇa.”<sup>6</sup>

The unnamed *sūta* starts by describing the scene of the original setting of the first narration of the birth of Skanda-Kārttikeya:

“After the noble Śuka had gone to the supreme station because of his desire for release, Vyāsa, tormented by grief for his son, saw Tryambaka (Śiva). Having seen the Great Lord, his pain disappeared.

“Then, while roaming the worlds, the sage (Vyāsa), the son of Satyavati, saw Sanatkumāra, the first-born son of Brahmā, granter of boons, furnished with yogic power, on the peak of Mt. Meru, standing there like fire, in his *vimāna* which was brilliant like the sun, surrounded by noble sages who were perfected in yoga, furnished with ascetic power and masters of all sciences; he looked like the four-headed god (Brahmā).

“After Vyāsa had seen that very great being, the sage, dwelling there like the Grandfather (Brahmā) in person, he praised him with the highest devotion.

5 Cf. Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata. A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 32–91, and, for a critique of the same, James L. Fitzgerald, “The Many Voices of the Mahābhārata,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123, no. 4 (2003): 815–817.

6 SP 1.11:

*bhāratākhyānasadr̥ṣaṃ purāṇād yad viśiṣyate |  
tat tvā pr̥cchāma vai janma kār̥ttikeyasya dhīmataḥ ||*

“Then the son of Brahmā (Sanatkumāra), embraced with affection the very mighty Vyāsa, who had approached, and he delivered an auspicious speech.

“You have arrived, o knower of Dharma, by good fortune, freed from sorrow because of the grace of Parameśvara. Ask and I will tell you!”<sup>7</sup>

In response to Sanatkumāra’s offer, Vyāsa asks him about something that has long bothered him: how is it possible that Skanda (Kumāra/Kārttikeya) can be the son of Rudra and of Vahni, of Gaṅgā, Umā, Svāhā, Suparṇī, and the Mothers, as well as of the Kṛttikās?<sup>8</sup> This question is remarkable, because it is after all Vyāsa himself who has given us at least three different accounts of Skanda’s birth in his own *Mahābhārata*.<sup>9</sup> Sanatkumāra promises to tell it all, and this promise initiates the telling of the *Skandapurāṇa*.

7 SP 1.15–22:

*mumuṣayā paraṃ sthānaṃ yāte śubhamahātmani |*  
*sutaśokābhisaṃtpto vyāsas tryambakam aikṣata ||*  
*ḍṣṭvaiva sa maheśānaṃ vyāso ’bhūd vigatavyathaḥ |*  
*vicaran sa tadā lokān muniḥ satyavatīsutaḥ ||*  
*meruśṛṅge ’tha dadṛṣe brahmaṇaḥ sutam agrajam |*  
*sanatkumāraṃ varadaṃ yogaiśvaryasamanvitam ||*  
*vimāne ravisamkāśe tiṣṭhantam analaprabham |*  
*munibhir yogasaṃsiddhais tapoyuktair mahātmabhiḥ ||*  
*vedavedāṅgatattvajñaiḥ sarvadharmāgamānvitaiḥ |*  
*sakalāvāptavidyais tu caturvaktam ivāvṛtam ||*  
*ḍṣṭvā taṃ sumahātmānaṃ vyāso munim athāsthitam |*  
*vavande parayā bhaktyā sāksād iva pitāmaham ||*  
*brahmasūnur atha vyāsaṃ samāyātaṃ mahaujasam |*  
*pariṣvajya paraṃ premnā provāca vacanaṃ śubham ||*  
*diṣṭyā tvam asi dharmajña prasādāt pārameśvarāt |*  
*apetaśokaḥ samprāptaḥ pṛcchasma pravādāmy aham ||*

8 SP 1.24–26:

*kumārasya kathaṃ janma kārttikeyasya dhīmataḥ |*  
*kiṃnimittaṃ kuto vāsya icchāmy etad dhi veditum ||*  
*kathaṃ rudrasutaś cāsau vahnigaṅgāsutaḥ kathaṃ |*  
*umāyās tanayaś caiva svāhāyās ca kathaṃ punaḥ |*  
*suparṇyās cātha māṅṅāṃ kṛttikānaṃ kathaṃ ca saḥ ||*  
*kaś cāsau pūrvam utpannaḥ kiṃtapāḥ kaś ca vikramaḥ |*  
*bhūtasamṃmohanaṃ hy etat kathayasva yathātatham ||*

9 For the various and conflicting birth stories in the *Mahābhārata*, see Richard Mann, *The Rise of Mahāsena. The Transformation of Skanda-Kārttikeya in North India from the Kuṣāṇa to Gupta Empires* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 18–21, 79–100.

This frame narrative is significant in several respects. First of all, it shows that the text engages strategically with a key event of the great epic. It concerns an episode that, from the perspective of its supposed author, Vyāsa, is one of the most troubling of all: his son's departure from this world in his quest for liberation (*mokṣa*). Seen in this light, it is not so surprising that Vyāsa should ask about the miraculous birth of another son, Skanda, since his own son is still on his mind.<sup>10</sup> While Vyāsa, being the archetypical composer of Brahminic lore, is traditionally credited with many compositions, including the Veda, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Purāṇas*,<sup>11</sup> on this occasion he is presented in an opposite role, as the dedicated

**10** It is even possible to establish a link between Vyāsa's questions at the start of the *Skandapurāṇa* (SP 1.24–26, cited above) and those of Yudhiṣṭhira to Bhīṣma at the start of the Śuka episode of the *Mahābhārata* (MBh 12.310.1–5), which likewise center around the mystery of his birth:

*kathaṃ vyāsasya dharmātmā śuko jajñe mahātapāḥ |  
siddhiṃ ca paramāṃ prāptas tan me brūhi pitāmaha ||  
kasyāṃ cotpādayām āsa śukaṃ vyāsas tapodhanaḥ |  
na hy asya jananiṃ vidma janma cāgryaṃ mahātmanaḥ ||  
kathaṃ ca bālasya sataḥ sūksmajñāne gatā matiḥ |  
yathā nānyasya loke 'smin dvitīyasyeha kasya cit ||  
etaḍ icchāmy ahaṃ śrotuṃ vistareṇa mahādyute |  
na hi me tṛptir astīha śṛṇvato 'mṛtam uttamam ||  
māhātmyam ātmayogaṃ ca vijñānaṃ ca śukasya ha |  
yathāvad ānupūrvyeṇa tan me brūhi pitāmaha ||*

As James Fitzgerald has pointed out to me (personal communication), both sons (Śuka and Skanda) share a similar kind of conception: Śuka is born from the seed of Vyāsa spilled on the fire sticks (see below) and Skanda is born from the seed of Śiva ejected into the fire (Agni).

**11** Cf. Bruce Sullivan, *Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata: A New Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1; also Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas, A History of Indian Literature 2.3* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986), 45–48, on Vyāsa as the composer of the “*Purāṇasaṃhitā*.” For Vyāsa's own pedigree, see Giorgio Bonazolli, “Purāṇic Paramparā,” *Purāṇa* 22 (1980): 33–60. His table I (pp. 36–39) indicates that the majority of the *Purāṇas* follow a tripartite scheme: Brahmā > sage (e.g. Vasiṣṭha, Sanatkumāra, or Nārada) > Vyāsa.

The name Vyāsa, as is well known, means “arranger,” hinting at his role as a “transmitter” or “tradent” of Brahminic lore. For the term “tradent,” used by scholars of Jewish rabbinic literature to refer to the “noncreative” role of the Rabbinic sages in the transmission of rabbinic literature, see Martin S. Jaffee, “Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–37. On this role of Vyāsa, see Peter C. Bisschop, “Vyāsa's Palimpsest: Tracking Processes of Transmission and Re-creation in Anonymous Sanskrit Literature,” in *Perspectives on Lived Religion: Practices – Transmission – Landscape*, eds. N. Starling, H. Twiston Davies, and L. Weiss (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2019), 165–172.

student of the mysterious figure of Sanatkumāra, the first-born son of Brahmā. I argue that through the introduction of this frame narrative, the composers of the *Skandapurāṇa* were aiming to rewrite the received *Mahābhārata* tradition<sup>12</sup> and present the audience with a higher perspective. By starting with a new and unknown narrative that concerns the composer of the epic at his most vulnerable, the *Skandapurāṇa* authors added an additional layer of interpretation that, as we shall see, turned Vyāsa into a dedicated Pāśupata adept.

To properly appreciate the significance of the *Skandapurāṇa*'s adoption of this frame story, we should first of all take a look at the relevant passage in the *Mahābhārata*, in which Śuka departs from this world and Vyāsa is left behind, grieving for his son. The story is told in book 12 of the epic, the *Śāntiparvan* "The Book of Peace."<sup>13</sup> Vyāsa had received Śuka from Śiva after performing austerities on Mt. Meru. He had asked for a son who would be equal in power to the five elements. The son is born when Vyāsa sheds his semen on the sacrificial fire sticks (*araṇī*) at the sight of the beautiful Apsaras Ghṛtācī (*MBh* 12.310–311). Śuka first learns the *mokṣadharmā* "Teachings on Liberation" from Vyāsa, then from king Janaka, and finally from Nārada (*MBh* 12.312–319).<sup>14</sup> In the end, Śuka resolves to abandon his body and attain final liberation. A long description of his ever-higher journey toward liberation follows, in which he identifies himself with Brahman (*MBh* 12.319–320). Vyāsa tries to follow him through yoga but he ends up realizing that Śuka has left him behind, after which he sits down in grief.<sup>15</sup> At

<sup>12</sup> By "Mahābhārata tradition" I mean not only the text as we have it, but also the cultural awareness that comes with it. This involves multiple sources: from commentaries, to performance traditions, to material representations, as well as new compositions that refer to it, such as – in the present case – the *Skandapurāṇa*.

<sup>13</sup> The story of Śuka in the *Mahābhārata* has been studied by a number of scholars, including V.M. Bedekar, "The Story of Śuka in the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas: A Comparative Study," *Purāṇa* 7 (1965): 87–127; C. MacKenzie Brown, "Modes of Perfected Living in the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas: The Different Faces of Śuka the Renouncer," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 157–183; David Shulman, *The Hungry God. Hindu Tales of Filicide and Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 108–146; and Hildebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 278–322.

<sup>14</sup> In the light of the *Skandapurāṇa*'s account, it is noteworthy that Nārada first of all refers to the teachings on renunciation and liberation as they were taught by Sanatkumāra (*MBh* 12.316.5–19).

<sup>15</sup> *MBh* 12.320.27:

*mahimānaṃ tu taṃ dṛṣṭvā putrasyāmitatejaśaḥ |*  
*niśasāda giriprasthe putram evānucintayan ||*

this moment, Śiva appears before him to console him (*MBh* 12.320.31–37). The compound used to express Vyāsa’s state of mind, *putraśokābhisamṭapta* (“tormented by grief for his son,” *MBh* 12.320.32c), is almost identical to that used by the *Skandapurāṇa* to describe the very same moment (*sutaśokābhisamṭapta*, *SP* 1.15c). It functions as a clear marker linking the two texts. Śiva reminds Vyāsa that he had given him a son who would master the elements, in accordance with Vyāsa’s own request. His son has won eternal fame. To console Vyāsa, he gives him Śuka in the form of a shadow as his constant companion.<sup>16</sup>

## 2 The Bhāgavata Character of the *Mahābhārata*

At this point, we need to ask the question: why did the authors of the *Skandapurāṇa* select this particular episode to frame the original narration of the *Skandapurāṇa*? I can see at least three reasons, which are, to a certain extent, all connected.

First of all, the position of the *Mahābhārata* as the founding epic of Sanskrit culture is undeniable. For new compositions to gain a mark of authority, it was thus good strategy to connect themselves in one way or another with events narrated in the great epic. The specific episode selected by the authors of the *Skandapurāṇa* is particularly fitting because it concerns one of the most moving moments in the life of the author of the text, namely his son’s departure for *mokṣa*. To claim the authority of the epic, what better episode than this one, in which the author himself is distraught at his son’s reaching the final state? It perfectly captures the conflict between the ideals of action (*pravṛtti*) and withdrawal (*nivṛtti*) that are at the heart of the epic. Moreover, the episode has a Śaiva connection, because Vyāsa had received his son from Śiva after practicing intense asceticism. This motif paved the way for linking it to the Śaiva Purāṇa about to be told.

A second reason, I argue, has to do with the Bhāgavata character of the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>17</sup> While the epic may not have started out as a religious document, it had been infused with a Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa theology by the time of its written Gupta redaction, which is what most scholars see as the form of the text as we

<sup>16</sup> *MBh* 12.320.37:

*chāyāṃ svaputrasadṛśiṃ sarvato’napagāṃ sadā |*  
*drakṣyase tvaṃ ca loke ’smiṇ matprasādān mahāmune ||*

<sup>17</sup> I use the term “Bhāgavata” in a general sense to refer to early traditions of Viṣṇu worship. Cf. Gérard Colas, “Bhāgavatas,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3, eds. Knut Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 295–301.



find it more or less represented in the main text of the Poona critical edition.<sup>18</sup> This Bhāgavata character is particularly evident in the teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā* (*MBh* 6.23–40) just before the start of the central battle, as well as various other Kṛṣṇa-, Viṣṇu- and Nārāyaṇa-related teachings strategically placed across different parts of the epic, but in particular in the – undeniably sectarian – *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* (*MBh* 12.321–339).<sup>19</sup> It may be precisely because of the insertion of Nārāyaṇa theology that many manuscripts of the individual books of the epic start with the celebrated *maṅgala* invocation of Nara and Nārāyaṇa:

*nārāyaṇaṃ namaskṛtya naraṃ caiva narottamam |*  
*devīm sarasvatīm caiva tato jayam udīrayet ||*<sup>20</sup>

**18** For a general overview, see James L. Fitzgerald, “Mahābhārata,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 2, eds. Knut Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 72–94. Cf. his characterization of the epic (p. 92): “The text of the *Mahābhārata* at the close of the Gupta era describes a particular episode of world history at a particular juncture of the flow of time in the cosmos, one of the occasional severe crises that arise in terrestrial affairs and call for apocalyptic divine sanction – god’s descending in disguised form into terrestrial affairs and marshalling divine and human forces against demonic energies that harm the fundamental welfare of all souls in the universe. In this text’s teachings, solace and hope are offered to all weary souls by showing that all things are centered upon the reality and activity of the god Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu, who presides over the creation, sustenance, and then destruction of the universe against the tableaux of the vast movements of time that are now seen.” See also John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Brill: Leiden, 1998), 256–302.

**19** Reinhold Grünendahl characterizes the overall incorporation of a Nārāyaṇa scheme in the final redaction of the *Mahābhārata* as follows: “Die Nārāyaṇa-Theologie des Nārāyaṇīya und das ihr zuzuordnende Ideenprofil manifestieren sich an diversen, über das *Mahābhārata* verteilten Stellen, die zusammen eine Art Rahmen bilden. Mittels dieses Rahmens hat die in ihm sich artikulierende Schule der »epischen Pāñcarātrins« ihre theologischen Vorstellungen offenbar planmäßig in das *Mahābhārata* integriert [ . . . ] und dem Epos als Ganzes damit zugleich ihre unverwechselbares Gepräge gegeben.” See Reinhold Grünendahl, “Zur Stellung des Nārāyaṇīya im *Mahābhārata*,” in *Nārāyaṇīya-Studien*, ed. Peter Schreiner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 197–240; also Reinhold Grünendahl, “On the Frame Structure and ‘Sacrifice Concept’ in the Nārāyaṇīya and Tirthayātrā Sections of the *Mahābhārata*, and the Craft of Citation,” *Zeitschrift der Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 152, no. 2 (2002): 309–340. This is not to deny that the *Mahābhārata* contains teachings involving Śiva as well, but when it comes to the epic’s overarching model, it is clearly centered around Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. The *Anuśāsanaparvan* in particular has a number of significant Śaiva episodes. For a structural study of Śiva in the *Mahābhārata*, see Jacques Scheuer, *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982); also Peter C. Bisschop, “Śiva,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 1, eds. Knut Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 744–746.

**20** On the other hand, as observed by V. S. Sukthankar in the prolegomena to the edition of the *Ādīparvan* (p. iii), this stanza is missing from the Southern manuscripts. See also Sylvain Lévi, “*Tato jayam udīrayet*,” trans. L. G. Khare, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 1, no. 1 (1918–19): 13–20. No less important than the specific form of the epic after its Gupta redaction

“Honour first Nārāyaṇa, and Nara, the most excellent of men; honour too Sarasvatī the goddess; then proclaim the Tale of Victory!”<sup>21</sup>

A text like the *Skandapurāṇa*, which advocates a Śaiva perspective, would have been confronted with this situation and have to address it in one way or another. In this connection, it seems significant that the Śuka episode of the *Mahābhārata* (12.310–320) precedes exactly the teachings of the *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* (*MBh* 12.321–339). We have seen how the Śuka episode forms the starting point for the telling of the Purāṇa. In the chapters that follow, in fact, some of the central doctrines concerning Rudra in the *Nārāyaṇīya* are taken up, but their message is turned around. This concerns in particular the teaching that Brahmā is the father of Rudra, which is a doctrine characteristic of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, but spectacularly overturned by the account of creation given in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Chapter 3 of the *Skandapurāṇa* tells how Brahmā was born in the Cosmic Egg and in his ignorance did not realize that he had a father. Thinking himself to be alone at the beginning of time, he hears a voice addressing him with the words “son, son!” (*putra putra*), which turns out to be that of Śiva. Brahmā takes refuge with Śiva, who grants him the position of demiurge and ruler over the worlds.<sup>22</sup> Various other elements in the *Skandapurāṇa* likewise show that the authors of

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is the question to what extent the transmission and control of the *Mahābhārata* may have been in the hands of Bhāgavata communities. The *maṅgala* verse of the Northern manuscripts certainly points in such a direction. The inclusion and general acceptance of the *Harivaṃśa*, treating of the life of Kṛṣṇa, as an appendix (*khila*) to the *Mahābhārata* suggests a Bhāgavata-dominated environment of *Mahābhārata* transmission as well. For the status of the *Harivaṃśa* as an “appendix” to the *Mahābhārata*, see André Couture, “The *Harivaṃśa*: a Supplement to the *Mahābhārata*,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 4, no. 3 (1996): 127–138; Freda Matchett, “The *Harivaṃśa*: Supplement to the *Mahābhārata* and Independent Text,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 4, no. 3 (1996): 139–150.

<sup>21</sup> Trans. Smith, *The Mahābhārata*.

<sup>22</sup> *SP* 3.4–7:

*purā brahmā prajādhyaḥṣaḥ aṅḍe ’smīn samprasūyate |*  
*so ’jñānāt pitarāṃ brahmā na veda tamasāvṛtaḥ ||*  
*aḥam eka iti jñātvā sarvāṃl lokān avaiḥṣata |*  
*na cāpaśyata tatrānyaṃ tapoyogabalānvitaḥ ||*  
*putra putreti cāpy ukto brahmā śarveṇa dhūmatā |*  
*praṇataḥ prāñjalir bhūtvā tam eva śaraṇaṃ gataḥ ||*  
*sa dattvā brahmaṇe śambhuḥ sraṣṭṛtvaṃ jñānasamhitam |*  
*vibhutvaṃ caiva lokānām antardhe parameśvaraḥ ||*

the text were familiar with and opposed to the teachings of the *Nārāyaṇīya*.<sup>23</sup> By putting the narrative frame in relation to the Śuka episode that directly precedes the *Nārāyaṇīya*, the authors were able to take control of the epic's religious teachings and bring in their own Śaiva perspective.<sup>24</sup>

A final reason for selecting this episode to frame the Śaiva teachings of the *Skandapurāṇa* is connected to the nature of the subject. The Śuka episode centers around the ideal of *mokṣa*, final liberation, realized by renunciation of life in total. Śuka is the quintessential yogin and renouncer. The *Nārāyaṇīya*, which follows upon the story of Śuka, teaches that devotion to lord Nārāyaṇa is the means of *bhakti* to achieve the same goal. The *Skandapurāṇa*, aside from being a foundational work that integrates Śaiva- and non-Śaiva mythology in a comprehensive manner, also teaches a theology and a corresponding path toward liberation. This path centers around the Pāśupata ideal of union with Śiva (*śivasāyujya*) reached through complete devotion (*bhakti*) to Śiva. As such, the way of *mokṣa* turns out to be the final teaching of the *Skandapurāṇa* as well. And it is this Pāśupata path to liberation that is ultimately taught to Vyāsa, the father who has lost his own son in the quest for final liberation. To understand how this links up with the narrative frame of the *Skandapurāṇa*, we now have to leave aside the main body of the work and turn to the conclusion of the text.

### 3 Vyāsa the Pāśupata

The final ten chapters of the *Skandapurāṇa* are dedicated to the teaching of Pāśupata yoga.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, this yoga involves a practice of what is called *utkrānti* (“proceeding upwards,” “stepping out,” or “yogic suicide,” as it is sometimes

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23 The relations between the *Nārāyaṇīya* and the *Skandapurāṇa* are addressed in my forthcoming study: “Rudra-Śiva in the *Nārāyaṇīya* and the Rejoinder of the *Skandapurāṇa*,” in *The Nārāyaṇīya: Reconsidering an Epic and Its Contexts*, eds. Robert Leach and Angelika Malinar.

24 On the connection between the *Nārāyaṇīya* and the Śuka episode, see Alf Hildebeitel, “*Mokṣa* and *Dharma* in the *Mokṣadharmā*,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 45 (2017): 749–766.

25 For the *Skandapurāṇa*'s connections with the Pāśupata movement, see Peter C. Bisschop, *Eary Śaivism and the Skandapurāṇa. Sects and Centres* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2006), 37–50; Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, 137–153; and Elizabeth A. Cecil, “Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Tradition, and the Geographic Imaginary,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 285–303. Although the last ten chapters as a whole may be referred to as “Pāśupatayogavidhi,” the text also addresses and criticizes the rival system of Sāṃkhya-Yoga. The Pāśupata teaching proper starts at *SP*<sub>Bh</sub> 180.

referred to).<sup>26</sup> “Suicide” brings with it a whole set of Western ideas that are not applicable; I therefore prefer to refer to *utkrānti* as “liberational death.” It is a way of taking control of death, which awaits us all, and turning it into the key to liberation.

The practice is described in detail in the text’s penultimate chapter (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 182); it is performed through a process of actively blocking the breath and pushing it upwards through the cranium. This voluntary death brings about final liberation through merging with Śiva (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 179.46–47ab):

*sadaivaṃ dhyāyato*<sup>27</sup> *vyāsa tad aiśvaryaṃ pravartate |*  
*yena śaḍviṃśakaṃ buddhvā hṛdayasthaṃ maheśvaram ||*  
*svecchayā svatanuṃ tyaktvā tasminn eva praliyate |*

“As one constantly meditates like this, Vyāsa, that lordship comes about, through which, after realizing the twenty-sixth [principle], Maheśvara, who resides in the heart, [and] abandoning one’s own body according to one’s own will, one is absorbed in Him [i.e. Maheśvara].”

The practice is the preserve of the Pāśupata yogins who, during life, abide by the regime of the Pāśupata observance of bathing in ashes (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 182.53):

*evaṃ pāśupatā viprā niṣkalaṃ taṃ maheśvaram |*  
*yogād āviśya mucyante punarjanmavivarjitāḥ ||*

“In this way the Pāśupata brahmins are released, freed from rebirth, after reaching the undivided Maheśvara through yoga.”

In several respects, one may argue, the practice of *utkrānti* forms the counter-part of the yogic ideal of retreat from bodily existence that was realized by the renunciant Śuka. For example, in *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 181.29–30d, it is said:

*nirmamā yogaviduṣaḥ śaṃkaravratam āsthitāḥ |*  
*gacchanti svatanuṃ tyaktvā hitvā māyāṃ paraṃ padam ||*

“The knowers of yoga, free from possession, abiding by the observance of Śaṃkara, reach the supreme state, after abandoning the body, leaving behind material existence.”

**26** On *utkrānti* in the context of traditions of yoga, see Peter Schreiner, “Yoga – Lebenshilfe oder Sterbetechnik?” in *Hinduismus-Reader*, ed. Angelika Malinar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 137–148; David Gordon White, “Utkrānti: From Epic Warrior’s Apotheosis to Tantric Yogi’s Suicide,” in *Release from Life – Release in Life. Indian Perspectives on Individual Liberation*, ed. Andreas Bigger et al. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 291–302; and James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin, 2017), s.v. “yogic suicide (*utkrānti*).”

**27** Corrected. Bhaṭṭarāi’s edition reads *dhyayato*. All of the following quotations from the final ten chapters of the text refer to the editio princeps of Bhaṭṭarāi (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>*).

This recalls Śuka’s reaching of the highest state after giving up his body. Sanatkumāra indeed refers to the practice as “voluntary renunciation of the body” (*svacchandatanusamtyāga*, *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 182.26a). The main difference, of course, is that Śuka did not take up the Pāśupata observance taught here, but followed his own path of yoga.

Although the Pāśupata yoga is described in these last chapters in a more or less general way, at several key moments in the instruction, Sanatkumāra addresses his teaching to Vyāsa personally, who affirms that he has understood it. The two share a *guru-śiṣya* relationship, as is made explicit for example in *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 182.9:

*evamuktaḥ sa śiṣyena vyāsenā sumahatmanā |  
kathayāmāsa viprendraḥ śivasiddhāntaniścayam ||*

“Thus addressed by his pupil, the very noble Vyāsa, the chief of brahmins (Sanatkumāra) explained the ascertainment of the dogma of Śiva.”

And in *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 182.50, Sanatkumāra emphatically instructs Vyāsa to practice the Pāśupata observance himself:

*sa tvaṃ vyāsa mahābuddhe caran pāśupataṃ vratam |  
mahādevaparo bhūtvā jñānam etad avāpnuhi ||*

“You, Vyāsa, very intelligent one, must practise the Pāśupata observance. Having become dedicated to Mahādeva, you will attain this knowledge.”

It is worth taking a moment to step back and reflect on the implications of the bold move expressed here; for with it, the composers of the *Skandapurāṇa* have managed to turn the celebrated author of the epic *Mahābhārata* into a dedicated Pāśupata ascetic.

The same is restated once more, in even stronger terms, in the text’s final chapter (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 183.53ff.). Here Sanatkumāra once again confirms that he has taught him the supreme yoga and that Vyāsa will attain the highest liberation after realizing the supreme lord. In this connection, he adds several prophecies about Vyāsa as well: he will become a yogin, he will compose the Purāṇa, he will divide the Veda into four, he will institute the Dharmas, and finally, he will attain absorption in Īśvara (*SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 183.59c-60b):

*bhasmavrataṃ ca samprāpya paśupāśavimocanam ||  
śāṃkarajñānasampannaḥ īśvare layam āpsyasi |*

“After completing the ash-observance, which releases from the bondage of a bound soul, you will attain absorption in the lord, being endowed with the knowledge of Śaṃkara.”

Several of these prophesies, such as his composition of the Purāṇa and his division of the four Vedas, fit with what we know about Vyāsa from other sources, but the notion that he achieves salvation through Pāśupata yoga is unique to the text and introduces a radically new perspective. It reorients the audience’s perception of the identity of the author of the great epic.

The passage concludes as follows (SP<sub>Bh</sub> 183.60cd–62):

*evamuktaḥ sa viprendro hr̥ṣṭasarvatanūruhaḥ ||  
 upasadya munīndraṃ taṃ bhasmasaṃskāram āptavān |  
 tatkṣaṇāc cāsya yogo ’sau prādurbhūto mahāmuneḥ ||  
 abhivādya guruṃ vyāso brahmasūnuṃ mahaujasam |  
 śarvāyatanavikṣārthaṃ vicācāra mahītale ||*

“Thus addressed, that best of brahmins (Vyāsa), with all his hair bristling with joy, approached the supreme sage and received the consecration with ashes; at that moment that yoga appeared to the great sage. After Vyāsa had saluted his preceptor, the son of Brahmā, of great might, he roamed the earth to see the abodes of Śaṃkara.”

These verses contain significant initiatory terminology, such as “consecration with ashes” (*bhasmasaṃskāra*) and “preceptor” (*guru*), once again indicative of the *guru-śiṣya* relationship between the two, and leave no doubt that Vyāsa is being initiated in the Pāśupata observance by Sanatkumāra. The latter is thus not only the narrator of the Purāṇa’s stories, but ultimately his spiritual guide, a Pāśupata teacher who directs Vyāsa on the Pāśupata path to liberation.<sup>28</sup>

## 4 The *Mahābhārata*’s Cultural Hegemony and What It Meant for Subsequent Compositions

Having shown how the authors of the *Skandapurāṇa* capitalized on the *Mahābhārata* epic by turning its composer into a dedicated student of Sanatkumāra and, ultimately, a Pāśupata liberation-seeker, I want to conclude with a few observations on the position of the *Mahābhārata* in the wake of the

<sup>28</sup> As for Sanatkumāra’s *adhikāra* to do so, in SP 175.35–36, Sanatkumāra tells Vyāsa that he received instruction in Pāśupata yoga from Śiva himself, which qualifies him as a Pāśupata teacher:

*yadāhaṃ devadevena svayam eva jagatsrjā|  
 svayogaṃ śambhunā vatsa grāhito gatasamśayaḥ||  
 tadā ṣaḍviṃśakaṃ tattvaṃ jñātvā sarvaḡam iśvaram|  
 vimukto yogasaṃsiddho ’haṃ mohavivarjitaḥ||*

Gupta period. In particular, I would like to raise the question to what extent its final Bhāgavata orientation may have affected the form and narration of subsequent compositions by different Brahminic religious communities, specifically the works of professed Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva identification. Naturally, this is a huge topic that I cannot address here in all its detail, but I do think it deserves more attention than it has received so far.

A good starting point for comparison is the composition of a new class of literature dedicated to the rituals, activities, and attitudes of devotion to be adopted by worshippers of Viṣṇu and Śiva, composed in the centuries after the completion of the *Mahābhārata*. For this, we have the *Viṣṇudharma* on the one hand and the *Śivadharma* (or *Śivadharmaśāstra*) on the other. While the precise dates of these texts remain open for discussion, there can be no doubt that both of them are postepic compositions.<sup>29</sup>

The *Viṣṇudharma* emphatically styles itself as a direct continuation of the *Mahābhārata* epic. This can already be seen from its opening verse, which – after the Bhāgavata mantra *oṃ namo bhagavate vāsudevāya* “Oṃ, homage to the Blessed Vāsudeva!” – commences with the same benedictory verse invoking Nara and Nārāyaṇa that also heads manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>30</sup> The second verse of the text is identical to the final verse of the entire *Mahābhārata*, asking the rhetorical question: “he who learns the Bhārata, what need has he of sprinkling with the waters of Puṣkara?”<sup>31</sup> By starting the work with a combination of the opening and concluding verse of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Viṣṇudharma* presents itself as a direct continuation of the epic. These verses can be seen as further markers of the Bhāgavata-controlled transmission of the *Mahābhārata* at the time.

<sup>29</sup> The *Viṣṇudharma* has been edited by Reinhold Grünendahl, *Viṣṇudharmāḥ. Precepts for the Worship of Viṣṇu*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983–1989). The study of the *Śivadharmaśāstra* has been taken up only relatively recently. For an introductory survey, with references to recent editions and studies, see Peter C. Bisschop, *Universal Śaivism. The Appeasement of All Gods and Powers in the Śāntyadhyaḥya of the Śivadharmaśāstra* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–27.

<sup>30</sup> The same verse also appears at the beginning of several Purāṇas, as well as the *Harivaṃśa*, which thus likewise present themselves as continuations of the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>31</sup> *MBh* 18.5.54 (also *MBh* 1.2.242):

*dvaipāyanaśṭhapuṭaniḥṣṭam aprameyaṃ, puṇyaṃ pavitraṃ atha pāpaharaṃ śivaṃ* (ViDh:  
*śubhaṃ) ca |*  
*yo bhārataṃ samadhigacchati vācyamānaṃ, kiṃ tasya puṣkarajalair abhiṣecanena ||*

On this verse, see James Hegarty, “What Need Has He of the Waters of Puṣkara? The Narrative Construction of *tīrtha* in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*,” in *Battle, Bards and Brāhmins*, ed. John Brockington, Papers of the 13th World Sanskrit Conference 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012): 129–156.

The same strategy is continued in the frame narrative of the *Viṣṇudharma*. The chief narrator of the text is Śaunaka, who plays a key role in the outermost narrative frame of the *Mahābhārata*'s elaborate frame structure. The text commences with the visit of Śaunaka and other sages to Śatānika, the son of Janamejaya, following his royal consecration. This setting once again evokes the *Mahābhārata*, for it was at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice that Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* was told by Vaiśampāyana and heard by Ugraśravas.<sup>32</sup> Śatānika requests Śaunaka to tell him about Nārāyaṇa, referring to the fact that his ancestors had regained their kingdom by turning to Nārāyaṇa, and that Nārāyaṇa had saved the life of his stillborn grandfather Parīkṣit.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the *Viṣṇudharma* emphatically places itself in direct relation to the *Mahābhārata* and, more importantly, presents the epic as a history in which the protagonists were ultimately successful because of their devotion to Nārāyaṇa. This further fuels the Bhāgavata perspective of the epic. Furthermore, the teachings of the *Viṣṇudharma* themselves have much in common with those of the *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>34</sup>

If we turn to the narrative frame of the *Śivadharmā*, however, the model is radically different. In a situation in which the canon of the *Mahābhārata* was in the hands of the Bhāgavatas, which allowed little room for the upcoming Śaiva traditions to claim their place, the *Śivadharmā* adopted a model that overruled anything that had been taught before, for the teaching of the *Śivadharmā* is fundamentally presented as the teaching of god Śiva himself. He is, in other words, both subject

32 When the sages headed by Śaunaka perform a twelve-year sacrifice in the Naimiṣa forest, the *sīta* Ugraśravas appears and tells the sages about how he attended the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, where he heard the *Mahābhārata* composed by Vyāsa being recited by Vaiśampāyana.

33 *Viṣṇudharma* 1.1–6:

*ṛtābhiṣekaṃ tanayaṃ rājñāḥ parīkṣitasya (corr.; pārikṣitasya Ed.) ha |  
 draṣṭum abhyāyayuh prītyā śaunakādya maharṣayaḥ ||  
 tān āgatān sa rājarṣiḥ pādārghyādibhir arcitān |  
 sukhopaviṣṭān viśrāntān kṛtasampraśnasatkathān ||  
 tat kathābhiḥ kṛtāhlādaḥ praṇipatya kṛtāñjaliḥ |  
 śatāniko 'tha papraccha nārāyaṇakathāṃ parām ||  
 rājovāca:  
 yam āśrītya jagannāthaṃ mama pūrvapitāmahaḥ |  
 vipakṣāpahṛtaṃ rājyam avāpuḥ puruṣottamāḥ ||  
 drauṇibrahmāstranirdagdho mama yena pitāmahaḥ |  
 parīkṣit prāṇasaṃyogaṃ devadevena lambhitāḥ ||  
 tasya devasya mātmyam śrutaṃ subahuśo mayā |  
 devarṣisiddhamanujaiḥ stutasyāśeṣajanmanaḥ ||*

The story of the resurrection of Parīkṣit is told in *MBh* 14.65–70.

34 See Grünendahl, "Zur Stellung des Nārāyaṇīya im Mahābhārata," 234–235.



and object of the teaching, just like Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Śivadharmā* is presented in its opening chapter as a dialogue between Nandikeśvara and Sanatkumāra (and other sages) on Mt. Meru, but Nandikeśvara tells Sanatkumāra that it was Śiva himself who had originally revealed the teaching of his own worship to Pārvatī, Skanda, Nandikeśvara, and other gods.<sup>35</sup> The text ends with an account of how the teaching came to the human world, stating that Sanatkumāra passed the teaching onto “a Śaiva devotee of the Candrātreyā lineage” and that Candrātreyā extracted the essence from it and taught the *Śivadharmā* in its present twelve chapters.<sup>36</sup> This model corresponds to that of the *tantrāvatāra* or “descent of the Tantra,” which became highly effective and was widely adopted in the early medieval period.<sup>37</sup>

The *Śivadharmā*’s model presents one way of circumventing the issue of the Bhāgavata canonization of the *Mahābhārata*. It effectively involved a complete disregard of the epic, instead introducing the very successful model of instruction by

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35 *Śivadharmāśāstra* 1.10–11:

*śrūyatām abhidhāsyāmi sukhopāyaṃ mahatphalam |  
paramaṃ sarvadharmāṇaṃ śivadharmam śivātmakam ||  
śivena kathitaṃ pūrvaṃ pārvatyāḥ saṃmukhasya ca |  
gaṇānāṃ devamukhyānāṃ asmākaṃ ca viśeṣataḥ ||*

Text as quoted in Bisschop, *Universal Śaivism*, 6–7, from Nina Mirnig’s draft edition of the first chapter.

36 *Śivadharmāśāstra* 12.102:

*sārāt sāraṃ samuddhṛtya candrātreyeṇa dhimatā |  
uktaṃ ca dvādaśādhyāyaṃ dharmāśāstraṃ śivātmakam ||*

Text as constituted in Florinda De Simini, *Of Gods and Books. Ritual and Knowledge Transmission in the Manuscript Cultures of Premodern India* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 62, n. 173.

37 See Dominic Goodall and Marion Rastelli, eds., *Tāntrikābhīdhānaśāstra. A Dictionary of Technical Terms from Tantric Literature*, vol. 3, T–PH (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), s.v. *tantrāvatāra* (pp. 77–79); Gerhard Oberhammer, *Offenbarungsgeschichte als Text: Religionshermeneutische Bemerkungen zum Phänomen in Hinduistischer Tradition* (Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili, 1994).

38 A precedent for this had already been set in some sense in the *Mahābhārata*, in the form of the “Dialogue between Umā and Maheśvara” (*Umāmaheśvarasaṃvāda*) of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (*MBh* 13.126–134). It is noteworthy that an *Umāmaheśvarasaṃvāda* was included as part of the *Śivadharmā* corpus in Nepal. For a preliminary study of the links between the *Umāmaheśvarasaṃvāda* of the *Śivadharmā* and the *Anuśāsanaparvan*, see Florinda De Simini and Nina Mirnig, “Umā and Śiva’s Playful Talks in Detail (*Lalitavistara*): On the Production of Śaiva Works and their Manuscripts in Medieval Nepal,” in *Indic Manuscripts Through the Ages*, eds. Vincenzo Vergiani, Daniele Cuneo, and Camillo Formigatti (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 587–653.

Śiva himself through a lineage of subsequent teachers.<sup>38</sup> The *Skandapurāṇa*'s strategy was a different one: it rather presents a complete reorientation of the *Mahābhārata* by turning its author into a Pāśupata ascetic. This involves a radical break with the received tradition, in particular that advocated by the *Nārāyaṇīya*.<sup>39</sup>

In the centuries to come, different religious communities developed different ways of connecting themselves with the *Mahābhārata*. Another telling example of this process is the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, which likewise presents Vyāsa as a pupil, but this time of the sage Nārada. Vyāsa asks Nārada what he had missed when he composed the *Mahābhārata*. Nārada tells him that he has not given due attention to the Bhagavat Vāsudeva (*BhP* 1.5). Vyāsa then composes the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* about devotion to the Bhagavat, which he subsequently teaches to none other than his son Śuka, who becomes its narrator. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* can indeed claim to have outdone the *Mahābhārata* as well, having gained a special status among the Purāṇas as the central sacred scripture of Vaiṣṇava communities up to the present day.<sup>40</sup> In the end, it all serves to show the prominent position that the *Mahābhārata* has had as a founding epic of Brahminic lore.

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**39** According to two passages in the *Nārāyaṇīya*, Vyāsa is an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa: *MBh* 12.334.9 and *MBh* 12.337.3–5; 42–44. This tradition is followed in several Purāṇas. See Marcelle Saindon, “Quand Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa est considéré comme un *avatāra* de Viṣṇu,” *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 22–23 (2004–05): 307–321. The rhetorical remark in *MBh* 12.334.9, however, has been given a Śaiva twist in *KūP* 1.30.67. This may reflect the influence of the *Skandapurāṇa*'s perspective.

*MBh* 12.334.9:

*kṛṣṇadvaipāyanaṃ vyāsaṃ vidhi nārāyaṇaṃ prabhum |*  
*ko hy anyañ puruṣavyāghra mahābhāratakr̥d bhavet ||*

*KūP* 1.30.67:

*kṛṣṇadvaipāyanaḥ sākṣād viṣṇur eva sanātanaḥ |*  
*ko hy anyas tattvato rudraṃ vetti taṃ parameśvaram ||*

**40** On the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* as a “new *Mahābhārata*,” see Freda Matchett, “Some Reflections on the Frame-Narrative of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*,” in *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature*, ed. Mary Brockington, Proceedings of DICSEP 2 (Zagreb: Croatian Academy, 2002): 287–295. As Matchett observes (p. 290), although the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* has much to say about Śuka, in line with its Kṛṣṇaite teachings, it refrains from referring to Śuka's connection with Śiva. The connections between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* have been well studied: Wendy Doniger, “Echoes of the *Mahābhārata*: Why is a Parrot the Narrator of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*?” in *Purāṇa Perennis. Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jain Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 31–57; Martin Christof, “The Legitimation of Textual Authority in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*,” in *Charisma and Canon. Essays on the Religious*

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- BhP* – Shastri, H. G., ed. *The Bhāgavata [Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa]*. Vol. 1, *Skandas I to III*. Ahmedabad: B. J. Institute of Learning and Research, 1996.
- KūP* – Gupta, Anand Swarup, ed. *The Kūrmapurāṇa*. Varanasi: All-India Kashiraj Trust, 1971.
- MBh* – Sukthankar, V. S., S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, eds. *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933.
- SP I* – Adriaensen, Rob, Hans T. Bakker, and Harunaga Isaacson, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. I, *Adhyāyas 1–25*. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998.
- SP IV* – Bisschop, Peter C. and Yuko Yokochi, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. IV, *Adhyāyas 70–95: Start of the Skanda and Andhaka Cycles*. In cooperation with Diwakar Acharya and Judit Törzsök. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- SP<sub>Bh</sub>* – Kṛṣṇaprasāda Bhaṭṭarāi, ed. *Skandapurāṇasya Ambikākhaṇḍaḥ*. Mahendraratnagrathamālā 2. Kathmandu: Mahendrasaṃskṛtāvīśvavidyālayaḥ, 1988.

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Laxshmi Rose Greaves

# The “Best Abode of Virtue”: *Sattra* Represented on a Gupta-Period Frieze from Gaṛhwā, Uttar Pradesh

“Poetry is a speaking picture, and painting silent poetry.”

Simonides of Ceos (ca. 556–468 BCE), quoted in Plutarch’s *De Gloria Atheniensium*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

Between 1871 and 1877, Alexander Cunningham visited Gaṛhwā (or Gaḍhwā) in Prayagraj District (formerly Allahabad District), Uttar Pradesh, three times, initially on the advice of historian Rājā Śiva Prasād.<sup>2</sup> Here, he reported a twelfth-century temple constructed in coarse gray sandstone,<sup>3</sup> a square pillar bearing two Gupta inscriptions that had later been cut into four beams,<sup>4</sup> other fragmented inscriptions, and a number of fine-grained pink sandstone architectural elements dating to the Gupta period (ca. 320–550 CE). Among the latter were jamb fragments or posts carved on three faces, and two ornate temple columns with detached capitals depicting pairs of lions sejant on each of their four faces.<sup>5</sup>

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1 As an aside, in his “A Treatise on Painting” (1651 CE), Leonardo da Vinci lampooned this popular quote, writing: “If you call painting mute poetry, poetry can also be called blind painting.” Cited in Henryk Markiewicz and Uliana Gabara, “Ut Pictura Poesis . . . A History of the Topos and the Problem,” *A New Literary History* 18, no. 3 (1987): 538. This, I suspect, is a comment on the power of (exceptional) art to “speak” to us, as Leonardo’s own work – and, I would argue, the Gaṛhwā frieze – so brilliantly demonstrate.

2 Alexander Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1873), 53–54.

3 I would describe the stone used for many of the ninth- to twelfth-century sculptures and the medieval temple as a sandy ocher color rather than gray. The large number of blackened architectural elements lying at the site, however, suggest that Gaṛhwā might have been subjected to fire at some point in its long history, or else the blackening is due to a buildup of grime. The ocher stone was evidently quarried locally from the rocky plateau on which Gaṛhwā sits. Red sandstone is also available in the Shankargarh area.

4 Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1874–75 and 1876–77* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1880), 10.

5 On one capital, agile male figures (possibly lion tamers) crouch on the abutting flanks of the lions, and on the other, male figures leap daringly from lion back to lion back; for Joseph Beglar’s

One of the most significant discoveries at Gaṛhwā was an extraordinary Gupta-period frieze panel of almost four meters in length, broken into three pieces (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Given its scale, it is likely that this panel spanned the entire width of an exterior wall of a monument at the time of its making. The alto-relievo figurative carvings on the frieze have been much celebrated for the sophistication of their composition; the distinctive nature of the subject material; the fluid and natural poses of the characters depicted; and the convivial interaction between them. Indeed, the frieze might be considered a remarkable demonstration of the proclivity in this era for visual imagery that seeks not only to inspire religious devotion while simultaneously delighting the senses, but that also demands intellectual engagement, at least from its more erudite observers. Moreover, there is a poetic quality to the iconography, as James Harle emphasizes, likening the poignancy of the frieze reliefs to “that other great evocation of a religious procession in Keats’ ‘Ode [on a Grecian Urn].’”<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1:** The Gaṛhwā frieze. Lucknow State Museum. Photographs courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

photograph of the pillars and capitals taken in 1870, see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/p/019pho000001003u00668000.html>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The Gaṛhwā frieze underwent minimal restoration and is now in two, rather than three fragments. The frieze is kept at the Lucknow State Museum, where it is displayed in two adjacent cabinets, regrettably in the wrong order, beginning with Viśvarūpa and ending at the *sattra*.

<sup>7</sup> J. C. Harle, *Gupta Sculpture: Indian Sculpture of the 4th to 6th Century CE* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 22–23. The relevant verse of Keats’s “Ode” reads as follows:

. . . Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
 Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
 What little town by river or sea shore,  
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

Both because of its singularity in the corpus of early Indian religious art and because of its much-lauded aesthetic qualities, the imagery on the frieze panel has been analyzed – in some instances, fleetingly – by several scholars, including Alexander Cunningham, Nilakanth Purushottam Joshi, James Harle, Joanna Williams, and Thomas Maxwell. While each has focused on particular aspects of the panel, the meaning of the iconographic scheme in its entirety has never been understood;<sup>8</sup> indeed, the imagery has at times been described as mysterious.<sup>9</sup> This paper seeks to determine the manifold meanings and allegorical references embodied in the imagery by examining the relief carvings in conjunction with epigraphic data from the site, while taking into account the religious environment of Gaṛhwā in the fifth century CE, within the limitations established by the extremely fragmentary nature of the early history of the site and the absence of scientific excavations or archaeological field surveys, with the exception of Cunningham’s two brief reports. It will be proposed that the frieze represents two royal processions, one meeting at a *sattra* (charitable almshouse) – an institution recorded in Gupta-period inscriptions from Gaṛhwā – and the other at a temple. I will argue that this is the earliest and perhaps only extant visual representation of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse; a ritual institution previously believed to have survived only in the form of literary and epigraphic references.<sup>10</sup> The frieze thus allows us a remarkable visual insight into a practice that probably began in the early years of the Gupta Empire.

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And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return . . .

See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

**8** T. S. Maxwell, in his astute analysis of the frieze panel, does suggest an overarching theme (see note 54). I do not dismiss his hypothesis, but rather envisage it as being one of the many layers of meaning intended for the frieze.

**9** Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23; J. C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 105.

**10** In the early modern period, a new kind of Vaiṣṇava *sattra* (or *satra*) emerged in Assam and West Bengal. To this day, *satra* continues to be a popular type of religious institution in Assam. Assamese *satras*, however, appear to be considerably more multifunctional than the earlier Gupta-era version of the *sattra*, and are closely associated with Vaiṣṇava monasteries. Nevertheless, since one of the Assamese *satra*'s primary functions is as a dwelling place for Vaiṣṇava devotees (both celibate and non-celibate), it might be proposed that it is not entirely distinct from the form of *sattra* that began around the fourth century CE. For further information on the Assamese *satra* see, for example, Satyendra Nath Sarma, *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1966). *Sattra* will be explored in more detail in part 4 of this paper.



## 2 Location

Garhwā is situated on a stone plateau in eastern Uttar Pradesh, five miles south of the River Yamuna, and in close proximity to Shankargarh, where part of a Gupta-period red-sandstone sculpture of Viṣṇu, now on display at the Allahabad State Museum, was discovered. In the fourth to sixth centuries CE, the region encompassing Garhwā was populous and home to a number of sizable settlements, such as Bhita, seventeen miles to the northeast of Garhwā; Prayāga, thirty-two miles to the northeast; and Kauśāmbī,<sup>11</sup> twenty miles to the northwest.<sup>12</sup> Bāra, a town eight miles east of Garhwā, sits on a large-scale mound but has yet to be investigated (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> Garhwā, which Dilip K. Chakrabarti describes as one of the most significant temple and sculptural sites in North India,<sup>14</sup> is situated on the ancient Dakṣiṇāpatha trade route leading from Paṭnā (ancient Pāṭaliputra), through Bhita – which was once a thriving, affluent center of trade – and onwards to Vidarbha, the heartland of the Eastern Vākātakas (fourth and fifth centuries CE) near modern-day Nagpur. About this route, Chakrabarti writes:

Between Bhita and Garhwa a road follows the river, and all along it, up to Garhwa I encountered sites: Chilla, Basahr, Shankargarh, Bara, Mankameshwar. This seems to be an early road and as D.P. Dube reminded me in personal conversations, this was probably part of the route from Allahabad/Prayag to Chitrakut. The location of Garhwa and Shankargarh is important. The main place is Shankargarh with Garhwa lying close to it. From the Shankargarh area one ventured towards the Vindhyas; the modern Allahabad-Rewa road passes through Shankargarh. It also lies on the way to Chitrakut and Banda. Further, from this side one can cross the Yamuna and after some time reach Kausambi. I tried to locate the principal ferry point for Kausambi. Where would people coming from central India have crossed the Yamuna for Kausambi? It appears that the contiguous area of Shankargarh-Mau was the most feasible point.<sup>15</sup>

Xuanzang visited both Prayāga and Kauśāmbī in the first half of the seventh century CE and describes in some detail a grand gift-giving ceremony that took place beside the confluence of the Rivers Ganges and Yamuna near Prayāga. In light of the subject of this paper, it is pertinent that the tradition

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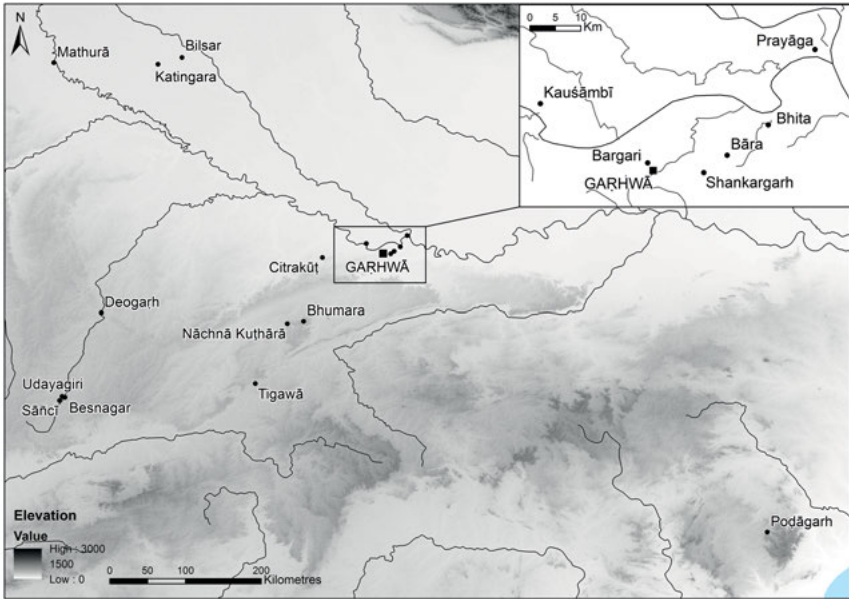
**11** Kauśāmbī is described by Xuanzang as teeming with heretics, meaning Hindus and Jains; see Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World Translated from the Chinese of Hsien Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner & Co., 1906), 235.

**12** I have measured the distances using modern roads, some of which might, by and large, be the same routes taken in the early centuries CE.

**13** Thanks to Dr. M. C. Gupta for informing me of this.

**14** Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: The Lower and the Middle Ganga* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 260.

**15** Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain*, 264–265.



**Figure 2:** Map showing Gaṛhwā and other sites featured in this paper.

of gift-giving by royals was practiced on a lavish scale not far from Gaṛhwā. Xuanzang writes:

To the east of the capital, between the two confluents of the river, for the space of 10 li or so, the ground is pleasant and upland. The whole is covered with a fine sand. From old time till now, the kings and noble families, whenever they had occasion to distribute their gifts in charity ever came to this place, and here gave away their goods; hence it is called the great charity enclosure. At the present time Śīlāditya-rāja,<sup>16</sup> after the example of his ancestors, distributes here in one day the accumulated wealth of five years. Having collected in this space of the charity enclosure immense piles of wealth and jewels, on the first day he adorns in a very sumptuous way a statue of Buddha, and then offers to it the most costly jewels. Afterwards he offers his charity to the residentary priests; afterwards to the priests (from a distance) who are present; afterwards to the men of distinguished talent; afterwards to the heretics who live in the place, following the ways of the world; and lastly, to the widows and bereaved, orphans and desolate, poor and mendicants . . . After this the rulers of the different countries offer their jewels and robes to the king, so that his treasury is replenished.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Śīlāditya-rāja is thought to be King Harṣavadhana, whose capital was at Kannauj.

<sup>17</sup> Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 233.

Garhwā, meaning “fort,” is enclosed within pentagonal parapet walls with four bastions. The perimeter of the fort is approximately 355 meters, while the surface area of the enclosure covers in the region of 8,800 square meters. According to Cunningham, the parapets, which are not believed to have served a defensive purpose, were constructed in the mid-eighteenth century by Rāja Vikramāditya.<sup>18</sup> A large haveli-style house, which Cunningham has estimated to be of the same date, sits at the center of the fort, and a stone bearing Gupta-period inscriptions, embedded in a wall of one of its rooms, was found by Rājā Śiva Prasād.<sup>19</sup>

The fort sits on a river bed with its western and eastern parapet walls acting as embankments.<sup>20</sup> I would suggest, though, that in the Gupta period, the built structures were situated in the usual way, close to the riverbank rather than on the riverbed itself.

Most of the pre-eighteenth-century sculptures and architectural elements surviving at Garhwā date from between the ninth and twelfth centuries CE. Three large-scale sculptures produced around the tenth century CE and depicting Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, bear inscriptions recording them to be gifts of yogī Jwālāditya, son of Bhaṭṭananta.<sup>21</sup> Cunningham suggests that the latter was responsible for the establishment of the village of Bhaṭṭagrām, which he hypothesizes was probably situated between Garhwā and the village of Bhaṭṭgarh (modern Bargari), approximately one mile to the north, since he found the whole area liberally scattered with broken bricks.<sup>22</sup> Without further exploration, however, it is not possible to determine the scale of the settlement during the Gupta period.

The ruins of an elegant temple placed on a tall *jagatī* (platform) are situated in the southwestern corner of the fort. Joseph Beglar’s photograph shows the *śikhara* (tower) partly intact in 1870, but it has since completely collapsed.<sup>23</sup> The temple, which was probably dedicated to Viṣṇu, bears several inscriptions dating to the twelfth century CE.<sup>24</sup> Two identical tanks clad in ashlar sandstone are situated to the fore of the temple, one in front of the other (Figure 3).

**18** Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 53.

**19** Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 55.

**20** At the time of my visit to Garhwā in March 2019, the riverbed was dry. Cunningham notes that an outlet for excess water in the monsoon season was cut into the fields to the north. See Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 53.

**21** Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 56.

**22** Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 60.

**23** For Joseph Beglar’s photograph of the medieval temple at Garhwā, see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/019pho000001003u00654000.html>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

**24** Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 58–60.



Figure 3: The twin tanks to the fore of the 12<sup>th</sup> century temple at Gaṛhwā. Author's photograph.

### 3 Gaṛhwā Frieze: Temple and Almshouse

Turning now to the frieze, at the center of the composition stands Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa in his Viśvarūpa (all-encompassing) form, wearing a *vanamālā* (garland) reaching down to his ankles (Figure 4). At only 25 cm in height, this figure is considerably smaller than other Gupta-period Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa images, yet, despite its scale and worn condition, the deity, with its myriad heads and floating forms emitting flames, is a spectacular example of this most awe-inspiring, wondrous manifestation of the god.<sup>25</sup> Viṣṇu's head has suffered considerable damage, lending it an unnaturally elongated appearance that culminates in what could be interpreted as a pronounced chin. To Harle, this elongation suggests that Viṣṇu might have been depicted with the head of a horse or lion.<sup>26</sup> However, Viṣṇu is

<sup>25</sup> Maxwell describes it as the smallest known sculpture of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. See T. S. Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 190.

<sup>26</sup> Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 47, note 73. If Viṣṇu's head was intended to be equine, then it is worth noting that in the *Nārāyaṇīya* of the *Mahābhārata*, to which we will return later in this paper, Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) reveals himself to Brahmā in a form with a horse's head (12.321–339). The theophany is not described in any detail, however, Maxwell writes that no sculptural evidence exists of a Hayaśiras or Hayagrīva (horse-necked or horse-headed) emanation of Viṣṇu surrounded by



**Figure 4:** Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. Author’s photograph.

wearing a *kīṛṭa* (crown), and it is just about possible to distinguish where on his head the crown rests. This indicates that his face is more likely to have been of a normal (human) scale, albeit with a decidedly chiseled jaw in contrast to the round faces of the other characters depicted. This chiseled appearance could potentially be the result of erosion, unless, as Harle proposes, the face was indeed zoomorphic. The absence of a defined neck is consonant with the other figures on the frieze.<sup>27</sup>

Four diminutive figures stand at Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa’s feet. The two figures on his left-hand side probably represent the *āyudhapuruṣas* (personification of

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flames and/or a multitude of small figures (see Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193) This does not mean that the horse-head hypothesis should be dismissed outright, but it should be treated with caution.

<sup>27</sup> Harle and Maxwell both note that the head of a horse appears to be portrayed above Viṣṇu (Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 47, note 73; Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 192). To some extent, this miniature horse mirrors the head of Viṣṇu below (in its current state).

weapons). Of the two figures to his right, at least one is female and if she is not also the personification of a weapon, then she might represent Śrī, Viṣṇu's consort, as proposed by Maxwell.<sup>28</sup> According to Maxwell, this is the only known Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa image depicted in a narrative scheme.<sup>29</sup> Yet this does not seem to be a theophany of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa in a known mythical setting. Instead, two walls contain the deity, and in agreement with Joshi and Maxwell, I believe this to be a depiction of a temple; more specifically, the inner sanctum of a temple containing the enshrined deity, with an outer porch in which the parasol-holder stands.<sup>30</sup> Early-fifth-century CE temples such as those at Sāñcī, Tigawā, and Udayagiri in eastern Madhya Pradesh share this same simple floor plan.

To the left of the shrine is a less familiar type of structure accessed via a gateway or building with a barrel-vaulted superstructure, only part of which has been represented.<sup>31</sup> Next to this is a triple-tiered monument with a row of pillars running along the upper platform (Figure 5). Figures crouch on the platforms and are fed and watered by three people. To begin with, like Harle,<sup>32</sup> I interpreted two of the triad as matronly women. Upon closer examination, however, it became clear that the figure portrayed leaning forward to fill the plates of two seated characters does not have breasts and moreover, is dressed differently from the other women on the frieze who all wear elegant form-fitting draped saris without blouses.<sup>33</sup> I surmise then that this figure is probably male. The gender of the second server is likewise not immediately apparent, although there is a suggestion of breasts and a narrower form. This figure wears

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**28** Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 191. In light of the fact that Sūrya and Candra have both been depicted with their consorts, it is likely that Viṣṇu has also been depicted with his wife or wives.

**29** Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 190.

**30** Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 190; N. P. Joshi, *Catalogue of the Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, part 1 (Lucknow: The State Museum, 1972), 87.

**31** The composition is constrained by the space available on the frieze. Because of this, it might be tentatively conjectured that were this architectural complex based on a real monument at Gaṛhwā, and if the barrel-vaulted structure was not intended as a gateway but rather a pavilion or religious building of some sort, then the “real” structure might have been positioned atop the pyramidal platforms. In part 5 of this paper, an alternative hypothesis will be explored. In personal communication (2019), Adam Hardy has dissected the barrel-vaulted structure. He suggests that over the pillar is a *kūṭa* (an aedicula topped with a finial) and above this a large *gavākṣa* (a horseshoe-shaped arch) crowned by a loose representation of an *āmālaka* (the ribbed crowning element of a North Indian temple, resembling a lightly squashed gooseberry).

**32** Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23.

**33** In art-historical terminology, this look is defined as “wet drapery”; essentially, the clothes provide modesty while simultaneously drawing attention to the shape and form of the body.



**Figure 5:** Detail of Garhwā frieze showing the *sattra*. Author’s photograph.

a particularly unusual turban-like headdress from which a long scarf flows behind the head and shoulders. If the pair does comprise a male and female, then they might represent a married couple. They are assisted by a bare-chested male carrying a basket over one shoulder. As an example of the animated detail in this frieze, a wide-eyed recipient is portrayed hungrily biting into his food (Figure 6). He and his companions at the receiving end of this charity are ascetics, mendicants, or *brāhmaṇas* (religious specialists). The gathering seems to be taking place at an almshouse of sorts and despite Joanna Williams’s commenting that the Gupta-period inscriptions found at Garhwā are not associated with any of the images, and in fact predate them,<sup>34</sup> I suggest that the inscriptions are directly linked to the almshouse represented on the panel and possibly to the long-lost building on which the frieze was displayed.

<sup>34</sup> Joanna Gottfried Williams, *The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 152.





**Figure 6:** Detail of Garhwā frieze showing one of the beneficiaries of the *sattra* mid-mouthful. Author's photograph.

## 4 Inscriptions

There are four fragmentary Gupta-period Sanskrit inscriptions from Garhwā, one from the reign of Candragupta II, dating to 407/408 CE; two from the reign of Kumāragupta I, one dated to 417/418 CE;<sup>35</sup> and one from the close of the reign of Skandagupta in 466/467 CE. Of the latter inscription, little survives, but it appears to record that a *vaḍabhi* temple – most probably a derivative of *valabhī*, a temple either with a barrel-vaulted roof or with beams, i.e. flat-roofed – was constructed and feet<sup>36</sup> of the god Viṣṇu Anantasvāmin were installed.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, some

<sup>35</sup> The date is missing on one of inscriptions from the reign of Kumāragupta I. See John Faithfull Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1888; repr., Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1960), 39.

<sup>36</sup> Fleet writes. “The use of the word *pāda*, not *pada*, shews that the inscription does not refer to the foot-prints or impressions of feet, which are so frequently objects of worship. So, also, just below this passage, ‘the feet of the divine (god) Chitrakūṭasvāmin’ means simply ‘the divine (god) Chitrakūṭasvāmin’” (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 268, note 10).

<sup>37</sup> This inscription has been translated by Fleet; D. R. Bhandarkar, “A List of Inscriptions of Northern India in Brahmi and Its Derivative Scripts, from about 200 A.C.”, in *Epigraphica Indica*, vols.



provision – probably money – was given to the treasury of a second image of Citrakūṭasvāmin, which may have been an image installed in a preexisting temple.<sup>38</sup> This inscription is immediately interesting for two reasons; firstly, because, as mentioned above, the reliefs on the frieze include the cross section of a barrel-vaulted *valabhī* roof or gateway seemingly belonging to the almshouse structure. Secondly, Citrakūṭasvāmin (Lord of Citrakūṭa) is an uncommon name for Viṣṇu in his Rāma *avatāra*.<sup>39</sup> Since there exists a tradition of naming the central deity of a temple after its patron, Citrakūṭa might refer to a historical personage; or, instead, it might recall the forested area fifty-five miles to the west of Gaṛhwā, where Rāma is described as having lived during the first part of his exile. For this reason, Citrakūṭ is considered a place of tremendous sanctity, much visited by pilgrims. Incidentally, as quoted above, Chakrabarti notes that an ancient route running from Prayāga to Citrakūṭ probably passed through or close to Gaṛhwā.<sup>40</sup> The occurrence of this name at our site in the Gupta period tentatively indicates that there might have been a drive to create a sacred Vaiṣṇava landscape here, even if on a small scale, and indeed, the surviving sculptural fragments from the Gupta period to the twelfth century indicate that the religious environment here was predominantly Vaiṣṇava in its orientation.

The other three inscriptions are carved on the damaged stone block that was found in a wall of the mid-eighteenth-century house at Gaṛhwā.<sup>41</sup> The inscriptions are fragmentary, but all record generous monetary donations, ranging from ten to twelve *dināras* (gold coins) for the perpetual maintenance of a

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19–23 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1929), 1280; and Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs* (Varanasi: Books Asia, 1983), 37. The Sanskrit text is available at <http://siddham.uk/incription/in00063>. Accessed September 13, 2019. Dániel Balogh has made a more convincing reading, which I have used here (personal communication, 2018).

38 The inscription records the provision as twelve . . . The following part of the inscription is missing, but it probably stated *dināras*.

39 This is also fascinating because – with the tentative exception of a shrine constructed under the Vākāṭaka queen Prabhāvatīguptā – we do not know of any temples dedicated to Rāma prior to the twelfth century CE; for further information on this subject, see Hans Bakker, *Ayodhyā* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1986), 65–66. However, the Bhitari pillar inscription of Skandagupta informs us that a Śārṅgadhara temple was constructed during his reign. *Śārṅga* is the name of Viṣṇu’s bow, but could potentially refer to Rāma. Sheldon Pollock writes, “[. . .] were this [Śārṅgadhara temple] in Ayodhyā (and more, were it a Rāma temple) it might suggest a royal cult of Rāma in the late fifth century [. . .],” but dismisses this possibility; see Sheldon Pollock, “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 265. 40 Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain*, 264–65.

41 Fleet reports that the stone bearing inscriptions was moved to the Imperial Museum in Calcutta (later the Indian Museum, Kolkata) (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 36).

*sattra* in the context of a charitable almshouse rather than for an extended ritual, which is the more ancient usage of the term *sattra*.<sup>42</sup>

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42 The inscription from the reign of Candragupta II, dated to 407 to 408 CE, records that the endowment was gifted by the wife of a householder (both names are lost) who wished to increase her religious merit (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 39, lines 12–15). *Sattra* in its more ancient form is a ritual that is given much importance in the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Āstika* of the *Ādiparvan* (book 1), the Kuru king, Janamejaya, holds a *sarpasattra* (an extended ritual snake sacrifice that involves regular intervals and has its origins in the Vedas) in Takṣaśilā (Taxila), with the objective of removing all snakes from the world after his father was killed by one. C. Z. Minkowski describes the *sarpasattra* as the frame story of the *Mahābhārata*, with the epic story being narrated to Janamejaya during the intervals of the *sarpasattra*. The ritual comes to a close at the end of the epic, but not before the *sattra* has been interrupted and the snakes saved. See C. Z. Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s *Sattra* and Ritual Structure,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 3 (1989): 402–405, and for a detailed exploration of the textual history and ritual of the *sarpasattra*, see 413–416. Minkowski defines *sattra* as an elaborate extended ritual “with its cyclical daily activity and its long breaks, during which the king as *dikṣita* [the consecrated one] must remain in his state of consecration by following only elevating pursuits and speaking only true things . . .” (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 403). Later, elaborating on the meaning(s) of *sattra*, Minkowski writes:

The term *sattra* is used to describe soma sacrifices [a Vedic sacrifice involving the Soma plant] in which there are twelve or more days of soma pressing. There is a subclass of these *sattras*, termed *sāmvasarikas*, which last for a year or longer. Certain unusual rules prevail in *sattras*. There is no distribution of sacerdotal duties, and, by consequence, only Brahmins may perform them. Rather, all the *sattrins* are equally the *yajamāna* or sponsor. There is, by consequence, no *dakṣiṇā* or gift to the officiants. (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 413)

Interestingly, as Minkowski notes, the rules that govern *sattra* are somewhat disrupted by the *sarpasattra* in the *Mahābhārata*, since it is performed by King Janamejaya rather than by a *brāhmaṇa* (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 413). This might indicate that *sattra* is more encompassing or flexible, and thus amenable to change, than is generally thought. In book nine of the *Mahābhārata*, a twelve-year *sattra* takes place in the Naimiṣa Forest (a location where many *sattras* happened and where the Vedas record the very first *sattra* being performed; see “Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 416) on the banks of the Sarasvatī River in North India. Many *brāhmaṇas* gathered for the *sattra*, and once the ritual had come to a close, this sanctified area continued to attract innumerable ascetics. Indeed, so great was the influx of ascetics here that there was insufficient space to accommodate them all. Thus, in order to facilitate sacrificial rites by creating abodes for the *brāhmaṇas*, the River Sarasvatī changed her course (*MBh* 9.37.37–55). In this story, a connection is forged between *sattra*, living quarters, and *brāhmaṇas*, and as such, *sattra* as a charitable almshouse does not seem so far removed from its earlier incarnation; see Justin Meiland, trans., *Mahābhārata Book Nine, Shalya*, vol. 2, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2007), 121–125. A rather fascinating

Michael Willis describes the newer form of *sattra* as being connected with Manu’s *atithi* (hospitality) or *manuṣyayajña* (sacrifice to men), laid out in the *Manusmṛiti Dharmasāstra* (*the Laws of Manu*). This would imply that the ritual aspect, while heavily modified, was still very much part of the institution of *sattra*.<sup>43</sup> Further epigraphic and textual references to *sattra*, most of which are explored in Willis’s book *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, help to flesh out what this institution constitutes. In close temporal proximity to the Gaṛhwā inscriptions are identical inscriptions on a pair of pillars from Bilsar dating to 415 CE, soon after the advent of Kumāragupta I’s reign. These describe how a *sattra* – the best abode of virtue – was constructed at a temple of Kārttikeya by a virtuous and venerable *brāhmaṇa*, Dhruvaśarman, who accrued superhuman powers through his actions.<sup>44</sup> Willis has suggested that “the best abode of virtue” means that virtue came to Dhruvaśarman through his establishment of a *sattra*;<sup>45</sup> however, it might also connote the dwelling of virtuous people, or the place where virtue flourishes. A mid-fifth-century pillar inscription from Poḍāgarh in Odisha records a king’s endowment for the establishment of a temple enshrining Viṣṇu’s footprints, along with a *sattra* in which to feed *brāhmaṇas*, ascetics, and the wretched, helpless poor for the purposes of worship (*pūjā*).<sup>46</sup> Thus, feeding *brāhmaṇas* and the needy is considered an act of worship in itself and is closely affiliated with temple worship, which involves – among other rituals – clothing and offering food to the deity housed in the sanctum. Another fifth-century reference to *sattra* is included in the encyclopedia of Amarasimha (the *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*), where it is defined as a perpetual giving of garments.<sup>47</sup>

An interesting sixth-century copper-plate inscription from Madhya Pradesh records a gift, from *mahārāja* Bhūta, of two villages in addition to some tax revenue to support a Viṣṇu temple established by his mother, Vīrāḍhyā. While

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aspect of *sattra* as prescribed or described in the Vedas and in the *Mahābhārata* is the recommendation that, during the intervals that take place throughout the extended sacrifice, heroic stories be shared as a means of teaching *dharma*, particularly stories that occur at royal sacrifices (Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s Sattra,” 417).

43 Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 104–5.

44 Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 42–45. One of the pillar inscriptions had suffered heavy damage, so only the better-preserved inscription is included in Fleet’s corpus; however, he describes them as duplicates (see 42).

45 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 104.

46 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 105 and 289, note 118.

47 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 107.

the term *sattra* is not explicitly mentioned here, as Willis notes,<sup>48</sup> its existence is clearly implied in the grant:

[. . .] and from now onward, support – medicine and restorative food – is to be given here to mendicants, to male and female slaves in the service of the god and to those bereft of food, clothing etc., who come to the habitation acquired by that [temple].<sup>49</sup>

The *Śivadhamottara*, placed by Florinda De Simini in seventh-century CE North India,<sup>50</sup> prescribes a pillared pavilion for a *sattra* in the east of a Śaiva hermitage complex (10.131);<sup>51</sup> a later copper-plate inscription found in Gaonri, southeast of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, dated 930 CE, records the gifts of King Govinda IV. Among these were land and money for temples and *pūjā*, as well as a village donated in order to establish a *sattra* in which *brāhmaṇas* could be fed and clothed.<sup>52</sup>

In light of these epigraphic and textual references, as mentioned in the introduction, it might be posited that the frieze panel depicts a *sattra* (probably the very same *sattra* recorded in the donatory Gupta-period inscriptions at Gaṛhwā), and an adjoining temple dedicated to Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāras*. The occupants of the *sattra* portrayed on the frieze are being offered food, while the figure heading up the procession on the left-hand side of the composition is presenting an article – fabric or maybe a rolled garment – to the figure at his feet. Thus, both the giving of clothing/cloth and food that characterize the institution of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse are pictured here. This makes the image an extraordinarily valuable visual documentation of a practice that seems to have been initiated in the Gupta era.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, fortuitously, the very first surviving epigraphic occurrence of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse is recorded in the inscriptions at Gaṛhwā.

48 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 106.

49 This translation is by Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 105.

50 Florinda De Simini, *Of Gods and Books: Ritual and Knowledge Transmission in the Manuscript Cultures of Premodern India*, Studies in Manuscript Cultures, eds. Michael Friedrich, Harunaga Isaacson, and Jörg B. Quenzer, vol. 8 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 22.

51 De Simini, *Of Gods and Books*, 386.

52 De Simini, *Of Gods and Books*, 174–5.

53 Although the earliest surviving mention of *sattra* as a charitable institution occurs in the Gupta period, the mid-second century CE Mathurā inscription of Huviṣka (year 28) records the establishment of an endowment, the purpose of which was the king's spiritual benefit. Money was to be given to guilds, and from the interest earned, *brāhmaṇas* and the poor were to be fed at a *puṇyasālā* (a house of meritorious acts) – perhaps a precursor to the institution of *sattra*, but not necessarily directly affiliated with temples. See Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 288, note 114.

## 5 The Tiered Structure in the Gaṛhwā Frieze

Based on the structures that survive at Gaṛhwā today, there is another tentative yet tantalizing hypothesis that I would like to propose, which, while impossible to verify, is nevertheless worth exploring briefly. The walls of the twin tanks in the fort have three receding tiers. Running behind the tanks at ground level is a long colonnade belonging to the eleventh or twelfth century CE (Figures 7 and 8). Each of the pillars has a square capital with rounded corners (*bharana* pillars). Both tanks are accessed by staircases, the central staircase having a gateway that, based on style, was probably an eighteenth-century addition. This architectural scheme is strikingly analogous to the tiered structure depicted on the frieze, which has columns with square, round-cornered capitals running along the upper platform and a *valabhi*-style gateway or pavilion of some sort. Could the visitors to the *sattra* be sitting on the side of one of the tanks, perhaps in order to keep cool? And could the medieval colonnade have replaced a Gupta period equivalent?



**Figure 7:** A view of a tank at Gaṛhwā with an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century colonnade running behind. Author’s photograph.



**Figure 8:** A view of the medieval colonnade, temple, and one of the tanks at Garhwā. Author's photograph.

## 6 Other Figures on the Panel

Returning now to the frieze, the composition comprises two processions culminating, on the left side, at the *sattra*, and on the right side, at the temple, which takes the most illustrious position in the hierarchy, at the center. The first figure on the left is the sun god, Sūrya, framed by the orb-shaped non-anthropomorphic sun (Figure 9). He rides a chariot drawn by seven horses and is flanked by two diminutive female archers, his consorts Uṣā and Pratyūṣā, engaged in banishing the darkness of night by shooting down sunrays. Adjacent to Sūrya are two men facing each other, standing arm in arm, one wearing a helmet and the other holding a sword. Next, we have men carrying goods on their heads and banghy bearers, punctuated by a taller man carrying a curved sword slung over his shoulders. To the fore of the procession stands the illustrious male figure mentioned earlier, with his hair tied in a topknot, gifting cloth or garments. A parasol is being held over his head, which identifies him as a royal personage. The man with the topknot standing to his side could be his *guru* or priest, or, as



Figure 9: Detail of Gaṛhṃwā frieze depicting Sūrya. Author’s photograph.

Joshi suggests, a minister.<sup>54</sup> All figures including the prince or king have naked upper bodies, with the exception of the four figures closest to the *sattra* (or possibly the tank connected with the *sattra*), which might indicate that they belong to the latter institution. Notably, only men participate in the procession winding its way to the *sattra*, in contrast to the procession leading to the temple, which includes women.

To the right of the panel is a charming depiction of Candra, god of the moon, gazing down at one of his wives seated beside him on the inanimate crescent moon (Figure 10). Of his twenty-seven wives – the twenty-seven *nakṣatras* or lunar mansions – Candra loves only Rohiṇī. Since this is an affectionate scene, it can be assumed that she is his companion here. The temporal dimension of the ritual taking place on the frieze has been lucidly emphasized by the positioning of the sun and moon gods at the beginning and end of the frieze, respectively.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Joshi, *Catalogue of the Brahmanical Sculptures*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> On the positioning of the sun and moon, Maxwell writes:

My own interpretation of the lintel as a whole is that it represents the *trisaṅdhya*, the three divisions of the day, at the junctions of which the ritual is performed to “join” the stages of time (symbolically including the *trikāla*- past, present and future) together: sunrise, noon, and nightfall. Thus the sun as Sūrya rises on the left of the frieze (presumably the lintel was seen from the north) and moonrise occurs at the opposite end as Candra,



**Figure 10:** Detail of Garhwā frieze showing Candra and Rohiṇī. Author's photograph.

Next to the lunar couple stand six tall, sinuous women, each holding a fly whisk (Figure 11). The two women closest to Candra stand in a semi-embrace, mirroring the two men standing beside Sūrya at the opposite end of the frieze. Unlike the other women and men portrayed, these six figures do not seem to be doing very much in particular. I propose that they simultaneously represent the chief women of a royal household and the six Kṛttikās who together form one of the *nakṣatras* and correspond to the month of *kārttika*, which spans parts of October and November. Incidentally, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes both Kṛttikā and Rohiṇī as auspicious *nakṣatras* under which to perform rituals (2.1.2), and significantly, Kṛttikā is positioned next to Rohiṇī in the *nakṣatra* system.<sup>56</sup>

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the course of the day being upheld at noon, when the sun is in the zenith, at which point Viṣṇu as the blazing *axis mundi* is manifest. (Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193–194)

The emphasis in the panel on the times of day is rather interesting in light of the Vedic form of *sattra* being cyclical and involving the pressing of the Soma plant in the morning, at noon, and in the evening (Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s *Sattra* and Ritual Structure,” 416).

<sup>56</sup> The Kṛttikās are also the surrogate mothers of the god Kārttikēya (known by many names, among them Kumāra and Skanda), who, according to one story in the *Mahābhārata*, was born from their six wombs in a forest of reeds (*Mbh* 13.2.86). It is tempting to hypothesize that this is a clever, if remote, allusion to Kumāragupta I, or even Skandagupta if the panel is later than





**Figure 11:** Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing six tall females. Author’s photograph.

The scene next shifts to five petite women holding poles that support a canopy protecting a special dish of food, carried by a male figure who rests it on the crown of his head (Figure 12). A further tall woman leads the way; perhaps she is the chief queen. She carries an object that might be a lamp or a censer with a long handle. She follows behind a man with a flat and heavy platelike object on his shoulder. In front of him is a band of male musicians playing a variety of instruments including drums, cymbals, and flutes (Figure 13). Finally, heading up the procession is a royal figure, sheltered by a parasol, kneeling with palms together before the deity in the inner sanctum of the temple. The extraordinary element of this scene is that Viṣṇu is giving the royal figure a full theophany of himself in his all-encompassing form.

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I believe. In the same vein, Candra and Rohiṇī could be read as an allusion to Kumāragupta I’s parents, Candragupta II and Dhruvadevi. It is more probable, however, that if these women do indeed represent the Kṛttikās, that they are signifying the time at which the monument was consecrated or when the ritual was performed.



**Figure 12:** Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing figures carrying a canopy protecting a special dish. Author's photograph.

## 7 Which Theophany?

There are a few occurrences, in the *Mahābhārata*, of Viṣṇu revealing his Viśvarūpa form. The iconography on the frieze, however, can be alluding to one of only two of these happenings. In the soteriological text, the *Nārāyaṇīya* – eighteen chapters contained within the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Śāntiparvan* (12.321–339) – Yudhiṣṭhira listens to Bhīṣma narrating the story of Sage Nārada's magnificent vision of Viṣṇu in his cosmic form, which occurred in the *Kṛta Yuga*.<sup>57</sup> Nārada is rewarded with this theophany after performing lengthy austerities and then singing a *stotra* (hymn) in praise of the god on the fabled White Island (*Śvetadvīpa*), north of Mount Meru, a place “inhabited only by the purest

<sup>57</sup> The *Nārāyaṇīya* synthesizes *bhakti* worship, *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), *yoga*, sacrifice, and philosophical inquiry with the aim of obtaining *mokṣa* (final liberation). A brief comparison of the *Nārāyaṇīya* and *Bhagavadgītā* is included in John L. Brockington, “*Bhagavadgītā*: Text and Context,” in *The Fruits of our Desiring – An Enquiry into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgītā*, ed. Julius Lipner (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 1997), 34–5; for an extensive study of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, see Peter Schreiner, ed., *Nārāyaṇīya Studien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997).



**Figure 13:** Detail of Garhwā frieze showing musicians. Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

devotees of Nārāyaṇa [Viṣṇu], pure-white, umbrella-headed creatures devoid of senses, who sit in perfect meditation upon God.”<sup>58</sup> Nārada sees Nārāyaṇa thus:

[. . .] His pure Self was somewhat like the moon, yet somewhat different in certain respects. Somewhat the colour of fire, the Lord was somewhat like a star. (2)

He was somewhat the colour of a parrot’s wing, somewhat crystalline. He was like a mound of dark collyrium, yet in places he was golden. (3)

He was the colour of the spikes of coral, yet in places he was like lapis lazuli. (4)

He looked like the dark blue lapis lazuli and in places like sapphire. He had the colour of a peacock’s neck, and in places resembled a necklace of pearls. (5)

Bearing many and various colours on his body, the eternal and blessed one of a thousand eyes, a hundred heads, a thousand legs and a thousand torsos and arms was in places still unmanifest. With his mouth he sang the syllable *om*, and thereafter, the Sāvitrī. (6–7)

<sup>58</sup> James W. Laine, *Visions of God: Narratives of Theophany in the Mahābhārata* (Vienna: Nobili Research Library, 1989), 191.

With his other mouths did the controlling god, Hari Nārāyaṇa, sing the Āraṇyaka, the treasure that arises from the four-fold Veda. (8)

The God of gods, Lord of the sacrifice, bore in his hands an altar, water pot, *darbha* grass, stones in the form of round gems, an antelope hide, a wooden staff, and a blazing fire. (9) [. . .]<sup>59</sup>

During this vision, Nārāyaṇa explains to Nārada how to obtain *mokṣa* (final liberation). The devotees on the White Island will obtain *mokṣa*, he informs Nārada, because they have succeeded in transcending the *guṇas* (approximately, darkness, passion, and harmony constituting the material world), and have their whole attention on Nārāyaṇa (12.326.18–19).

None of Viṣṇu's theophanies are quite so dramatic as the centerpiece of the *Bhagavadgītā* (eighteen chapters in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*), when the Pāṇḍava prince, Arjuna, is granted a vision of the god in his true form, as radiant as a thousand suns, with his infinite heads and eyes, flaming mouths and fangs, and weapons, his boundless form encompassing the forms of all the other gods.<sup>60</sup> Below is an excerpt of the vision:

[. . .] Then Arjuna, seized by wonder,  
with his hair standing up on end,  
with joined hands raised to his bowed head  
in reverential gesture, said,  
'I see all gods, O God, within your body,  
and every kind of being all collected,

and the Lord Brahmā seated on his lotus,  
with all seers and with sacred serpents.  
'I see you crowned and armed with mace and discus,  
a splendid mass of many-sided brilliance  
almost impossible to grasp completely,  
limitless blazing of the sun and fire!

You, the unchanging object of all knowledge,  
you, the ultimate refuge of this cosmos,  
you, the eternal law's immortal champion,  
And, as I now believe, primeval spirit! [. . .]'  
(11.14–19)

Because of the distinctly royal character of the principal figures in the Gaṛhwā frieze, it strikes me as more credible that the artist has been inspired by Arjuna's

<sup>59</sup> *Mahābhārata* 12.326.2–9, quoted from Laine, *Visions of God*, 191.

<sup>60</sup> *Bhagavadgītā* 11.9–49, quoted from *The Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Gavin Flood, trans. Gavin Flood and Charles Martin (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 56–60.

vision, rather than Sage Nārada’s.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the flames surrounding the cosmic image of Viṣṇu in the frieze correspond to the description in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Is this then Arjuna kneeling at Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa’s feet? Well, firstly, this is undoubtedly not a direct depiction of the *Bhagavadgītā* episode, which takes place on a battlefield and not in a temple or ritual context. However, there is a possibility that this scene is intended to conjure parallels with the *Bhagavadgītā* theophany. Similarly, whether or not this figure actually represents Arjuna is of minor importance. What is more significant here is that this image would inspire favorable parallels between Arjuna and local kings or other notable people who might perform *pūjā* at this temple and make offerings to the inhabitants of the *sattra*.<sup>62</sup>

## 8 The *Mahābhārata* at Gaṛhwā

It has been tentatively proposed by Joanna Williams that at least four of the five Pāṇḍava brothers – *kṣatriya* princes and protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, of whom Arjuna is one – might be represented on the left-hand side of the panel.<sup>63</sup> The twins Sahadeva and Nakula are the youngest of the Pāṇḍava brothers. They descend from the Aśvin twins, the sons of Sūrya. With this in mind, the two men at the rear of the procession, standing beside Sūrya, might conceivably represent Nakula and Sahadeva, the half embrace connecting them being

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<sup>61</sup> After the talk I gave at the conference Asia Beyond Boundaries: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Primary Sources from the Premodern World (August 27–31, 2018, Leiden University), James Fitzgerald suggested that the panel might depict the theophany of the *Nārāyaṇīya* rather than that of the *Bhagavadgītā*. It is not possible to be conclusive about the artist’s influence, since the frieze image appears to be an indirect allusion to a textual source, rather than a faithful reproduction of one. However, the image depicts a prince or king receiving a theophany, and not a sage, and in my opinion, this alone is enough reason to consider the *Bhagavadgītā* episode as the more probable source. Maxwell also believes the imagery to be recalling the *Bhagavadgītā*. He writes, “Here, surely, is the scriptural source of the central panel of the Gaṛhwā relief; and the *kṣatriya* figure kneeling to pay homage to the image is following the example of Arjuna in worshipping this ferocious cosmic vision of Viṣṇu [ . . . ]” (Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193).

<sup>62</sup> Arguably, this scene constitutes the earliest surviving image alluding to the *Bhagavadgītā* – albeit indirectly. As such, this representation is of tremendous importance, since it indicates that the *Bhagavadgītā* must have been familiar enough by the early fifth century CE that it could be referenced on this frieze, presumably with the expectation that the allusion would be widely recognized.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154, note 168; Williams stresses that this is a highly speculative hypothesis unless the scenes on the frieze can be identified.

a signifier of their relationship as twins (Figure 14). Bhīma is the second eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers and is known for his sheer physical strength. His name means “awe-inspiring” in Sanskrit. The towering, sword-carrying figure at the midway point of the procession could represent Bhīma (Figure 15). King Yudhiṣṭhira, the oldest of the brothers, is the embodiment of righteous conduct and in the *Mahābhārata* is a very generous giver of gifts to *brāhmaṇas*. He might be the dutiful king depicted here (Figure 16).



**Figure 14:** Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing twins. Author’s photograph.

A second Gupta-period frieze fragment (98 × 25 cm) from Gaṛhwā depicts the fight between Bhīma and Jarāsandha, with Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna watching (Figure 17).<sup>64</sup> Jarāsandha, a devotee of Siva, plays an important role in the *Mahābhārata*. His two daughters were married to Kaṁsa, the despotic uncle of Kṛṣṇa. After the kill-

<sup>64</sup> This frieze panel is on display at the Lucknow State Museum, Uttar Pradesh.



**Figure 15:** Detail of Garhwā frieze showing tall soldier. Author’s photograph.

ing of Kāṁsa by Kṛṣṇa, Jarāsandha took revenge and repeatedly attacked Mathurā until Kṛṣṇa moved to the impenetrable coastal city of Dvārakā. Jarāsandha then began preparations for a grand *yajña* (sacrifice) to Siva in order to be granted a boon of greater power by the god. The *yajña* would involve the sacrifice of a hundred kidnapped rulers. To rescue these unfortunates, Kṛṣṇa devised a plot (*MBh* 2.14–24) whereby he appealed to Yudhiṣṭhira, who was intent on becoming emperor, by informing him that the only obstacle standing in the path of his performing the *rājasūya*, or royal consecration sacrifice (involving copious and lavish gifts to *brāhmaṇas*), was Jarāsandha. With Yudhiṣṭhira’s blessing, Bhīma and Arjuna, in the guise of *brāhmaṇas*, attended a *pūjā* (*MBh* 2.19.20) held by Jarāsandha, following which the king offered them a gift. They asked that he wrestle one of them. Jarāsandha chose Bhīma and, after fourteen days of fighting, the



**Figure 16:** Detail of Gaṛhṇā frieze showing a king or prince offering clothing or fabric to a figure kneeling at his feet. Author's photograph.



**Figure 17:** Gupta-period frieze from Gaṛhṇā depicting Bhīma wrestling with Jarāsandha. Lucknow State Museum. Author's photograph.

king finally met his demise after being split in two, a tactic suggested by Kṛṣṇa. While this subject matter is interesting in view of the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze, the two panels are unlikely to have belonged to the same monument. The stone used for the Jarāsandha frieze is of an ocher color, in contrast to the deep pinkish-red of the Viśvarūpa panel. Moreover, aside from a notable difference in style, the artists have exhibited a dissimilar approach to composition, especially apparent in the treatment of perspective evidenced by the architectural structures portrayed.



The depictions of Arjuna and Bhīma in the second frieze panel, while embodying typical paradigms, do not resemble any of the characters on the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze.

At the start of the paper, the remnants of extraordinary Gupta-period posts from Gaṛhwā were mentioned (Figures 18a and 18b).<sup>65</sup> The style, treatment of composition, execution, and type of stone indicate that these have been carved by the same expert hands as the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze. The emotive scenes in deep relief on the posts are particularly eroded and fragmentary. A regal, pot-bellied male figure in a turban appears twice and might depict Kubera, the *yakṣa* lord of wealth (Figures 19a and 19b), or Māñibhadra, lord of property (also called Pārśvamauli in *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.15.8–10, ‘he of the sideways diadem’). Other scenes portray women, children, lovers, and – of interest in relation to the *sattra* – at least three mendicant-like or elderly male figures, each carrying a stick (Figure 20). Some of the scenes depict narrative events taking place in a courtly setting, and Williams suggests that the *Mahābhārata* might have been their source.<sup>66</sup> This hypothesis is most persuasive with regard to a scene depicting a game of dice between two men who might represent Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni, and to a further scene depicting a woman being dragged by a man in the presence of a soldier (Figures 21 and 22). This could represent Draupadī being forcibly removed by Duṣśāsana after Yudhiṣṭhira gambles away everything, including her, in that fateful game of dice.<sup>67</sup> Worthy of mention is the exquisitely crafted foliate ornamentation on other faces of the posts. The vines with their furled leaves are inhabited by several slender figures, both male and female, some of whom playfully swing from the stems while others rest languidly against the borders of the posts. One female figure holds a manuscript or a letter in her open palms (Figures 23a and 23b).

## 9 *Sattra* and the *Mahābhārata*

If the Pāṇḍavas do number among the characters in the Viśvarūpa frieze, then this imagery constitutes an entirely original narrative for the brothers. Essentially, there is no textual counterpart to this processional image in the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, the institution of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse did not even exist when

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<sup>65</sup> The posts are still at Gaṛhwā, but I was only able to examine them through the bars of the site shed, which is owned by the Archaeological Survey of India.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154.

<sup>67</sup> Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154.



**Figures 18 a and b:** Gupta period carved posts from Garhwā. Photographs courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

(a)



(b)



**Figures 19 a and b:** Relief carvings from Gaṛhwā probably depicting Kubera or Māṇibhadra. (a) Author’s photograph (b) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

the *Mahābhārata* was composed. However, as already addressed, there are several occasions in the epic when Yudhiṣṭhira does lavish gifts upon *brāhmaṇas*, most notably during the *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* sacrifices – the latter in which Yudhiṣṭhira offers the *brāhmaṇas* three times the stipulated fee for the sacrifice. In these instances, the gifts are opulent and include gold and such like. In contrast, in our image, the gifts appear to be limited to cloth and food. Because of Yudhiṣṭhira’s history of giving to *brāhmaṇas*, perhaps it is not absurd to suggest that the artist has placed the *sattra* in an imagined *Mahābhārata* setting, one that was invented and yet is perfectly conceivable, and by doing so is attempting to furnish the actual institution at Gaṛhwā with a long and illustrious history in order to elevate its ritual importance, heighten its glory, and inspire awe and donations. Earthly rulers, of course, have a propensity to model themselves in the image of the great kings of the Sanskrit epics, Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira. The Supiā pillar inscription (459–60 CE) of Skandagupta, for example, describes the prosperous *mahārāja* as



**Figure 20:** Relief fragment from Gaṛhwā possibly depicting a humiliated Draupadī being aided by the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra who in turn is speaking with Duḥśāsana or Yudhiṣṭhira. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

resembling “a *cakravartin* in strength and valor, Rāma in righteous conduct, and Yudhiṣṭhira in truthfulness, conduct, and self-control.”<sup>68</sup>

## 10 Ambiguity and the Art of Double Meaning

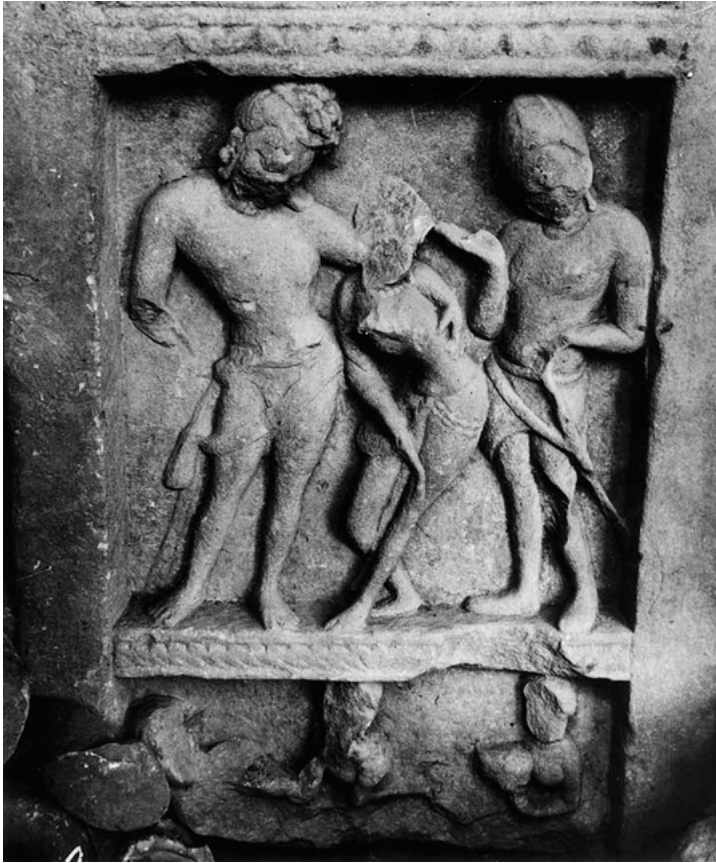
The key characters in the frieze procession have persistently evaded conclusive identification because they have not been depicted with detailed signifiers or

<sup>68</sup> The inscription is available at <http://www.siddham.uk/index.php/inscription/in00037>. Accessed September 13, 2019.



**Figure 21:** Relief carving on a Gupta-period post from Gaṛhwā possibly depicting Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni placing dice. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

attributes. We would, for instance, expect Arjuna to be portrayed with a *channa-vīra* (crossbelt) and bow, or otherwise pictured in a scenario where he is usually recognizable, such as hunting the boar in the *kirātārjuniya* myth. I would like to suggest, however, that this ambiguity was exactly what the artist was seeking; he was, after all, an exceptional master of his craft, and moreover, the Guptas were no strangers to the subtle art of double or indeed multiple meanings, enabling mythical, astrological, and human worlds to converge. We could perceive the characters who take part in the processions as representing, on the one hand, soldiers, wives, servants, and courtiers accompanying an earthly ruler – perhaps modeled on a historic scenario or at least the type of scenario that would be familiar to people viewing the frieze. On the other hand, there appears to be a vivid analogy to the Pāṇḍava brothers, with the ruler on the left recalling Yudhiṣṭhira, the model of *dharma*, and the ruler on the right suggestive of Arjuna, being blessed with the vision of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. This iconographic ambiguity arguably serves to flatter and further the cause of both kingship and of the *sattra* with remarkable flair and sophistication.



**Figure 22:** Relief carving on a Gupta-period post from Garhwā depicting a woman being dragged away by a soldier. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

## 11 Religion, Politics, and Wonder-Working

Beyond the most wondrously luminous universal form of Viṣṇu at the center of the frieze, to which all eyes are naturally drawn, there are convoluted power relationships at play. On the left side of the composition, a person kneels before the royal personage – either a *brāhmaṇa* or an impoverished mendicant. Mirroring this, on the right side of the panel, a king kneels with humility before the god. Surely in a frieze where each detail is so considered, this symmetry is not accidental. The relationship between kings and *brāhmaṇas* is reciprocal and



(a)



(b)



**Figures 23a and b:** Gupta-period posts from Gaṛhwā depicting vines inhabited by slender figures. (a) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

mutually advantageous.<sup>69</sup> Kings enrich *brāhmaṇas*, and *brāhmaṇas* legitimize kings and ensure the continuation of their bloodline, the protection or expansion of their territory, and so on, by performing the necessary sacrifices. As for the poor, it is the duty of a righteous ruler to look after his subjects.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while the image portrays a hierarchy that descends from god to king to *brāhmaṇas* and persons deemed wor-

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Vijay Nath, *Dāna: Gift System in Ancient India, c. 600 B.C.–c. A.D. 300. A Socio-Economic Perspective* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987).

<sup>70</sup> Willis notes that giving to mendicants and the poor was considered to deflect threats and increase merit (Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 104).

thy of charity, it also demonstrates that the king has to perform correct *pūjā* protocols by venerating the inhabitants of the *sattra* before performing worship at the temple and receiving a *darśana* – a sight – of god. And what a *darśana* he receives.

## 12 Dating and Artistic Networks

James Harle draws attention to the strong narrative element of the Gaṛhwā fragments, which he likens to Kuṣāṇa-period doorways and lintels from Mathurā. The pictorial scenes on doorjambs, he points out, later make way for *mithuna* couples, so in this regard the Gaṛhwā carvings belong to an earlier tradition. Likewise, the intertwining flora depicted on the panels is considered to be of the early Gupta type. However, due to the jaunty sideways hairstyle sported by some of the figures on the pillars, in addition to the way the goddess Gaṅgā is depicted with her *makara* vehicle and a parasol,<sup>71</sup> Harle places the Gaṛhwā fragments in the late fifth century. He later proposes instead that they belong toward the end of Kumāragupta I's reign – i.e., not much earlier than 455 CE.<sup>72</sup> He believes the images to predate the Gupta temples at Deogaṛh, Bhumara, and Nāchnā Kutthārā.<sup>73</sup> Joanna Williams initially places the Gaṛhwā frieze and pillar fragments in the middle decades of the sixth century<sup>74</sup> and later revises this to the late fifth century.<sup>75</sup> She observes, however, that the Gupta-period carvings from Gaṛhwā have little stylistic affinity with the art of the surrounding ancient sites:

Though the site lies 40 kilometres south of Allahabad, the Gaḍhwa images share little with those of Kauśāmbī or other sites in the Sangam area. Equidistant from Nāchnā and Sārnāth, Gaḍhwa lacks the regional style of the former and the conservatism of the latter. At most there is enough in common between these carvings and those of Bhumara to suggest that Gaḍhwa may represent a source for one of the Bundelkhandi idioms.<sup>76</sup>

Arguably, this surprising stylistic dissimilitude implies that the Gaṛhwā artifacts have been placed too late in the fifth century. Indeed, it is quite possible that the

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<sup>71</sup> Williams correctly asserts that the river goddesses are portrayed in a multitude of ways from early on and thus cannot be used in isolation to date the Gaṛhwā fragments (Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152).

<sup>72</sup> Harle, *The Art and Architecture*, 107.

<sup>73</sup> Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Joanna Gottfried Williams, "A Recut Aśokan Capital and the Gupta Attitude towards the Past," *Artibus Asiae* 35, no. 3 (1973): 237.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152.



artistic styles and forms Williams compares are separated by a significant number of years, and are therefore the products of disparate, though related, fashions, influences, and developments. On this note, I tentatively propose that the majority of the Gupta-period Gaṛhwā reliefs and architectural elements should be placed in the first years of Kumāragupta I’s reign, or possibly even earlier, toward the end of Candragupta II’s reign.

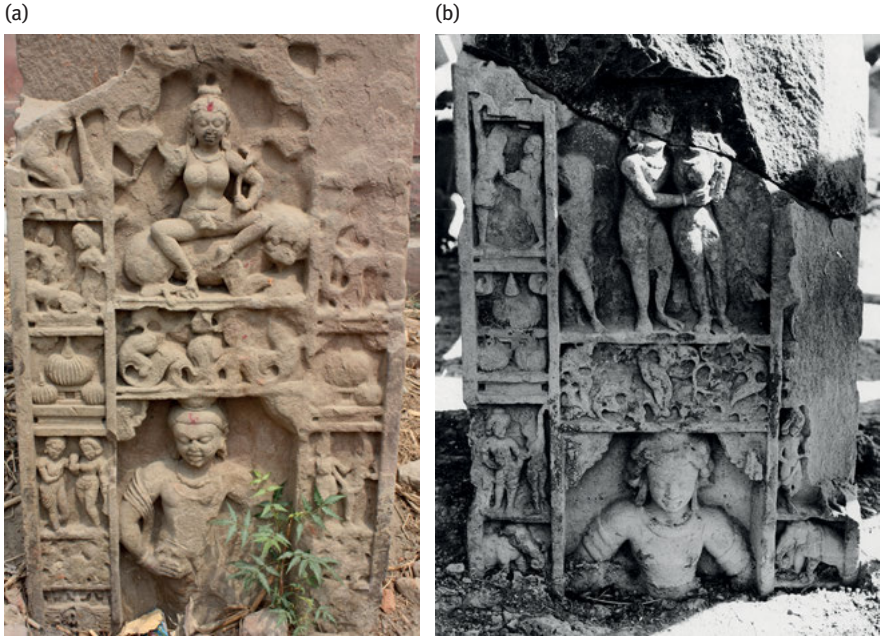
In order to position the Gaṛhwā reliefs within a wider stylistic context, I believe it necessary to turn to the west and southwest – to Bilsar and Katingara in Etah District, Uttar Pradesh, and to Besnagar and Udayagiri in Vidiśā District, Madhya Pradesh. As already discussed, pillar inscriptions at Bilsar commemorate the construction of a *sattra* at a temple of *Kārttikeya*. The same inscriptions also record the making of a gateway, parts of which still survive. Because these exquisitely carved remnants of gateway pillars are securely dated to 415 CE, they act as a chronological benchmark here. The Bilsar pillars are more complex in design than the Gaṛhwā posts, having central panels containing deity images carved in mezzo-relievo, flanked by small side-niches with depictions of temples, couples, and narrative scenes (Figures 24a and 24b). In contrast, the Gaṛhwā posts have single panels arranged vertically. In terms of artistic style and execution, however, there is an extraordinary resemblance between the reliefs from the two sites.<sup>77</sup> This affinity can be witnessed in facial and bodily features, figurative stances, mood, *rasa*,<sup>78</sup> and in the treatment of composition.

Eighteen miles southwest of Bilsar lies the small archaeological site of Katingara. Numerous terracotta plaques were unearthed from temple mounds here.<sup>79</sup> They depict narrative scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Harivaṃśa* alongside images of lesser divinities and amorous couples. While the medium of terracotta brings with it a unique set of characteristics, parallels with the Gaṛhwā reliefs can be seen in the relatively spartan compositions, the theatrical, clever, humorous, and sometimes poignant iconography, and the soft, slightly fleshy, yet slender-waisted figures and their supple movements (Figure 25).

<sup>77</sup> Cunningham also notes the similarity between the carved posts from Gaṛhwā and the gateway pillars from Bilsar. See Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> *Rasa*, literally meaning “taste” or “flavor,” is an Indian theory of aesthetics outlined in Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. second century BCE to second century CE).

<sup>79</sup> See Laxshmi Rose Greaves, “Locating the Lost Gupta Period Rāmāyaṇa Panels from Katingara, Uttar Pradesh,” *Religions of South Asia* 12, no. 2 (2018): 117–153.



**Figures 24a and b:** Stumps of gateway pillars from Bilasar, Etah District, Uttar Pradesh. (a) Author's photograph (b) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

A further comparable panel in red sandstone originates from Besnagar and is now on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.<sup>80</sup> The panel once formed a single element of the surrounding of a temple door and depicts the goddess Gaṅgā with attendant figures. On the basis of style, it has been dated by the museum to ca. 405 to 415 CE. The goddess bears a close resemblance to the relief carving of Durga on one of the Bilasar gateway pillars, and moreover, the composition displays the same delicate balance between grace and playfulness evinced on the Gupta-period architectural elements at both Gaṛhwā and Bilasar.

Williams compares the iconographic style of the Gaṛhwā frieze with a Gupta-period abacus on a lion capital from Udayagiri depicting astrological figures, each sitting within an orb.<sup>81</sup> Between these orbs – which call to mind the images of Candra and Sūrya on the Gaṛhwā frieze – are additional standing figures (*rāśi* or

<sup>80</sup> For a photograph of the Besnagar Gaṅgā, see <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/ganga-28951>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> The lion capital is at the Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior.



**Figure 25:** Gupta-period terracotta plaque from Katingara, Etah District, Uttar Pradesh, in a private collection.

animal-headed zodiac figures) and a repeating motif of three flat circles. Williams places the abacus in the sixth century CE.<sup>82</sup> Meera Dass, however, notes that the only precedent she has seen for this motif of three circles (in the case of the abacus, Williams suggests this design represents stars<sup>83</sup>) is on a panel from Amarāvati held at the British Museum (ca. third century CE).<sup>84</sup> This panel depicts three scenes from the life of the Buddha, arranged horizontally. The scenes are divided by three circular dots placed in vertical rows as on the Udayagiri abacus. Each central orb contains a seated figure. It might be proposed that the circular dots on both the Amarāvati reliefs (a recurring pattern) and on the Udayagiri abacus represent *stūpa* railings with roundels. This minor iconographic connection with the Amarāvati panels tentatively suggests a considerably earlier date for the abacus than that given by Williams.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, “A Recut Aśokan Capital,” 237–239. Further photographs of the abacus are published in Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, plates 36 and 37.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, “A Recut Aśokan Capital,” 239.

<sup>84</sup> Meera I. Dass, “Udayagiri: A Sacred Hill: Its Art, Architecture and Landscape” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2001), 146.

Lastly, according to Ellen Raven,<sup>85</sup> an early date for the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze and posts at Gaṛhwā is further supported by coins from the reigns of Candragupta II and Kumāragupta I, which share a comparable iconographic style.

## 13 Conclusion

Gaṛhwā is home not only to the earliest epigraphic mention of a *sattra*, but also, I believe, to the earliest known image of a *sattra* – in point of fact, the only image of *sattra* surviving from the Gupta period. Moreover, the frieze is an excellent example of iconography that seamlessly weaves together the concepts of time, kingship, devotion, and some of the intricacies of *pūjā* worship, not only in terms of the types of offerings made, but also in the relationships between the various groups of people involved, some of which are quite ambiguous and can be read in more than one way. The frieze might be described as an efficacious liminal space where gods, celestials, mythical heroes, and mortals come together, while simultaneously giving us a rare and valuable window into how religion was actually practiced at this locale in the Gupta era.

The magnitude of the donations given to the *sattra* at Gaṛhwā, when considered together with the finesse of the relief carvings and architectural elements, indicate that the temple complex here was affluent and, as such, of some consequence, possibly having a reputation that ranged beyond its immediate environs. Furthermore, its position on or near an important trade route would have facilitated pilgrimage – and certainly the *sattra* would have been a magnet for wandering ascetics and the poor, as well as those more wealthy, seeking to increase their spiritual merit through charitable giving.

In striking contrast to literature on the Vedic form of *sattra*, textual references to *sattra* as a charitable almshouse are primarily found in endowments or commemorative records, rather than in more verbose prescriptive or mythological texts. In lieu of such texts, the Gaṛhwā frieze is tremendously important for the shape, form, texture, context, and even potency it brings to *sattra*, a ritual institution about which we have limited knowledge. In turn, textual references enable us to comprehend aspects of the imagery that might otherwise seem oblique, or even purely fictional. The rich iconography provides a visual documentation of the close relationship between temple and *sattra* hinted at in the Bilsar and Poḍāgarh inscriptions and reveals that the giving of clothing and food at the *sattra* was a ceremonious affair and one that was considered to

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<sup>85</sup> Personal communication, 2018.

greatly increase the merit of the benefactor. The imagery also tentatively indicates – as we would expect – that astronomical and temporal factors were important considerations for those involved in ceremonious giving to the inhabitants of the *sattra* and subsequent worship at the temple. Moreover, the frieze imagery gives the impression that the institution of *sattra* received royal support. This theory is proven by the copper-plate inscriptions of King Bhūta and King Govinda IV and the inscription from Poḍāgarh, which inform us that *sattras* received royal patronage in the Gupta, post-Gupta, and early medieval periods, both in terms of ritual giving to existing *sattras*, and sometimes in their establishment.

Looking ahead, a study that explores the seemingly erratic evolution of *sattra* from Vedic times up to the present day is a desideratum.

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Hans T. Bakker

## The *Skandapurāṇa* and Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*

The composers of the *Skandapurāṇa* (*SP*) and Bāṇa, the author of the *Harṣacarita* (*HC*), were actors in and witnesses to the same historical world that existed in northern India from the end of the sixth to the middle of the seventh century.

The *Skandapurāṇa* refers to a Purāṇa text whose origin is datable to around 600 CE (not to be confused with a later text of this name that consists of a collection of separate books or *khaṇḍas*).<sup>1</sup> The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa is the celebrated historical novel that describes the life and deeds of King Harṣavardhana (ca. 595–647 CE) up to the moment that he has firmly established his rule in Kanauj (ca. 612 CE).

The time span from 550 to 650 CE is a pivotal era in the history of northern India, since it marks the transition from the classical culture – usually called the “Gupta period” after its main political dynasty – to the period that many historians conceive of as “early medieval,” in which the cultural idioms, values, and visual language developed in the classical period became consolidated. In my Gonda lecture,<sup>2</sup> I have argued that this historical break was expedited by the Hunnic invasion of the subcontinent around 500 CE.

The reality lying beneath both of the texts at issue was sublimated into the two works in two very different ways: on the one hand, this historical world is elevated to the atemporal realm of the Śaiva mythological universe in the versified style of the Purāṇa, in which historical details are eschewed as far as possible, and, on the other hand, it is transmuted into a historical novel in the *kāvya* prose style, in which historical reality is glorified and its timeless essence is expressed through symbolism and literary metaphor. Moreover, the focus of each

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1 A critical edition of this text is being prepared in Groningen, Kyoto, and Leiden and has advanced halfway, to chapter 95 (*SP* IV). For a historical assessment of this text, see Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa. Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries*, Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

2 Hans T. Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory, in the Age of the Hunnic Wars: 50 Years that Changed India* (484–534), J. Gonda Lecture 24 (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017).

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of the texts is intrinsically different: the Purāṇa aims at sanctifying geographical locations by associating them with the world of Śaiva mythology, thus giving them a transcendent quality; the *kāvya* aestheticizes the life and deeds of its historical protagonist, and thus transcends the contingency and idiosyncrasy of the human condition.

The common ground of Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* and the *Skandapurāṇa* is found in their nature: they are both idealized, comprehensive, literary imaginations, products of the same mould, the cultural world of North India around 600 CE. This, I will argue, may explain the occurrence of interface.

In this paper, I will investigate three instances of this postulated interface by means of three research questions. 1) Why does Bāṇa devote the first chapter of his biography of King Harṣa to his own, fabricated ancestry and the legendary figure of Dadhīca in particular? 2) What is the significance of Bāṇa's observation at the beginning of the seventh *ucchvāsa* that Harṣa, when he is preparing himself for the ceremony in which he will be installed as commander in chief of the army to fight Śāsāṅka, "offers worship to Nīllohita with deep devotion"? 3) Why does Bhairavācārya, the preceptor of Puṣyabhūti, founder of the Vardhana dynasty, reside near the temple of a mother goddess (Mātr) in Thanesar?

We shall see that the three instances of interface are best explained if we assume that Bāṇa began working on his history when the text of the *Skandapurāṇa* was being concluded. The article intends to highlight features of this time overlap in order to improve our understanding of both works and their historical context.

## 1 Bāṇa's Ancestry

According to Bāṇa's own account, the recitation of his chef d'œuvre, the *Harṣacarita*, had been prompted by the bard Sūcībāṇa with the following two Āryā verses, which were sung in accompaniment to a Purāṇa recitation; they articulate the interface between the two texts through double entendre of the predicates. In the translation of both verses, the comparandum and the primary meaning of its complements are indicated by small capitals.

Methinks that this PURĀṆA does not differ from the deeds of Harṣa (*harṣacarita*) after all! Since it – also sung by a sage/SEER – is surpassing (the deeds of) king Pṛthu/BROAD BEYOND BOUNDARIES, it also is captivating/SPREADING OVER THE WORLD, and it also is purifying/BORN FROM THE WIND (*pāvana*).

This CHANT (of the Purāṇa) is like the rule of Harṣa (a realm of joy): it issues from a POWERFUL THROAT/Śrīkaṇṭha/Śiva, it follows the ACCOMPANYING FLUTE/dynastic tradition, it

is WITHOUT DISHARMONY/undisputed, it ARTICULATES RHYTHMICALLY/expands widely/distinctly, and it is loaded with adoration of BHARATA'S WAY/the *Bhārata*/Bharata's exploits.<sup>3</sup>

This incident of poetic inspiration, according to Bāṇa, took place in the poet's home village, Pṛitikūṭa, situated on the Śoṇa River,<sup>4</sup> where his ancestor Vatsa had once grown up together with Sārasvata, son of Dadhīca and the goddess Sarasvatī, who lived in exile there (Figure 1).

*Pāvanam* in verse 3b, “descending from Pavana,” i.e. the Wind, is, following Śaṅkara's commentary, usually taken to mean that the *Purāṇa* that was recited and to which the verse refers is the *Vāyupurāṇa*, which was spoken by Vāyu (“the Wind”).<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note, however, that precisely those chapters that deal with the appearance of Sarasvatī in the world, the *Sarasvatīmāhātmya* in *Skandapurāṇa* 5 to 7 (*SP* I: 132–149), are also spoken by Vāyu, whereas the *Vāyupurāṇa* as we have it does not contain the myth of Sarasvatī's descent into the world.

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3 *Harṣacarita* (hereafter *HC*) 3, vv. 3–4; the edition quoted is Kāśinātha Pāṇḍuraṅga Parab, ed., *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa with the Commentary Saṅketa of Śaṅkarakavi*, 7th ed., re-edited by Nārāyaṇa Rāma Ācārya “Kāvya-tīrtha” (Bombay: Nirṇaya Sagara Press, 1946), 85. Cf. translation (hereafter “trans.”) in E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas, trans., *The Harṣa-carita of Bāṇa* (1897; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 73.

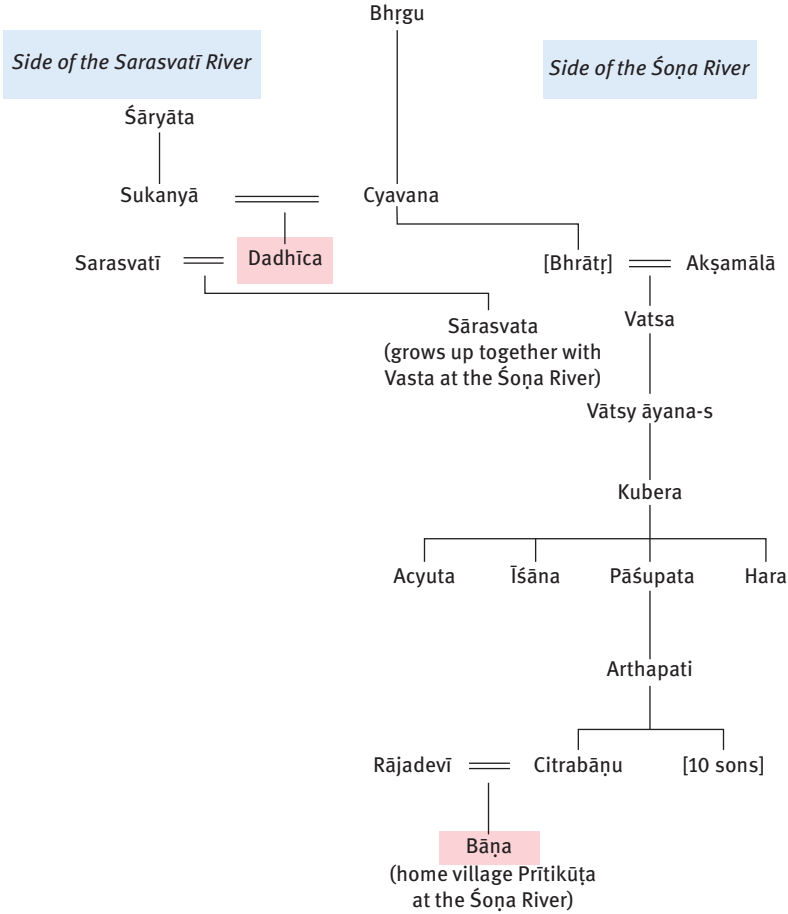
*tad api munigītam atipṛthu, tad api jagadvyāpi pāvanam tad api |*  
*harṣacaritād abhinnaṃ, pratibhāti hi me purāṇam idam || 3.3 ||*  
*vaṃśānugam avivādi sphuṭakaraṇam bharatamārgabhajanaguru |*  
*śrikanṭhaviniryātam gītam idam harṣarājyam iva || 3.4 ||*

4 *HC* 1, p. 19f. (trans., p. 14f.). The subject is Sarasvatī:

[. . .] *apaśyac cāmbaratalasthitaiva hāram iva varuṇasya, amṛtanirjharam iva*  
*candrācalasya, śaśimaṇiniṣyandam\* iva vindhyasya, karpūradrumadravapravāham iva*  
*daṇḍakāraṇyasya [ . . . ] svacchaśiśirasuravāriṇīpūrṇam bhagavataḥ pitāmahasyāpatyaṃ*  
*hiraṇyavāha\*\*nāmānaṃ mahānadam, yaṃ janāḥ śoṇa iti kathayanti |*

Some MSS in Führer's edition read \**nispandam*, and this edition accepts the variant \*\**hiranyabāhu* as the name of the river; see A. A. Führer, ed., *Śriharṣacaritamahākāvyaṃ: Bāṇabhaṭṭa's Biography of King Harshavardhana of Sthāṇviśvara with Saṅkara's Commentary Saṅketa*, Bombay Sanskrit and Prakrit Series 66 (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1909). We take this passage to mean that the village lay at the foot of the Vindhya hills, i.e. somewhere in the vicinity of Akbarpur (N 24°31', E 83°54'), where the Śoṇa River (“the ooze of the Vindhya's moon gem”) enters into the Gangetic Plain and loses its turbulence, not far from the Rohtasgarh hill fort, which lies about 2.5 km to the west of Akbarpur.

5 *MbH* 3.189.14 mentions the “*Purāṇa* spoken by Vāyu” (*vāyuproktam anusmṛtya purāṇam ṛṣisaṃstutam*), which deals with the past and future as comprised by the four Yugas.



**Figure 1:** Bāṇa's pedigree.

The recitation of the Purāṇa in Prītikūṭa, be it a chapter from the *Vāyu* or from the *Skanda*, evokes the goddess of learning, Sarasvatī, or, in the world of the Purāṇa, the Sarasvatī River.

The evocation of Sarasvatī by the reader Sudṛṣṭi when he chants the “Purāṇa spoken by the Wind” is beautifully described by Bāṇa as follows:

By his chanting he enchanted the hearts of his audience with sweet intonations, (evoking) as it were, the tinkling of the anklets of Sarasvatī as she presented herself in his mouth,

while it seemed as if, by the sparkling of his teeth, he whitewashed the ink-stained syllables and worshipped the book with showers of white flowers.<sup>6</sup>

This must have touched the right chord with the audience, not only because it consisted of learned Brahmins who fostered their intimacy with Sarasvatī, but because Bāṇa and his kinsmen, living alongside the Śoṇa River, through their imagined relationship with the goddess Sarasvatī, had ties with the Sarasvatī side, the river, and its banks, from which the goddess's lover Dadhīca, their ancestor, hailed.

Bāṇa works out this intricate relationship in the first chapter of his book, and it provides us with a significant instance of interface between the *Harṣacarita* and the *Skandapurāṇa*.

In this first chapter, Bāṇa tells the story of his own descent from the sage Bhr̥gu through the latter's son Cyavana, who is not only a forefather of his own family tree, but also the father of Dadhīca, who, as legend has it, grew up with his grandfather on the banks of the Sarasvatī River, but fell in love with the goddess Sarasvatī when she was living in exile on the left bank of the River Son.<sup>7</sup> Dadhīca had arrived there in search of his father Cyavana, whose hermitage was across the Śoṇa River. The son of this (divine) couple, Sārasvata, became the foster brother (*frère de lait*) of Vatsa, the other grandson of Cyavana,<sup>8</sup> who in turn became the father of the Vātsyāyanas, from whom the author of the *Harṣacarita*, by his own account, was descended.

As he embroidered on the story of Dadhīca's mother Sukanyā, told in *Mahābhārata* 3.121 to 125, Bāṇa and his audience may have been thinking of the legend that attributed the foundation of King Harṣa's native town Thanesar, situated on the banks of the Sarasvatī in Kurukṣetra, to Sukanyā's son Dadhīca. This story is found in the *Skandapurāṇa*. It tells us about the origin of Sthāneśvara in a *Sthāneśvaramāhātmya* (SP 31.48–115).

<sup>6</sup> HC 3, p. 85f. (trans., p. 72f.):

[. . .] *kṣālayann iva maṣimalināny akṣarāṇi dantakāntibhiḥ, arcayann iva sitakusumamuktibhir granthaṃ, mukhasaṃmihitasarasvatīnūpuraravair iva gamakair madhurair ākṣipān manāṃsi śrotṛṇāṃ gītyā, pavamānaproktaṃ purāṇaṃ papāṭha |*

<sup>7</sup> In this way, Bāṇa gave his own twist to the epic myth told in *MBh* 9.50.5–24, in which Sārasvata was born from the Sarasvatī River when Dadhīca lost his semen therein at the sight of the nymph Alambusā.

<sup>8</sup> I take the expression *bhārgavavaṃśasaṃbhūtasya bhr̥tūr brāhmaṇasya jāyām akṣamālām* (HC 1, p. 38.; trans., p. 29) to mean that Akṣamālā was the wife of a Brahmin of the Bhr̥gu family who himself was the brother (*bhr̥tṛ*), viz. of Dadhīca. According to *BdP* 2.1.93–94, Cyavana had two sons with Sukanyā: Āpravāna and Dadhīca.

The Śaiva sage Dadhīca, whose *āśrama* is said to be on the Sarasvatī River,<sup>9</sup> had entered into a hot dispute with the Vaiṣṇava king Kṣupa about the superiority of either the *brahman* or the *kṣatra* principle, which dispute turned into a fight in which Dadhīca eventually defeated his Vaiṣṇava rival with Śiva's help. To commemorate this victory, Śiva allowed the site (*sthāna*) where the fight between Dadhīca and Kṣupa took place to become known under the name of "Sthāneśvara."<sup>10</sup> This is evidently the foundation myth of Sthāneśvara, i.e. Thanesar.

This great, divine, and holy site was established by Dadhīca. It is called Sthāneśvara and has become famous throughout the Three Worlds.<sup>11</sup>

This legend, though it remained untold in the *Harṣacarita* itself, must have been known, we think, to Bāṇa, his audience, and King Harṣa, and it may actually have been the very reason why the author gave the fictional character of Dadhīca such a prominent role in the first chapter of his history and why he linked his own pedigree to him.

The evocation of Sarasvatī in the Purāṇa recitation thus served as a sort of hub, a key passage in the middle of the composition, in which Bāṇa's family history (chapter 1) and its link with the goddess of learning evokes the eponymous

<sup>9</sup> *MBh* 3.81.162–64 mentions a Dadhīcatīrtha where one attains the Sarasvatī state (*sārasvatīm gatim*) and where the ascetic Aṅgiras Sārasvata lives; it is near the Kanyāśrama and the Saṃnihitī, where Brahmā etc. assemble every month (*MBh* 3.81.165f.).

<sup>10</sup> *SP* 31.105f.:

*yasmāt sthitam idaṃ vairaṃ varadānāt tava prabho |*  
*iha tasmāt tava sthānaṃ nāmnaitena bhavatv aja || 105 ||*  
*deva uvāca |*  
*sthāneśvaram iti khyātaṃ nāmnaitat sthānam uttamam |*  
*bhavitṛ krośaparyantaṃ nānāpuṣpalatākulam || 106 ||*

<sup>11</sup> *SP*<sub>5</sub> 167.81:

*dadhīcena mahad divyaṃ puṇyam āyatanaṃ kṛtam |*  
*sthāneśvaram iti khyātaṃ lokeṣu triṣu viśrutam || 81 ||*

Compare the version in *SP*<sub>RA</sub> 167.4.10, 20:

*tapaḥkṣetre kuruḥkṣetre dharmakṣetre sanātane |*  
*dadhīcena mahad divyaṃ puṇyam āyatanaṃ kṛtam |*  
*dadhīcasyālayaḥ khyātaḥ sarvapāpaharaḥ paraḥ || 10 ||*  
 [. . .]  
*dadhīcena yatas tatra kṛtam āyatanaṃ śubham |*  
*sthāneśvaram iti khyātaṃ tena lokeṣu triṣv api || 20 ||*

river on whose banks one of the poet's own Bhārgava ancestors had founded the native city of the hero of his *Harṣacarita*. Harṣa's story is told in the subsequent "exhalations" (*ucchvāsas* 3–8), beginning on the day following the Purāṇa recitation in Sarasvatī's place of exile, the banks of the Śoṇa River.

## 2 Harṣa's Worship of Nīlālohita

Prince Harṣavardhana, as part of the ceremony that inaugurated him as commander in chief, is said by Bāṇa to have performed, with utmost devotion, a worship ritual for Lord Nīlālohita.<sup>12</sup> This may come as a surprise, since the figure of Nīlālohita is not mentioned again in the *Harṣacarita*, nor does this deity seem to play a prominent role in early Hinduism or Śaivism. We may derive the significance of Nīlālohita in this specific context from the *Skandapurāṇa*.

In *MBh* 7.74, Nīlālohita is said to be a figure who emerges from Śīva's side – very strong, with tawny eyes, a *brahmacārin*, the embodiment of *tapas* – who demonstrates the use of the Pāśupata weapon to Arjuna. In the following *Karṇaparvan*, Nīlālohita is the manifestation of Śīva as the berserk warrior, described as wearing only a skin, smoke-colored (*dhūmra*), wrapped in the flames of his *tejas*, blazing like ten thousand suns, and inciting fear.<sup>13</sup>

The *Skandapurāṇa* takes up this fearsome nature of Nīlālohita. It tells us that a deluded Brahmā wishes Śīva to be his son. Śīva says, "Because you want your father to be your son, you shall have a son in my form (*mūrti*); my *gaṇapa* Rudra shall incarnate and he will teach you a lesson" (*SP* 4.6–7). It is then described how this Nīlālohita is born from Śīva's *tejas* in Brahmā's sacrificial fire. In this way, the warrior figure of Nīlālohita is connected with the Vedic myth of Rudra's birth and Brahmā's sacrificial altar.<sup>14</sup>

In the next chapter, it is told how Brahmā quarrels with Yajña and Veda about his putative superiority, but when he goes so far as to claim that he is the creator and leader of all Revelation, the time has come to teach him a lesson. Brahmā falls from the sky and lands in a bower on the Himavat mountain. When Brahmā is unable to discern who is doing this to him, since the perpetrator is

<sup>12</sup> *HC* 7, p. 202. (trans., p. 197): *viracayya paramayā bhaktyā bhagavato nīlālohitasyārcām*.

<sup>13</sup> *MBh* 8.24.87: *sa nīlālohito dhūmraḥ kṛttivāsā bhayaṃkaraḥ | ādityāyutasanḥkāśas tejojvālāvṛto jvalan ||*

<sup>14</sup> This theme is elaborated in Hans T. Bakker, "Pārvatī's Svayaṃvara. Studies in the Skandapurāṇa I," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 40 (1996): 9f.

hidden in a sunlike disk in the sky, he sprouts an aggressive fifth head. This head is chopped off by Śiva's factotum Nilalohita with the nail of his left thumb (SP 5.43). It is Nilalohita who then goes around with Brahmā's skull (*kapāla*) as his begging bowl (SP 5.64), referred to as Brahmā's 'mark' (*cihna*).

Nilalohita reaches the World of Brahmā. Brahmā asks Nilalohita the following.

O Devadeveśa, I wish that this mark (*cihna*) of mine be made by you in such a way that this world be marked by this mark, O lord of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Lord Śiva fulfills Brahmā's wish and begins by creating Sarasvatī in the *brahmasaras*, that is in his mouth, when he pronounces "ॐ." Sarasvatī creates the Brahmasaras ("Lake of Brahmā") in the Brahmaloaka.<sup>16</sup> Then she descends to earth and Nilalohita follows her (*anuprāpya*) in order to install the skull in the foremost spot of this world.<sup>17</sup> The skull installed at that spot is known as Mahākapāla or "Great Skull" and, once installed, it becomes known as "Śiva's Pond" (*śivataḍāga*, SP 7.25 = *Ākh* 1.9.18). "To date," our text concludes, "that great lake (*saras*) Mahākapāla can still be seen there."<sup>18</sup>

A hermeneutic problem arises from the fact that our text does not explicitly say where this "there" (*tatra*), "the foremost spot in this world," is situated. From the text as we have it, we can derive that we are concerned with a great lake (*saras*) called Mahākapāla, otherwise known as Śiva's Pond (*Śivataḍāga*),

**15** SP 7.4: *icchāmi devadeveśa tvayā cihnam idaṃ kṛtam | yena cihnena loko 'yaṃ cihnitaḥ syāj jagatpate* || 4 ||

**16** Cf. *MBh* 9.50.19.

**17** SP 7.13: *taṃ gṛhītvā mahādevaḥ kapālam amitaujasam | imaṃ lokam anuprāpya deśe śreṣṭhe 'vatiṣṭhata* || 13 || Cf. *SkP Āvanyakhaṇḍa* (*Ākh*) 1.9.2–3. For the parallels of this and the following passage (SP 7.13–38) in *Ākh* 1.9.2–26, see Yuko Yokochi, "The Relation between the Skandapurāṇa and the Āvanyakhaṇḍa," in *Origin and Growth of the Puranic Text Corpus with Special Reference to the Skandapurāṇa*, ed. Hans T. Bakker, Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference 3.2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 98–102.

**18** SP 7.24–25, 36:

*kapālam sthāpitaṃ yasmāt tasmin deśe pinākinā |  
mahākapālam tat tasmāt triṣu lokeṣu gadyate* || 24 ||  
*sthāpitasya kapālasya yathoktam abhavat tadā |  
khyātaṃ śivataḍāgaṃ tat sarvapāpāpramocanam* || 25 ||  
[ . . ]  
*tad adyāpi mahad divyaṃ saras tatra pradṛśyate |  
mahākapālam vipreṇḍrāḥ svargās tatrākṣayāḥ smṛtāḥ* || 36 ||

Cf. *Ākh* 1.9.17–19.

somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Sarasvatī River – a pond that is conceived of as the hallmark (*cihna*) of Brahmā and as the most holy spot on earth.

If we take these indications as our lead, we arrive at the land between the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī rivers, which is defined by Manu as Brahmāvarta,<sup>19</sup> whereas the *Mahābhārata* calls the same Kurukṣetra.<sup>20</sup> The epic continues by saying that the holy Kurukṣetra, also referred to as Samantapañcaka, is Brahmā's sacrificial altar, and within it are the "Lakes of Rāma" (Rāmahrada-s),<sup>21</sup> which is confirmed by the *Saromāhātmya* in the *Vāmanapurāṇa*. This Māhātmya identifies the Rāmahrada lake with the Brahmasaras.<sup>22</sup> The names Rāmahrada and Samantapañcaka refer to the myth of Rāma Jāmadagnya (Paraśurāma or Bhārgava Rāma), who extinguished the *kṣatriyas* and filled five/seven lakes with their blood.<sup>23</sup> The same sacred complex is also referred to as Sānnihatya/Sāṃnihita-saras, after the river Saṃnihitī, which the *Saromāhātmya* connects with the decapitation of Brahmā.<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of the combined evidence, we can conclude that the Mahākapāla or Śiva's Pond of the *Skandapurāṇa* was regarded as the terrestrial counterpart of the Brahmasaras in the Brahmāloka, created by Sarasvatī and springing from

19 *MaS* 2.17: *sarasvatīdṛṣadvatyor devanadyor yad antaram | taṃ devanirmitaṃ deśaṃ brahmāvartaṃ pracakṣate* || Cf. *SP* 32.151 and annotation ad loc. (*SP* IIB, p. 54, note 162).

20 *MBh* 3.81.175: *dakṣiṇena sarasvatyā uttarena dṛṣadvatīm | ye vasanti kurukṣetre te vasanti triviṣṭape* || Cf. *VāmP Saromāhātmya* 1.1.

21 *MBh* 3.81.177f.:

*brahmavedī kurukṣetraṃ puṇyaṃ brahmarṣisevitam |  
tad āvasanti ye rājan na te śocyāḥ kathaṃcana* || 177 ||  
*tarantukārāntukayor yad antaraṃ rāmahrādānāṃ ca macakrukasya |  
etat kurukṣetrasamantapañcakaṃ pitāmahasyottaravedir ucyate* || 178 ||

For these verses, see P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra (Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law in India)*, Government Oriental Series B6 (Poona, 1930–62), 4:683, note 1551.

22 *VāmP Saromāhātmya* 1.4–14: the Brahmasaras *tīrtha* (v. 4), considered to be the site of Brahmā's Altar, is known as Rāmahrada: *ādyaiṣā brahmaṇo vedis tato rāmahradaḥ smṛtaḥ* | (v. 13ab). This *tīrtha* is known as Kurukṣetra: *kurunā ca yataḥ kṣṭam kurukṣetraṃ tataḥ smṛtam* || 13 ||

23 This myth is also briefly told in *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 123.1–29; *SP<sub>Bh</sub>* 123.21 mentions Samantapañcaka as the place where this Bhārgava Rāma filled seven *hradas* with their blood. Cf. *MBh* 1.2.1–10, where five *hradas* of blood are mentioned, referred to as Samanta-pañcaka. The identification of the Rāmahrada and Brahmasaras may have been called forth by what both tanks were believed to have in common: they were filled with blood – the Rāmahrada with the blood of the *kṣatriyas*, the Brahmasaras with that of Viṣṇu (see *SP* 6.4–6). The goriness apart, there are no other connections between this myth and the Kapāla Cycle in the *Skandapurāṇa*.

24 *VāmP Saromāhātmya* 1.5, 28.5–7. It is located near the Sthāṇutīrtha on the Sarasvatī River (*VāmP Saromāhātmya* 28.5–7); cf. op. cit. 1.12. Cf. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 4:686.



Śiva's mouth. The myth of Nilalohita and Brahmā's skull served as an etiology for this big holy pond in Kurukṣetra, which is today known as Brahma Sarovar.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, the *Skandapurāṇa* gave a powerful Śaiva twist to the respectable Sanskrit lore that existed regarding this ancient site, viz. the Rāmahrada formed by the blood of the *kṣatriyas* killed by Rāma Jāmadagnya. That this twist is in conformity with the religious situation by the end of the sixth century is evidenced by the *Harṣacarita*, in which Bāṇa depicts Thanesar (Sthāṇvīśvara) under the legendary king Puṣyabhūti as a country completely devoted to Maheśvara.<sup>26</sup>

In view of this significant evidence, it can no longer come as a surprise that Harṣa is said to have worshipped Nilalohita in preparation for his campaign against Śaśāṅka, not only because this ectype of Śiva represents his warrior side, evoked in the face of a dangerous threat, but also because the Śaiva tradition connected this figure in particular with Brahmā's Altar in Kurukṣetra, where he was born, and its central holy place, the Mahākāpāla or Śiva's Pond, where he deposited Brahmā's skull.

### 3 Bhairavācārya's Residence at the Mātṛ Temple

The myth of Nilalohita in Kurukṣetra brings us to a third instance of interface between the *Harṣacarita* and the *Skandapurāṇa*. The latter text continues the Mahākāpāla myth by telling (*SP* 7.15–23) that the Gaṇas set up a great roar when Nilalohita installed the skull. This noise attracted the buffalo Hālāhala and his fellow demons (*asuras*). The Gaṇādhyakṣa, in the present context Nilalohita, orders his Gaṇas to defend the skull; they kill Hālāhala.

A terra-cotta panel found in Ahicchatra (AC I) may illustrate this myth. It shows Śiva Nilalohita with the buffalo demon Hālāhala slung over his shoulder (Figure 2).

<sup>25</sup> For the present-day Brahma Sarovar, see Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, 169. The *Āvantiyakhaṇḍa* (*Ākh* 1.9.22), which borrows from the *SP*, seems to locate Mahākāpāla in the Mahākālavana in Ujjayinī (Yokochi, "The Relation between the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Āvantiyakhaṇḍa*," 84).

<sup>26</sup> *HC* 3, p. 100 (trans. 84f.): *gr̥he gr̥he bhagavān apūjyata khaṇḍaparaśuḥ* | That by *khaṇḍaparaśuḥ* ("the lord with the cleaving axe") Śiva is meant follows from the preceding lines, in which Puṣyabhūti's devotion is said to have been directed exclusively to Bhava, who sustains the universe, creates the beings, and cuts through the chain of worldly existences: [. . .] *bhagavati, bhaktisulabhe, bhuvanabhṛti, bhūtabhāvane, bhavacchidi, bhava bhūyasi bhaktir abhūt* |.



**Figure 2:** Ahicchatra (AC I): Niḷalohita killing the buffalo demon Hālāhala. Photo courtesy of Laxshmi Greaves.<sup>27</sup>

Next, Piśācīs are invited to feast on the remains of the buffalo, and Deva (Niḷalohita) gives them a place to live there, naming them “Mothers of the Skull,” Kapālamāṭṛ-s.<sup>28</sup> The holy field where these events took place is prophesied

<sup>27</sup> See also Laxshmi Rose Greaves, “Brick Foundations: North Indian Brick Temple Architecture and Terracotta Art of the Fourth to Sixth Centuries CE” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2015), 436–39.

<sup>28</sup> *SP* 7.23 (cf. *Ākh* 1.9.17):

*bhakṣayanti sma mahiṣaṃ mitvā mitvā yatas tu tāḥ |  
kapālamāṭaraḥ proktās tasmād devena dhīmatā || 23 ||*

The *Skandapurāṇa* provides many connections between the Pāśupata movement and the cult of goddesses or “Mothers.” This is a very old relationship, as follows from the grant of Bhulunda, year 56 (374/5 CE), one of the Bagh inscriptions, in which it is said that the Pāśupata *ācārya* Bhagavat Lokodadhi had founded a temple at the site of the Mother Goddesses; see K. V. Ramesh and S. P. Tewari, *A Copper-plate Hoard of the Gupta Period from Bagh, Madhya Pradesh* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1990), 22. The Bagh inscriptions also attest to a connection between the Piśāca cult and the Pāśupatas, who are said to serve in the temple of Bappa Piśāca-deva (Ramesh and Tewari, *A Copper-plate Hoard of the Gupta Period*, 10f., 13, 26).

to attract accomplished ascetics, that is, it will become a Siddhakṣetra; it will also be known as “Cremation Ground” (Śmaśāna), a secret abode of the Highest God (Devātideva).<sup>29</sup>

We now turn to the *Harṣacarita*, chapter 3. In order to entitle Puṣyabhūti to reign over the land of Śrīkaṇṭha (Kurukṣetra), an accomplished Siddha, the Mahāśaiva Bhairavācārya, performs a fire sacrifice in the cavity of a skull within the Cremation Ground (Mahāśmaśāna). This Siddha, wrapped in a black, woolen cloth,<sup>30</sup> with a throng of Māheśvaras around him, is said to reside in a *bilva* plantation north of an old Mātṛ temple.<sup>31</sup>

The correspondences with the *Skandapurāṇa* stand out: the Śmaśāna in Kurukṣetra, the Mātṛ temple there, and the Śaiva teacher and his Kāpālika ritual. We do not need to believe in the historicity of Bāṇa's story to see that this conspicuous agreement may point to a common historical background.

Recently, some evidence has come to light that may help us to understand the historical setting. In 1996, Devendra Handa reported the discovery of ancient remains at the northwestern corner of the Brahma Sarovar, the supposed Mahākāpāla tank (Figure 3).

29 *SP* 7.27–28:

*ardhayanavistīrṇaṃ kṣetram etat samantataḥ |*  
*bhaviṣyati na saṃdehaḥ siddhakṣetraṃ mahātmanaḥ || 27 ||*  
*śmeti hi procyate pāpaṃ kṣayaṃ śānaṃ vidur budhāḥ |*  
*dhyānena niyamaiś caiva śmaśānaṃ tena saṃjñitam |*  
*guhyaṃ devātidevasya paraṃ priyam anuttamam || 28 ||*

This passage, i.e. *SP* 7.26–35, which is not in the *Āvantiyakhaṇḍa*, might well be a later addition to the S recension of the *SP*; it is found only in the RA manuscripts (*SP* I, p. 73, note 41; Yokochi 2004, 83). Instead of Mahākāpāla, it speaks of, among others, a Kāpālasthāna, which originally may have referred to another *tīrtha* (Yokochi, “The Relation between the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Āvantiyakhaṇḍa*,” 83, note 11). However, the very insertion of this passage in the Mahākāpāla story of the *SP* testifies to the fact that after the first composition of the *Skandapurāṇa* was completed, the site of Mahākāpāla or Śivataḍāga became known as a cremation ground that attracted Siddhas.

30 *HC* 3, pp. 102–5 (trans. 87, 263–65).

31 *HC* 3, p. 102 (trans. 87); the subject is King Puṣyabhūti:

*gatvā ca kiṃcid antaraṃ tadīyam evābhimukham āpatantam anyatamaṃ śiṣyam adrākṣit |*  
*aprākṣic ca – kva bhagavān āste iti | so 'kathayat – asya jīrṇamātṛgṛhasyottareṇa bilvavāṭikām*  
*adhyāste iti | gatvā ca taṃ pradeśam avatātāra turagāt | praviveśa ca bilvavāṭikām |*

The remains of [a] Stūpa may still be seen on an elevated ground between the Brahma Sarovara and the Kurukshetra University. It is lying in a neglected and dilapidated state now and seems to have been opened by someone as is indicated by a cleft in its solid brick core. When and by whom, nobody knows.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 3:** Map of historic locations in Thanesar. Courtesy Google Earth Pro.

At about the same time, Mohindar Singh explored the mound in more detail and is reported to have “uncovered a massive baked-brick structure,” thought to “belong to a stupa of the Vardhana period” (Figure 4).<sup>33</sup> The website of the Directorate of Archaeology & Museums, Government of Haryana provides some additional information.

<sup>32</sup> Devendra Handa, “Haryana Heritage: An Introduction to the Buddhist Remains in the Region,” *Journal of Haryana Studies* 27–28 (1995–96): 17.

<sup>33</sup> Reported in Manoj Kumar, “A Unique Gupta Period Terracotta Sealing from Thanesar, Depicting the Female Counterpart of Hari-Hara,” in *South Asian Archaeology and Art 2016. Vol.1*, eds. Laxshmi Rose Greaves and Adam Hardy (New Delhi: Dev Publishers, 2020), 283–287 (283).

The Ancient Budh Stupa is situated (29° 57' 46" N, 76° 49' 15" E) in the north-east area of Kurukshetra University near Fine Arts Department. Brahma Sarovar lies on the east side of the stupa. The mound is spread over an area of approximately three acres and the height of the mound is around 4 meters from the surrounding ground level. Five burnt bricks structures were recovered during the archaeological course at mound. First three structures belong to Kushana phase, one related to Gupta period, last structure has the four successive phases which belong to Vardhana period to later medieval period. A massive wall of a big compound which was built during the Harsha period was constructed by reused bricks of previous periods. The width of this wall is 3 m and was cleared up to 30 m.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 4:** Brick structure at the northwestern corner of the Brahma Sarovar.<sup>35</sup>

However, this site, which stretches over ca. 3 acres (1.2 ha or ca. 110 × 110 m) also yielded other, non-Buddhist antiquities, as the subsequent clearance work

<sup>34</sup> Directorate of Archaeology & Museums, Government of Haryana, "Sites and Monuments," accessed December 14, 2018, <http://archaeologyharyana.nic.in/sites-and-monuments>.

<sup>35</sup> Photo courtesy of Vinit Bhanwala (Heritage of Haryana), accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/VinitBhanwala/photos/pcb.187539685412881/187539515412898/?type=3&theater>



by Manoj Kumar of Kurukshetra University in 2012 and 2013, under the direction of Ranvir Sashtri, has shown.<sup>36</sup>

A mound in the northwestern corner of the Brahma Sarovar yielded “a wealth of antiquities, potteries and structural remains,” among which “a round terracotta sealing with a diameter of 5 cm” (Figure 5).<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 5:** Seal found at the northwestern corner of the Brahma Sarovar. Photo courtesy John Guy.

The seal has a two-line inscription (the first line an uneven *śloka pāda*) that reads:

[1] || śrīḥ piḍārttahiṭā devī

[2] kaṃhāru

“The illustrious goddess Kaṃhāru, who is salutary to those who are afflicted by pain.”<sup>38</sup>

**36** Kumar, “A Unique Gupta Period Terracotta Sealing,” p. 283. I am indebted to John Guy, who presented me with a draft of Manoj Kumar’s article and provided a photograph of the seal. See also John Guy, “In Search of Blessings: Ex-Votos in Medieval Greater South Asia,” in *Agents of Faith. Votive Objects in Time and Place*, ed. Ittai Weinryb (New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 2018), 191–223.

**37** Kumar, “A Unique Gupta Period Terracotta Sealing.” The precise topographical relationship between this findspot and the *stūpa* site is not clear.

**38** The *akṣara dā* is written in continuation of/above the right vertical arm of the *pi* (for a similar type of *dā*, see the entry for “Sumandala Plates of Dharmaraja (569)” at Harry Falk and Oliver Hellwig, *Indoskript 2.0* (website), accessed December 14, 2018, <http://www.indoskript.org/manuscripts/details/140>). I am grateful to Yuko Yokochi for her help in deciphering this legend. Manoj Kumar reads “*pa[dama] Sri Rajni hita devika puru*” (“A Unique Gupta Period Terracotta Sealing,” p. 284).

The Prakrit *Kaṃhāru* or *Kaṃhālu* corresponds to Sanskrit *Kṛṣṇā*, the Black Goddess.<sup>39</sup>

The iconography of the seal poses a bigger problem. The two-armed goddess holds up a *bilva* fruit in her right hand, while her left hand holds a chain, either of eight *rudrākṣa* beads or – more likely, in view of their size – skulls (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Upper field of the seal found at the northwestern corner of the Brahma Sarovar.

The upper part of the figure stands in front of a tree, probably the *bilva* or bael tree, which surrounds her head as a sort of halo, whereas the lower part of her body seems enclosed by another structure, which in my view most likely

<sup>39</sup> OIA *kṛṣṇa* = MIA *kaṃha*; see Oskar von Hinüber, *Das ältere Mittellindisch im Überblick*, 2nd ed., Sitzungsberichte (Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse) 467 (Vienna: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001), §153. For the MIA suffix *āla/ālu* in the sense of *-vat/-mat*, see Frank van den Bossche, *A Reference Manual of Middle Prākṛit Grammar. The Prākṛits of the Dramas and the Jain Texts* (Gent: Vakgroep Talen en Culturen van Zuid- en Oost-Azië, 1999), §136. The exchange of *ra/ru* and *la/lu* is illustrated by the OIA *taddhita* suffix *-ra/la*; see William Dwight Whitney, *Sanskrit Grammar: Including Both the Classical Language and the Older Dialects of the Veda and Brāhmaṇa*, 5th ed. (1924; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), §§1226–27.

represents a water surface, the bottom perimeter of which is abutted by a row of vertical strokes. It could point to the nearby Mahākāpāla tank.

To the right of the Goddess stands a large *triśūla*; to the left are two objects that are difficult to identify. The upper object consists of three concentric circles. The outer circle is formed by ten interrupted strokes or knobs; the inner one encloses four crosslike spokes. Manoj Kumar proposes to identify these two objects as *cakra* and *śaṅkha*, which is problematic in view of the details of their design and the overall Śaiva iconographic program.<sup>40</sup>

The upper object, in my view, has little in common with a conventional *cakra*. It may be observed that there is a similarity between the chain in the left hand of the goddess and this object: not only do the eight knobs of the chain correspond in form to the ten strokes of the object, but in the centre of the chain, we see vague contours of something that appears to be similar to the inner ring of the object. The object may represent a structure of some kind. Considering the possible skull-like nature of the knobs/strokes, I wonder whether we are here concerned with a symbolic representation, either of the cremation ground as a *kālacakra* of some sort, or of the temple of the Black Goddess herself – arguably the old “Mātṛ temple” of the *Harṣacarita*.

The lower object, if it is a conch or *śaṅkha*, may represent the instrument blown by warriors in the battlefield, foreboding death; it is appropriate to a warrior goddess.

Given the ominous atmosphere that surrounds the site of the goddess – referred to in the *Skandapurāṇa* as a place assigned by Śiva to the “Mothers of the Skull,” in the *Harṣacarita* as an “old Mātṛ temple” in a *bilva* plantation, the residence of a tantric teacher dressed in black, who conducts a Kāpālīka ritual in the Mahāśmaśāna – this sinister sphere seems likewise to underlie the iconographic program of the seal found at the Brahma Sarovar. Both Sanskrit texts assimilate, according to their own, distinct literary modes, the historic reality of the Black Goddess of Sthāneśvara, Kaṃhāru, who may have had her shrine near the site where the seal was found, that is to the northwest of the Mahākāpāla tank, ca. 1,300 m south of the ancient Vardhana capital, which is marked today by the Harṣa kā Ṭilā (Figure 3).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> I cannot subscribe to John Guy’s assessment of the image (Guy, “In Search of Blessings,” 207): “In all probability then she is, as her title suggests, a local goddess with Vaiṣṇava allegiances, though the presence of Śaiva as well as Vaiṣṇava iconography points to the fluid state of sectarian boundaries in this period.”

<sup>41</sup> The tradition of this Black Goddess may live on in the extremely popular (modern) Mā Bhadrakālī Piṭh Mandir, situated east of the Harṣa kā Ṭilā.



As both our texts suggest, in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Mahākapāla tank in Kurukṣetra, adjacent to the capital Sthāneśvara, was a meeting place for accomplished Śaiva ascetics and Pāśupata and Kāpālika Siddhas, who hung around in the cremation ground, the nearby *bilva* plantation, and the local temples, among which that of the Black Goddess and, possibly, that of Nilalohita, who was, after all, believed to have been born there on Brahmā's Altar.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike its Buddhist affiliation, the Śaiva affiliation with the place lived on, as evinced by the *Akbar Nāma*. Abū'l-Faḍl reports that Emperor Akbar witnessed, on the banks of the Brahma Sarovar in 1567 CE, a fight between two rivaling Śaiva orders (*akhāṛās*), the Puris and the Kur (= Giris?).<sup>43</sup>

This ends our third specimen of interface between the *Harṣacarita* and the *Skandapurāṇa*. It is time to wrap up and to come to some conclusion.

## 4 Conclusion

It transpires from the three instances we have explored that the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Harṣacarita* show substantial interface, since both emanate from the same historic reality. This, however, does not imply that there is intertextuality between the two texts, such as there is between the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* or *Vāyupurāṇa*, for instance. Given the fact that the two texts belong to very different genres of Sanskrit literature, this was not to be expected from the outset. Consequently, the question of whether the composers of both texts may have known each other's work should be addressed. Since we may assume that composers at this level will have been acquainted with the major Sanskrit works of their times, this amounts to a question of chronology.

"When one day" (*atha kadācid*) – the opening words of the third *ucchvāsa* – Bāṇa returned from Harṣa's makeshift court at the Ajiravati River (the Gandhak) to his native village Prītikūṭa on the River Son, where he was solicited to recite a part of what was to become his *Harṣacarita*, it seems that the poet's favour with the king was common knowledge and his literary enterprise was known to his cousins. Irrespective of whether this recitation actually took place or not, the

<sup>42</sup> A seal (no. 8) found in the excavations at the Harṣa kā Ṭilā, currently in the site museum, reads "śrībhairava."

<sup>43</sup> Abū'l-Faḍl, *The Akbar Nāma. History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of His Predecessors*, trans. H. Beveridge (repr., Delhi: Rare Books, 1973), 2:423. Cf. David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 1 (1978): 61–75, 68f.; William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28ff.; Clark, *The Daśanāmi-Saṃnyāsīs*, 62.

overall structure of the composition, which includes the recitation scene itself, suggests that the work was completed after Bāṇa's return to his village in around 612 CE, when Harṣa had firmly established his rule.<sup>44</sup>

From these admittedly inconclusive indications, we may deduce, tentatively, that the *Harṣacarita* cannot have been finished much before the end of the second decade of the seventh century. That is, its composition may have begun around the time that the work on the *Skandapurāṇa* was being concluded.<sup>45</sup> Bāṇa thus may have known some or all of the Purāṇa text and it cannot be ruled out that the *Skandapurāṇa* resounds in the two Āryā verses with which we began our essay. The *Sarasvatī Māhātmya* in particular, comprising chapters 5 to 7 of the *Skandapurāṇa*, sung by Vāyu, the god of the wind, would be appropriate to the occasion – or, in the words of Sūcībāṇa:

Methinks that this Purāṇa does not differ from the Deeds of Harṣa after all!

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### Abbreviations

- Ākh* – Śrīkṛṣṇadāsa, Kṣemarāja, ed. *Śrī-Skandamahāpurāṇa*. Vol. 5. *Āvanyakhaṇḍa*. Bombay: Venkateśvara Press, 1910.
- BḍP* – Shastri, Jagdish Lal, ed. *Śrī-Vyāsa-maharṣiprokṭaṃ Brahmāṇḍapurāṇam*. 1912. Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973.
- HC* – Parab, Kāśinātha Pāṇḍuraṅga, ed. *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa with the Commentary Saṃketa of Śaṃkarakavi*, 7th ed. Re-edited by Nārāyaṇa Rāma Ācārya “Kāvyaṭīrtha.” Bombay: Nirṇaya Sagara Press, 1946.
- MBh* – Sukthankar, V. S., S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, eds. *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*. 19 vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1927–59.
- MaS* – Shastri, Jagdish Lal, ed. *Manusmṛti with the Sanskrit Commentary Manvantara-Muktāvalī of Kullūka Bhaṭṭa*. With an introduction by S. C. Banerji. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.
- SP 1* – Adriaensen, Rob, Hans T. Bakker, and Harunaga Isaacson, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. I, *Adhyāyas 1–25*. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998.

<sup>44</sup> Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, 92ff.

<sup>45</sup> See also Martine Kropman, “The Consecration of Kumāra: The Role of Thanesar and King Harṣa in the Composition of the *Skandapurāṇa*,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 29, no. 1 (2018): 1–31, who makes a case for the close connection of the origin of the *Skandapurāṇa* and Harṣavardhana's accession to the throne.

- SP IIA – Bakker, Hans T., and Harunaga Isaacson, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. IIA, *Adhyāyas 26–31.14: The Vārāṇasī Cycle*. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2004.
- SP IIB – Bakker, Hans T., Peter C. Bisschop, and Yuko Yokochi, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. IIB, *Adhyāyas 31–52: The Vāhana and Naraka Cycles*. In cooperation with Nina Mirnig and Judit Törzsök. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- SP III – Yokochi, Yuko, ed. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. III, *Adhyāyas 34.1–61, 53–69: The Vindhyavāsini Cycle*. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Groningen: Forsten; Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- SP IV – Bisschop, Peter C. and Yuko Yokochi, eds. *The Skandapurāṇa*. Vol. IV, *Adhyāyas 70–95: Start of the Skanda and Andhaka Cycles*. In cooperation with Diwakar Acharya and Judit Törzsök. Groningen Oriental Studies, Supplement. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- SP<sub>S</sub> 167 / SP<sub>RA</sub> 167 – For the edition of *Skandapurāṇa adhyāya 167*, see Bisschop 2006.
- SP<sub>Bh</sub> – Bhaṭṭarāi, Kṛṣṇaprasāda, ed. *Skandapurāṇasya Ambikākhaṇḍaḥ*. Mahendraratnagranthamālā 2. Kathmandu: Mahendrasaṃskṛtaviśvavidyālayaḥ, 1988.
- SKP – Śrīkṛṣṇadāsa, Kṣemarāja, ed. *Śrī-Skādamahāpurāṇam*. 7 vols. Bombay: Venkatesvara Press, 1910.
- Vāmp – Gupta, Anand Swarup, ed. *The Vāmana Purāṇa*. Varanasi: All India Kashiraj Trust, 1967.
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## **Part II: Political Landscapes and Regional Identity**



Max Deeg

# Describing the Own Other: Chinese Buddhist Travelogues Between Literary Tropes and Educational Narratives

In his monumental *Naturalis Historia*, the famous Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) gives us the following description of India:

For the peoples of the more civilised Indian races are divided into many classes in their mode of life: they cultivate the land, others engage in military service, others export native merchandise and import goods from abroad, while the best and wealthiest administer the government and serve as judges and counsellors of the kings. There is a fifth class of persons devoted to wisdom, which is held in high honours with these people and almost elevated into a religion; those of this class always end their life by a voluntary death upon a pyre to which they have previously themselves set light. There is one class besides these, half-wild people devoted to the laborious tasks – from which the classes above mentioned are kept away – of hunting and taming elephants; these they use for ploughing and for transport, these are their commonest kind of cattle, and these they employ when fighting in battle and defending their country: elephants to use in war are chosen for their strength and age and size.<sup>1</sup>

On the same topic, the Chinese historian Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), in his *Hou-Hanshu*, “History of the Later Han,” says the following:

The kingdom of Tianzhu (India) is [also] called Shendu; [it] is located several thousand *li* southeast of the Yueshi. The customs are the same as the Yueshi, [but the land] is humid and hot. Its kingdoms adjoin the Great Water. In battle [they] ride on elephants. Its people are weaker than the Yueshi, [and they] practice the Way of the Buddha (*futu* 浮圖) and therefore have made nonkilling their habit. All land [that has] the kingdoms of the Yueshi and Gaofu to the west, extends to the Western Ocean in the south, [and] extends to Panqi in the east belongs to Shendu. Shendu has several hundreds of independent cities, [and

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<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 6.22: *namque vita mitioribus populis Indorum multipertita degitur: telurem exercent, militia alii capessunt, merces alii suas evehunt externasque invehunt, res publicas optumi ditissimique temperant, iudicia reddunt, regibus adsident. quintum genus celebratae illis et prope in religionem versae sapientiae deditum voluntaria semper morte vitam accenso prius rogo finit. unum super haec est semiferum ac plenum laboris immensi – a quo supra dicta continentur – venandi elephantos domandique; is arant, is invehuntur, haec maxime novere pecuaria, his militant dimicantque pro finibus: dilectum in bella vires et aetas atque magnitudine faciunt.* Text and translation Harris Rackham, *Pliny: Natural History*, vol. 2, *Libri III–VII*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1961), 386–389.

each] city installs [its own] governor. There are tens of independent kingdoms, [and each kingdom has [its own] king. Although each of them is a little bit different, they all together are called Shendu. At that time it belonged to the Yueshi. The Yueshi killed its king and installed a commander to rule it. The land produces elephants, rhinoceroses, tortoise shells, gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, and tin, [and since] it trades with Daqin in the west, it also gets the treasures of Daqin. There is also muslin, high-quality woolen cloth, different [kinds of] incense, “stone honey” (cane sugar), pepper, ginger, and black salt.<sup>2</sup>

The comparison of Pliny’s description of India and the one by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445) in the *Hou-Hanshu* provides a couple of starting points for the subsequent discussion of Chinese Buddhist travelogues and their position in the broader Chinese literary discourse of much of the first millennium and beyond. Pliny focuses on aspects and features of India that are of political (government), social (caste system), and military interest (elephants), and only mentions and repeats the topos that earlier sources contain with reference to the gymnosophists, the wise men of India.<sup>3</sup> Fan Ye follows earlier models of the description of foreign regions, but is the first official Chinese historiographer to give some information about Indian religion, claiming that Indians are exclusively Buddhist and do not kill. It seems clear where this idealized information may have come from: when he finished his work in 445, Fan Ye probably had access to such records on India as Shi Daoan’s 釋道安 (312–385) *Xiyu-zhi* 西域志, “Record of the Western Regions,” or maybe even Faxian’s 法顯 *Foguo-ji* 佛國記, “Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms.”

What unites these texts and others, normally but not quite correctly called “pilgrim records,” is the common background of their authors. They were all written and compiled by Buddhists, monks, or, in just three cases, by laymen (Song Yun, Wei Jie, and Wang Xuance; see below) who had traveled to the homeland of their religion. Although I would not speak of a specific genre in

<sup>2</sup> *Hou-Hanshu* 後漢書 86, *Xiyu-zhuan* 西域傳: 天竺國一名身毒, 在月氏之東南數千里。俗與月氏同, 而卑溼暑熱。其國臨大水。乘象而戰。其人弱於月氏, 脩浮圖道, 不殺伐, 遂以成俗。從月氏、高附國以西, 南至西海, 東至磬起國, 皆身毒之地。身毒有別城數百, 城置長。別國數十, 國置王。雖各小異, 而俱以身毒為名, 其時皆屬月氏。月氏殺其王而置將, 令統其人。土出象、犀、玳瑁、金、銀、銅、鐵、鉛、錫, 西與大秦通, 有大秦珍物。又有細布、好毳毼、諸香、石蜜、胡椒、薑、黑鹽。 See also John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate – China to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes 1st to 2nd Centuries CE: An Annotated Translation from the Hou Hanshu*, “The Chronicle on the Western Regions,” rev. ed. (n.p.: John E. Hill, 2015), 31, from whose translation I differ in places.

<sup>3</sup> See Klaus Karttunen, *India in Early Greek Literature* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1989), 217–219; Klaus Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1997), 55–57.



the light of their diversity of form, structure, and content,<sup>4</sup> some of the texts obviously share some features. As partly ideological constructions of foreign regions, particularly of India, they express, as alluded in the title, a Buddhist worldview that is informed by more general Buddhist cosmological ideas seen from a Chinese perspective. In this worldview, the agents, being at once Buddhist and Chinese, try to mediate the tension, experienced by Chinese Buddhists, of being culturally Chinese and religiously “Indian”; it tries, in a way, to come to terms with the (Buddhist) own and (Indian) other at the same time.<sup>5</sup> Quite naturally, these Buddhists focused on Buddhist concerns, such as the situation of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, monasteries, and *stūpas*, as well as narratives linked to the sacred geography of the respective places or regions described, but also followed inherited patterns of Chinese “xenology,” the means of describing the foreign or other.

Collecting and recording information about foreign regions has a long tradition in China, starting with the first official dynastic history, the (*Qian-*) *Hanshu* (前)漢書, compiled by Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54 CE) and his son Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE). This information was usually collected at the end of the thematic chapters (*zhuan* 傳) following the annalistic (*ji* 記) or biographical parts of the works, and comprised data such as the distance from the imperial capital, the geographical and political situation, the number of households, and information about social customs in the respective regions, but often not much about religious concepts and practices.

This “traditional” format was taken over in part by the earlier Buddhist descriptions of foreign countries, which, as could be expected, added information about Buddhism in the regions or countries described. Unfortunately, most of these early records, such as the (*Shi-Daoan-*)*Xiyu-zhi* (釋道安)西域志 of Shi Daoan 釋道安, certainly the most active and broadly interested Chinese scholar-monk of

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4 I therefore disagree with Nancy Elizabeth Boulton, “Early Chinese Buddhist Travel Records as a Literary Genre” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1982), who suggests that the records form a genre of their own due to the shared topic and subthemes.

5 On the situatedness of Chinese Buddhists between a Chinese cultural and a Buddhist religious identity, see Max Deeg, “Chongu ‘biandi qingjie’: Han chuan fojiao zhong dui Yindu de zhujian rongshou” 重估“边地情结”: 汉传佛教中对印度的逐渐容受 [“Borderland complex” reloaded: Coming to terms with India in Chinese Buddhism], in *Zhongyin guanxi yanjiu de shiye yu qianjing* 中印关系研究的视野与前景, eds. Shen Dansen 沈丹森 and Sun Yinggang 孙英刚 (Shanghai: Fudan-daxue-chubanshe 复旦出版社, 2016), 65–76. On the “geographical” aspect of this process, see Max Deeg, “Mapping Common Territory – Mapping Other Territory,” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 8, no. 1 (2008): 145–161.

his time,<sup>6</sup> are no longer extant, so we know next to nothing about their format, structure, and content. From Daoan's compilation, at least a few fragments are quoted in fascicle 797 of the Song encyclopedia *Taiping-yulan* 太平御覽 and – if we accept the identification of the *Shishi-Xiyu-ji* 釋氏西域記, “Record of the Western Regions [by a Follower] of the Clan of the Śākya,” with Daoan's work<sup>7</sup> – in the *Shuijing-zhu* 水經注, “Annotations to the ‘Classic of Rivers,’” by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (+527);<sup>8</sup> these fragments seem to demonstrate that the work mainly contained information about the Buddhist background of a specific region. As an example, I provide the excerpt from the *Xiyu-zhi* quoted in the *Taiping-yulan*:

Juyi:<sup>9</sup> The “Record of the Western Regions” of Shi Daoan says, “The kingdom of Juyi is several hundred *li* to the north of the city. On top of a mountain there is a camel made of stone [from which] water is dripping down; [if one] fetches it with vessels made of gold, copper, iron, or wood [or] with the palms of the hand it all leaks out, [and] only [vessels made of] gourd do not leak; consuming it makes the body stink, and hair and skin come off [such that one] should stop [consuming it]. The *brāhmaṇas* of this kingdom are guarding [it].” Boluonaisi<sup>10</sup> (Vārāṇasī): The “Record of the Western Regions” of Shi Daoan says, “[In] the kingdom of Boluonaisi, the Buddha has turned the wheel of the *dharma* [and] Devadatta went to hell, [and] the place [where] the ground sank in is still there in this country.” The [kingdom of] the king of the rats: The “Record of the Western Regions” of Shi Daoan says, “On the way to Yutian (Khotan) there is the kingdom of the king of the rats, the big ones [as big] as dogs, the small ones [as small] as rabbits; [the king] wears a golden *kāṣāya*, [and] the *śramaṇas* transgress [the] rules

6 On Daoan, see Erich Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China – The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 180–204, as well as Max Deeg, *Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle. Der älteste Bericht eines chinesischen buddhistischen Pilgermönchs über seine Reise nach Indien mit Übersetzung des Textes* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), 31–34.

7 Luciano Petech, “La description des pays d’occident de Che Tao-ngan,” in *Mélanges de sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville*, vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 169–170; Luciano Petech, “Note additionelle sur la ‘Description des pays d’occident’ de Che Tao-ngan,” in *Mélanges de sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 399–401.

8 The fragments have been translated and discussed by Luciano Petech, *Northern India according to the Shui-Ching-Chu* (Rome: Is.M.E.O., 1950).

9 拘夷 / \*kuě-ji. All reconstructed Early Middle Chinese forms marked with an asterisk (\*) follow Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991). Juyi looks like an abbreviated form of Juyinajie 拘夷那竭 / \*kuě-ji-na'-giat or Jushinajia 拘尸那竭 / \*kuě-ši-na'-giat, Kuśinagara, but has been identified contextually as a transliteration of Kuča: Petech, “La description des pays d’occident,” 169–170.

10 波羅奈斯 / \*pa-la-na<sup>h</sup>-si.

and have no etiquette, [while] the white-robed [laypeople] always harm people.”<sup>11</sup> Mohelai<sup>12</sup> (Mahārāṣṭra): The “Record of the Western Regions” of Shi Daoan says, “The kingdom of Mohelai again extends to the kingdom of Helai in the south; there is the Anouda<sup>13</sup> (Anavatapta) mountain, [and] the city [known as] ‘Royal Residence’<sup>14</sup> (Rājagṛha) is [situated] at the southeastern corner of the [A]nouda mountain; the ‘Bamboo Grove’ monastery<sup>15</sup> (Veṇuvana-vihāra) is west of the city; the *aśvattha* tree [under which] the Buddha practiced austerities for six years is fifty *li* from the city.” Boliyue:<sup>16</sup> The “Record of the Western Regions” of Shi Daoan says, “The kingdom of Luowei<sup>17</sup> [measures] four hundred *li* from east to west [and] extends to the kingdom of Boliyue. The kingdom of Boliyue is the kingdom of the Buddha’s maternal grandfather.”<sup>18</sup>

As can be seen, Daoan already includes India (Kuśinagara, Mahārāṣṭra, Kapilavastu, Rājagṛha) as part of the Western Regions and is interested in the Buddhist or local legends linked to the different places. Otherwise, he seems to follow the established pattern of giving directions, measures, and maybe – in the original version – additional information.

**11** The Tang dictionary *Yiqiejing-yinyi* 一切經音義, “Sounds and Meanings of All *Sūtras*”, compiled by Huilin 慧琳 (737–820), seems to reflect some of the older legends about the rats of Khotan, according to which the rats have golden fur (T.2128.706b.7f.). The remark on the evil behavior of the monks and laypeople may originate from the narratives around the corrupt *saigha* of Khotan in other texts.

**12** 摩訶賴 / \**ma-xa-laj*<sup>h</sup>. Petech, “La description des pays d’occident,” 184, points out that the “geography” is confused here.

**13** 阿耨達 / \**?a-nəw*<sup>h</sup>-*dat*: in standard Buddhist cosmology, a lake in the north near the central mountain (Su)meru. In the Tang period, Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), in his *Shijia-fangzhi* 釋迦方志, “Record of the Regions of Śākya[muni],” with reference to authoritative texts like the *Shuijing-zhu* and others, identifies Anavatapta mountain with the Kunlun 崑崙 range (T.2088.949b.23ff.).

**14** Wangshe 王舍, the old capital of the kingdom of Magadha.

**15** Zhuyuan-jingshe 竹園精舍.

**16** 波麗越 / \**pa-lej*<sup>h</sup>-*wuat* (?); as Petech (“La description des pays d’occident,” 182) has observed, this is a strange name for the kingdom of Koliya, the Buddha’s grandfather’s kingdom in the Buddhist texts.

**17** Luowei 羅衛 is an abbreviated form of Jiaweiluowei 迦維羅衛 / \**kia-jwi-la-wiaj*<sup>h</sup>: Kapilavastu, the Buddha’s hometown.

**18** 拘夷: 釋道安《西域志》曰: 拘夷國, 北去城數百里。山上有石駱駝, 潮水滴下, 以金、銅、鐵及木器、手掌承之皆漏, 惟瓢瓠不漏, 服之令人身臭, 毛皮盡脫得止。其國有婆羅門守視。波羅秦[em. 奈]斯: 釋道安《西域志》曰: 波羅秦斯國, 佛轉法輪, 調達入地獄, 土陷處, 皆在其國。鼠王: 釋道安《西域志》曰: 于闐道中有鼠王國, 大者如狗, 小者如菟[em. 兔], 著金袈裟, 沙門過不禮, 白衣不禮輒害人。摩訶賴: 釋道安《西域志》曰: 摩訶賴國, 又南得訶賴國, 有阿耨達山, 王舍城在耨達山東南角, 竹園精舍在城西。佛, 六年苦行貝多樹, 去城五十里。波麗越: 釋道安《西域志》曰: 羅衛國東西四百里, 至波麗越國。波麗越國, 即佛外祖國也。

What changed the authority and reliability of Buddhist reports about the Western Regions and, more particularly, about India – but not necessarily their descriptive framework – were the authentic reports of Chinese Buddhists who traveled to and within India. Most of these records have not survived and are only known from references in other and later works: Faxian's companion Baoyun 寶雲 (377–449) allegedly wrote a record (*jizhuan* 記傳) whose title is not known, but is referred to in Huijiao's 慧皎 *Gaoseng-zhuan* 高僧傳 (T.2059.340a.13f.), “Biographies of Eminent Monks” (ca. 530).<sup>19</sup> In the year 439, Zhimeng 智猛 published his (*Youxing*-) *Waiguo-zhuan* 遊行外國傳, “Record of (Travels Through) the Foreign Kingdoms,” mentioned in three dynastic histories (*Suishu*, *Jiu-Tangshu*, *Xin-Tangshu*) and in Daoxuan's *Shijiafangzhi* (T.2088.969b.9f.), on his travels to Central India between 404 and 437, paraphrased in the *Gaoseng-zhuan*. Daopu 道普 traveled after 424 and left a work with an unknown title.<sup>20</sup> Fasheng 法盛 compiled a work called *Liguo-zhuan* 歷國傳, “Record of Traveling Through the Kingdoms,” which is mentioned in the *Suishu*.

Only one of these records from the beginning of the fifth century has survived: Faxian's *Foguo-ji*, the “Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms.” It is worth mentioning that Faxian, like Zhimeng in his record, did not follow the formal model of the historiographical *zhuan*, featuring information about the individual regions, but focuses on directions, distances, and Buddhist narratives linked to these regions. He gives, however, a rather idealized description of Central India after having passed through Mathurā:<sup>21</sup>

[The region] south of [of Mathurā] is called the Middle Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom, the weather is moderate in summer and in winter, without frost and without snow. The people are wealthy and happy, and there is no [system of] registration and [no] state control. Only those who cultivate royal land have to return revenue. When they want to leave they go, [and] when they want to stay they stay. The king rules without corporeal punishment or capital punishment. Culprits only have to pay a fine according to the seriousness

<sup>19</sup> The information has been collected by Édouard Chavannes, “Voyage de Song Yun dans l'Udyāna et le Gandhāra (518–522 p.C.),” *Bulletin de l'École Française de l'Extrême-Orient* 3 (1903): 430–441.

<sup>20</sup> Daoxuan refers to a “big record” (*dazhuan* 大傳: T.2088.969c.8).

<sup>21</sup> This passage is mistaken by Xuanzang as a description of Mathurā: see Max Deeg, “Has Xuanzang Really Been in Mathurā? Interpretatio Sinica or Interpretatio Occidentalia – How to Read Critically the Records of the Chinese Pilgrims,” in *Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture. Festschrift in Honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. Christian Wittern and Shi Lishan (Kyoto: Editorial Committee for the Festschrift in Honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki, 2007), 35–73.

of their crime. [Even if] they commit a crime for a second time, they only have their right hand cut off. The whole royal guard receives a salary. No citizens kill living beings, drink [spirits], or eat spicy food, except for the *caṇḍālas*. *Caṇḍāla* means “evil people”; they live separately from the others. When they go to the market in the city, they beat a piece of wood to distinguish themselves [from the others] – that the others recognize them and can avoid them [so that] they have no contact [with the other people]. In the kingdom [they] do not keep pigs or chicken and they sell no domesticated animals. There are no butchers in the markets and no liquor shop. For trading, cowry is used. Only the *caṇḍālas* are fishermen and hunters and sell meat.

After the Buddha [had entered] *parinirvāṇa*, all the kings, elders and clan leaders erected monasteries for the *saṅgha* and donated fields, houses, farms, fields, people, cows, and calves, [and these] donations were registered on iron plates; since then, [this custom] has been transferred from king to king and nobody dares abandon [it, so] the custom continues until nowadays.

All throughout the residences of the monks, there is no lack of bedding and blankets, of food or drink, of clothing. The monks are normally preoccupied with meritorious activity, such as reciting *sūtras* or sitting in meditation.

When guest monks arrive, the resident monks welcome them, carry their robes and alms bowls, and give them water for washing their feet, oil for their feet, and broth [as food normally] not to be consumed outside the permitted time for eating. After [the guest monks] have rested for a short time, they are asked for their ordination age and are given a room and bedding according to [their rank]. All of this [is arranged] according to the *dharma*.

Where the monks reside, *stūpas* for Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Ānanda stand erect, as well as for the [three *piṭakas*,] Abhidharma-, Vinaya-, and Sūtra(-piṭaka).

One month after the summer retreat, families who hope for merit (*puṇya*) produce liquid food to be donated to the monks and which can be consumed outside of the allocated time for meals. The great assembly of the monks expounds the *dharma*. After having expounded the *dharma*, they offer flowers, [fruit,] and incense to the *stūpa* of Śāriputra. Lamps are burning the whole night and dancers and musicians [perform scenes of] when Śāriputra still was a *brāhmaṇa* and visited the Buddha to ask him for permission to leave the household, as well as [scenes] concerning Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Mahākāśyapa.

The nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*) only make offerings to the *stūpa* of Ānanda, since Ānanda asked the Venerable One to allow women to leave the household. The novices (*śrāmaṇera*) make offerings to *Rāhula*. The masters of the *abhidharma* make offerings to the [*stūpas*] of the *abhidharma*, [and] the masters of the *vinaya* to the [*stūpas*] of the *vinaya*. [These festivities] take place annually and have their [specific] date. When they are followers of the Mahāyāna, they make offerings to Prajñāpāramitā, Mañjuśrī, Avalokitasvara, and other [divine beings]. When the monks enter their next monastic year after the summer retreat, the elder, householders, *brāhmaṇas*, and others distribute robes and [other] things needed by the *śramaṇas*. The monks accept [these] and distribute them among themselves. These rules of behavior of the holy community have been transmitted continuously since the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

From where [Faxian and his companions] crossed the Indus to South India, to the Southern Sea, [the distance] is forty or fifty thousand *li*. [The land] is as flat [as] the ocean, and there are no big mountains or rivers.<sup>22</sup>

In Faxian's record, we first grasp what could be called an "ethno-topography of correspondence": the character and mentality (temperament, behavior, customs, etiquette, and – last but not least – religion) of the people correspond to the climate and geographical situation. Since Buddhism is supported, the country is prospering and the people are happy. This, as far as I can see, is a Buddhist innovation in this specific form, however building on a Chinese descriptive pattern that Needham has called "correlative thinking," i.e. the idea that all phenomena on different ontological levels (micro-, meso-, and macrocosms) are correlated.<sup>23</sup> Later Buddhist records like Xuanzang's or Huichao's 惠超 (who traveled before 729)<sup>24</sup> also follow this model.

**22** 859a. 凡沙河已西，天竺諸國，國王皆篤信佛法。供養眾僧時，則脫天冠，共諸宗親，群臣手自行食。行食已，鋪氈於地，對上座前坐，於眾僧前不敢坐床。佛在世時，諸王供養法式，相傳至今。從是以南，名為中國。中國寒暑調和，無霜，雪。人民殷樂，無戶籍官法；唯耕王地者乃輸地利，欲去便去，欲住便住。王治不用刑斬；有罪者但罰其錢，隨事輕重；雖復謀為惡逆，不過截右手而已。王之侍衛，左右皆有供祿。舉國人民悉不殺生，不飲酒，不食葱蒜，唯除旃荼羅。旃荼羅名為惡人，與人別居；若入城市，則擊木以自異，人則識而避之，不相唐突。國中不養豬，雞，不賣生口；市無屠酤及沽酒者；貨易則用貝齒。唯旃荼羅，獵師賣肉耳。自佛般泥洹後，諸國王，長者，居士為眾僧起精舍，供給田，宅，園，圃，民戶，牛，犢，鐵券書錄；後王王相傳，無敢廢者，至今不絕。眾僧住止房舍，床蓐，飲食，衣服，都無缺乏，處處皆爾。眾僧常以作功德為業，及誦經，坐禪。客僧往到，舊僧迎逆，代擔衣鉢，給洗足水，塗足油，與非時漿，須臾；息已，復問其臘數，次第得房舍，臥具；種種如法。眾僧住處，作舍利弗塔，目連，阿難塔，並阿毘曇，律，經塔。安居後一月，諸希福之家勸化供養僧，作非時漿；眾僧大會說法。說法已，供養舍利弗塔，種種華香，通夜然燈，使伎樂人作'舍利弗本婆羅門時詣佛求出家'；大目連，大迦葉亦如是。諸比丘尼多供養阿難塔，以阿難請世尊聽女人出家故。諸沙彌多供養羅云。阿毘曇師者，供養阿毘曇。律師者，供養律。年年一供養，各自有日。摩訶衍人，則供養般若波羅蜜，文殊師利，觀世音等。眾僧受歲竟，長者，居士，婆羅門等各持種種衣物，沙門所須，以布施僧；眾僧受亦自各各布施。佛泥洹已來，聖眾所行威儀法則，相承不絕。自度新頭河，至南天竺，迄于南海，四五萬里，海平坦，無大山川，正有河水。See also Max Deeg, *Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle*, 263–268, 528–531.

**23** Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), particularly 280–281; see also Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 78–82.

**24** An English translation of Huichao's (incomplete) travelogue is Yang Han-Sung, Jan Yün-Hua, Iida Shotaro, and Laurence W. Preston, *The Hye Ch'o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1984); see also Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Hyecho's Journey: The World of Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

For the individual regions, Faxian seems to refer to an idealized *illo tempore*, implicitly or sometimes explicitly applying a rhetoric of decline: what was a prosperous region at the time of the Buddha is mostly lying in decay.<sup>25</sup> Instead of providing details, he is quite focused, as is to be expected, on giving information about the Buddhist sacred geography and the narratives attached to specific places and sites.

The next records partially preserved are those of Song Yun 宋雲, Senghui 慧生, and Daoyao 道藥 (or Daorong 道榮), from the beginning of the sixth century. Longer fragments contained in *Luoyang-jialan-ji* 洛陽伽藍記, “Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang,” of Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 from around 547 only cover the Central Asian regions and the Indian Northwest, the region of Gandhāra.<sup>26</sup> Besides giving information about Buddhist legends, Song Yun – as one might expect from the report of an official envoy of the Chinese court – also includes information about his encounter with the rulers of the Hephthalites, Udyāna (Swāt), and Gandhāra (the historical Hunnic king Mihirakula), as well as about distances and the political situation, partly in the style of the *zhuan* of the dynastic histories, but he mostly omits details about climate, people, and products.

The earlier travelers to India paved, as it were, the way for imperial contact in later times. Song Yun’s mission, although not penetrating into the Indian and Buddhist heartland was, in a way, one of the first cases. However, before the religio-diplomatic missions of a later dynasty could take place successfully, the reunification of the realm had to be accomplished for the sake of political stability and a new true imperial outreach. When reunification finally happened, it led to the first peak in Sino-Indian relationships. A prelude to a concrete and increased diplomatic relationship with Indian states was the short-lived Sui 隋 dynasty’s (581–618) special interest in the “Western Regions” (*xiyu*), which at that time clearly included India.<sup>27</sup> But it was partly on Buddhists that the court re-

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25 Scholars have taken this at face value and have used Faxian’s and other travelers’ information as a basis for reconstructing a general decline of Buddhism in India between the late fourth and seventh centuries (Xuanzang), without taking into account the religious backdrop of the Buddhist theory of the decline of the *dharma*, on which see Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).

26 See the more recent translations by Wang Yi-t’ung, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang by Yang Hsiian-chih* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), and Jean Marie Lourme, *Yang Xuanzhi: Mémoire sur les monastères bouddhiques de Luoyang* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).

27 I have discussed the following in Max Deeg, “When Peregrinus Is Not Pilgrim: The Chinese ‘Pilgrims’ Records – A Revision of Literary Genre and its Context,” in *Dharmayātra – Buddhist Pilgrimage in Time and Space*, eds. Christoph Cueurppers and Max Deeg (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2014), 85–87.

lied when retrieving the information it wanted and needed. An eminent monk of the Sui period, Yancong 彥琮 (557–610),<sup>28</sup> on the basis of information given by the Indian monk Dharmagupta/Damojueduo 達摩笈多 (active 590–619), wrote a record on imperial order, thematically arranged in ten chapters,<sup>29</sup> called *Dasui-xiguo-zhuan* 大隋西國傳, “Record of the Western Kingdoms (Written under the) Great Sui,” aka *Xiyu-zhuan* 西域傳.<sup>30</sup> Yancong cooperated

**28** On Yancong, see Axel Held, “Der buddhistische Mönch Yen-Ts’ung (557–610) und seine Übersetzungstheorie” (PhD diss., University of Cologne, 1972).

**29** T.2060.435c.20ff. 以笈多遊履具歷名邦，見聞陳述事逾前傳，因著大隋西國傳一部，凡十篇，本傳：一方物，二時候，三居處，四國政，五學教，六禮儀，七飲食，八服章，九寶貨，十盛列山河，國邑，人物。斯即五天之良史，亦乃三聖之宏圖；故後漢《西域傳》云：‘靈聖之所降集，賢懿之所挺生’者是也。詞極綸綜，廣如所述。“Because [Dharma]gupta had traveled through famous regions, and had reported information exceeding [what had been reported] in former reports, [Yancong] wrote the *Dasui-xiguo-zhuan* in ten chapters, truly recording: 1. products; 2. seasons; 3. dwellings; 4. governmental affairs; 5. teachings (religions); 6. etiquette; 7. eating and drinking; 8. clothing; 9. jewelry [and] money; 10. mountains, rivers, kingdoms, cities, [and] people. This is an excellent historical [work], even comparable with the Great Plan of the three saints (here probably the three ‘cultural heroes’ Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹); therefore, this is what is said in the ‘Records of the Western Regions of the Later Han’: ‘What the saints have bestowed, what the sages have produced . . .’ [Even if] these words are extremely comprehensive [they describe] what is broadly said [in the record].” My translation differs considerably in some points from that of Held, “Der buddhistische Mönch Yen-Ts’ung,” 141–142. The Tang catalogue *Datang-neidian-lu* 大唐內典錄 (T.2149.280a.24 and 332b.15) calls the ten sections “fascicles” (*juan* 卷). It is not clear if this is the same *Xiguo-zhuan* 西國傳 as mentioned in the *Fahua(jing)-zhuanji* 法華(經)傳記 (T.2068.79b.6), in a story about the Gomati monastery in Khotan or, in the same text, in a story about a monk rescuing a poisonous *nāga* in the mountains near Vārāṇasī who is in pain due to worms in his belly (80b.22), and another one about a foreign (*waiguo* 外國: Indian?) soothsayer (89b.16). In the same collection, there is a quotation from a *Xiyu-zhi* about Mahāyāna Buddhism in Khotan and Karghalik (Zhegoupan-guo 遮响槃國; see 50.b.4ff.), the origin of which is not clear. The *Xiguo-zhuan* mentioned, however, seems to be a different text, concentrating on narratives: *Sanbao-ganying-yaoliue-lu* 三寶感應要略錄, “Essential Record of Stimulative Responses of the Three Jewels” (T.2084.827a.13), quotes it as one of the sources of its story of the famous first Buddha statue of King Udyana (Uḍḍiyāna) of Roruka, and other Indian stories are taken from this source alone (841a.26, 845a.17, 852c.17). Another, similar collection mentioned in the *Fahua-zhuanji* is a *Xiyu-zhuan* 西域傳 (T.2068.73b.21).

**30** XGT.2060.437c.3. In the same passage (437c.5ff.), it is mentioned that on imperial order, Yancong translated two works, the *Sheli-ruitu-jing* 舍利瑞圖經, “Sūtra of the Auspicious Images of the Relics,” and the *Guojia-xiangrui-lu* 國家祥瑞錄, “List of the Auspicious Signs in the Nation,” into Sanskrit (? *fan sui wei fan* 翻隋為梵) on behalf of an anonymous *śramaṇa* from Rājagṛha (Wangshe-cheng 王舍城); these were arranged into ten fascicles that were then distributed to the kingdoms of the Western Region. These ten fascicles, however, may refer to a different work ascribed to Yancong, the *Xiyu-xuanzhi* 西域玄志, “Mysterious Report on the Western Regions,” also in ten fascicles (FZ, T.2122.1022c.21, simply called *Xiyu-zhi* in the *Datang-neidian-*



with the high Sui official Pei Ju 裴矩, an advisor of emperor Yangdi 楊帝 (r. 604–617), in compiling information on matters of the Western Regions.<sup>31</sup> Pei Ju, as a collector of “intelligence regarding Inner Asia” and an “indefatigable geographer and ethnographer,”<sup>32</sup> authored a work called *Xiyu-tuji* 西域圖記 (in three fascicles), an “Illustrated Record of the Western Regions,” which included maps of the more than forty kingdoms described.<sup>33</sup> According to Yancong’s biography in the *Xu-gaoseng-zhuan* 續高僧傳 (XGZ), Yancong and Peiju also coauthored a *Tianzhu-ji* 天竺記, “Records of India,”<sup>34</sup> which was probably a complement<sup>35</sup> to Pei Ju’s other work, which was mainly concerned with Central Asia. From this evidence,<sup>36</sup> it is clear that the interest in Central Asia and India was not only motivated by religious devotion,<sup>37</sup> but by an

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lu, T.2149.280a.24 and 332b.15), which – if it really is identical with the compilation in ten fascicles mentioned in Yancong’s biography (see below) – would be the only example of a Chinese text or compilation (probably based on Indian sources) translated into an Indic language: T.437c.

**31** On Pei Ju, his life, and his political role, see Fritz Jäger, “Leben und Werk des P’ei Kü,” *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* 9 (1920–1922): 81–115, 216–231, and Arthur F. Wright, “The Sui Dynasty (581–617),” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, *Sui and T’ang China, 589–906, Part I*, eds. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 127 passim.

**32** Wright, “The Sui Dynasty (581–617),” 127.

**33** Recorded in the *Suishu* 隋書 and *Xin-Tangshu* 新唐書 and repeated in FZ (T.2035.312a.20ff.). As there is no mention of Yancong in these sources, especially not in the Buddhist encyclopedias, this work is certainly not identical with Pei Ju’s *Tianzhu-ji*, as Held, “Der buddhistische Mönch Yen-Ts’ung,” 131, implies. Furthermore, in the reference to Pei Ju’s work, the name for India is given as Bei-Poluomen 北婆羅門, “[the] northern [kingdom of] the *brāhmaṇa*” (312a.29), instead of *Tianzhu* 天竺.

**34** T.2060.437c.21f. 勅又令裴矩共琮修續《天竺記》，文義詳洽，條貫有儀。“Furthermore, it was ordered that Pei Ju together with [Yan]cong should compile a ‘Record of India,’ the literary content [of which] was detailed and balanced, [and] the form [of which] was regular.” See also the German translation by Held, “Der buddhistische Mönch Yen-Ts’ung,” 61–62.

**35** This seems to be suggested by the use of the word *zuan* 續, “to continue, complement,” in the biography.

**36** A similar propagandistic and ideological agenda behind a growing interest in Buddhist India and its history under the Sui is reflected in Fei Zhangfang’s 費張房 catalog *Lidai-sanbao-ji* 歷代三寶記 (presented to the court in the year 597): see Max Deeg, “Zwischen Spannung und Harmonie: Das Problem von Chronologie und Synchronologie in der frühen chinesischen buddhistischen Historiographie,” in *Geschichten und Geschichte: Historiographie und Hagiographie in der asiatischen Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2010), 96–139.

**37** In Yancong’s case, this religious interest is reflected in his writing the biographies (*zhuan* 傳 or *benzhuan* 本傳) of the Indian monks Dharmagupta and Narendrayāśas/Naliantiyeshe 那連提耶舍 (517–589): see Held, “Der buddhistische Mönch Yen-Ts’ung,” 130ff.

imperial agenda in the context of the policy of the unified Sui empire. This is also shown by the lost record, *Xifan-ji* 西番記, “Record of the Western Barbarians,” of the Chinese envoy to Central Asia, Wei Jie 韋節, during the reign of the second and last Sui emperor Yangdi 煬帝 (605–616); the envoy made his way to Kaśmīr or Kapīśa (Jibin) and all the way to Rājagṛha in Central India.<sup>38</sup> It is in this period that the collection of information about these foreign regions gained an official status, which can only be understood in a political and diplomatic context.

More consistent diplomatic relations with India, albeit only for a short period, were established in the second half of the reign of the second emperor of the Tang dynasty (618–907), Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649); between 641 and 658, seven diplomatic missions (three Indian, four Chinese) went back and forth between Chang’an and the court of the North Indian Puṣpabhūti (Puṣyabhūti) ruler Harṣavardhana Śīlāditya (ca. 590–647) of Kānyakubja (modern Kanauj),<sup>39</sup> who also happened to rule the Buddhist heartland Magadha (today’s Bihār), where most of the Buddhist sacred places were located. We do not know exactly what triggered these missions,<sup>40</sup> but it is likely that they were linked, on the Chinese side, by the growing expansionism of emperor Taizong. Taizong’s foreign policy was marked by a mixture of a specific version of “loose rein”<sup>41</sup> and imperial expansionism in the Western borderlands, which aimed at the flexibility of being prepared for conquest and for alliances with respect to individual regions in the “Western Regions.” For realizing this policy, the court, like the Sui dynasty did before them, needed up-to-date and detailed information about as many regions as possible.

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**38** Chavannes, “Voyage de Song Yun,” 438.

**39** See the table in Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 21. There may have been a fourth tour to India by Wang Xuance before 663. Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 16, mentions more than fifty missions in total between China and India between the years 619 and 753 (without giving the sources for this number). Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589–1276* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 72–77, lists twenty-three missions for roughly the same period.

**40** I do not agree with the political implication of the statement of Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 17, that “Xuanzang was instrumental in turning Taizong’s attention toward Buddhism and South Asia”: Xuanzang returned in 645 after the first mission had already gone to India in 641.

**41** Wang Bangwei 王邦維, *Datang-xiyu-qiufa-gaoseng-zhuan-xiaozhu* 大唐西域求法高僧傳校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua-shuju 中華書局, 2009), 262.

Linked with three of the aforementioned Chinese missions is the name of the Tang official Wang Xuance 王玄策 (fl. 641–666).<sup>42</sup> The mix of diplomatic and religious activities are very prominent in the case of Wang: on his third tour to India, on which he set off in the year 657 and from which he probably returned in 662, he had the imperial order to present a *kāṣāya* at Bodhgayā and to bring the eminent Chinese monk Xuanzhaoh 玄照 back to China.<sup>43</sup> Wang also set up inscribed stelae in Bodhgayā and on mount Ḡḍhrakūṭa during his visit in the year 645.<sup>44</sup> For Wang, we also have external evidence that he was a dedicated Buddhist in the form of an inscription – in the Buddhist caves of Longmen 龍門, near the eastern capital of Luoyang 洛陽, and dated to the year 665 – in which he expresses his devotion to the future Buddha Maitreya.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the record that Wang had written between 661 and 666, the *Zhong-tianzhu-xingji* 中天竺行記, “Report on Travels in Central India,” in ten fascicles, is only preserved in some fragments quoted in other Buddhist works, but this suffices to gain a rough picture of Wang’s missions and his record,<sup>46</sup> although the fragments focus, of course, on Buddhist matters, maybe selected as complementary information to those contained in Xuanzang’s “Record.”

The “ultimate” Buddhist record, of course, is Xuanzang’s *Datang-Xiyu-ji* 大唐西域記, “Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang [Dynasty],” written between 645 and 646 by order and on behalf of the second Tang emperor, Taizong. The “Record” follows the historiographical tradition of giving detailed information about the individual regions, but focuses chiefly (though not exclusively) on the Buddhist legends linked to these places, mostly episodes from the life of the Buddha but also of other eminent Buddhist individuals. A closer and contextual reading of the text suggests that, instead of just providing a description of different places and regions in Central Asia with a Buddhist flavor, Xuanzang is driven by the educational agenda of informing the emperor about

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42 Édouard Chavannes, “Les inscriptions chinoises de Bodh-Gayā aux Xe et XIe siècles,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 34, no. 1 (1896): 26–29; Tansen Sen, “In Search of Longevity and Good Karma: Chinese Diplomatic Missions to Middle India in the Seventh Century,” *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 (2001), 14–22.

43 Sylvain Lévi, “Les Missions de Wang Hiuen-ts’e dans l’Inde,” *Journal Asiatique*, 9th ser., 15 (1900): 304–305.

44 Lévi, “Les Missions de Wang Hiuen-ts’e dans l’Inde,” 319–321.

45 See Max Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae: Early Chinese Reports on Nepal: The Foundation Legend of Nepal in its Trans-Himalayan Context* (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2016), 33. At Longmen, there also exist inscriptions of Wang Xuance’s brother and of the monk Xuanzhaoh, whom Wang brought back from India to China.

46 Lévi, “Les Missions de Wang Hiuen-ts’e dans l’Inde”; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 15–25; Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae*, 32–33.

the strong presence of Buddhism in certain areas and the ideal (or rather idealized) situation of the religion under the rule of Buddhist kings, particularly Harṣa Śīlāditya of Kanauj, or about the rather unfortunate destiny of kings who turned against the *dharma*.<sup>47</sup>

Xuanzang's "Record" is usually considered to be innovative and exceptional, but there are elements that clearly stand not only in the tradition of the *zhuan* in the dynastic histories, but also follow the previously discussed compendiums of the Sui period. This becomes clear when one looks for the model and origin of the rather extensive general description of India in the first half of the second fascicle of the "Record"; it contains subchapters, though not marked as such, on the following subjects:<sup>48</sup>

- The names of India
- The general geographical situation
- Measures of distance
- Measures of time
- Settlements and residences
- Outer appearance, clothes, and adornment
- Hygiene and purity
- The writing system
- Official documents
- General education and knowledge
- The four Vedas
- Teachers and scholars
- Buddhist learning and Buddhist institutions
- The caste system
- The military system
- The legal system
- Etiquette and behavior
- Illness and medical care
- Death and funerary customs
- Administration and taxation
- Agriculture and products
- Food and drinks

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<sup>47</sup> See Max Deeg, "Writing for the Emperor – Xuanzang Between Piety, Religious Propaganda, Intelligence, and Modern Imagination," in *Pāsādikadānaḥ: Festschrift für Bhikkhu Pāsādika*, eds. Martin Straube et al. (Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 2009), 30–60.

<sup>48</sup> A full English translation and detailed commentary of this general description of India will be given in my forthcoming translation and commentary of the *Datang-Xiyu-ji* (publication planned for 2021).

- Utensils and tools for preparing and eating food
- Precious items and money
- Climate

This clearly recalls the structure Yancong's *Dasui-xiguo-zhuan*, which was divided into ten thematic chapters on: 1. products; 2. seasons; 3. dwellings; 4. governmental affairs; 5. teachings (religions); 6. etiquette; 7. eating and drinking; 8. clothing; 9. jewelry [and] money; 10. mountains, rivers, kingdoms, cities, [and] people.

The predominance of Xuanzang's "Record" is not only reflected in its use as a source for official history writing, but also by the position it held in Chinese Buddhist historiographies. The *Fozu-tongji* 佛祖統紀, "General Records of the Buddhist Patriarchs," compiled by Zhipan 志磐 (fl. 1258–1269), lists most of the well-known Buddhist travelers before and after Xuanzang, but only mentions the records of the two famous Tang monks Xuanzang and Yijing, even omitting Faxian's travelogue.<sup>49</sup> Over time, Xuanzang's "Record"

<sup>49</sup> T.2035.464b.27ff. Xitian-qifafa 西天求法, "[On Those Who] Searched for the *Dharma* in West India." Note that Xitian is not to be taken in the literary sense, but means India (Tian) in the Western Regions (*xiyu*): 魏高貴鄉公: 沙門朱士西遊于闐, 得放光般若。晉安帝: 沙門法顯自西域, 往五天竺, 得經像, 泛南海而還。宋高祖: 曇無竭往西竺, 二十年還, 揚都譯經。○後廢帝: 沙門法獻西遊于闐, 得提婆品。○梁沙門智宣往西竺, 得梵經還。陳宣帝: 沙門智圓往西竺, 隋文帝時得梵經還。北魏孝明: 遣使者宋雲沙門法力往西天, 得梵經百七十部還。北齊後主: 沙門實暹等往西天, 得梵本還。隋文帝: 陳朝沙門智周等西竺求經還。唐太宗: 勅李義表王元策使西竺, 登耆山, 刻碑, 紀唐威德。○玄奘三藏自西天求經還, 召見詔撰西域記。○武后: 初義淨三藏自南海附舶, 往西竺求法, 至是將梵本, 寄佛逝國, 述南海寄歸傳、求法高僧傳。○玄宗: 沙門惠日往西天還, 召見說法, 賜號慈愍三藏法師。○梁太祖: 沙門智宣往西竺, 求經還, 進佛骨、梵經。○宋太祖: 沙門道圓遊五天竺還, 進舍利、梵經。○沙門行勤等應詔往西竺, 求法, 所經諸國並賜詔書, 令遣人前導。○沙門建盛自西竺還, 進貝葉梵經。○真宗: 開封府陳恕言: 沙門往西天取經者, 宜察人材。○仁宗: 沙門懷問乞往西竺, 為今上建塔於佛金剛座側。○沙門懷問、得濟、永定等自中天竺還, 進佛骨舍利、貝葉梵經、西天碑十九本。"Under the [rule] of the noble prince of the Wei, *śramaṇa* Zhu Shi[xing] traveled westward to Khotan in order to get hold of the 'Light-Emitting *Prajñā*[*pāramitā-sūtra*']'. The *śramaṇa* Faxian, [under the reign] of Jin Andi (r. 382–419), went from the Western Regions to the Five Indias in order to obtain *sūtras* and statues, sailed across the Southern Ocean and returned [to China]. [During the reign] of Song Gaozu (r. 420–422), Tanwujie went to Western India and after twenty years returned to Yangdu (Nanjing) to translate *sūtras*. – After the emperor had been dethroned, the *śramaṇa* Faxian traveled westward to Khotan to obtain the *Tipo-pin* (*Mohebanruoboluomi-hengjiatipo-pin* 摩訶般若波羅蜜伽伽提婆品, T.227.568b.7ff., translated by Kumārajīva). – The *śramaṇa* Zhixuan of the Liang [dynasty] (502–587) traveled to Western India to obtain Sanskrit *sūtras* and returned [to China]. [During the reign of] Xuandi of the Chen [dynasty] (r. 563–582), the *śramaṇa* Zhiyuan went to Western India, [and during] the time of Sui Wendi (r. 581–604), [he] obtained Sanskrit *sūtras* and returned [to China]. [During the era] Xiaoming of the Western Wei [dynasty] (r. 510–528), the envoy Song Yun [and] Fali were

overwrote most of the previous and later travelogues and other descriptions of the “Western Regions”<sup>50</sup> – presumably one of the reasons that so many of them were lost or only preserved as fragments.

The Buddhist activities in this field certainly had an impact on non-Buddhist Chinese writing on foreign regions, and I will again take India as my point of reference to briefly demonstrate this influence. As already observed for the Sui period, the new dynasty of the Tang, with its obvious imperial and expansionist ambitions, was very interested in information about the Western Regions, which first expressed itself in a period of extreme productivity of compiling the official histories of preceding dynasties with the respective ethno-geographical chapters

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dispatched to Western India to obtain Sanskrit *sūtras*, [and they] returned with 170 [texts]. [During the reign of] the last ruler of the Northern Qi (r. 565–577), the *śramaṇa* Baoxian and others went to Western India to obtain Sanskrit *sūtras* and returned [to China]. [During the reign of] Sui Wendi (r. 581–604), the *śramaṇa* Zhizhou of the court of the Chen and others searched for *sūtras* in Western India and returned [to China]. Tang Taizong ordered Li Yibiao [and] Wang Yuan[Xuan]ce on a mission to Western India, [during which they] ascended Mount Gṛdhrahakūṭa and inscribed a stone tablet commemorating the power and virtues of the Tang. – Tripiṭaka Xuanzang [went] to search for *sūtras* in Western India and returned [to China]; [he] had an audience with the emperor, [who] ordered him to compile the ‘Record of the Western Regions’. – [During the reign] of [empress] dowager Wu [Zetian] (r. 690–705), Yijing embarked on a boat from the Southern Ocean and went to Western India to search for *sūtras*, then dispatched Sanskrit to the kingdom of [Śrī] Bhoja, the ‘Record Sent Back from the Southern Ocean’ (*Nanhai-jigui[-neifa]-zhuan*) [and] the ‘Biographies of Eminent Monks Searching for the *Dharma*’ (*Qiufo-gaoseng-zhuan*). – [During the reign of] Xuanzong (r. 712–756), the *śramaṇa* Huiji went to the Five Indias and returned [to China], had an audience with the emperor to preach the *dharma*, and was bestowed with the name ‘Tripiṭaka *Dharma*-Master Compassion (Cimin)’. – [During the reign] of Liang Taizu (r. 907–923), the *śramaṇa* Zhixuan went to Western India to search for *sūtras* and returned [to China], submitting to the throne bones of the Buddha and Sanskrit *sūtras*. [During the reign of] Song Taizu (r. 960–976), the *śramaṇa* Daoyuan traveled to the Five Indias and returned [to China], submitting to the throne relics [and] Sanskrit *sūtras*. – The *śramaṇa* Xingqing and others went to Western India on imperial order to search for *sūtras* and presented imperial letters to all the kingdoms they passed through, ordering that the envoys should be guided. – The *śramaṇa* Jiancheng returned from Western India and presented to the throne Sanskrit *sūtra* manuscripts (*pattra*). – [During the rule of] Zhenzong (r. 997–1022), the governor of Kaifeng, Chen Shu, declared that *śramaṇas* going westward to fetch *sūtras* should be scrutinized with regard to their qualities. – [During the rule of] Renzong (r. 1023–1063), the *śramaṇa* Huaiwen asked [for permission] to go to Western India and to build a *stūpa* for the present emperor next to the Diamond Throne. – The *śramaṇas* Huaiwen, Deji, Yongding, and others returned from Central India and submitted to the throne Buddha bone relics, Sanskrit *sūtra* manuscripts, and nineteen inscriptions from Western India.”

**50** Such as, for instance, Daoxuan’s 道宣 (596–667) compilation *Shijia-fangzhi* 釋迦方志, [Record of the Regions of Śākya[muni]]; see Janine Nicol, “Daoxuan (c. 596–667) and the Creation of a Buddhist Sacred Geography of China: An Examination of the *Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志” (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2016).

between 622 and 650. What most of the previous dynasties had not done, namely the writing of the dynastic history of the preceding house of rulers, was promoted particularly under the second Tang emperor, Taizong, shortly after he ascended the throne in 626. I give a list of the dynastic histories compiled during this period with the high officials in charge and, if included, the chapters on the “Western Regions” and the respective countries or kingdoms.<sup>51</sup>

Compared with previous dynastic histories, we can see an increase in information about the Western Regions, however with a rather anachronistic and cumulative approach and a slightly chaotic presentation; the most extensive and latest of these works, the *Beishi*, also includes names of “obscure and otherwise unknown states and tribes.”<sup>52</sup> The *Nanshi*, then, for the first time, includes a brief description of Central India, Zhong-Tianzhu 中天竺, while the *Beishi* extends the “Western Regions” to areas that were not previously included, but only refers to South India (Nan-Tianzhu 南天竺).

It was exactly in the middle of this busy period of establishing and compiling the dynastic histories of the previous dynasties that Taizong ordered Xuanzang to write his *Datang-Xiyu-ji* when he arrived back in China in 645. His description

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51 I shall not give the complete list of Central Asian countries in each text here, but quite randomly select only those adjacent to or at the periphery of South Asia: *Chenshu* 陳書, 622–629 (636), compiled by Yao Cha 姚察 and Yao Silian 姚思廉; -. *Beiqishu* 北齊書, 627–636 (636), compiled by Li Delin 李德林 and Li Boyao 李百藥; -. *Liangshu* 梁書, 628–635 (636), compiled by Yao Cha and Yao Silian; -. *Zhoushu* 周書, 629 (636), compiled by Linghu Defen 令狐德棻: chapter 50, *Yiyu* 異域 2, has paragraphs on the Turks (Tujue 突厥), the Hephthalites (Yeda 嚙噠), the Sogdians (Sute 粟特), the Parthians (Anxi 安息), and Persia (Bosi 波斯), but nothing on India. *Suishu* 隋書, 629–636 (636), compiled by Wei Zheng 魏徵: chapter 83, *Xiyu* 西域, has paragraphs on the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾, Tokharistan (Tuhuoluo 吐火羅), the Hephthalites (Yida 挹怛), and Persia (Bosi 波斯), and in chapter 84, *Beidi* 北狄 on the Turks (Tujue 突厥) and the Western Turks (Xi-Tujue 西突厥), but nothing on India. *Jinshu* 晉書, 644 (646), compiled by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡: chapter 67, *Siyi-zhuan* 四夷傳, *Xirong* 西戎, has paragraphs on the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾, Ferghana (Dayuan 大宛), and Syria/Byzantium (Daqin 大秦), but nothing on India. *Nanshi* 南史, 630–650 (659), compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽: *Yimo* 1 夷貊上, aside from Southeast Asian countries, contains paragraphs on Zhong-Tianzhu 中天竺 (Central India), Tianzhu-Jiapili 天竺迦毗黎 (India-Kapila[vastu?]), and Shizi 師子 (Śiṃha[ladvīpa] = Śrī Lāṅkā). *Beishi* 北史, 630–650 (659), compiled by Li Yanshou: chapter 97, *Xiyu* 西域, contains a long list of Central Asian countries/kingdoms, paragraphs on the Sogdians (Sute 粟特), Persia (Bosi 波斯), the territories of the five *yabghus* (*xihou* 翕侯) in Bactria and adjacent regions, Syria/Byzantium (Daqin 大秦), Jibin 罽賓 (in this context Kāpiśi), Tokharistan (mentioned twice, once as Tuhuluo 吐呼羅 [sic] and later as Tuhuoluo 吐火羅), South India (Nan-Tianzhu 南天竺), the Hephthalites (Yeda 嚙噠), Udyāna/Swāt (Wuchang 烏菴), Gandhāra (Gantuo 乾陀 [sic]), and Bāmiyān (Yinhan 嚙汗). On the dynastic histories, see Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, rev. ed., Harvard Yenching Institute Monograph Series 52 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 503–504.

52 Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World*, 2.

of the “Western Regions” that comprised India became the standard model for generations, and while it may already have influenced the compilers of the *Nanshi* and the *Beishi* in their decision to include India, it definitely left its traces in the extensive list of “Western Regions” in the *Beishi*.

By the time of the compilation of the Older Tang History (*Jiu-Tangshu* 舊唐書), compiled between 940 and 945 under the supervision of Liu Ju 劉昫 (888–947), Xuanzang’s description of India already had made such a great impact that the record can be seen to rely heavily on the information given in the *Xiyu-ji*,<sup>53</sup> but obviously also contains information gained from other sources:

The kingdom of India (Tianzhu 天竺) is the kingdom of Shendu 身毒 of the Han [dynasty], also called “the land of the *brāhmaṇa*” (*bolouomen* 婆羅門). Having the “Onion Mountains” (Karakorum-Pamir) to its northwest, it encompasses more than thirty thousand *li*. It is divided into the Five Indias, the first one called Central India, the second East India, the third South India, the fourth West India, [and] the fifth North India. Each region [has a circumference of] several thousand *li*, [and] there are several hundreds of cities and towns. South India adjoins the Great Ocean; North India extends to the “Snow Mountains” (Himālaya), [and] there are mountains everywhere, forming a wall; in southern direction, it faces one valley, which forms the gateway to the kingdom;<sup>54</sup> East India borders the Great Ocean to the east and has common borders with Fu’nan (扶南: South Vietnam) and Linyi (Central Vietnam); West India is connected with Jibin (罽賓, here Kāpiśi) and Persia; Central India is linked with all the [other] four Indias; its capital has a circumference of more than seventy *li*, and in the north [it] is adjacent to the river Chanlian (Nairāñjanā). It is said that formerly there was a *brāhmaṇa*, the leader of a thousand followers, [who] practiced under a tree; the tree goddess came down, and they finally became husband and wife. A palace appeared miraculously, full of young servants. Thereupon [the *brāhmaṇa*] had a hundred deities build a city to rule over it, and after one day it was accomplished. Later, King Aśoka again had a ghost pile up rocks into a palace and chisel patterns and statues [out of the rocks]. No human would have had the power to do this. King Aśoka rather ruled with terror, established the punishment of burning, and called [the place] “Hell”; nowadays, traces of it are still visible. The kings of Central India are of the class of the *qilidie* (乞利啞) clans, also called *chali* 刹利 clans;<sup>55</sup> [they] have ruled this kingdom for generations, [and] there has been no regicide. This land is humid and hot, [and] the rice matures four [times] a year; there are diamonds similar to amethysts [that] do not melt [even if one] tempers them a hundred times, [but one] can cut jade with it. There is also incense like sandal[wood]

53 Due to lack of space, I am not able to go into a detailed analysis of the text and its relation to the *Xiyu-ji*, and some notes may suffice here to demonstrate how the text was compiled. Detailed information and discussion will be given in my translation and commentary of the second fascicle of the *Xiyu-ji* (publication planned for 2021).

54 This is taken from the description of Kaśmīr and transferred to North India as a whole.

55 This is a wrong combination of details taken from Xuanzang: *chali* is an older form of the term for *kṣatriya*, for which Xuanzang suggests *chadili* 刹帝利 (T.2087.877b.4f.); *qilidie* 乞利啞 seems to be a corruption of Xuanzang’s *qiliduo* 訖利多 / \**kit-lʰ-ta*, the name of a previous ruling dynasty of Kaśmīr, the Kṛita (T.2087.886b.9f. et passim).



(*zhantan* 旃檀) [or] turmeric (*yujin* 郁金); because [the trade] goes through Daqin (大秦: Syria-Byzantium), its treasures [are] sometimes [traded] all the way to Fu'nan [and] Jiaozhi (交趾: Northern Vietnam).<sup>56</sup> The people are wealthy and happy, [and their] customs are not recorded. Those who cultivate the royal land contribute to the fecundity [of it]. [People] use cowry as currency. The people have deep-set eyes, long noses, and [when they] pay the ultimate respect, [they] lick the feet and rub the heels [of the high person]. [In each] household, there are some musicians and dancers. The king and the high officials mostly dress in brocade and felt; [they] twist the [hair on their crest and] cut the rest of the hair to a curl. The common people all walk barefoot, [and their] clothes [are] of a pure white [color]. Only the members of the caste of the *brahmācārīn* drape a white cotton [shawl around their shoulders] to distinguish themselves [from the others]. When [someone] dies, [they] either burn the corpse and collect the ashes and make a *stūpa* (*futu* 浮圖) [for it], expose [the corpse] in an open field to give it to the wild animals, or [they] let it flow in the river to feed the fish and turtles. They do not have funeral epitaphs. Those who plot a rebellion are killed secretly; minor criminal offenses [are punished by] a monetary fine to atone for one's crime. For impious behavior (*buxiao* 不孝), hands and feet are cut off, ears and nose are severed, [and the perpetrators] are sent off [into exile] outside of the border.<sup>57</sup> They have writing and are skilled in astronomy and calendrical arithmetic. The people of this [land] all study the "Siddham Chapter" (*Xitan-zhang* 悉曇章), [which] is said to be the way of god Brahmā. To [compose] records, [they] write on the leaves of the *aśvattha* tree (*beiduo-shu* 貝多樹). [They] do not kill living beings, [and] everywhere in the kingdom, there are ancient traces of the Buddha.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this obvious dependence on Xuanzang, it is interesting to see how the compilers of the text used the vast amount of information contained in the

56 This remark seems to reflect some concern about long-distance trade between the Levant and Southeast Asia going via South Asia rather than using the Silk Road through China.

57 This description of the Indian law and penal system is a digest of Xuanzang's record in the second fascicle of the *Xiyu-ji*; see Max Deeg, "Indian Law from a Seventh Century Chinese Buddhist Perspective," *Bulletin de l'École Française de l'Extrême-Orient* 105 (2019): 19–49.

58 *Jiu-Tangshu* 198, Xirong 西戎, "Western Barbarians": 天竺國，即漢之身毒國，或云婆羅門地也。在蔥嶺西北，周三萬餘里。其中分為五天竺：其一曰中天竺，二曰東天竺，三曰南天竺，四曰西天竺，五曰北天竺。地各數千里，城邑數百。南天竺際大海，北天竺拒雪山，四周有山為壁，南面一谷，通為國門；東天竺東際大海，與扶南、林邑鄰接；西天竺與罽賓、波斯相接；中天竺據四天竺之會，其都城周回七十餘里，北臨禪連河。云昔有婆羅門領徒千人，肄業於樹下，樹神降之，遂為夫婦。宮室自然而立，僮仆甚盛。於是使役百神，築城以統之，經日而就。此後有阿育王，復役使鬼神，累石為宮闕，皆雕文刻鏤。非人力所及。阿育王頗行苟政，置砲烙之刑，謂之地獄，今城中見有其跡焉。中天竺王姓乞利咄氏，或云剌利氏，世有其國，不相篡弑。厥土卑濕暑熱，稻歲四熟，有金剛，似紫石英，百煉不銷，可以切玉。又有旃檀、郁金諸香。通於大秦，故其實物或至扶南、交趾貿易焉。百姓殷樂，俗無簿籍，耕田地者輸地利。以齒貝為貨。人皆深目長鼻。致敬極者，舐足摩踵。家有奇樂倡伎。其王與大臣多服錦罽。上為螺髻於頂，餘髮翦之使拳。俗皆徒跣。衣重白色，唯梵誌種姓披白疊以為異。死者或焚屍取灰，以為浮圖；或委之中野，以施禽獸；或流之於河，以飼魚鱉。無喪紀之文。謀反者幽殺之，小犯罰錢以贖罪。不孝則斷手刖足，截耳割鼻，放流邊外。有文字，善天文算歷之術。其人皆學《悉曇章》，云是梵天法。書於貝多樹葉以紀事。不殺生飲酒。國中往住有舊佛跡。

*Xiyu-ji* in quite a selective way: probably in order to adapt it to the established genre of Chinese historiographical writing, the *Xiyu-ji*'s heavy focus in the on all things Buddhist is given up – instead, the text mentions Brahminic ascetics (*fanzhi* 梵誌, *brahmacārin*) and the god Brahmā (Fan-tian 梵天) – and the information about Buddhism is kept to a minimum (sacred traces of the Buddha), or shifted in favor of a “traditional” focus on productivity and customs. It is striking that the *stūpa* (*futu* 浮圖) is deprived of its Buddhist symbolism and turned into a general “tomb,” and that the paradigmatic Buddhist king Aśoka is presented only as a despotic ruler, without mentioning his later conversion and pro-Buddhist actions.

It is the nature of the Buddhist travelogues to focus on the Buddhist sacred landscape and to give only the most necessary information about the natural, social, political, and economic conditions of the respective regions. How much information is given seems to depend on the audience: while travelers like Faxian and Huichao wrote for a Buddhist readership and could restrict the more secular data to a minimum, authors like Song Yun and Xuanzang, as well as writers collating information about India and other “Western Regions” from different sources without having traveled themselves, had to provide more such data due to the semiofficial or official nature of their reports. Buddhist travelogues had a “reassuring” function for Chinese Buddhists: despite the fact that most of them lived in what the Buddhist worldview would call an inferior “borderland,” they were part of a Buddhist sacred geography with its center in Central India. India was thus the “other,” but at the same time, it was a defining part of their own position in a soteriologically meaningful world. Later secular historiographers then used the material and the information that they found in the Buddhist travelogues, but were less interested in the specific Buddhist and religious features of these records; they reduced the Buddhist way of describing “the own other” to a mere description of the (Indian) other and thereby, in a way, turned the description back into a traditional Chinese secular mode of recording.

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Emmanuel Francis

# Imperial Languages and Public Writings in Tamil South India: A Bird's-Eye View in the *Very Longue Durée*

In North India, the Gupta period (ca 320–550 CE) witnessed the spread of Sanskrit as the expressive language of political inscriptions and the final displacement of the Prakrit languages in this capacity in the framework of what Pollock has called the Sanskrit cosmopolis.<sup>1</sup> This shift toward Sanskrit – for aesthetic rather than religious reasons, according to Pollock, who has also argued that Sanskrit had linguistic stability and had been secularized – also took place very early in South India, notably in Āndhra. It is from Āndhra that the oldest known copper-plate grant survives: the Prakrit Patagandigudem plates, which begin with a Sanskrit formula.<sup>2</sup> Āndhra is also significant as the region in which the Pallavas rulers first find mention. The Pallavas quickly shift from the use of Prakrit charters in favor of Sanskrit charters around the middle of the fourth century CE. Later, when the dynasty is reestablished in the north of present-day Tamil Nadu (around 550 CE), we find bilingual charters composed in both Sanskrit and Tamil.

The relocation of the Pallava polity to the northern portion of the Tamilakam (“the Tamil space”), and the linguistic dynamics that this geographic shift entailed, provide a useful introduction to the subject of this paper. I will look – in the very *longue durée*, from ca. 550 CE to the early nineteenth century CE – at the languages used in political expressions intended for public viewing (that is, in copper-plate and stone inscriptions) in the Tamil South, a region that experienced the coexistence and cross-fertilization of two rich literary and intellectual traditions, one expressed in Tamil, the other in Sanskrit. I will first adopt a dynastic approach (§ 2), examining language use by successive dynasties of the Tamil South in their epigraphical production. I will then focus on a particular district of present-day Tamil Nadu (§ 3) and assess its epigraphical languages over a very long period. The inscriptional records presented here are thus mainly royal inscriptions, that is, inscriptions commissioned by royal figures (which is especially the case of the copper-plate grants), but nonroyal records will also be taken account, especially when they contain eulogies of kings and royal self-depictions,

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *EIAD* 55, ca. 250–300 CE.

presumably borrowed from royal records. My aim is to assess which languages were used in inscriptions in the Tamil South, at which periods, and for which reasons.

## 1 Epigraphy in the Tamil South

The Tamil South is one of the richest regions for the study of Indian inscriptions. A reasonable estimate of their quantity is 30,000 inscriptions, mostly on stone (temple walls) and copper (grants).<sup>3</sup> These were written in different languages (Sanskrit, Tamil, Maṇḍipiravālam, Telugu, etc.) and different scripts (Grantha, Siddhamāṭṛka, Tamil, Vaṭṭeḷuttu, etc.), in various constellations: most inscriptions were composed exclusively in Tamil, but a significant number of bilingual inscriptions, mainly in Tamil and Sanskrit, are also found. Unlike other regions of India in which bilingual inscriptions are found, the Tamil South is unique in that different scripts were used for Sanskrit and Tamil: Grantha and, rarely, Siddhamāṭṛka script for Sanskrit, and Tamil and Vaṭṭeḷuttu script for Tamil-language inscriptions.

The choice of language and language register often depended on the content of the record and the type of material (stone, copper, etc) to be inscribed. Typically, charters produced between the seventh and fourteenth century CE were bilingual (Sanskrit and Tamil) and diglossic, while later ones were monolingual (Sanskrit or Tamil or another southern language). The cases of diglossia – “hyperglossia,” as Pollock calls it, underlining the fact that Sanskrit was a superordinate language with respect to Tamil<sup>4</sup> – are those in which Sanskrit is used for the eulogy and Tamil for the administrative portion, or when (part of) a Tamil record written in prose or “administrative” style also contains a royal eulogy in literary and metrical Tamil (that is, *meykkīrtti*).

Often, words written in Grantha script can be found in inscriptions written mostly in Tamil language and script. For instance, it is customary to begin an inscription with the words *svasti śrī* written in Grantha. Some words are preferably written in Grantha at some periods, and later on become assimilated to Tamil orthophony and orthography. For instance, we find both *brahmadeya*

<sup>3</sup> This count excludes graffiti and inscriptions on potsherds. For a table of the distribution of Tamil inscriptions, see Y. Subbarayalu, “Tamil Epigraphy Past and Present,” in *Negotiations with the Past: Classical Tamil in Contemporary Tamil*, eds. M. Kannan & C. Mena (Pondicherry: IFP, 2006), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, 50 and 118.

(Grantha) and *piramateyam* (Tamil script, i.e. *piramatēyam*), sometimes in the same inscription. I would not however describe such inscriptions in terms of epigraphic Maṇḍipravāḷam (mixing of Sanskrit and Tamil language): the Sanskrit words are not numerous and are typically used to refer to normative concepts or categories of the cosmopolitan order (for instance, *brahmadeya* to designate a grant to Brahmins or *maṇḍapa* to designate an architectural element); in other words, Sanskrit and Tamil here are again in a diglossic relationship.<sup>5</sup> Other inscriptions (or parts of inscriptions), of which I will present some examples below, illustrate what I would call epigraphic Maṇḍipravāḷam proper, since in these inscriptions, the Sanskrit and Tamil languages are used complementarily in the same function.

I will also show that the inscriptions commissioned by major and minor dynasties<sup>6</sup> in the Tamil area evince various strategies of public communication, which relied on the Sanskrit and/or Tamil literary traditions. Various genres of eulogy were produced: Sanskrit *praśastis* proper, in the form of a genealogy; Tamil *meṅkīrttis*, focused on the achievements of a single ruler; *birudāvalis* or lists of *birudas* or *biruda* titulature, that is, strings of glorifying sobriquets of the king. I will illustrate my points with inscriptions drawn from the corpora of the Pallavas, Pāṇḍyas, Muttaraiyars, Irukkuvēḷs, Cōlas, Kāṭavarāyars, Vijayanagara kings, Nāyakas, and Teṅkāci Pāṇḍyas. I have no ambition to be exhaustive here, as I have dealt extensively with the Pallava and Cōla inscriptions elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

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5 For the conceptualization of Sanskrit loanwords as a diglossic phenomenon, see Timothy Lubin, “Legal Diglossia: Modeling Discursive Practices in Premodern Indic Law,” in *Bilingual Discourse and Cross-Cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India*, eds. Whitney Cox and Vincenzo Vergiani (Pondicherry: IFP & EFEQ, 2013).

6 Major dynasties are “imperial” dynasties, such as the Pallavas and the Cōlas, that were the dominant dynasties of their time in the Tamil South and played a transregional role. Minor dynasties are royal lineages, such as the Muttaraiyars, who were subordinate to the major dynasties of their time.

7 I will thus refrain from repeating what I have already published elsewhere, but will refer to earlier publications. Illustrations have been selected in order to call attention to graphic, and sometimes calligraphic, aspects of royal inscriptions, which, while extraordinary, are beyond the scope of the present paper. On calligraphy, see Richard Salomon, “Calligraphy in Pre-Islamic India,” in *Indian Epigraphy: Its Bearing on the History of Art*, eds. Frederick M. Asher and G.S. Gai (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1985); on the shell script (*śaṅkhalipi*), see, among many other publications, Richard Salomon, “A Recent Claim to Decipherment of the ‘Shell Script,’” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 2 (1987): 313–15.



## 2 Dynastic Approach

### 2.1 Pallava Charters (ca. 300 to 900 CE)

The Pallava inscriptions from ca. 300 to 350 CE (one pillar inscription and four copper-plate charters) are in Prakrit, with minimal portions in Sanskrit (see Table 1).<sup>8</sup> For the period of ca. 350 to 550 CE, we have from the Pallavas only copper-plate grants, written entirely in Sanskrit. As the Pallavas relocate to the north of present-day Tamil Nadu, around 550 CE, we start to find bilingual copper-plate grants in Sanskrit and Tamil. The first bilingual diglossic Sanskrit-Tamil copper plates in the Tamil South are the Paḷḷaṅ Kōyil copper plates.<sup>9</sup> Sanskrit is used for the *praśasti* of the first portion of the grant, while Tamil is used for the documentary or administrative portion that follows. We thus have here bilingual, diglossic Sanskrit and Tamil copper-plate grants.

**Table 1:** Pallava copper plates (ca. 300–900 CE).

	ca. 300–350 CE (4 sets)	ca. 350–550 CE (15 sets)	ca. 550–900 CE (15 sets)
Prakrit	4 sets (Āndhra)		
Sanskrit		14 sets (Āndhra) 1 set (Tamil South)	2 sets (Āndhra)
Sanskrit & Tamil			13 sets (Tamil South)

### 2.2 Pallava Stone Inscriptions (ca. 550 to 900 CE)

The rock-cut caves and structural temples that the Pallavas had excavated and completed between the late sixth and late seventh century CE bear foundation

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed presentation of the Pallava-period epigraphic corpus, see Emmanuel Francis, *Le discours royal dans l'Inde du Sud ancienne: Monuments et inscriptions pallava (IV<sup>e</sup> me–IX<sup>e</sup>me siècles)*, vol. 1, *Introduction et sources* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2013), 61–75.

<sup>9</sup> T. N. Subramaniam, “Paḷḷaṅkōvil Jaina Copper-plate Grant of Early Pallava Period,” *Transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India 1958–1959* (1959).

inscriptions in Sanskrit.<sup>10</sup> The Pallava kings were also fond of lists of *birudas*, that is, glorifying sobriquets extolling their fame. For example, the ruler Mahendravarman I (ca. 600–625) has *birudas* in several languages: Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Pillar found in the Ekambaranātheśvara temple, Kāñcīpuram, ca. 600 CE (today kept at the entrance of the Chennai Government Museum). Photo: E. Francis, 2017.

Narasimhavarman II Rājasimha (ca. 700–725 CE) has *birudas* in Sanskrit only, but in four different scripts (Figure 2): two varieties of Grantha and two varieties of Siddhamātṛka (one extremely ornamental) (Figure 3).

In the ninth century CE, we notice a modest uptick in the use of Tamil in royal Pallava records other than bilingual diglossic charters and the general rise of

<sup>10</sup> See Francis, *Le discours royal*, 1:68–69; Emmanuel Francis, *Le discours royal dans l'Inde du Sud ancienne: Monuments et inscriptions pallava (IV<sup>e</sup>me–IX<sup>e</sup>me siècles)*, vol. 2, *Mythes dynastiques et éloges royaux* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2017), 511ff., 537ff., 584ff.



**Figure 2:** Base of one of the miniature temples (no. 7) of the *prakāra* of the Kailāsanātha temple, Kāñcīpuram, ca. 700–725 CE. Photo: E. Francis, 2008.

Tamil language as a politically expressive medium,<sup>11</sup> but there are earlier examples of smaller ruling lineages (such as the Muttaraiyars, below) that drew from the Tamil literary tradition in their epigraphic production before the Pallavas did.<sup>12</sup>

The royal Pallava corpus also contains other biscript or digraphic inscriptions, such as that found on the rock to the left and right of the entrance of a seventh-century CE cave at Cāḷuvaṅ Kuppam, near Māmallapuram (Figure 4).

It is possible that both of these inscriptions are part of a later intervention in the monument – perhaps a cave from the first half of seventh century CE may have been renovated at the beginning of the eighth century CE or slightly

<sup>11</sup> See Francis, *Le discours royal*, 1:67 and 2:648.

<sup>12</sup> On epigraphic praise in Tamil language during the Pallava period, see Emmanuel Francis, “Praising the King in Tamil during the Pallava Period,” in *Bilingual Discourse and Cross-Cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India*, eds. Whitney Cox and Vincenzo Vergiani (Pondicherry: IFP & EFEO, 2013), 305–409.



**Figure 3:** Examples of inscriptions on the bases of the miniature temples of the *prākāra* of the Kailāsanātha temple, Kāñcīpuram, ca. 700–725 CE. From top to bottom: Siddhamātṛka from miniature temple no. 3; two varieties of Grantha from miniature temple no. 7; and ornate Siddhamātṛka from miniature temple no. 17. Photos: E. Francis, 2008.



**Figure 4:** Cāluvaṇ Kuppam, Atiraṇacaṇḍeśvara cave, ca. 650–725 CE. From left to right: Sanskrit inscription in Grantha script, left of entrance; general view of the cave; Sanskrit inscription in Siddhamātṛka script, right of entrance. Photos: E. Francis, 2009, 2007, 2009.

earlier. On the left side of the entry to the cave, the visitor finds Sanskrit stanzas engraved in Grantha script, while on the right side, a nearly identical Sanskrit text is found, but written in a different, Siddhamātrka-like script (Figure 5).<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 5:** The term *abhiṣeka-jalāpūrṇe* (first *pāda* of stanza 2), Cāḷuvan Kuppam, Atiraṇacaṇḍeśvara cave, ca. 700 CE. Left: in Grantha script, on the rock at the left of the entrance of the cave. Right: in Siddhamātrka script, on the rock at the right of the entrance of the cave. Photos: E. Francis, 2009, and processed facsimiles published in *EI* 10 (1909–10).

This Pallava eulogy from Cāḷuvan Kuppam, as well as the above-mentioned four-row list of *birudas* at the Kailāsanātha temple, are part of a small corpus of royal inscriptions from South India, dated to the seventh and eighth centuries CE, that consists in paired texts, engraved on the same support or on different but complementary positions at the same temple or site. The paired inscriptions, in Sanskrit, feature more or less the same text, while the scripts are markedly different. One script is of a North Indian style – described in earlier scholarship as Nāgarī, though it might be preferable to label it Siddhamātrka, as the Nāgarī script is not attested before the second half of the ninth century CE<sup>14</sup> – while the other is a refined and ornamental variety of the regional South Indian script. Besides the above examples from the capital and ceremonial cities of the Pallavas (Māmallapuram and Kāñcīpuram) in present-day Tamil Nadu, we also find other instances from the same period under the Western Cāḷukyas at Paṭṭadakal in present-day Karnataka.<sup>15</sup> The Pallavas and the Cāḷukyas both

<sup>13</sup> The inscription on the left side of the entrance is longer than its counterpart on the right side of the entrance, as two further Sanskrit lines in Grantha script were added by another hand.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39–41.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent assessment of the Paṭṭadakal biscript inscribed pillar, see Elizabeth A. Cecil and Peter C. Bisschop, “Columns in Context: Venerable Monuments and Landscapes of Memory in Early India,” in *History of Religions* 58.4 (2019): 355–403. For late ninth-century CE examples of biscript inscriptions from Cambodia, see Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, “Les

claimed the status of universal sovereign at that period; these bicult inscriptions participate visually in this rivalry, as the command of the cosmopolitan Sanskrit in two different scripts – one indexing the local and South Indian context, the other the North Indian homeland of translocal Sanskrit – supported their claim for authority and for the status of universal ruler of India.

### 2.3 Early Pāṇḍyas (ca. 750 to 900 CE)

The early Pāṇḍyas also issued copper-plate grants. These were bilingual Sanskrit and Tamil inscriptions like the Pallava copper-plate grants, but unlike their Pallava counterparts, their Tamil portions also contain a versified eulogy of the donor and his family.<sup>16</sup> These early Pāṇḍya plates, with their dichotomy between the Sanskrit eulogy and the Tamil administrative section, are thus diglossic like the Pallava grants. At the same time, however, the Tamil language, like Sanskrit, was also used for poetic praise. So while the same diglossia – that is, between the Sanskrit eulogy and the Tamil administrative section – operates here as in the Pallava grants, the novelty is that the first part of the Tamil portion has the same eulogistic function as the Sanskrit *praśasti* that precedes it. This eulogistic Tamil portion even adopts the conventions of the Sanskrit *praśasti* (for instance, the genealogical format). It thus appears as an example of the larger process of vernacularization that Pollock traces in his work – that is, the vernacular takes the Sanskrit literary tradition as its model.

We also find *biruda* eulogies in these Pāṇḍya charters, as in the Tamil section of the early Pāṇḍya Vēlvikkuṭi plates (second half of the eighth century CE), where the king Neṭuñcaṭaiyaṇ is praised with a string of *birudas*, most of them Sanskrit loanwords in Grantha – marked with the Tamil third-person singular suffix *-aṇ*, Grantha-ized as *n* – as well as some *birudas* in Tamil.<sup>17</sup> This is an instance of epigraphic Maṇippiravaḷam proper, i.e. the mixing of Sanskrit and Tamil, where both languages have the same function.

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Yaçodharâçrama, marqueurs d'empire et bornes sacrées – Conformité et spécificité des stèles digraphiques khmères de la région de Vat Phu,” *BEFEO* 97–98 (2010–2011), 331–55.

<sup>16</sup> For examples of early Pāṇḍya plates containing a Sanskrit *praśasti* followed by a Tamil metrical eulogy, see *IEP* 7, 11, 16, 61, 79, 90.

<sup>17</sup> See Emmanuel Francis, “Multilingualism in Indian Inscriptions: With Special Reference to Inscriptions of the Tamil Area,” in *Aspects of Multilingualism in South India*, eds. G. Ciotti & E. MacCann (Pondicherry: EFEO & IFP, forthcoming).



The early Pāṇḍya corpus comprises other (rare) instances of epigraphic Maṅgipiravāḷam, such as on a slab found in the bed of the river Vaikai (Figure 6).<sup>18</sup> Two different scripts are used: Vaṭṭeḷuttu for Tamil, Grantha for Sanskrit, thus Sanskrit and Tamil are intermingled the same way as in the Maṅgipiravāḷam of the medieval Vaiṣṇava commentaries and Kerala Maṅgipiravāḷam.<sup>19</sup> Both languages are on a par, without any diglossic relationship, equally contributing to the shared purpose of praising.



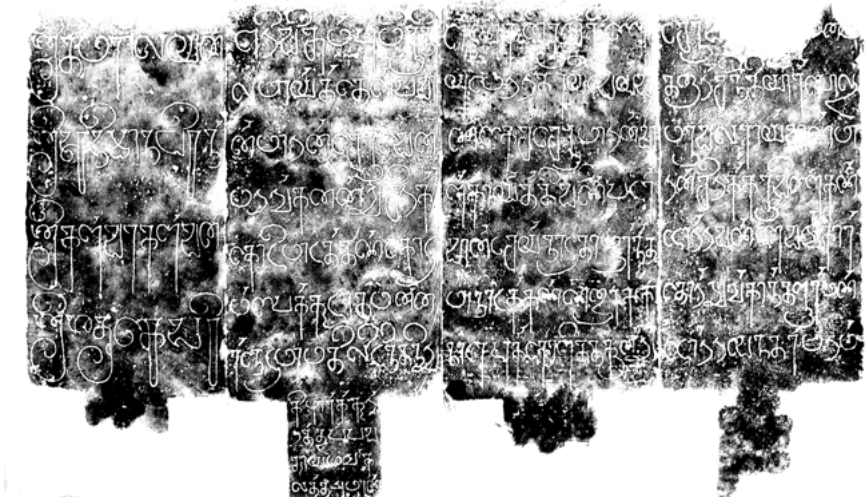
Figure 6: Vaikai river bed inscription, eighth (?) century CE. Photo: Babu N. Ramaswamy, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> EI 38, no. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Kerala Maṅgipiravāḷam, as defined in the *Lilātilakam* of the late fourteenth century CE, is a literary, poetic, and metrical language mixing Keraḷabhāṣā, i.e. early Malayalam, and Sanskrit.

## 2.4 The Muttaraiyars (Eighth Century CE)

Minor dynasties in the Tamil South show other types of inscriptions and eulogies. For instance, in Centalai, four pillars, each engraved on their square upper sections, yield a total of four *biruda* lists and twenty-four Tamil stanzas glorifying the Muttaraiyar kings (Figure 7).<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 7:** Pillar III, upper portion, Mīṇāṭcīcuntaresvarar temple, Centalai, eighth (?) century CE. From left to right: *biruda* list and three stanzas. Estampage: E. Francis, 2013.

While the Tamil poems in Centalai show that Tamil language, on its own, has the same capacity for praise as Sanskrit, the *biruda* lists are bilingual, with alternating *birudas* in Sanskrit and Tamil. Interestingly, one Tamil *biruda* (*śrikaḷvarakaḷvan*) is found written not only in Tamil script, but also in Grantha, a script normally reserved for Sanskrit.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *EI* 13, no. 10, tentatively dated to the eighth century CE. See Francis, “Praising the King.” Due to later construction, only 29 of the 32 inscriptions are accessible. Besides the *biruda* lists and the stanzas, there is a prose inscription introducing the lineage of the Muttaraiyar kings.

<sup>21</sup> See Francis, “Multilingualism in Indian Inscriptions.”



## 2.5 The Cōlas (Tenth to Thirteenth Century CE)

Under the Cōlas, we find bilingual (Sanskrit and Tamil), diglossic royal copper-plate charters similar to those of the late Pallavas. In the Cōla period, not only did kings issue plates, but also, for instance, temple authorities such as that of the Tirukkaḷar temple;<sup>22</sup> note, however, that the Tirukkaḷar plates were written entirely in Tamil and are not grants or charters proper, but list the property of the temple.<sup>23</sup>

As for Cōla-period stone inscriptions, those in Sanskrit are greatly outnumbered by their Tamil counterparts. Tamil stone inscriptions incorporate expressive Tamil in the form of *meykkīrttis*. One example is the programmatic inscription of the whole epigraphic corpus of the great temple that Rājarāja I had built at Tanjore at the beginning of the eleventh century CE (Figure 8).<sup>24</sup> In this inscription, engraved on the base of the temple, Rājarāja I orders that a list of his gifts and those of his close relatives be engraved on the temple. The inscription starts with a Sanskrit verse stating that what follows is an order of Rājarāja I. Then comes the *meykkīrtti* of Rājarāja I – that is, his eulogy in metrical Tamil – and then the content of the royal order in Tamil (as the reported speech of the king), followed by the list of donated items.

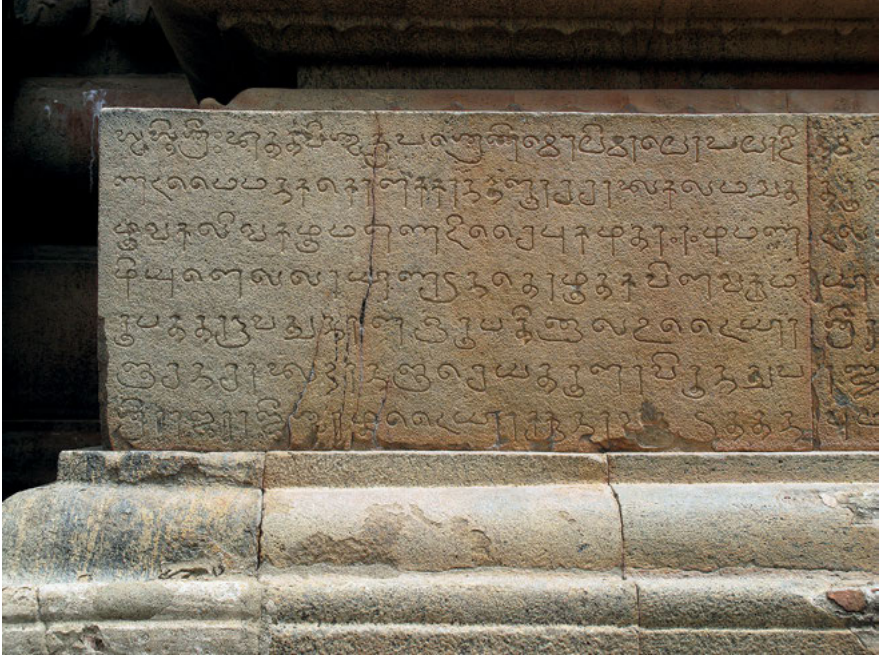
The great innovation of the Cōla period under Rājarāja I is the *meykkīrtti*, the metrical Tamil eulogy of the ruling king that is found as a preamble to hundreds of Tamil inscriptions, royal and nonroyal, in Tamil Nadu and beyond. *Meykkīrttis* are pieces of poetry that owe little to the Sanskrit literary tradition, unlike the Tamil eulogies of the early Pāṇḍya charters, which follow Sanskrit literary conventions. *Meykkīrttis* definitely do not constitute examples of vernacularization in the Pollockian sense. They are not, for instance, in the form of a genealogy and do not include Sanskrit words in Grantha.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See *SII* 3, nos. 207–211, i.e. five sets of copper plates dated between 1030 and 1207 CE.

<sup>23</sup> For a study and examples of Cōla copper-plate inscriptions, see Emmanuel Francis, “Cōla Copper Plates (10th–13th century): Languages and Issuers,” in *Whispering of Inscriptions: South Indian Epigraphy and Art History: Papers from an International Symposium in Memory of Professor Noboru Karashima*, eds. A. Murugaiyan and E. Parlier-Renault (Oxford: Indica et Buddhica Publishers, forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> *SII* 2, no. 1.

<sup>25</sup> On the genre of *meykkīrtti*, see Emmanuel Francis & Charlotte Schmid, “Preface,” in *Pondicherry Inscriptions: Part II. Translation, Appendices, Glossary and Phrases by Dr. G. Vijayavenugopal* (Pondicherry: IFP & EFEO, 2010); Emmanuel Francis, “Pierres & inscriptions. Usages royaux et locaux dans le Sud tamoul (VIIe–XIIIe siècles),” in *Rājamaṇḍala: dans le cercle des rois. La société de cour comme paradigme en Inde*, eds. E. Francis and R. Rousseleau (Paris: EHESS Éditions, forthcoming).



**Figure 8:** Tanjore, inscription of Rājarāja I Cōla, early eleventh century CE. Photo: E. Francis, 2008.

## 2.6 The Kāṭavarāyars (Late Twelfth to Thirteenth Century CE)

The end of the Cōla period saw the emergence of several would-be kings, such as the Kāṭavarāyars Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I and Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ II, who claimed to be heirs of the Pallavas. A late-twelfth-century CE epigraphic poem praises several of the Kāṭavarāyars over eleven Tamil stanzas interspersed with prose.<sup>26</sup> On Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I, we find Tamil and Sanskrit eulogies on stone inscriptions, some bilingual. For instance, at Vailūr,<sup>27</sup> a five-verse Tamil eulogy of Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ comes after a short prose passage that is also found, however

<sup>26</sup> This poem is found twice, at Vṛddhācalam (*SII* 12, no. 263) and at Tiruveṅṅainallūr (*SII* 12, no. 264). See Leslie Orr, “Chiefly Queens: Local Royal Women as Temple Patrons in the Late Chola Period,” in *The Archaeology of Bhakti: Royal Bhakti, Local Bhakti*, eds. E. Francis & C. Schmid (Pondichéry: IFP & EFEO, 2016), 404.

<sup>27</sup> *EI* 23, no. 27 = *SII* 12, no. 128.

fragmentary, at Tiruvaṅṅāmalai.<sup>28</sup> Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I is described as victorious over the Cōla king at Teḷḷāru and is addressed as Avaṇinārāyaṇaṅ, Kāṭavaṅ, Nṛpātuṅgaṅ, king of Mallai. Such a description makes him the heir of the Pallavas and provides a parallel with the depiction of the Pallava Nandivarman III (ca. 850 to 860 CE) in the *Nantikkalampakam*, a ninth-century CE Pallava court poem praising Nandivarman III.<sup>29</sup> On Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ II, there is a lengthy twelve-verse Sanskrit eulogy written in Grantha script side by side with identical versions in Telugu and in Nāgarī scripts.<sup>30</sup> We thus have here a rare case of a trigraphic eulogy, with the same text engraved three times and in three different scripts.

## 2.7 The Bāṇas (ca. 850 to 1400 CE)

Other would-be kings, appearing in the historical records earlier than the Kāṭavarāyars and remaining in later times, are the Bāṇas.<sup>31</sup> Early Bāṇas (ninth century CE) are known from Tamil records dated to the regnal years of Pallava kings, some of which contain eulogistic or titulature-related phrases in Sanskrit in Grantha script.<sup>32</sup> From the same period, there recently surfaced an exceptional dedicatory inscription in Sanskrit at Taccūr: the inscribed slab, possibly part of a staircase and found along with other sculptures, records the foundation of

<sup>28</sup> TAM 189, line 1.

<sup>29</sup> On the *Nantikkalampakam*, see Francis, *Le discours royal*, 2:701ff. Further inscriptions praising Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I are: a lengthy Tamil eulogy of Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I (TAM 208 = *SII* 8, no. 69); a long string of Sanskrit *birudas* at the beginning of an inscription (*SII* 12, no. 120); a Tamil eulogy in six verses (*SII* 12, no. 125); and a record of his benefactions, which starts in Tamil and ends in Sanskrit (*SII* 12, no. 126). Leslie Orr has pointed out to me that other Tamil verses praising a Pallavarkōṅ are found at Karantai (*ARE* 1939–42, Appendix B [1939–40], nos. 140 and 142). This Pallavarkōṅ seems to be Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I, since he is described as victorious at Teḷḷāru in one of the records. Kōpperuñciṅkaṅ I is also probably the Kāṭava king praised in three Tamil verses at Tirukkaṭaiyūr (*SII* 12, no. 265) and described as the vanquisher of the Cōla king.

<sup>30</sup> *SII* 12, no. 247 and *ARE* 1905–06, Appendix B (1905), nos. 197 and 202.

<sup>31</sup> My information about these later Bāṇa inscriptions derives mostly from Leslie Orr, “The Bhakti of the Bāṇas,” in *Clio and Her Descendants: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat*, ed. M. V. Devadevan (New Delhi: Primus Publications, 2018). See also Orr, “Chiefly Queens” and Leslie Orr, “Women and the Gift in Medieval South India,” in *Women, Religion, and the Gift: An Abundance of Riches*, ed. M. Joy (Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> See *SII* 3, nos. 42ff. (Tiruvallam) and *EI* 11, no. 22 (Guḍimallam). Sanskrit formulaic phrases are found, e.g., in *SII* 3, no. 42 (the Bāṇa king is involved in the transaction, but does not seem to be the direct commissioner of the inscription) and in *EI* 11, no. 22D. See *SII* 22, no. 86 for a variant formulaic phrase in an inscription dated to year 26 of Rājarāja I Cōla (1011/2 CE).

the Dayāvakeśvaragṛha by Satī, the daughter of the Bāṇa king Viṣṇu and the spouse of king Purodhaḥpati, whose lineage is not mentioned.

In addition, we have two sets of copper plates issued by Vikramāditya II (ca. first half of the tenth century CE).<sup>33</sup> The Guḍimallam plates<sup>34</sup> are almost entirely in Sanskrit: they provide, in Sanskrit, the genealogy of the Bāṇas, followed by a statement of the recorded transaction, which is the confirmation of a land grant to Brahmins (lines 1–53). The Tamil portion (lines 53–54) consists in one short sentence stating the revenue assessment (Tamil *puravu*) of the village granted. The Utayēntiram plates<sup>35</sup> are entirely in Sanskrit but are incomplete: we also find here a genealogy of the Bāṇas and the donation is likewise a land grant to Brahmins. The Utayēntiram plates might have ended with a Tamil portion. The set contains four plates, but one is an “odd plate,” also incomplete and in Sanskrit, with verses identical to those found in the Guḍimallam plates, followed by Sanskrit prose. As put forward by Leslie Orr,<sup>36</sup> the Sanskrit is used for documentary purposes here, but unlike the Tamil of the administrative portions of bilingual plates, I would argue, as the focus here is on the eligibility of the recipient(s) of the grant rather than other details, such as the obligations and services owed to the recipient(s) by local people.<sup>37</sup>

On the later Bāṇas, whose connection with the earlier Bāṇas might be fictive, we also find some interesting stone inscriptions. For instance, discrete Tamil and Sanskrit metrical eulogies of the chief or magnate named Vāṇakōvaraiyar Poṅṅparappiṇāṇ Rājārājatēvaṇ, aka Makātēcaṇ (late twelfth and early thirteenth century CE), are found in the Tiruvaṅṅāmalai, Pudukkottai, and Madurai regions, as listed in Table 2.

<sup>33</sup> Another set has long been considered as Bāṇa, but is in fact more properly Cōḷa. See Emmanuel Francis, “Cōḷa Copper Plates (10th–13th century): Languages and Issuers” (forthcoming). Bāṇa copper-plate grants are known beyond the Tamil South, in Karnataka: the Beḷkere grant, in Sanskrit and Kannaḍa, dated to the third year of Vṛddharāja (*ARE* 1962–63, Appendix A, no. 42 = *DLCPI* 1, no. 11) and the Sanskrit Muḍyanūr plates, dated to the twenty-third year of Malladeva Nandivarman and, anachronistically, to the Śaka year 261 (= 339–340 CE). See B. Lewis Rice, “Mudyanur Plates of Saka 261 of the Bana King Malladeva-Nandivarman,” *Indian Antiquary* 15 (June 1886): 172–177.

<sup>34</sup> *EI* 17, no. 1, from present-day Andhra Pradesh, very close to present-day Tamil Nadu.

<sup>35</sup> *EI* 3, no. 13, from the northern part of present-day Tamil Nadu.

<sup>36</sup> See Leslie Orr, “Tamil and Sanskrit in the Medieval Epigraphical Context,” in *Passages: Relationships Between Tamil and Sanskrit*, eds. M. Kannan & J. Clare (Pondicherry: IFP, 2009), 102, note 12, and Leslie Orr, “Words for Worship: Tamil and Sanskrit in Medieval Temple Inscriptions,” in *Bilingual Discourse and Cross-Cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India*, eds. Whitney Cox & Vincenzo Vergiani (Pondicherry: IFP & EFEO, 2013), 329.

<sup>37</sup> See Francis, “Multilingualism in Indian Inscriptions.”

**Table 2:** Eulogies (verse) of Vāṇakōvaraiyar Poṅparappiṇāṇ Rājarājatēvaṇ, aka Makātēcaṇ (late twelfth century CE).

	Sanskrit verse	Tamil verse
Arakaṇṭhanallūr	ARE 1934–35, Appendix B, no. 117	ARE 1934–35, Appendix B, no. 191
Tiruppālappantal		SII 17, no. 177
Tiruvaṇṇāmalai	TAM 214 = SII 8, no. 135 TAM 215 (same as TAM 214)	TAM 212 = SII 8, no. 97 TAM 213 = SII 8, no. 134 TAM 216 = SII 8, no. 145
Ceṅkamā		SII 7, no. 123
Nārattampūṇṭi	ARE 1924–25, Appendix B (1925), nos. 369–371 <sup>38</sup>	ARE 1924–25, Appendix B (1925), nos. 367–368, 372–374
Tiruvāṇaikkāval	ARE 1908–09, Appendix B (1909), no. 482	ARE 1939–42, Appendix B (1941–42), nos. 255–258 <sup>39</sup>
Tirupparaṅkuṇṭram	ARE 1939–42, Appendix B (1941–42), no. 247 <sup>40</sup>	
Poṅṇamarāvati		IPS 677
Kuṭumiyāmalai		SII 22, nos. 381–383, 385

We thus find more Tamil than Sanskrit verses, but interestingly, eulogies in both languages are found at five sites. Leslie Orr notes that the Bāṇa chiefs directly patronized only the temples at Arakaṇṭhanallūr, Tiruppālappantal, and Tiruvaṇṇāmalai. She further emphasizes that “the eulogies do not refer to the ruler as the patron of brāhmaṇas or temples, but instead focuses on his military prowess; only in one of the Sanskrit verses at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai<sup>41</sup> is there a brief mention of his having gilded the roof of the temple” and that “Makatecaṇ’s title Poṅparappiṇāṇ (‘he who spread gold’) presumably alludes

<sup>38</sup> Sakalavidyācakraṇvartin is mentioned as the poet in ARE 1924–25, Appendix B (1925), nos. 369 and 371.

<sup>39</sup> With these might be also considered ARE 1939–42, Appendix B (1941–42), nos. 225 and 259.

<sup>40</sup> The poet here is again Sakalavidyācakraṇvartin. ARE 1902–03, Appendix A (1902), no. 544, which alludes to the gilding of a temple by a Bāṇa chief, might also be considered here, but it is not clear whether it is verse or not.

<sup>41</sup> TAM, no. 214.

to this act of generosity.”<sup>42</sup> These eulogies are thus closer in content to *meykkīrttis* than to *praśastis*, as the latter refers to royal patronage more regularly than the former.

## 2.8 Vijayanagara Copper Plates (1336 to 1646 CE = Śaka 1258 to 1568)

Moving forward in time, let us have a look at the Tamil South after it was integrated into the Vijayanagara empire, with a focus on copper plates. In the two volumes of the *Dynastic List of Copper Plate Inscriptions Noticed in Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy (DLCP)*, 268 items are classified as Vijayanagara.<sup>43</sup> I have selected those which unequivocally concern transactions in the Tamil South<sup>44</sup> and obtained a total of ninety-eight plates (see Table 3 for their distribution language-wise), most dated or at least datable, but some of which, however, might not be royal inscriptions.

**Table 3:** Vijayanagara copper plates concerning the Tamil South (fourteenth century to 1646 CE).

	Sanskrit (38+0 <sup>45</sup> )	Tamil (17+23)	Telugu (4+8)	Kannaḍa (1+0)	Multilingual (6+1)
Śaka 1236–1300	2 <sup>46</sup>		1 <sup>47</sup>		1 <sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Orr, “The Bhakti of the Bāṇas,” 375.

<sup>43</sup> I have not been able to take full account of volumes 5 and 6 of the *IVR*, in which Vijayanagara copper plates not listed in the *DLCPs* are likely to have been included.

<sup>44</sup> I have thus provisionally excluded plates kept in the Madras/Chennai Government Museum or in Madras/Chennai city, some of which, after examination, could prove to concern transactions in the Tamil South.

<sup>45</sup> The first figure is the total before Śaka 1566, the second the total after Śaka 1574.

<sup>46</sup> *DLCP* 1, nos. 1079 (Śaka 1258; Harihara I), 1096 (Śaka 1255; Kṛṣṇadevarāya, thus most probably a forgery). None of these are found in *IVR*, vol. 6.

<sup>47</sup> *DLCP* 1, no. 1130 (Śaka 1236; Viranarasimharāya).

<sup>48</sup> *DLCP* 1, no. 1094 (Sanskrit and Tamil; undated, but the donor is Harihara, son of Saṅgama, i.e. Harihara I).

Table 3 (continued)

	Sanskrit (38+0 <sup>45</sup> )	Tamil (17+23)	Telugu (4+8)	Kannaḍa (1+0)	Multilingual (6+1)
Śaka 1300–1400	5 <sup>49</sup>	3 <sup>50</sup>	1 <sup>51</sup>	1 <sup>52</sup>	3 <sup>53</sup>
Śaka 1400–1500	19 <sup>54</sup>	9 <sup>55</sup>	2 <sup>56</sup>		2 <sup>57</sup>
Śaka 1500–1574	12 <sup>58</sup>	5 <sup>59</sup>			
Śaka 1600–1669		12 <sup>60</sup>	8 <sup>61</sup>		1 <sup>62</sup>
Śaka 1715–1726		11 <sup>63</sup>			

Note that one has to be cautious with the early plates, some of which might be forgeries (see footnote 46). Note too that, under the label Vijayanagara, the *DLCPIs* also classify plates that were issued after the fall of the Vijayanagara empire, which is conventionally dated to Śaka 1568 (1646 CE), when Śrīraṅga

49 *DLCPI* 1, no. 1064, 1071, 1075, 1126, 1201.

50 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1122, 1145; *DLCPI* 2, no. 293.

51 *DLCPI* 1, no. 1093.

52 *DLCPI* 1, no. 1061.

53 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1068 (Sanskrit and Kannaḍa), 1092 (Kannaḍa and Telugu); *DLCPI* 2, no. 287 (Sanskrit and Telugu).

54 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1035, 1040, 1046 (Sanskrit?), 1100–1101, 1106, 1111–1112, 1118–1119, 1134, 1147, 1152, 1165, 1167, 1169–1171; *DLCPI* 2, no. 305 (undated, but the donor is Kṛṣṇadevarāya).

55 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1045, 1105, 1146; *DLCPI* 2, nos. 294–297, 298 (undated, but the donor is Mallikārjuna, like in the other plates in this series), 299.

56 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1037, 1135.

57 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1113 (Sanskrit and Kannaḍa), 1159 (Telugu and Sanskrit).

58 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1121, 1172–1173, 1175, 1202, 1207, 1210, 1212–1213, 1217, 1230–1231.

59 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1178, 1209, 1225; *DLCPI* 2, nos. 310–311.

60 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1184–1185 (Śaka 1658 and 1663 respectively; Śrīraṅga III, although then dead), 1234–1237 (Śaka 1631; Veṅkaṭa IV); *DLCPI* 2, nos. 317 (Śaka 1602; Rāmarāja), 319 (Śaka 1648; Veṅkaṭapatirāya), 320 (Śaka 1650; Rāmarāya), 322–323 (Śaka 1659, Śrīraṅgadevamahārāya), 325 (Śaka 1690; Śrīraṅgadeva).

61 *DLCPI* 1, Nos. 1233 (Śaka 1630; Veṅkaṭa IV), 1238 (Śaka 1632; Veṅkaṭa IV), 1240 (Śaka 163[9]; Veṅkaṭa IV), 1241–1243 (Śaka 1644, 1654, 1655 respectively; Veṅkaṭa, ruling from Ghanagiri); *DLCPI* 2, nos. 321 (Śaka 1656; Śrīraṅgarāya), 324 (Śaka 1666; Veṅkaṭapatidevamahārāya).

62 *DLCPI* 1, no. 1239 (Sanskrit and Telugu; Śaka 1639; Veṅkaṭa IV).

63 *DLCPI* 1, nos. 1186–1195 (dated from Śaka 1715 to 1726; Śrīraṅga), 1196 (undated, but the donor is Śrīraṅga, like in the other plates of this series).

III of the Araviḍu dynasty was defeated at Virinchipuram by a coalition of the sultan rulers of Bijapur and Golkonda. These late Vijayanagara plates belong to the residual Araviḍu dynasty: Śrīraṅga III died in 1672 CE,<sup>64</sup> but plates were dated to his reign even after this (see footnote 61), as well as to the reign of Veṅkaṭa III and IV, according to the ASI genealogical nomenclature. These late Vijayanagara plates could have been taken into account in § 2.11, but I prefer to consider them in the present paragraph, as their labeling and authenticity await further assessment (most of these plates are still unpublished as far as I know).

With the Vijayanagara dominance over the whole of South India in the fifteenth century CE, we observe, as far as royal copper-plate grants are concerned, the issuing of fully Sanskrit copper plates, such as the one edited by Jean, Vasundhara, and Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat (1986).<sup>65</sup> This recourse to Sanskrit is understandable, as Vijayanagara was an empire covering most of South India, where various Dravidian languages were spoken: Sanskrit was thus seemingly promoted in official documents as a transregional idiom.<sup>66</sup>

We thus see that, in the Tamil South, under Vijayanagara, between the mid-fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century CE, we revert to monolingual Sanskrit plates with thirty-eight sets,<sup>67</sup> compared to seventeen in Tamil, four in Telugu, one in Kannaḍa, and five multilingual plates (four of which contain Sanskrit).

As for the plates, later than Śaka 1574, we see that none is monolingual Sanskrit and that the languages chiefly used are Tamil and Telugu. Sanskrit is however used in the only multilingual set from this period.<sup>68</sup> This tendency to use the vernaculars in this period will be confirmed, as we will see, with the plates of the later rulers of Tamil Nadu.

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**64** P. R. Srinivasan, *Tiruvannamalai: A Śaiva Sacred Complex of South India*, vol. 1.1 (Pondicherry: IFP, 1990), 111.

**65** Jean, Vasundhara, and Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, *A Copper Plate Inscription of Śrīraṅgarāya I* (Pondicherry: All India Press, 1986). The plates are dated 1585 CE. The text is entirely in Sanskrit verse (*praśasti* and documentary portion).

**66** Note also that Vijayanagara rulers fostered Sanskrit studies and literature. See Cezary Galewicz, *A Commentator in Service of the Empire: Śāyana and the Royal Project of Commenting on the Whole of the Veda* (Vienna: Sammlung de Nobili, Institut für Südasiens-, Tibet- und Buddhismuskunde der Universität Wien, 2010). The Vijayanagara princess Gaṅgādevī (fourteenth century) authored the *Madhurāvijaya*.

**67** Note that among the thirty-eight monolingual Sanskrit copper-plates, only one is in Grantha (*DLCPI* 1, no. 1075; Śaka 1367), whereas the others (dated from Śaka 1255 to 1566) are in Nāgarī/Nandināgarī.

**68** *DLCPI* 1, no. 1239.



## 2.9 Vijayanagara *Biruda* Titulature

The Vijayanagara kings are very often eulogized with strings of *birudas*, which are thus not, *pace* Cuppiramaṇiyam (1983), *meykkīrtti* proper.<sup>69</sup> As an illustration, here is the beginning of an inscription from Tiruvaṇṇāmalai:<sup>70</sup>

*svasti śrīmanumahāmaṇḍaliśvaran harirāyavibhāṭan bhāṣaikku tappuvarāyara kaṇṭan muvarāyar kaṇṭan pūrvvadakṣiṇapaścimasamudrādīpati śrī<sup>o</sup>ariyappa<sup>o</sup>uṭaiyār kumārar śrīviraviruppaṇṇa<sup>o</sup>uṭaiyar prithivirājyam paṇṇiyarulāniṅra śakābdam 1310ṅ [ . . . ]<sup>71</sup>*

Prosperity! In the Śaka year 1310, when “the glorious lord of large territory,” “the destroyer of enemy kings,” “the warrior to (i.e. the chastiser/destroyer of) kings unfaithful to their words,” “the warrior to (i.e. the vanquisher of) the three kings,”<sup>72</sup> “the lord of eastern, southern and western oceans,” (that is,) the glorious and heroic Lord Viruppaṇṇa (i.e. Virūpākṣa I), son of the glorious Lord Ariyappa (i.e. Harihara II), was graciously taking on the rule over the earth [ . . . ]<sup>73</sup>

The string of *birudas* (each individually enclosed between quotation marks in the translation), of variable length and dependent on the date, is very often found at the beginning of stone inscriptions throughout the Vijayanagara empire.<sup>74</sup> According to Y. Subbarayalu and S. Rajavelu, such a “stereotyped *praśasti* passage [ . . . ] is a Tamil variant of the Kannada original.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> See Pū. Cuppiramaṇiyam, *Meykkīrttikal* (Ceṅṅai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1983), 279–296, and Whitney Cox, *Politics, Kingship and Poetry in Medieval South India: Moonset on Sunrise Mountain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 54, note 54.

<sup>70</sup> *SII* 8, no. 156 = TAM 341 = *IVR* 5.1, no. 156; dated to Śaka 1310 = 1388 CE. Original text in transliteration, Grantha script in italics, Tamil script in roman; initial vowels preceded by “<sup>o</sup>.”

<sup>71</sup> I follow here the edition of *SII* 8, no. 156, which alone discriminates between Tamil and Grantha scripts.

<sup>72</sup> This epithet seems to be used specifically in the Tamil South and refers to the Cōḷa, the Cēra, and the Pāṇḍya kings.

<sup>73</sup> My translation, following P.R. Srinivasan, *Tiruvannamalai: A Śaiva Sacred Complex of South India*, vol. 1 (Pondicherry: IFP, 1990), 429. Compare earlier translations of some of these *birudas* by J. Burgess and S.M. Naṭēśa Śāstrī, *Tamil and Sanskrit Inscriptions with Notes on Village Antiquities: Collected Chiefly in the South of Madras Presidency* (Madras: Government Press, 1886), 157 (“lord of the great world, who destroyed the army of Ariyarāyar, who cuts into a thousand and three thousand pieces those failing in [*the correctness of*] their language”) or Vasundhara Filliozat, *L’épigraphie de Vijayanagara du début à 1377* (Paris: EFEO, 1973), 5 (“[. . .] mahāmaṇḍalēśvara vainqueur des rois ennemis, punisseur des rois infidèles”).

<sup>74</sup> For examples from outside the Tamil South, see *IVRs* and Vasundhara Filliozat, *L’épigraphie de Vijayanagara*.

<sup>75</sup> Y. Subbarayalu & S. Rajavelu, *Inscriptions of the Vijayanagara Rulers*, vol. 5, *Part I: Tamil Inscriptions*. (Bengaluru: Indian Council of Historical Research, Southern Regional Centre, 2014), xv.

## 2.10 Teṅkāci Pāṇḍyas (Sixteenth Century CE)

In the sixteenth century CE, Teṅkāci was the site of a Tamil renaissance, according to David Shulman. Sanskrit was not discarded, however, as the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* by Maṇḍalakavi, a Sanskrit historical text, was probably composed at the Teṅkāci court.<sup>76</sup> Several Teṅkāci Pāṇḍya kings are known, and interestingly, the copper plates issued by them in the sixteenth century CE, listed in the *DLCPs*, are all in Sanskrit and Grantha.<sup>77</sup> Later plates, from the seventeenth century CE, are however in Tamil.<sup>78</sup>

## 2.11 Copper Plates of Later Rulers of Tamil Nadu (Seventeenth to Early Nineteenth Century CE)

If we take a look at the production of copper plates after the Vijayanagara period, from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century CE (see Table 4, where the figures are based on the two volumes of the *DLCP*), we find that Tamil was the main medium.

From the seventeenth century CE onwards, the use of Sanskrit as a medium for copper-plate inscriptions dwindles dramatically, in contrast with the late Vijayanagara plates (§ 2.8), most of which were in Sanskrit. The late seventeenth century CE thus marks a historical shift, that is, a second regionalization (the first being that of the *meykkīrtti*), in which, besides Tamil, the languages of migrant groups are also attested (Kannaḍa, Telugu, Marāṭhī).

## 3 Regional Approach: Chingleput District

Following the above dynastic approach, which was also qualitative as it was based on a selection of inscriptions, I will adopt now a more decidedly quantitative approach, focusing on a portion of present-day Tamil Nadu. T.V. Mahalingam in his

<sup>76</sup> David Shulman, *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 155ff., and 155, note 1.

<sup>77</sup> *DLCP* 1, nos. 739 (Śaka 1503), 747 (Śaka 1515), 748 (Śaka 1505); *DLCP* 2, no. 187 (third year of Parākrama-pāṇḍya, son of Abhirāma-parākrama). Further Sanskrit plates of the Teṅkāci Pāṇḍyas are found in T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Travancore Archaeological Series*, vol. 1 (repr., Trivandrum: Government of Kerala, 1988), 87ff.

<sup>78</sup> *DLCP* 1, nos. 741 (Śaka 1692), 751 (Śaka 1675, incorrectly for 1676); *DLCP* 2, no. 182 (Śaka 1675, incorrectly for 1676).

**Table 4:** Copper plates of later rulers of Tamil Nadu (seventeenth to early nineteenth century CE).

	Sanskrit (1)	Sanskrit & Telugu (2)	Sanskrit & Tamil (6)	Tamil (137)	Telugu (14)	Tamil & Telugu (1)	Marāṭhī (2)	Kannaḍa (8)
Nāyakas Maturai 17th century			1 <sup>79</sup>	16 <sup>80</sup>	14 <sup>81</sup>	1 <sup>82</sup>		
Nāyakas Tanjore 17th century	1 <sup>83</sup>	1 <sup>84</sup>		3 <sup>85</sup>				
Cētopatis Rāmanāthapuram 17th–18th century				67 <sup>86</sup>				
Marāṭhas Tanjore 17th–18th century				6 <sup>87</sup>	12 <sup>88</sup>		2 <sup>89</sup>	1 <sup>90</sup>

nine volumes of *Topographical List of Inscriptions in Tamil Nadu and Kerala States* lists a total of 16,673 inscriptions. Mahalingam however stops his list at 1300 CE and does not integrate the *Annual Reports on Epigraphy (ARE)* later than 1978. Given this sheer number of inscriptions, I have been able to compute information concerning only the undivided Chingleput District (Figure 9). I have selected this district because it was the seat of the Pallava dynasty, the epigraphic corpus of

**79** DLCPI 1, no. 690.

**80** DLCPI 1, nos. 682–689, 692, 697–699; DLCPI 2, nos. 153–156.

**81** DLCPI 1, nos. 673–681, 693–696; DLCPI 2, no. 153.

**82** DLCPI 1, no. 691.

**83** DLCPI 1, no. 703.

**84** DLCPI 1, no. 704.

**85** DLCPI 1, nos. 700–702.

**86** DLCPI 1, nos. 894–924; DLCPI 2, nos. 235–270.

**87** DLCPI 1, nos. 625, 634–638.

**88** DLCPI 1, nos. 626–628, 630–632; DLCPI 2, nos. 142–147.

**89** DLCPI 1, nos. 629, 639.

**90** DLCPI 1, no. 633.

Table 4 (continued)

	Sanskrit (1)	Sanskrit & Telugu (2)	Sanskrit & Tamil (6)	Tamil (137)	Telugu (14)	Tamil & Telugu (1)	Marāṭhī (2)	Kannaḍa (8)
Toṅṭaimāṇ Putukkōṭṭai 18th–early 19th century				11 <sup>91</sup>				
Woḍeyars, Mysore 18th–early 19th century				7 <sup>92</sup>				7 <sup>93</sup>

which I have been studying for many years. The inscriptions of the Chingleput District are found in Mahalingam’s volume 3, which contains 2,279 inscriptions, and which I have supplemented with post-1300 CE inscriptions and further *AREs*.<sup>94</sup> I have thus obtained a total of 3,593 inscriptions.

### 3.1 Language Distribution in Chingleput District

If we look globally at the languages used in the inscriptions of the undivided Chingleput District, we obtain the following figures.

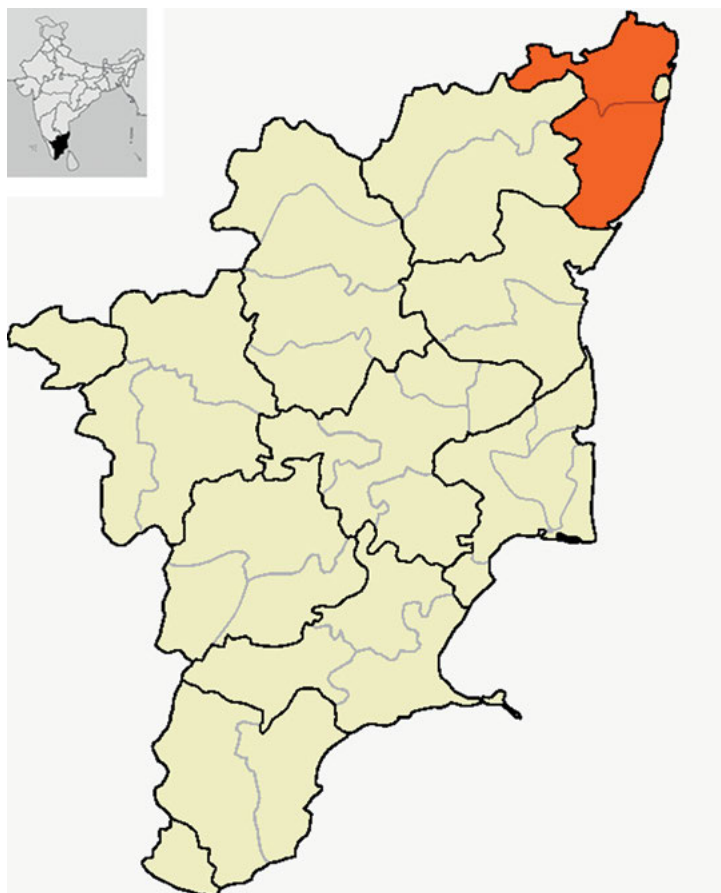
The lion’s share, unsurprisingly, comprises Tamil inscriptions, with a total of 3,197 inscriptions – that is, inscriptions whose language is described in the *AREs* as Tamil (3,192 items) or as “Tamil and Grantha inscriptions” (five items),

<sup>91</sup> *DLCPI* 1, nos. 984–990; *DLCPI* 2, nos. 273–276.

<sup>92</sup> *DLCPI* 1, nos. 650–651, 653, 655, 658–659; *DLCPI* 2, no. 223.

<sup>93</sup> *DLCPI* 1, nos. 656–657, 660–663; *DLCPI* 2, no. 222.

<sup>94</sup> I have not been able to update this list completely, as several *AREs* later than 1978 are not accessible to me. I have not taken into account either copper-plate inscriptions or the inscriptions from Chennai (listed in Mahalingam’s volume 5), as the latter require further assessment, since Chennai is not their findspot but their place of deposit (e.g. in the Chennai Government Museum, the collections of which include inscribed artifacts from the Madras Presidency, which was larger than Tamil South India). This list is thus only provisional for the time being, but nonetheless reveals some trends.



**Figure 9:** Undivided Chingleput District (as in 1956). Map: Adapted from Wikimedia Commons (© SwiftRakesh).

**Table 5:** Language distribution of inscriptions from the undivided Chingleput District.

Tamil	Sanskrit	Bilinguals (Sanskrit & Tamil)	Telugu	Kannaḍa	Multilinguals	Other	To be confirmed
3,197	131	50	73	15	15	32	80

which is, as far as I understand, a category for Tamil inscriptions in Tamil script but also containing Sanskrit words in Grantha script. Sanskrit comes second with 131 inscriptions, which I will treat in detail below (§ 3.2).

There are fifty bilingual inscriptions (Sanskrit and Tamil), but here too further assessment is required, since some of these might in fact be Tamil inscriptions in Tamil script containing only a few interspersed Sanskrit words in Grantha script.

The Telugu and Kannaḍa inscriptions (73 and 15 items, respectively) date, in large part, to the late Vijayanagara and Nāyaka periods (especially to the sixteenth century CE). There is one early Kannaḍa inscription (eighth century CE) at the Kailāsanātha temple.<sup>95</sup>

As for the fifteen multilingual inscriptions, these comprise: one item in Armenian, Hebrew (?), and Persian;<sup>96</sup> one item in English and Dutch;<sup>97</sup> one item in Portuguese and Latin;<sup>98</sup> one item in Kannaḍa and Tamil (dated to Śaka 1379); one item in Sanskrit and Telugu;<sup>99</sup> one item in Tamil and English (dated to Śaka 1699); and nine items in Tamil and Telugu (none earlier than the late Vijayanagara period).

As for the category “Other” (thirty-two items), these are mostly late inscriptions in Armenian (two items), Dutch (two items), English (nineteen items), Latin (one item), Pahlavi/Persian (five items), Arabic and Persian mixed (one item), Portuguese (one item), and Urdu (one item).

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<sup>95</sup> *EI* 3, no. 48.

<sup>96</sup> See *ARE* 1966–67, Appendix B, no. 192 and Appendix D, no. 139. This inscription, dated to 1726 CE, was found on a tablet built into the Marmalong Bridge (today replaced by the Maraimalai Adigal Bridge) in Saidapet, south of Chennai. It records the reconstruction of the bridge by the Armenian merchant Petrus Uscan.

<sup>97</sup> See *ARE* 1911–12, Appendix B (1911), no. 329. This item in fact consists in graffiti inscriptions, that is, English and Dutch proper names engraved by visitors in the seventeenth and eighteenth century CE.

<sup>98</sup> See *ARE* 1961–62, Appendix B, no. 219. This is an epitaph on a tombstone, dated to 1744 CE, from Saint Thomas Mount, near Chennai. Other, monolingual (Tamil, English, Pahlavi) epitaphs were also reported in the same *ARE* and are integrated into Table 5. On these epitaphs and many more, not taken into account in Table 5, see Julian James Cotton, *List of Inscriptions on Tombs or Monuments in Madras: Possessing Historical or Archaeological Interest*, vol. 2, ed. B. S. Baliga (Madras, Government Press, 1946), 57ff. The bilingual Tamil/Portuguese item is no. 1365, p. 69.

<sup>99</sup> See *ARE* 1905–06, Appendix B (1905), no. 450. The original must still be checked, as it is not clear from the report whether the inscription is fully in Sanskrit in Telugu script or bilingual, with both Sanskrit and Telugu in Telugu script.

### 3.2 Sanskrit Inscriptions in Chingleput District

Sanskrit, as we have already seen, comes second in the Chingleput District, with 131 inscriptions written in this language only,<sup>100</sup> that is, approximately 3.5% of the total, of which the chronological distribution is represented in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Chronological distribution of Sanskrit inscriptions from the Chingleput District.

Pallavas (550–900 CE)	Cōlas (900–1300 CE)	Telugu-Cōḍas (13th century CE)	14th century CE	Vijayanagara (15th–16th century CE)	17th–18th century CE	Undated
58	18	7	2	12	4	30

We find that the majority (fifty-eight items) dates to the Pallava period and are in fact mostly from two sites, Kāñcīpuram and Māmallapuram, where most of the Pallava royal foundations are found. These are in Grantha, except for a few in Siddhamātrka (see above).

There are seventeen Sanskrit inscriptions from the Cōla period, among which I also count one late Cēra inscription. Seven Sanskrit inscriptions belong to the Telugu-Cōḍa corpus. Only two Sanskrit records are found from the fourteenth century CE (one Hoysāla item and one late Pāṇḍya item). Under Vijayanagara rule, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century CE, twelve Sanskrit inscriptions are noted (eight in Grantha script, three in Telugu script, and one in Kannaḍa script). Four Sanskrit inscriptions date to the seventeenth and eighteenth century CE: one Quṭṭb Shāhi record; two inscriptions dated to Śaka 1536; and one inscription dated Śaka 163[2].

Among the thirty undated Sanskrit inscriptions, several from Ayyangarkulam and Kāñcīpuram concern Tātācarya/Tātayadeśika (late fifteenth century to the first half of the sixteenth century CE), either as commissioner, composer, or the person referred to. They can thus be dated to the fifteenth century CE at the earliest.

From the figures obtained from the Chingleput District alone, we can say that the estimate of 30,000 inscriptions in Tamil Nadu is realistic. But it is difficult to extrapolate further on the basis of the data for one district only, as we can expect differences across regions.

<sup>100</sup> Sanskrit is also used in the fifty bilingual (Sanskrit and Tamil) inscriptions of Table 5. Note that we also have to take into account the multilingual inscriptions from Table 5, which contain Sanskrit.

## 4 Conclusions: Moments and Trends

This bird's-eye view of the imperial languages in the Tamil South leads to the identification of what I will call moments and trends in the epigraphic production. By "moments," I mean experiments attempted once but never replicated, or innovations with no or almost no future; for instance, biscript or digraphic eulogies were mostly produced under the Pallavas. Moreover, the production of Tamil eulogies on the model of the Sanskrit literary tradition was limited to the early Pāṇḍya charters, to which alone Pollock's concept of vernacularization applies. As for epigraphic Maṇippiravāḷam, we find examples under the early Pāṇḍyas, as in the course of time the Sanskrit words became fully assimilated to Tamil script and ceased to be marked as Sanskrit words.

On the other hand, there are also long-lasting trends, opposed to which, at some point in time, we occasionally find countertrends. For instance, over a period of six centuries, under the Pallavas and Cōḷas and with the exception of the early Pāṇḍyas, royal copper-plate grants were diglossic. Under the Vijayanagara empire, one countertrend was to write copper plates entirely in Sanskrit, until finally, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century CE, Sanskrit was only rarely used in copper plates, mostly in favor of Tamil and other vernaculars. Another enduring trend is the *meykkīrtti*, which became a massive phenomenon under the Cōḷas and the later Pāṇḍyas, that is, over almost four centuries. As for *Birudāvali* eulogies, we find them consistently from the Pallavas to the Vijayanagara kings, for whom it was even the main type of eulogy.

Furthermore, we can also distinguish two periods of regionalization in the Tamil South. A first regionalization occurred under the Cōḷas, notably with the spread of the *meykkīrttis*, metrical eulogies in Tamil: the status of Tamil as an expressive political language was firmly established, side by side with Sanskrit in the same capacity (a linguistic situation I propose to call "amphiglossia" as opposed to diglossia<sup>101</sup>). After the fall of Vijayanagara, an imperial formation that somehow marked the resurgence of Sanskrit as an imperial language, a second wave of regionalization took place, when, from the late seventeenth century CE onwards, inscriptions in Sanskrit became increasingly rare, while Tamil and other Dravidian languages displaced Sanskrit as the expressive political languages.

However, another language then entered the game, that of the British rule: English. To illustrate this development, one final example will suffice, encountered in recent fieldwork (Figure 10).

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<sup>101</sup> See Francis, "Multilingualism in Indian Inscriptions."





**Figure 10:** Stele at Vālikaṇṭapuram, nineteenth (?) century CE. Photo: E. Francis, 2017.

This inscription is found on a stele currently kept to the right of the main *gopura* of the temple of Tiruvaḷlikaṇṭaṇ at Vālikaṇṭapuram (Perampalūr taluk and district, Tamil Nadu). It contains no internal date, but dates plausibly to the nineteenth or early twentieth century CE. It reads (Tamil text transliterated, English text transcribed):

viḷamparam  
carkkār cottu  
maṇat' aṛintu keṭuti ceykiṛavarkaḷ taṇṭak kaikuṭapaṭuvārkaḷ<sup>102</sup>

**102** A straightforward translation of this Tamil text would be: “Notice. Property of the Government. Knowing (this) in their mind, those who do damage will receive punishment.”

## NOTICE

GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. ANY WILLFUL DAMAGE THERE TO WILL BE VISITED WITH A PENALTY.

The inscription, issued by a temple authority, comprises a Tamil text followed by an English text, both with the same content. We have here a true bilingual, not diglossic, inscription that is representative of a new development of the colonial period, when true bilingual inscriptions became more common than in the preceding periods. The story of colonial-period epigraphy is nevertheless beyond the scope of the present essay.

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### Abbreviations

ASI	Archaeological Survey of India
ARE	<i>Annual Reports on Epigraphy</i>
BEFEO	<i>Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient</i>
DLCPi	<i>Dynastic List of Copper Plate Inscriptions Noticed in Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy</i> See Gai (volume 1, 1986), Padmanabha Sastry (volume 2, 2008)
EFEO	École française d'Extrême-Orient
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
EIAD	<i>Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa</i> . See Griffiths et al. (2017).
IEP	<i>Inscriptions of the Early Pāṇḍyas</i> . See Krishnan (2002).
IFP	Institut français de Pondichéry
IPS	<i>Inscriptions of the Pudukkotal State</i>
IVR	<i>Inscriptions of the Vijayanagara Rulers</i> . See Subbarayalu & Rajavelu (2014), Ritti (2017).
SII	<i>South Indian Inscriptions</i>
TAM	Truvannamalai inscriptions. See Srinivasan (1990).

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Miriam T. Stark

# Landscapes, Linkages, and Luminescence: First-Millennium CE Environmental and Social Change in Mainland Southeast Asia

## 1 Introduction

Profound social transformations took place across South and Southeast Asia during the early first millennium CE, incorporating new religious and philosophical ideologies across the Old World. Conventional Southeast Asian scholarship uses documentary sources and art history to explain the origins of first-millennium CE developments, when temple-based Brahmanic and Buddhist religions, international trade networks, and the region's earliest cities emerged. Archaeological research documents Southeast Asians' materialization of indigenous and South Asian ideas in their construction of politico-ritual places and goods that linked these landscapes into broader interactional landscapes from the mid- to late third to the early seventh centuries CE: the Gupta period in South Asia. Researchers have delved into contemporary developments west and northwest of the Gupta epicenter to understand pan-regional developments during the first millennium CE.<sup>1</sup> Expanding our vision eastward to Southeast Asia, whose concurrent developments have conventionally been attributed to "Hindicization" or "Indianization,"<sup>2</sup> also contextualizes the Gupta Age and offers insights on pan-regional developments during the first millennium CE. Brahmanic structures that housed Indic gods offer chronological anchors and define geographic limits of new ideologies; urban scale and settling along trade routes yield demographic insights, and artifact provenances define interactional space. Such information is essential to interrogating environmental history and material matters.

Understanding how Southeast Asians used a South Asian idiom to establish a regional identity through religious ideologies and ritual practice is the goal of this chapter. Archaeological techniques document the development of new economic,

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1 See Jason Emmanuel Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and Beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

2 For recent engagements with these issues, see Pierre-Yves Manguin, "Introduction," in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), xiii–xxxi.

political, and social networks that linked Mekong Delta settlements into a single polity by the mid-first millennium CE. Scholars working across Southeast Asia now identify three phases in Southeast Asia's contact with South Asian polities.<sup>3</sup> The earliest phase, from ca. 400 to 300/200 BCE, is signaled by selected South Asia-derived goods in archaeological sites. A second and intensified phase of interaction took place from ca. 200 BCE to 300 CE,<sup>4</sup> a period for which South Asia-derived archaeological artifacts have been recovered from Southeast Asian sites and for which third-century CE Chinese annals describe "more than a thousand Indian Brahmins" in the Southeast Asian Kingdom of Funan.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the third phase of ideological transmission, from ca. 300 to 600 CE,<sup>6</sup> in which formalized Indic architectural forms appear across much of the region's coasts and river valleys. Across the Lower Mekong Basin (and particularly in the Mekong Delta), aspiring Khmer elites used South Asian ideological systems to build religious and social landscapes that became the foundation for early urban centers.<sup>7</sup> Built to house both Brahmanic and Buddhist statuary, these structures also introduced the region's first dated inscriptions on sandstone stelae.<sup>8</sup>

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**3** See Bérénice Bellina and Ian Glover, "The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World, from the Fourth Century BC to the Fourth Century AD," in *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History*, eds. Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 68–88.

**4** Alison Kyra Carter, "The Production and Exchange of Glass and Stone Beads in Southeast Asia from 500 BCE to the Early Second Millennium CE: An Assessment of the Work of Peter Francis in Light of Recent Research," *Archaeological Research in Asia* 6 (2016): 23–24; Glover and Bellina 2011.

**5** Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961), 17.

**6** Bellina and Glover, "The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World," 75–77; Carter, "The Production and Exchange of Glass and Stone Beads in Southeast Asia," 23; Cristina Cobo Castillo, Bérénice Bellina, and Dorian Q. Fuller, "Rice, Beans, and Trade Crops on the Early Maritime Silk Route in Southeast Asia," *Antiquity* 90 (2016): 1255–69.

**7** Miriam T. Stark, "Inscribing Legitimacy and Building Power in the Mekong Delta," in *Counternarratives and Macrohistories: New Agendas in Archaeology and Ancient History*, ed. Geoffrey Emberling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

**8** Nadine Dalsheimer and Pierre-Yves Manguin, "Viṣṇu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-Est: Nouvelles données archéologiques sur le Ier millénaire apr. J.-C.," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998): 87–116; Paul Lavy, "As in Heaven, So on Earth: The Politics of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Harihara Images in Preangkorian Khmer Civilisation," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 341 (2003): 21–39; Pierre-Yves Manguin, "Pan-Regional Responses to South Asian Inputs in Early Southeast Asia," in *50 Years of Archaeology in Southeast Asia: Essays in Honour of Ian Glover*, eds. Bérénice Bellina, Elisabeth A. Bacus, Thomas O. Pryce, and Jan Wissemann Christie (Bangkok: River Books, 2010), 172; Miriam Stark, "Pre-Angkorian

The kinds of connectivity linking fourth- and fifth-century CE South and Southeast Asia during this dramatically transformative period remain a matter of some debate. Goods and people – including artisans, Buddhist monastics, Brahmanic Vaiṣṇavas, and Tamil traders – moved between these regions.<sup>9</sup> How did the spread of these Indic ideologies, with their concomitant institutionalization of religious cults across the Indian subcontinent, extend its reach to Southeast Asia? Alongside these developments in the religious landscape, the physical terrain – major river valleys and some deltas of mainland and peninsular Southeast Asia – was similarly transformed. New economic, political, and social networks emerged as long-standing maritime trade networks moved new goods and ideas and expanded their geographic range. Similar developments, often with no more than a two-hundred-year lag behind South Asia, emerge in Southeast Asia. Particular objects and icons, like images of the Buddha, appear in both the Lower Mekong Basin and South Asia and reflect broader ideological trends associated with the Gupta period.<sup>10</sup>

Cultures in areas neighboring the Gupta world, like the Pyu, adopted Buddhism by the mid-first millennium CE;<sup>11</sup> other areas followed in the next fifty to one

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Settlement Trends in Cambodia's Mekong Delta and the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project." *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 26 (2006): 98–109.

**9** On the movement of artisans, see Bérénice Bellina, "Maritime Silk Roads' Ornamant Industries: Socio-Political Practices and Cultural Transfer in the South China Sea," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 24 (2014): 345–77; and Alison Kyra Carter, "Garnet Beads in Southeast Asia: Evidence for Local Production?" in *Crossing Borders in Southeast Asian Archaeology. Selected Papers from the 13th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, vol. 1, edited by Dominik Bonatz, Andreas Reinecke, and Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz (Singapore: NUS, 2012), 296–306. On religious specialists, see J. G. de Casparis, "Palaeogeography as an Auxiliary Discipline in Research on Early South East Asia," in *Early South East Asia: Essays in Archaeology, History, and Historical Geography*, edited by R. B. Smith and William Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 386–7; Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Transmission of Vaiṣṇavism across the Bay of Bengal: Trade Networks and State Formation in Early Historic Southeast Asia," in *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World*, vol. 2, *Exchange of Ideas, Religions, and Technologies*, edited by Anglea Schottenhammer (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 51–68; Peter Skilling, "Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual in Early Peninsular Southeast Asia," in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 373. For Tamil merchant groups, see John Guy, "Tamil Merchants and the Hindu-Buddhist Diaspora in Early Southeast Asia," in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, 243–62.

**10** See Robert L. Brown, "Indian Art Transformed: The Earliest Sculptural Styles of Southeast Asia," in *Indian Art and Archaeology*, eds. Ellen M. Raven and Karel R. van Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 43.

**11** Janice Stargardt, "From the Iron Age to Early Cities at Sri Ksetra and Beikthano, Myanmar," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 357.



hundred years. For decades, historiographical interpretations of Southeast Asia's first millennium have generated a kind of "Gupta echo effect" that often reduces Southeast Asia to a foggy reflection of its western neighbor. Detailed chronometric work on sites and their architectural features is scarce in both regions. To date, the literature suggests that South Asian ritual architectural technologies began in the late centuries BCE, but the Hindu temple emerged some centuries later.<sup>12</sup> Scripts, art styles, and architectural traditions in first-millennium Southeast Asia, all demonstrably produced in the region, reflect varying influences from the South Asian continent and vary by geographic region across mainland Southeast Asia.

Archaeological research documents Southeast Asians' materialization of indigenous and South Asian ideas in their construction of the politico-ritual places and goods that linked these landscapes within broader interactional landscapes from the mid- to late third to the early seventh centuries CE. Brahmanic and Buddhist structures that housed Indic gods define the geographic limits of new ideologies. Archaeological and art-historical work has begun to place these features in time and space. Yet the work of archaeologists is inherently paradoxical: we study past behaviors that we cannot observe, and these behaviors preserve differentially in the archaeological record and through a variety of media. Organic materials like wood, used for homes, watercraft, and religious images, were ubiquitous in the first-millennium CE Mekong Delta; so were spices, resins, and textiles, used in daily and ritual practice. Yet these are nearly invisible in its archaeological record, leaving infrequent microscopic traces (e.g., pollen, starch, residues, carbonized flecks) that rarely survive the tropical climate.

Such methodological challenges are doubled in studying this transitional period when the earliest documentary records appear in the region. Few historians dare to tread on this period, and most archaeologists prefer the prehistoric or later historic periods for study. Yet mainland Southeast Asia's archaeological record is ideally suited for studying two organizational changes that transformed societies: (1) the shift to institutionalized religion and large-scale ritual practice (largely through the shift to temple-based practices); and (2) the adoption of standardized writing systems. These changes had profound implications for the structure of Southeast Asian leadership and settlement organization, producing (among other changes) the region's earliest urban settlements. This chapter expands our current understandings of the greater Gupta world by

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<sup>12</sup> See Himanshu Prabha Ray, "The Apsidal Shrine in Early Hinduism: Origins, Cultic Affiliation, Patronage," *World Archaeology* 36 (2004): 343–359; Michael Willis, "The Formation of Temple Ritual in the Gupta Period: pūjā and pañcamahāyājñā," in *Prajñādhara: Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya*, eds. Arundhati Banerji and Gerd J. R. Mevissen (New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2009), 66–88.

looking eastward to *Suvañṇabhūmi* and using a case study from the Lower Mekong Basin (Cambodia and environs). Increasing archaeological and art-historical attention to first-millennium CE mainland Southeast Asia illustrates multiple independent developmental trajectories.

## 2 Finding the “Gupta Age” in Southeast Asia

Conventional Southeast Asian scholarship uses documentary sources and art history to explain the origins of first-millennium CE developments, when temple-based Brahmanic and Buddhist religions, international trade networks, and the region’s earliest cities emerged. Recent archaeological and art-historical approaches in both regions now illustrate differences and possible synergies in how Southeast Asians constructed politico-ritual landscapes in dialogue with South Asia during this time of religious dynamism.<sup>13</sup> South Asian members of the Buddhist sangha – both learned monks and nuns – were active during the Gupta period, and scholars suggest multidirectional relationships that linked Gupta India and Southeast Asia as well as discrete chronologies associated with different subregions of Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup>

Several subregions in mainland Southeast Asia reflect Gupta Age developments, so my discussion begins by sketching out general parameters of Southeast/South Asia interactions from ca. 200 BCE to 500 CE. This time period, variously known as the Iron or Late Age,<sup>15</sup> early historic period,<sup>16</sup> or protohistoric period,<sup>17</sup> is associated with Southeast Asia’s transition to history, if we accept the Western

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<sup>13</sup> See Manguin, “The Transmission of Vaiṣṇavism across the Bay of Bengal,” 62–63.

<sup>14</sup> Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, 32; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 22; Skilling, “Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual,” 372.

<sup>15</sup> Carter, “Garnet Beads in Southeast Asia,” and “Beads, Exchange Networks and Emerging Complexity: A Case Study from Cambodia and Thailand (500 BCE–CE 500),” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 25 (2015): 733–57; Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities.”

<sup>16</sup> Miriam T. Stark, “The Transition to History in the Mekong Delta: A View from Cambodia,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 2 (1998): 175–204.

<sup>17</sup> Bellina, “Maritime Silk Roads’ Ornament Industries”; Chureekamol Onsuwan Eyre, “Social Variation and Dynamics in Metal Age and Protohistoric Central Thailand: A Regional Perspective,” *Asian Perspectives* 49 (2011): 43–84; Piphal Heng, “Transition to the Pre-Angkorian Period (300–500 CE): Thala Borivat and A Regional Perspective,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 484–505; Rona M. Ikehara-Quebral et al., “Biocultural Practices during the Transition to History at the Vat Komnou Cemetery, Angkor Borei, Cambodia,” *Asian Perspectives* 56 (2017): 191–236; Manguin, “Introduction.”

equation of “history” with literacy.<sup>18</sup> The few first-millennium CE transnational studies come largely from art history<sup>19</sup> and suggest that social and demographic developments across mainland Southeast Asia took separate but parallel, and occasionally overlapping, trajectories<sup>20</sup> during the late Gupta/post-Gupta period. Major cultural traditions, defined by Chinese toponyms, are illustrated in the map as Figure 1.

Burma’s/Myanmar’s Pyu populations embraced urbanization and Buddhism in the early centuries CE.<sup>21</sup> Developments in what is now central Thailand took place later, in concert with late and post-Gupta India, with the Buddhist-influenced Dvaravati “civilization.”<sup>22</sup> The earliest urban centers and Indic iconography in the Lower Mekong Basin, and particularly in the Mekong Delta, emerged at nearly the same time as those in Burma, but took different forms. Collectively, the region’s chronology can be divided into three periods that span this transitional period and extend to the Gupta period, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Intensified intraregional and interregional contact was one factor that contributed to these 200 BCE-to-500 CE transformations. We know that South Asians desired myriad goods that circulated within and between regions in mainland Southeast Asia, including marine-shell ornaments, glass and semiprecious stone beads, copper and tin ingots, marble, serpentine, salt, and other commodities, by

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**18** See Stephen A. Murphy and Miriam T. Stark, “Introduction: Transition from Late Prehistory to Early Historic Periods in Mainland Southeast Asia c. Early to Mid-First Millennium CE,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 333–40; Miriam T. Stark and S. Jane Allen, “The Transition to History in Southeast Asia: An Introduction,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 2 (1998): 163–75.

**19** E.g., Charlotte Galloway, “Ways of Seeing a Pyu, Mon and Dvaravati Artistic Continuum,” *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 30 (2010): 70–8; Nicolas Revire, “Dvāravatī and Zhenla in the Seventh to Eighth Centuries: A Transregional Ritual Complex,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 393–417.

**20** Miriam Stark, “Early Mainland Southeast Asian Landscapes in the First Millennium AD.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 407–32.

**21** See Bob Hudson, “A Thousand Years before Bagan: Radiocarbon Dates and Myanmar’s Ancient Pyu Cities,” in *Bagan and the World: Early Myanmar and its Global Connections*, eds. Michael Aung-Thwing, John N. Miksic, and Geok Y. Goh (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 88–121; Janice Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu of Burma*, vol. 1, *Early Pyu Cities in a Man-Made Landscape* (Cambridge: Publications on Ancient Civilizations in Southeast Asia; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990) and “From the Iron Age to Early Cities”; this volume.

**22** See Ian Glover, “The Dvaravati Gap – Linking Prehistory and History in Early Thailand,” *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 30 (2010): 79–86; Phasook Indrawooth, “The Archaeology of the Early Buddhist Kingdoms of Thailand,” in *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History*, eds. Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 120–148.



**Figure 1:** Major cultural traditions in first millennium Southeast Asia using Chinese toponyms, with some major sites indicated using black dots (using base map from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Southeast\\_Asia\\_location\\_map.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Southeast_Asia_location_map.svg)).

the late first millennium BC.<sup>23</sup> Regional interactional networks that moved prestige goods like semiprecious stone and glass beads and bangles, worked precious metals, and silver coins expanded as communities grew increasingly localized in their utilitarian artifact styles;<sup>24</sup> metals and silver coinage apparently expanded. Along

<sup>23</sup> Bellina and Glover, “The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World,” 69.

<sup>24</sup> Eyre, “Social Variation and Dynamics in Metal Age and Protohistoric Central Thailand”; Joyce C. White, “Incorporating Heterarchy into Theory on Socio-Political Development: The

	c. 200 BCE–300 CE	c. 320–550 CE	550–?750 CE
Mainland Southeast Asia	Protohistoric period/Late Iron Age	Protohistoric-pre-Angkorian  proto-Dvaravati  Pyu  Cham	Pre-Angkorian  Dvaravati  Pyu  Cham
South Asia (broadly glossed)	Early Historic Period	Gupta	Post-Gupta

**Figure 2:** Southeast Asian and South Asian chronologies from the late first millennium BCE to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

the coasts of the South China Sea, certain artifacts, like Indo-Roman rouletted ware, spouted vessels known as *kendi*, and glass beads appeared by the early centuries CE. The technological similarities of these objects suggest the development of pan-regional cultural and technological traditions.<sup>25</sup> This timing coincides closely with the economic integration of India’s entire east coast, involving the movement of pearls, gems, semiprecious stones, and perhaps even horses.<sup>26</sup>

Coastal emporiums in both regions held goods that the other desired; art historians and archaeologists<sup>27</sup> support Chinese documentary sources suggesting that South Asian Brahmans lived in Southeast Asian communities by the third century CE. Whether or not they were long-term residents, South Asians

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Case from Southeast Asia,” in *Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies*, Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association 6, eds. Robert M. Ehrenreich, Carole L. Crumley, and Janet E. Levy (Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association, 1995), 101–123.

25 E.g., Jan Wisseman Christie, “State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia: A Consideration of the Theories and the Data,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151 (1995): 235–88; Laure Dussubieux and Bérénice Bellina, “Glass Ornament Production and Trade Politics in the Upper-Thai Peninsula during the Early Iron Age,” *Archaeological Research in Asia* 13 (2018): 25–36.

26 Himanshu Prabha Ray, “Early Maritime Contacts between South and Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20 (1989): 43–46.

27 E.g., Guy, “Tamil Merchants and the Hindu-Buddhist Diaspora”; Skilling, “Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual,” 373; Bérénice Bellina-Pryce and Praon Silapanth, “Khao Sam Kaeo and the Upper Thai Peninsula: Understanding the Mechanisms of Early Trans-Asiatic Trade and Cultural Exchange,” in *Uncovering Southeast Asia’s Past: Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, eds. Elisabeth A. Bacus, Ian C. Glover, and Vincent C. Pigott (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 390.

came to Southeast Asia for its forest products and Chinese goods, in part through private entrepreneurial ventures whose profits were invested into Buddhist and Jaina monastic establishments along coastal eastern India by the second century BCE.<sup>28</sup> Southeast Asians, in turn, sought Indian punch-marked silver coins,<sup>29</sup> beads made of glass, carnelian, and semiprecious stones,<sup>30</sup> and perhaps also more perishable goods like cotton.<sup>31</sup> Clear South Asian connections are evidenced by coinage derived from Southeast Asia's protohistoric sites: coins recovered from the Mekong Delta, for example, bear direct parallel to Chandravalli, Karnataka, and other areas in southern India.<sup>32</sup> Populations at Sri Ksetra (Pyu) and Angkor Borei (Funan) first experimented with brick architectural technologies by the late centuries BCE.<sup>33</sup>

Trade between South and Southeast Asia intensified after the Chinese emperor Han Wudi (r. ca. 140–87 BCE) established a “maritime silk route” from China to Rome via South Asia that operated into the Song and Yuan dynasties. Southern China's primary trading ports for this maritime silk route likely lay in Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Trade accelerated after Augustus established the Pax Romanica in 58 BCE, when Indian traders were finally permitted access to the Roman Empire (via the Red Sea) and thus to Mediterranean markets.<sup>34</sup> By the first century CE, Indian traders had reached the Malay Peninsula and, eventually, South China ports via Southeast Asia. And in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, maritime trade made regular use of the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea. Economic and political changes during mainland Southeast Asia's

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**28** Ray, “Early Maritime Contacts between South and Southeast Asia”; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

**29** R. S. Wicks, *Money, Markets, and Trade in Early Southeast Asia: The Development of Indigenous Monetary Systems to AD 1400* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), 114–121, 156–164.

**30** Carter, “Beads, Exchange Networks and Emerging Complexity” and “The Production and Exchange of Glass and Stone Beads in Southeast Asia”; James W. Lankton and Laure Dussubieux, “Early Glass in Asian Maritime Trade: A Review and an Interpretation of Compositional Analyses,” *Journal of Glass Studies* 48 (2006): 121–44.

**31** Judith Cameron, “Iron and Cloth Across the Bay of Bengal: New Data from Tha Kae, Central Thailand,” *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 559–57.

**32** Ray, “Early Maritime Contacts between South and Southeast Asia,” 52; see also Wicks, *Money, Markets, and Trade in Early Southeast Asia*.

**33** See Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities,” 348–351; Miriam T. Stark, David C. W. Sanderson, and Rob G. Bingham, “Monumentality in the Mekong Delta: Luminescence Dating and Implications,” *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 26 (2006): 115–116.

**34** Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 28–29.

protohistoric period reflect international factors, local developments, and long-term trends toward social stratification,<sup>35</sup> all of which set the stage for the emergence of institutionalized religion and statecraft in the mid-first millennium CE.

Urbanization swept across Monsoon Asia from eastern India and the Bay of Bengal<sup>36</sup> to northern Vietnam by the first few centuries CE.<sup>37</sup> Large population settlements emerged in inland regions that held high agrarian potential and along the South China Sea's coastline,<sup>38</sup> whose deepwater ports and coastal settlements held valued export goods and housed foreign traders. Their populations managed, and perhaps in some cases restricted,<sup>39</sup> the circulation of food, commodities, and exotic goods to inland settlements across the Lower Mekong Basin. Regional and extraregional trade was integral to their success.<sup>40</sup> These trade networks had deeper roots into the late first millennium BCE,<sup>41</sup> although expanded interaction also drew populations into new settlements by the first centuries CE,

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**35** Hall, *Maritime Trade*, 1985; Miriam T. Stark and Bong Sovath, "Recent Research on the Emergence of Early Historic States in Cambodia's Lower Mekong," *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 19 (2001): 92–94.

**36** Ranjusri Ghosh, "Pundravardhana in the First Phase of Urbanization (4th Century B.C.–3rd Century A.D.) – A Study," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 57 (1996): 199–209; Sunil Gupta, "The Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (1000 BC–AD 500)," *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 25 (2005): 21–30; Himanshu Prabha Ray, "The Archaeology of Bengal: Trading Networks, Cultural Identities," *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient* 49 (2006): 68–95.

**37** Caitlin Evans, Nigel Chang, and Naho Shimizu, "Sites, Survey, and Ceramics: Settlement Patterns in the First to Ninth Centuries CE in the Upper Mun River Valley, Northeast Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 438–67; Heng, "Transition to the Pre-Angkorian Period"; Murphy and Stark, "Introduction," 335–336; Miriam T. Stark, "Early Mainland Southeast Asian Landscapes in the First Millennium AD," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 407–32.

**38** Aude Favereau and Bérénice Bellina, "Thai-Malay Peninsula and South China Sea Networks (500 BC–AD 200), Based on a Reappraisal of 'Sa Huynh-Kalanay'-Related Ceramics," *Quaternary International* 416 (2016): 219–27; Stark, "Early Mainland Southeast Asian Landscapes."

**39** Carter, "Beads, Exchange Networks and Emerging Complexity," 751.

**40** See Jan Wisseman Christie, "State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia: A Consideration of the Theories and the Data," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151 (1995): 235–88; Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Archaeology of Early Maritime Polities of Southeast Asia," in *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History*, eds. Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 282–313.

**41** Ambra Calo et al., "Sembiran and Pacung on the North Coast of Bali: A Strategic Crossroads for Early Trans-Asiatic Exchange," *Antiquity* 89 (2015): 394.

or the protohistoric period.<sup>42</sup> South Asians practiced animist, Buddhist, and Brahmanic belief systems in both urban centers and their surrounding countryside by the early centuries CE;<sup>43</sup> South Asia's earliest Buddhist monasteries also appeared during this time.<sup>44</sup>

These protohistoric developments established the foundation upon which South and Southeast Asian subregions flourished in the mid-first millennium CE. Archaeologists and art historians have documented the materialization of both indigenous and South Asian ideologies and practices in places and goods from the "Gupta era" in Southeast Asia from the mid- to late third to the early seventh centuries CE.<sup>45</sup> Peninsular South Asia, the Bay of Bengal, and much of mainland Southeast Asia underwent parallel cultural developments during this time. These included the ideological transmission of Indic ideologies and practices by lay people (particularly merchants and artisans) and elites, which are manifest in multireligious built landscapes. Jewelry, containers, and – somewhat later – stone and perhaps wooden statuary forged larger terrestrial and maritime cultural landscapes than ever before.<sup>46</sup>

A desire to participate in emerging economic and religious networks drew inland, agrarian populations to urban coastal settlements and emergent cities in alluvial floodplains. Their managerial elite embraced Brahmanic and Buddhist practices, which in turn required new physical trappings: writing on bamboo strips and sandstone stelae (not copper plates), institutionalized religion, ritual paraphernalia, and shrines and temples. These objects required caretakers: literati for the inscriptions; artisans for the amulets and ritual vessels; and geomancers,

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<sup>42</sup> Carter, "Beads, Exchange Networks and Emerging Complexity," 751; Miriam T. Stark, "Pre-Angkorian Settlement Trends in Cambodia's Mekong Delta and the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project," *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 26 (2006): 98–109.

<sup>43</sup> See Jason D. Hawkes, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Landscapes of Religious Change in Vindhya Pradesh," *South Asian Studies* 30 (2014): 1–15; Ray, "The Archaeology of Bengal"; Julia Shaw, "Nāga Sculptures in Sanchi's Archaeological Landscape: Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Local Agricultural Cults in Central India, First Century BCE to Fifth Century CE," *Artibus Asiae* 64 (2004): 5–59.

<sup>44</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 19.

<sup>45</sup> See Alison Kyra Carter and Nam C. Kim, "Globalization at the Dawn of History: The Emergence of Global Cultures in the Mekong and Red River Deltas," in *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*, ed. Tamar Hodos (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 733–734 for a recent review.

<sup>46</sup> Dalsheimer and Manguin, "Viṣṇu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-Est"; Pierre-Yves Manguin, "City-States and City-State Cultures in Pre-15th-Century Southeast Asia," in *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters, 2000), 409–16 and "The Archaeology of Early Maritime Polities of Southeast Asia."



architects, and ritual specialists for the shrines. With these new responsibilities came the emergence of a new elite that conveyed cultural and social order; writing and temple construction became vehicles of social power,<sup>47</sup> and third-century CE Chinese sources noted the books and archives of “Funan.”<sup>48</sup> The next section tacks between current knowledge of the timing of changes in South Asian ritual, language, and networks in Gupta-period South Asia with respect to Southeast Asia.

## 3 Material and Ideological Matters in South and Southeast Asia

### 3.1 South and Southeast Asia’s Earliest Temples and Ritual Practice

Historians can occasionally access the earliest vestiges of ancient religions through texts, but archaeologists generally record its later formalization through the study of sacred places, images, and ritual paraphernalia, like carved ring stones, terracotta images, and carnelian lions.<sup>49</sup> Recent South Asian syntheses date the earliest durable structures in brick (shrines, caves, and rock shelters) associated with Buddhist and Brahmanic religions by the third and second centuries BCE. The early Mauryan construction date that Hawkes<sup>50</sup> suggests for monastic buildings at the site of Deur Kothar (Madhya Pradesh) is significantly earlier than most other reports.

By this time, people built and patronized Buddhist monasteries and pilgrimage sites with *stūpa* complexes and Hindu apsidal shrines, often along trade routes, from the Western Ghats to the eastern coast of Peninsular India, including the Bay of Bengal region.<sup>51</sup> Crossing cultural and political boundaries, these

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47 See, e.g., Lavy, “As in Heaven, So on Earth.”

48 Paul Pelliot, “Le Fou-Nan,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient*, 3 (1903): 248–303, 254.

49 Lars Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 29; Upinder Singh, “Cults and Shrines in Early Historical Mathura (c. 200 BC–AD 200),” *World Archaeology* 36 (2004): 378–98.

50 Hawkes, “One Size Does Not Fit All,” 2.

51 E.g. Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, 19; Robin Coningham, “Monks, Caves and Kings: A Reassessment of the Nature of Early Buddhism in Sri Lanka,” *World Archaeology* 27 (1995): 222–42; Fogelin, *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*, 104–109; Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, 207–208; Himanshu Prabha

ideological systems circulated people and goods, forged communities through ritual practice, and merged religion and statecraft with both Sanskrit and Pali as liturgical languages by the mid-second century BCE.<sup>52</sup>

Asians on both sides of the Bay of Bengal adopted temple-based religion and its associated rituals, language, and political ideology by the fifth and sixth centuries CE.<sup>53</sup> Reasons why priests moved their *pūjā* ritual practice from the domestic environment to public shrines and community temples have been discussed in depth elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> At stake here is the process by which it took place, and why Southeast Asians embraced this shift relatively soon after it developed in South Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. Southeast Asian archaeologists and art historians acknowledge both multiple aesthetic influences on Southeast Asia's earliest architecture and Buddhist and Brahmanic statuary; yet nearly all identify profoundly local stylistic traditions that distinguish the art from its South Asian counterparts.<sup>55</sup>

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Ray, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), "Early Maritime Contacts between South and Southeast Asia," and "The Archaeology of Bengal," 87; Julia Shaw, "Monasteries, Monasticism, and Patronage in Ancient India: Mawasa, a Recently Documented Hilltop Buddhist Complex in the Sanchi Area of Madhya Pradesh," *South Asian Studies* 27 (2011): 111–30 and "Archaeologies of Buddhist Propagation in Ancient India: 'Ritual' and 'Practical' Models of Religious Change," *World Archaeology* 45 (2013): 93 et passim.

<sup>52</sup> Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, 50; Ingo Strauch, "The Character Writing System Between Identity and Assimilation," in *The Idea of Writing: Writing Across Borders*, eds. Alex de Voogt and Joachim Friedrich Quack (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 149.

<sup>53</sup> E.g., Robert L. Brown, "Importance of Gupta-Period Sculpture in Southeast Asian Art History," in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 317–31; Michael de Havenon, "The Earliest Viṣṇu Sculpture from Southeast Asia," *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 64/65 (2006/2007): 81–98; Manguin, "The Transmission of Vaiṣṇavism across the Bay of Bengal," 55. For the earliest suggestion, see Hermann Kulke, "Indian Colonies, Indianization or Cultural Convergence? Reflections on the Changing Image of India's Role in South-East Asia," in *Onderzoek in Zuidoost-Azië: Agenda's voor de Jaren Negentig*, ed. Henk S. Nordholt (Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden, Vakgroep Talen en Culturen van Zuidoost-Azië en Oceanië, 1990), 8–32.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., Willis, "The Formation of Temple Ritual in the Gupta Period."

<sup>55</sup> Brown, "Importance of Gupta-Period Sculpture in Southeast Asian Art History"; Dalsheimer and Manguin, "Viṣṇu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-Est"; Heejung Kang, "The Spread of Sarnath-Style Buddha Images in Southeast Asia and Shandong, China, by the Sea Route," *Kemanusiaan* 20 (2013): 39–60; Paul A. Lavy, "Conch-on-Hip Images in Peninsular Thailand and Early Vaiṣṇava Sculpture in Southeast Asia," in *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, eds. Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (Bangkok: River Books, 2014), 157–164; Janice Stargardt, "Death Rituals of the Late Iron Age and Early Buddhism in

Southeast Asians erected their shrines and temples in communities where they had already lived for centuries:<sup>56</sup> alluvial plains from the Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya rivers to the Mekong Delta. They filled these structures with Buddha statues and representations of deities, including Śiva *liṅga*, Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Brahmā, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, and Lakṣmī.<sup>57</sup> They so embraced literacy that third-century Chinese visitors described books and depots where Funan residents stored their archives.<sup>58</sup> What remains for scholarly study are their intricately carved stone stelae, which favored vernacular languages by the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>59</sup> They also used Sanskrit and Khmer on their stelae, and archaic types of Brahmi and Pallava on gold plaques recovered from early brick foundations across southern Vietnam during the 1980s and 1990s, with the earliest examples from the Go Thap site.<sup>60</sup> Bronkhorst contends that within a few centuries a great majority of Brahmins in Southeast Asia were Southeast Asian, and some had studied in Indian ashrams.<sup>61</sup>

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Central Burma and South-East India – Whose Norms, Whose Practices?” in *Im Dickicht der Gebote; Studien zur Dialektik von Norm und Praxis in der Buddhismusgeschichte Asiens*, *Historia Religionum* 26, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2005), 407–33.

56 E.g., Evans et al., “Sites, Survey, and Ceramics”; Heng, “Transition to the Pre-Angkorian Period”; Stephen A. Murphy, “The Case for Proto-Dvāravatī: A Review of the Art Historical and Archaeological Evidence,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47 (2016): 366–92; Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities.” For Gupta parallels, see Jason D. Hawkes and Riza Abbas, “Copperplates in Context: A Preliminary Investigation of the Study and Archaeological Settings of Land Grant Inscriptions,” *Pratnatattva* 22 (2016): 51.

57 See Le Thi Lien, “Hindu Deities in Southern Vietnam: Images on Small Archaeological Artefacts,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 407–431; Stanley J. O’Connor, “Some Early Siva Linga in Nakorn Si Thammarat, Peninsular Thailand,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 71 (1983): 1–5.

58 Pelliot, “Le Fou-Nan,” 254.

59 E.g., Michael Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th–8th Centuries* (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, 1998).

60 Le Thi Lien, “Gold Plaques and Their Cultural Contexts in the Oc Eo Culture,” *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 25 (2005): 145–54 and “Brahmi Inscriptions from Archaeological Sites in Southern Vietnam During the 1st Millennium CE,” in *Advancing Southeast Asian Archaeology 2013: Selected Papers from the First SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology, Chonburi, Thailand 2013* (Bangkok: SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, 2015), 364–365.

61 Johannes Bronkhorst, “The Spread of Sanskrit in Southeast Asia,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 269.

### 3.2 The Adoption of Southeast Asian Writing Systems

Southeast Asians' adoption of writing systems marks the start of the region's historical period. The earliest Sanskrit inscriptions have been recovered from eastern Borneo, western Java, and southern Vietnam, where scholars date the Vo Canh inscription to the third century CE on paleographical grounds. Writing on seals, intaglios, and rings from the Mekong Delta site of Oc Eo bears close resemblance to second- to fifth-century South Asian scripts.<sup>62</sup> The first locally-written inscription in Old Khmer, using a Brāhmī-derived script, was recovered from Angkor Borei and dates to 611 CE.<sup>63</sup>

Research across mainland Southeast Asia suggests variation in the timing and nature of Indic cultural transmission, particularly with regard to literacy. The Pyu may have been the earliest adopters, with third- and fourth-century Indic-derived writing on seals, reliquaries, and stone urns: Prakrit at Beikthano; Prakrit, Pali, and Pyu at Sri Ksetra.<sup>64</sup> Sociopolitical transformations in the structure of leadership and urbanization accompanied such shifts. The factors that motivated Southeast Asians to embrace beliefs, practices, and religious specialists of Indic origin remains a matter of some debate. Oliver Wolters emphasized both popular devotionalism (and the introduction of modes of worship informed by bhakti theologies) and a view of religious specialists as carriers of efficacious ritual knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Many elites welcomed Brahmanic ideas and perhaps even Brahmins themselves into their communities; such foreigners infused magical qualities into ritual knowledge and introduced Sanskrit language and epics (e.g., *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*), showcased Brahmanic power, and conferred benefits on local rulers who allied with these newcomers.<sup>66</sup>

Scholars now agree that Early Southeast Asian Brahmanic and Buddhist practices and monumentality took localized forms reflecting, but not directly copying, traditions in neighboring South Asia. More germane to this chapter is the fact that institutionalized Indic traditions, and particularly religion and statecraft, did not materialize across much of Southeast Asia until the latter

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<sup>62</sup> De Casparis, "Palaeogeography as an Auxiliary Discipline," 381–382.

<sup>63</sup> Georges Cœdès, "XXV. Deux inscriptions sanskrites du Fou-nan," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 31 (1931): 1–12.

<sup>64</sup> Stargardt, "From the Iron Age to Early Cities," 342.

<sup>65</sup> Oliver W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asian Program, Cornell University, 1999), 107–125.

<sup>66</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas*, *Handbook of Oriental Studies* 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 409–412; Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, 111.

end of the Gupta period: nearly a millennium after the earliest evidence for contact. When it did, Southeast Asians created ritual-political landscapes, replete with shrines, temples, monastic establishments, ashrams, and pilgrimage centers that fundamentally restructured their political world. Archaeologists working in the Mekong Delta since World War II have studied this “Gupta-period” transition, which rippled across the Lower Mekong Basin within centuries to generate new cosmologies of power. The work of the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project in southern Cambodia since 1996 offers an archaeological case study of change and continuity.

## 4 LOMAP Landscapes

The Lower Mekong Basin was the crucible for developments leading to the ninth- to fifteenth-century Angkorian state. Scholars now agree that communities across the basin were converging into complex polities during the early first millennium CE, but the earliest, best-documented case involves the “Kingdom of Funan.”<sup>67</sup> Third- and sixth-century Chinese visitors to this polity recorded its scale, organization, and political history for their rulers; emissarial missions between China and Funan involved the movement of goods, people, and ideas.<sup>68</sup> A consensus now exists that one of Funan’s most prominent capitals lay at the archaeological site of Angkor Borei, in southern Cambodia. The earliest dated Khmer inscription (611 CE) was found at this site.<sup>69</sup> The small Phnom Da hills just south of Angkor Borei yielded the earliest dated eponymous Khmer art tradition,<sup>70</sup> which epigrapher Georges Coédès linked with Funan’s last ruler, Rudravarman (ca. 514–539 CE).<sup>71</sup>

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**67** See Pelliot, “Le Fou-Nan.”

**68** See reviews in Yoshiaki Ishizawa, “Chinese Chronicles of 1st–5th Century A.D. Funan, Southern Cambodia,” in *South East Asia & China: Art, Interaction & Commerce*, eds. Rosemary Scott and John Guy, Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia 17 (London: University of London Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1996), 11–31; Claude Jacques, “China and Ancient Khmer History,” in *South East Asia & China*, 32–40; Stark, “The Transition to History in the Mekong Delta.”

**69** Coédès, “XXV. Deux inscriptions sanskrites du Fou-nan.”

**70** Pierre Dupont, “Les linteaux khmers du VII siècle,” *Artibus Asiae* 15 (1952): 31–83 and *La statuaire pre-angkorianne* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1955).

**71** Georges Coédès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 1 (Hanoi: L’École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1942), 155.

## 4.1 Material Remains

Angkor Borei today remains a named location where more than 14,000 Cambodians live and farm (Figure 3). This 300-hectare walled and moated site contains deep sub-surface deposits; more than fifteen moated mounds with collapsed brick architectural features and their associated ancient ponds are still visible within the settlement.<sup>72</sup> Field investigations by the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project have demonstrated that the site was first occupied in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE,<sup>73</sup> construction of its encircling brick wall began as early as the first century CE,<sup>74</sup> and its water sources are much older;<sup>75</sup> its human burial population was relatively healthy, compared with populations further north, and bore little sign of interpersonal violence.<sup>76</sup> The city had intimate links through artificial channels to a range of satellite communities to its west and south.<sup>77</sup> Site excavations produced findings that parallel Louis Malleret's earlier work done in Vietnam's Mekong Delta,<sup>78</sup> and more recent work since the 1970s.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Miriam T. Stark, "Angkor Borei and the Archaeology of Cambodia's Mekong Delta," in *Art & Archaeology of Fu Nan: Pre-Khmer Kingdom of the Lower Mekong Valley*, ed. J. Khoo (Bangkok: Orchid Books, 2003), 87–106; Stark et al., "Results of the 1995–1996 Archaeological Field Investigations at Angkor Borei, Cambodia," *Asian Perspectives* 38 (1999): 7–36.

<sup>73</sup> Stark and Bong, "Recent Research on the Emergence of Early Historic States."

<sup>74</sup> Stark, Sanderson, and Bingham, "Monumentality in the Mekong Delta: Luminescence Dating and Implications."

<sup>75</sup> Paul Bishop et al., "A 3.5ka Record of Paleoenvironments and Human Occupation at Angkor Borei, Mekong Delta, Southern Cambodia," *Geoarchaeology* 18 (2003): 1–35.

<sup>76</sup> Ikehara-Quebral et al., "Biocultural Practices During the Transition to History"; Michael Pietruszewsky and Rona M. Ikehara-Quebral, "The Bioarchaeology of the Vat Komnou Cemetery, Angkor Borei, Cambodia," *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 26 (2006): 86–97.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Bishop, David C. W. Sanderson, and Miriam T. Stark, "OSL and Radiocarbon Dating of a Pre-Angkorian Canal in the Mekong Delta, Southern Cambodia," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 31 (2003): 319–36; David C. W. Sanderson et al., "Luminescence Dating of Anthropogenically Reset Canal Sediments from Angkor Borei, Mekong Delta, Cambodia," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 22 (2003): 1111–1121; Stark, Sanderson, and Bingham, "Monumentality in the Mekong Delta: Luminescence Dating and Implications."

<sup>78</sup> L. Malleret, *L'Archéologie du Delta du Mekong* (Paris: Publication de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1959–1963).

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Linh Côn Dao, "The Oc Eo Burial Group Recently Excavated at Go Thap (Dong Thap Province, Việt Nam)," in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1994: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, vol. 1, ed. Pierre-Yves Manguin (Hull: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1998), 111–17; Van Tan Ha, "Oc Eo: Endogenous and Exogenous Elements," *Vietnam Social Sciences* 1–2 (1986): 91–101; Pierre-Yves Manguin and Vo Si Khai, "Excavations at the Ba The/Oc Eo Complex (Viet Nam): A Preliminary Report on the 1998 Campaign," in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998: Proceedings of*



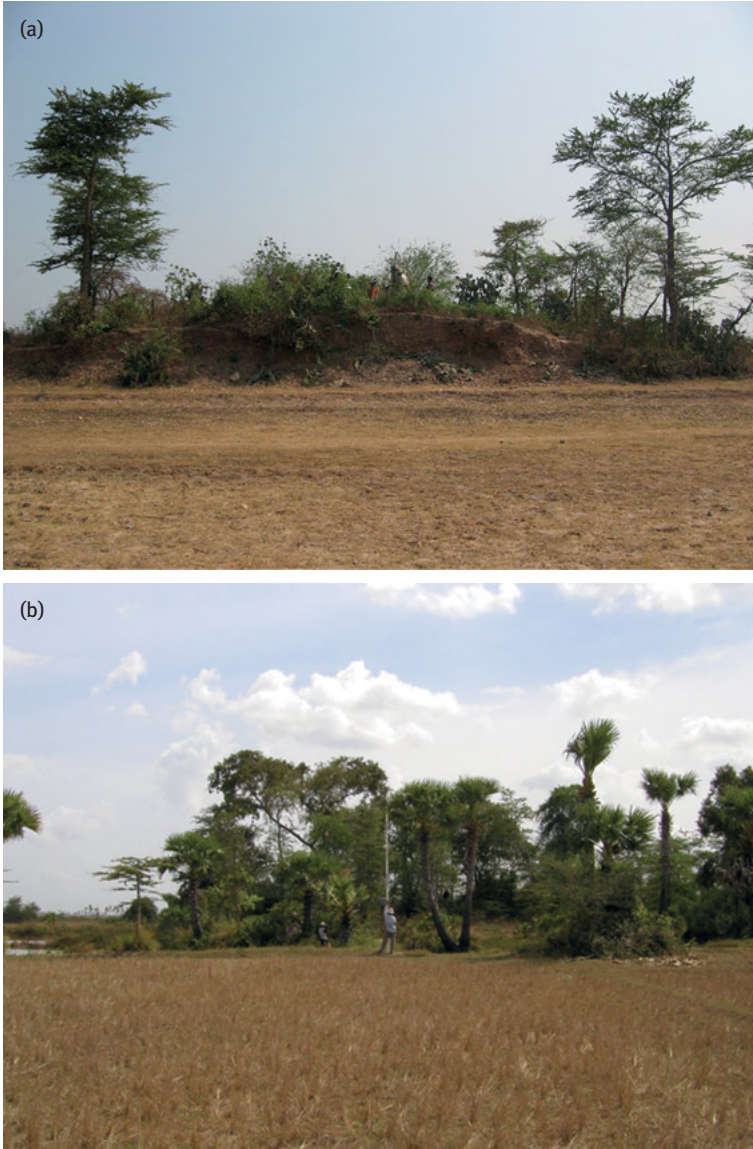
**Figure 3:** Angkor Borei archaeological site (Takeo Province, Cambodia) using Google map as a base map.

Four seasons of systematic archaeological field survey produced a robust settlement history for the Takeo River catchment in which Angkor Borei is located.<sup>80</sup> LOMAP findings from Angkor Borei and from the 2003 to 2009 field survey, coupled with Vietnamese field investigations of “Oc Eo Culture” sites, offer patterns for comparison against “Gupta South Asia” in three domains. Most documented first-millennium CE sites were small mounds containing vestiges of collapsed brick features (Figure 4), most of which had been scavenged; only two tall (i.e., >10 meters in height) mounds were recorded that contained ostensibly intact brick temples. Figure 5 illustrates the fragmentary nature of brick architecture in most mapped mounds. Mounds that were mapped in rural areas associated with neighboring settlements appeared either as isolates or in small dispersed groups; most were moated, and pond depressions were still visible in locations where farmers had not infilled the areas for farming. Moated and non-moated mounds also appeared in villages atop archaeological sites, but Angkor Borei was the

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*the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, eds. Wibke Lobo and Stefanie Reimann (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 2000), 107–21; Trinh Thi Hòa, “Réflexions sur les vestiges de la culture d’Oc Eo,” *Etudes Vietnamiennes*, n. s., 50 (1996): 111–23.

**80** Stark, “Pre-Angkorian Settlement Trends in Cambodia’s Mekong Delta”; Stark, Sanderson, and Bingham, “Monumentality in the Mekong Delta: Luminescence Dating and Implications.”



**Figure 4:** Mapping Pre-Angkorian archaeological sites from LOMAP 2004 Survey. 4a (top): Ang Neakta Chhvía; 4b (bottom): Tuol Kpuos.





**Figure 5:** Examples of dated fragmentary brick structures in LOMAP region: (upper) Ang Yay Nuon. OSL date:  $650 \pm 50$  CE. (lower) Ta Tos (Angkor Borei site). OSL dates:  $320 \pm 30$  CE (SUTL 1565),  $95 \pm 30$  CE (SUTL 1566),  $570 \pm 30$  CE (SUTL 1567). In Stark et al. (2006:115, Table 2).

only nucleated settlement with more than ten mapped small mounds and at least two large temples.<sup>81</sup>

Smaller brick structures that have been documented in both southern Vietnam and southern Cambodia were likely Hindu and Buddhist shrines,<sup>82</sup> based both on their dimensions and original contents. Most mounds that our 2003 to 2009 LOMAP survey (Takeo Province, Cambodia) mapped had been excavated previously by villagers in search of gold; they consistently reported, with great disappointment, that soundings in the mounds' centers produced objects associated with ritual deposits (e.g., inscribed and/or decorated gold leaves; four bricks placed in a square that Ślącza links to the *Prathameṣṭakanyāsa* consecration ritual;<sup>83</sup> and white sand), rather than abundant gold caches. Larger mapped structures, some ranging up to 70 meters in length, are presumed to have served as temples. Most have been partly or completely destroyed; one from Angkor Borei yielded at least three Brahmanic images in the late 1990s during its dismantlement. Rural hamlets had shrines; nucleated villages had shrines and, later in the sequence, large brick temples. Physical manifestations of institutionalized Brahmanism and Buddhism (temples, shrines, statuary, and inscribed stelae) were transformative objects in the past. Collectively, such features produced ritual landscapes,<sup>84</sup> in which some settlements like Angkor Borei were sufficiently nucleated to be considered urban. That such ritual structures were established in locations of traditional indigenous *neak ta* ancestral spirits<sup>85</sup> suggests both a merging of religious and political, and the kind of ideological multivocality that also characterized fifth- and sixth-century Gupta India from its core region to Tamil Nadu and the Bay of Bengal.<sup>86</sup> In both South and Southeast Asia, populations tolerated Buddhism and established monastic centers under rulers who patronized Brahmanism. Epigraphic and art-historical evidence from the Mekong Delta suggests both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva practice during the first millennium

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**81** Stark et al., "Results of the 1995–1996 Archaeological Field Investigations," 20–22; Stark, "Pre-Angkorian Settlement Trends in Cambodia's Mekong Delta."

**82** Ślącza, Anna Aleksandra, "The Depositing of the Embryo: Temple Consecration Rituals in the Hindu Tradition of South and Southeast Asia: A Study of the Textual and Archaeological Evidence," in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 433–42 and "The Brick Structures of Go Thap: Tombs or Temples?" *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 31 (2011): 109–117.

**83** Ślącza, "The Depositing of the Embryo," 437.

**84** See Stark, "Inscribing Legitimacy and Building Power in the Mekong Delta," 75–105.

**85** Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, 309.

**86** Ray, *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*, 71, 115.

CE.<sup>87</sup> Figure 6 illustrates a pre-Angkorian Śiva *liṅga* in situ at the Kampong Youl community in 1997 before its removal to the Angkor Borei Museum; the subsequent LOMAP survey mapped both first-millennium CE mounds and residential areas at this location.



**Figure 6:** Pre-Angkorian *liṅga* in situ at Kampong Youl village, Takeo Province, Cambodia (July 1997).

## 4.2 Materializing Political Organization

Who were these rulers, and what was the sociopolitical framework in which they rose to power? Pre-Angkorian elite donors with hereditary *poñ* titles sponsored sixth- and seventh-century CE inscriptions across the Lower Mekong Basin and lived within broader communities guided by headmen and perhaps even councils of elders – not unlike the fifth- and sixth-century *adhikaraṇa* or councils that administered Puṇḍravardhana in north Bengal, based on copper-plate land grants,<sup>88</sup> although such administration became more centralized

<sup>87</sup> E.g., Cœdès, “XXV. Deux inscriptions sanskrites du Fou-nan”; Lavy, “As in Heaven, So on Earth”; Le Thi Lien, “Gold Plaques and Their Cultural Contexts,” “Hindu Deities in Southern Vietnam,” and “Brahmi Inscriptions from Archaeological Sites”; Malleret, *L’Archéologie du Delta du Mekong*; Manguin and Vo Si Khai, “Excavations at the Ba The/Oc Eo Complex.”

<sup>88</sup> R. Furui, “Variegated Adaptations: State Formation in Bengal from the Fifth to Seventh Century,” in *Interrogating Political Systems: Integrative Processes and States in Pre-Modern India*, eds. Bhairavi Prasad Sahu and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), 259–264.

through this period.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps matrilineal in organization, local lineages may have controlled land collectively.<sup>90</sup> We cannot identify specific landholding estates or monastic centers on the contemporary landscape, but epigraphic sources suggest the replacement of hereditary *poñ* titles in the eighth century with the new *mratañ* title. Historians equate this change in title with the gradual assumption of power by non-*poñ* rulers,<sup>91</sup> a change that coincided with the emergence of multiple polities across the Lower Mekong Basin.<sup>92</sup>

Consolidating power in ancient Cambodia depended on building and maintaining linkages with elites elsewhere in the region, and archaeologists can explore the time depth and directionality of some of these networks by studying language, objects, and architecture. Technological studies of stone and glass materials (frequently but not always beads) recovered from Iron Age and protohistoric burials across the Lower Mekong and into Peninsular Thailand suggests multiple sequential phases of South/Southeast Asia interaction that began in the mid-first millennium BCE and intensified through time. Glass and stone beads, carnelian lion pendants and high-tin knobbed bronze bowls from South Asia have been recovered from second- and first-century BCE sites from Vietnam to Myanmar,<sup>93</sup> suggesting movement between regions and likely using the Bay of Bengal.<sup>94</sup> Linguistic and maritime studies indicate that Southeast Asian seafarers likely dominated the interchange.<sup>95</sup> South Asians sought Southeast Asian goods:

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**89** Arlo Griffiths, “New Documents for the Early History of Puṇḍravardhana: Copperplate Inscriptions from the Late Gupta and Early Post-Gupta Periods,” *Pratna Samiksha: A Journal of Archaeology*, n. s., 6 (2015): 25–26.

**90** Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, 299, 324.

**91** Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, 372–379.

**92** See Heng, “Transition to the Pre-Angkorian Period”; Claude Jacques, “‘Funan’, ‘Zhenla’: The Reality Concealed by These Chinese views of Indochina,” in *Early South East Asia: Essays in Archaeology, History and Historical Geography*, eds. R. B. Smith and W. Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 371–379.

**93** Ian C. Glover and Bérénice Bellina, “Ban Don Ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo: The Earliest Indian Contacts Re-Assessed,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 17–45.

**94** See Ray, *Winds of Change*, 1994.

**95** Hoogervorst, “Tracing Maritime Connections,” 2017; Pierre-Yves Manguin, “Trading Ships of the South China Sea. Shipbuilding Techniques and Their Role in the History of the Development of Asian Trade Networks,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 36 (1993): 255–264 and “Ships and Shipping in Southeast Asia,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, ed. David Ludden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

tin, copper, tortoiseshell, aromatic tree products, and food crops were all transported westward.<sup>96</sup>

By the fourth century CE, earthenware ceremonial objects like spouted ewers (*kendi*) appear in Thailand,<sup>97</sup> southern Cambodia,<sup>98</sup> and southern Vietnam.<sup>99</sup> Figure 7 illustrates three nearly complete but unprovenanced *kendi* vessels from the Angkor Borei Museum that villagers recovered. LOMAP excavations recovered *kendi* sherds (primarily spouts) that date to the third to sixth centuries CE.<sup>100</sup> This vessel form appears in coastal and inland sites whose inhabitants participated in a pan-South China Sea network whose origins may lie nearly a millennium earlier in time.<sup>101</sup> Made from fine alluvial clays, this painted or plain fine-paste vessel form exhibits little variation in form irrespective of provenance and suggests a shared ceramic technological tradition whose horizon encompassed the entire region in which Southeast and South Asians interacted in the early to mid-first millennium CE.

The South Asian provenance of some objects, and a larger number of objects reflecting South Asian technological traditions,<sup>102</sup> supports historians' contention that people and ideas moved freely between South and Southeast Asia. So does the appearance of mid-fifth-century Sanskrit inscriptions, some of which are in Tamil Grantha script, and mitered Viṣṇus along the coasts of Java, Borneo, and Sumatra.<sup>103</sup> In nearly every instance, Southeast Asians added their distinct signature to ideas and objects that originated in South Asia, and developed these South Asian-infused objects at different points in the sequence.

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**96** Tom Hoogervorst, "If Only Plants Could Talk . . . Reconstructing Pre-Modern Biological Translocations in the Indian Ocean," in *The Sea, Identity and History: From the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea*, eds. Satish Chandra and Himanshu Prabha Ray (New Delhi: Manohar Press, 2013), 67–92; Hoogervorst, "Tracing Maritime Connections," 2017: 760–761.

**97** A. Barram and Ian C. Glover, "Rethinking Dvaravati," in *Archaeology in Southeast Asia – from Homo erectus to the Living Traditions*, ed. J.- P. S. Méry, V. Zeitoun and E. Rambault (Chiang Mai: European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, 2008) 175–182; 180, Table 1.

**98** Miriam Stark, "Pre-Angkor Earthenware: Ceramics from Cambodia's Mekong Delta," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 1 (2000): 69–89.

**99** Masanari Nishimura, Nguyễn Duy Tỷ, and Huỳnh Đình Chung, "Excavation of Nhon Thành at the Hậu Giang River Reach, Southern Vietnam," *Taida Journal of Art History* 25 (2009): 1–68.

**100** Miriam T. Stark and Shawn Fehrenbach, "Earthenware Ceramic Technologies of Angkor Borei, Cambodia," *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 14 (2019): 116.

**101** E.g., Favereau and Bellina, "Thai-Malay Peninsula and South China Sea Networks."

**102** E.g., Carter, "Garnet Beads in Southeast Asia."

**103** Dalsheimer and Manguin, "Viṣṇu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-Est"; Guy, "Tamil Merchants and the Hindu-Buddhist Diaspora," 244–248.



**Figure 7:** Examples of *kendi* vessel forms housed at the Angkor Borei Museum (Takeo Province, Cambodia).

## 5 Luminescence, Tempo, and Change

This chapter has summarized recent research in the Lower Mekong Basin to understand the dynamic modes of cultural production in the first millennium CE that ultimately transformed the region into urbanized state-level societies. The wealth of “Indic” evidence that appeared shortly after the mid-first millennium suggests that the area’s populations joined the pre-existing South China Sea network during the early centuries CE.<sup>104</sup> What happened in the Mekong Delta

<sup>104</sup> See Carter, “Beads, Exchange Networks and Emerging Complexity.”

during the “Gupta era” was thus something new, demographically as well as organizationally. A growing body of archaeological, art-historical, and epigraphic research suggests a mid-sixth-century CE date for organizational transformations across the Lower Mekong and Chao Phraya basins,<sup>105</sup> and contemporary inscribed Pyu stone burial urns bearing royal names that reflect Sanskrit origins<sup>106</sup> suggests that Gupta India resonated with a broad audience to its east. Refining the timing of South Asian and Southeast Asian developments is challenging on many counts: both regions housed discrete, if interacting, polities during the mid-first millennium CE; art historians hold differing views regarding the timing of some of Southeast Asia’s earliest Brahmanic art;<sup>107</sup> and few radiometric dates exist for monuments that would have been the centers of communal ritual practice. We know, however, that Buddhism and its practitioners reached southern India and the Bay of Bengal by the late centuries BCE.<sup>108</sup> Southeast Asia’s westernmost Pyu embraced monastic centers by the early centuries CE.<sup>109</sup>

Archaeologists have now documented protohistoric settlement in most Southeast Asian places where these fifth- and sixth-century temple communities developed. The timing of this emergence varied across the region, but art-historical and archaeological evidence suggests that most polities were in conversation with institutionalized ideologies through the movement of people and goods. So did hearing the Sanskrit epics that these Brahmins carried, which illustrated Brahmanic power and mapped neatly onto traditional Southeast Asian tutelary spirits. We lack clear evidence that evangelizing Buddhist monks on the move after the fifth-century collapse of Gandharan patronage<sup>110</sup> reached Southeast Asian

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**105** Brown, “Importance of Gupta-Period Sculpture in Southeast Asian Art History”; Murphy, “The Case for Proto-Dvāravati”; Stark, “Early Mainland Southeast Asian Landscapes.”

**106** Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities,” 358–359.

**107** E.g., de Havenon, “The Earliest Viṣṇu Sculpture from Southeast Asia”; Lavy, “Conch-on-Hip Images in Peninsular Thailand”; Stanley J. O’Connor, *Hindu Gods of Peninsular Siam*, Supplementum 28 (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1972).

**108** See Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, 319; Himanshu Prabha Ray, “Multi-Religious Maritime Linkages Across the Bay of Bengal During the First Millennium CE,” in *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, eds. Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (Bangkok: River Books, 2014), 135–51.

**109** Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities,” 353.

**110** Kurt Behrendt, “Evidence for the Diffusion of Gandhara Forms after the Late 5th Century,” in *South Asian Religions and Visual Forms in their Archaeological Context*, South Asian Archaeology and Art 2012, vol. 2, eds. Vincent Lefèvre, Aurore Didier, and Benjamin Mutin (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers), 407–408; for Chinese parallel, see Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Network*, 306.



shores; better evidence exists for entrepreneurial Brahmins and artisans who traveled to Southeast Asian shores in search of better lifeways.<sup>111</sup> Skilling's work shows how the dynamics of relic and image worship facilitated the eastward spread of Buddhism,<sup>112</sup> with a particular focus on Avalokiteśvara and post-sixth-century ritual Buddhist images (e.g. clay seals, plaques, tablets, *stūpa* images) across much of Thailand and Cambodia.

Rules changed as ideas moved eastward: statuary took new forms that acknowledged South Asian origins but adapted to local traditions.<sup>113</sup> Within generations, mainland Southeast Asians embraced the ideo-technological package of image-focused and temple-based Indic ideological systems.<sup>114</sup> Why did Southeast Asians wait until the mid-first millennium CE to adopt these practices, rather than doing so centuries earlier? Perhaps it was the shift to temple-based ritual, occurring in Gupta-period South Asia, that persuaded them? Indic iconography and statuary had broad appeal in mainland and island Southeast Asia: fifth- to seventh-century mitered Viṣṇus and Bhadrāsāna Buddhas with the *vitarkamudrā* have been recovered from sites across the mainland's river valleys and in settlements flanking the coasts of the South China Sea.<sup>115</sup> Understanding the tempo and scale of artistic dialogue, cultural transmission, or missionary zeal behind these social transformations that swept Monsoon Asia during the mid-first millennium CE requires transdisciplinary and transnational approaches. We cannot explain why Mekong Delta populations embraced Indic iconography and practices when they did, but scholars working in both South and Southeast Asia have much to contribute to the quest to situate Gupta Age developments within the broader premodern world in which they took place.

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**111** Skilling, "Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual," 373.

**112** Skilling, "Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual," 374.

**113** See Robert L. Brown, "'Rules' for Change in the Transfer of Indian Art to Southeast Asia," in *Ancient Indonesian Sculpture*, eds. Marijke J. Klokke and Pauline Lunsingh Sheurleer (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), 10–22.

**114** Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns, and 'Vulgar Practices': The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49 (1988–1989): 153–168, 155; Willis, "The Formation of Temple Ritual in the Gupta Period."

**115** Dalsheimer and Manguin, "Viṣṇu mitrés et réseaux marchands en Asie du Sud-Est"; Nicolas Revire, "New Perspectives on the Origin and Spread of Bhadrāsāna Buddhas throughout Southeast Asia (7th–8th centuries CE)," in *Connecting Empires and States: Selected Papers from the 13th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, eds. Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, Andreas Reinecke, and Dominik Bonatz (Singapore: NUS Press Pte Ltd, 2012), 131; Nicholas Revire, "From Gandhara to Java: A Comparative Study of Bhadrāsāna Buddhas and their related Bodhisattva Attendants in South and Southeast Asia," in *India and Southeast Asia: Cultural Discourses*, ed. Anna L. Dallapiccola (Mumbai: K.R. Cama Cultural Institute, 2017) 280–304.



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Janice Stargardt

# Sri Ksetra, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE: Indianization, Synergies, Creation

## 1 Introduction

George Cœdès, the celebrated epigrapher of Sanskrit and Old Khmer, developed a theory of the Indianization of Southeast Asia in a colonial context in the 1930s, as a parallel to contemporary research on the Romanization of Europe. Qualified in the Asian case as a cultural, not a military, colonization, Cœdès wrote: “In the majority of cases [in Southeast Asia], *one passes without transition from a late Neolithic to the first traces of Hinduism* [my translation and emphasis].”<sup>1</sup> He proposed processes of intensifying *cultural colonization* in the 2nd and 3rd centuries with enduring results by the 4th century. This view permeated the work of many scholars, e.g. K. N. Chaudhuri, up to 1990.<sup>2</sup> It is an undeniable fact that, at different times in the 1st millennium CE, societies throughout most of Southeast Asia that previously lacked systems of writing – and had *therefore* been widely assumed by scholars of Indianization to lack organized social structures, religions, art, and architecture – adopted Indian scripts and bodies of Indian sacred texts and adapted Indian religious thought, architecture, and art.

The exact nature of this much-invoked Indianization of Southeast Asia, its human agencies, its driving forces, and its timing, all demand constant reinterrogation through research. This chapter is such an attempt, justified by the fact that the valuable archaeological publications since c. 1990 to have addressed this problem<sup>3</sup> include little up-to-date research on the Pyu sites of Myanmar, which covered the most extensive geographical area of any culture in mainland

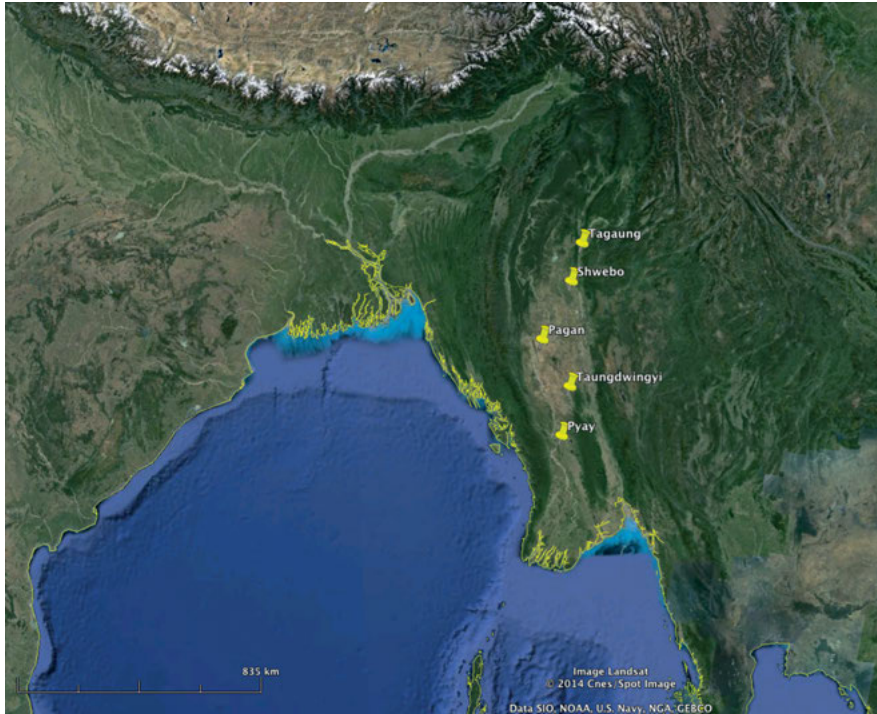
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1 George Cœdès, *Les états hindouisés de l'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (Paris: Boccard, 1964), 44; quoted in Janice Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu of Burma*, vol. 1, *Early Pyu Cities in a Man-Made Landscape* (Cambridge: PACSEA; Singapore: ISEAS, 1990), 41; on Greater India and Further India, see e.g. R. C. Majumdar, *Hindu Colonies in the Far East* (Dhaka: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963) and other Southeast Asian “colonies” books by this author.

2 K. N. Chaudhuri, “Indian Ocean Trade and Southeast Asia.” (Lecture to the Asian Studies Centre, St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, Spring 1990).

3 I. C. Glover, *Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of a World Trading System*, Occasional Paper 16 (Hull: University of Hull Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 1989; repr., 1990); I. C. Glover and P. Bellwood, eds., *Southeast Asia, from Prehistory to History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); see also Elizabeth Moore, “Space and Place in Early Burma: A New Look at ‘Pyu Culture,’” *Journal of the Siam Society* 97 (2008): 1–27.

Southeast Asia up to ca. 700 CE (Figure 1) and provide much evidence relevant to this problem. The largest Pyu site, Sri Ksetra (near Pyay), forms the central study of this chapter.



**Figure 1:** The approximate area of Pyu settlement, ca. 650 km north-south [image adapted from Google Maps by Gabriel Amable].

I wish here, as well, to challenge the view that the possession of a system of Indic writing a) exemplifies Indianization, and b) that writing is *the* criterion for the emergence of a complex society. Coédès famously regarded *Sanskritization* and *Indianization* as interchangeable terms, thus privileging texts over artifacts.<sup>4</sup> In Burma, too, studies on inscriptions on stone and metal were published on a greater scale than those on archaeology and conservation.<sup>5</sup> Evidently the written

<sup>4</sup> Coédès, *Les Etats hindouisés*, 55; George Coédès, *Articles sur le Pays Khmer*, ed. Claude Jacques (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> *Inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya and Ava. Based on the Mahamuni Marble Slabs*, collected by Emil Forchhammer, eds. Taw Sein Ko and Charles Duroiselle (Rangoon: Office of the Government

sources of any ancient society provide precious evidence on which to construct some aspects of its history; in South and Southeast Asia, these are aspects of civil and religious power. The Pyu produced a cluster of inscribed texts – some of them long and of great importance for South and Southeast Asia. Those from ca. 4th–6th centuries CE will be discussed below. On the other hand, it can be noted here that, as far as is known, those written sources provide no information about the growth of irrigation works and their impact on harvests, population growth, and social complexity: the factors, in short, which underpinned Pyu – and many other – civilizations.

## 2 Regional Archaeological Research in Southeast Asia

It is not by chance that archaeological research in Southeast Asia since the 1980s, with its emphasis on material evidence and environmental contexts, has profoundly challenged the Cœdès hypothesis, firstly through prehistoric research on social and economic stratification as revealed in the rich Bronze and Iron Age burials of mainland Southeast Asia,<sup>6</sup> secondly through evidence of (often reciprocal) agricultural, commercial, and technological exchanges between parts of India and parts of Southeast Asia many centuries before the appearance of Indic religious thought there,<sup>7</sup> and thirdly through recent archaeology on sites of early-stage urbanization, notably at Angkor Borei (southern Cambodia); Co Loa (north Vietnam); around Oc-Eo (Mekong Delta); peninsular Thailand and Myanmar; and Halin, Beikthano, and Sri Ksetra in Dry Zone Myanmar.<sup>8</sup> Long-term indigenous processes

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Printer, 1899); *Epigraphia Birmanica; Being Lithic and Other Inscriptions of Burma*, 3 vols. (Rangoon: Government Printing Office, 1919–21); G. H. Luce and Pe Maung Tin, eds., *Inscriptions of Burma, 493–599 B.E. (AD 1131–1237)* (Rangoon: University of Rangoon, Oriental Studies Publications, 1933–56), 5 portfolio volumes printed by Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., C. F. W. Higham, “The Transition from Prehistory to the Historic Period in the Upper Mun Valley,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 2, no. 3 (1998): 235–61; C. F. W. Higham, “The Prehistory of Southeast Asia: A Retrospective View of 40 Years Research,” *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 639–53.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Kennedy, “Bananas and People in the Homeland of Genus *Musa*,” *Ethnobotany Research and Applications* 7 (July 2009): 179–197; publications of the Early Rice Project, led by Dorian Fuller, UCL. Bellina, Bérénice, ed. *Khao Sam Kaeo. An Early Port-City between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea*. Paris, École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Stark, “Results of the 1995–1996 Archaeological Field Investigations at Angkor Borei, Cambodia,” *Asian Perspectives* 38, no. 1 (1999): 17–36; Miriam Stark et al., “Biocultural Practices

of economic and cultural change have been traced across the region, which suffice to challenge the model of Indian cultural colonization imposed on passive Southeast Asian societies trapped in a late Neolithic, and to demand new inquiries into the real nature of the profound cultural changes that were taking place before any evidence of literacy.

### 3 Sri Ksetra, the Urban Context of the Yahanda Mound

Sri Ksetra and two other large Pyu sites, Beikthano and Halin (Figure 1),<sup>9</sup> exemplify an early form of urbanization in Southeast Asia that was to reappear at much later, better-known historical cities. Sri Ksetra is a city of vast spatial extent, enclosing 1.847 ha within its walls, with important extramural neighborhoods on the north, west, and south sides; Beikthano covers 900 ha and Halin ca. 500 ha, both also with extramural areas. In this type of urbanization, space was defined by irrigation works (canals, moats, and reservoirs) of practical and sometimes symbolic significance, in which horticulture and agriculture coexisted with monumental clusters.<sup>10</sup> Since this was urbanization in the Dry Zones of the humid tropics, evidently both the natural and the man-made environments provided the indispensable contexts of all Pyu urban sites, and were of equal significance in the later Dry Zone royal cities of mainland Southeast Asia, such as Angkor, Pagan, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya. On the other hand, habitation sites long remained elusive at all these sites until the use of LiDAR at Angkor and

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during the Transition to History at the Vat Komnou Cemetery, Angkor Borei, Cambodia,” *Asian Perspectives* 56, no. 2, (2017): 12–46; Nam C. Kim, Lai Van Toi, and Trinh Hoang Hiep, “Co Loa; An Investigation of Vietnam’s Ancient Capital,” *Antiquity* 84, no. 326 (2010): 1011–1027; Janice Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities at Sri Ksetra and Beikthano, Myanmar,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (October 2016): 341–365; Bérénice Bellina, ed., *Khao Sam Kaeo. An Early Port-City between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea* (Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, 2017).

**9** *Nomination Dossier for the Ancient Pyu Cities, to the World Heritage Committee Meeting 2014* (Naypidaw: Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology and National Museums, 2013); all three Pyu cities were awarded World Heritage status in June 2014 for urbanization and its wider significance.

**10** Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu*, 45–142; Janice Stargardt, “Le cosmos, les ancêtres et le riz; l’eau dans l’espace urbain des pyus en birmanie,” in *Disciplines croisées, hommages à Bernard-Philippe Groslier*, ed. G. Condominas (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1992), 311–35.

wider areas in Cambodia,<sup>11</sup> and the independent discovery of the Yahanda Mound at Sri Ksetra through surface survey and coring.<sup>12</sup>

The archaeological excavations at the Yahanda Mound in Sri Ksetra, presented below,<sup>13</sup> have recovered datable phases in the record of a nonelite Pyu community that underwent the transition there from the late Iron Age in the last centuries BCE, and participated in stages of urbanized culture on this mound for much of the 1st millennium CE. They created a sacred space for complex funerary rituals from ca. the 1st century BCE culminating in the last cremation burials on the mound in the mid-3rd–5th centuries CE, in direct proximity to their habitations (AMS dates, Table 1). The new Yahanda evidence includes encounters with both Buddhism and Hinduism there on a popular level from ca. mid-/late 4th century until the end of occupation on the mound in the 8th century. From identifiable points in time, Pyu communities at Sri Ksetra practiced both Buddhism and Hinduism, at times with traceable Indic sources of inspiration (synergies), but often adding new features to both traditions, thereby making durable records of their own changing, inclusive culture. In the last part of this chapter, the Yahanda findings will briefly be placed in the wider context of research on elite Buddhist and Hindu culture at Sri Ksetra.

Śrīkṣetra in Sanskrit can be translated in at least two ways: Noble Field or Field of Śrī; its use is attested in a local Prakrit source (Figure 2),<sup>14</sup> a large bronze ring which belonged to a great spiritual leader. It is palaeographically datable to ca. 5th–6th century.

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**11** Damian Evans et al., “Uncovering Archaeological Landscapes at Angkor Using lidar,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of the United States [PNAS]* 110, no. 31 (July 30, 2013): 12595–12600.

**12** Win Kyaing, 2012–14; Win Kyaing and the author, October 2014; Ne Win, Irrigation Department, coring of the mound to 3.40 m, December 2014.

**13** Conducted under the ERC project “Beyond Boundaries.” Team members: Win Kyaing, Kyaw Myo Win, Tin May Oo, Myint Aung, Tin Tin Htay, Nyo Nyo Yin Mauk, Yin Nyein Aye, Naw Pauk Wah, and Win Sein, Field School of Archaeology; Janice Stargardt, Gabriel Amable, Sheila Kohring, and Sean Taylor, University of Cambridge.

**14** Large bronze ring from Sri Ksetra inscribed in Prakrit, translated and dated by Dr. Lore Sander: *Siri Khetta Maha The*, private collection, Germany. Chinese sources record the name *Shilichadalu* from the seventh century: Sun Laichen, “Chinese Historical Sources on Burma; A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Works,” special issue, *The Journal of Burma Studies* 2 (1997): 13.

Table 1: AMS Radiocarbon Dates for the Yahanda Mound.\*

SUBMITTER NO.	SERVICES	MATERIAL/ PRETREATMENT	CONVENTIONAL AGE	2SIGMA CALIBRATION	2SIGMA CALIBRATION PDF	STABLEISOTOPE&CN
H59/8/5-6/ 100-10	AMS-Standard delivery	(Charred Material): Acid/ alkali/acid	1610+/-30 BP	Cal AD 390 to 540 (Cal BP 1560 to 1410)		δ13C(%) -27.3
H59/ 8/6-7/140	AMS-Micro-sample Analysis; Standard delivery	(Charred Material): Acid/ alkali/acid	1680+/-30 BP	Cal AD 260 to 280 (Cal BP 1690 to 1670) and Cal AD 325 to 420 (Cal BP 1625 to 1530)		δ13C(%) -25.7
H59/ 9/8/175	CANCELED					
H59/3/68	AMS-Standard delivery	(Charred Material): Acid/ alkali/acid	1290+/-30 BP	Cal AD 660 to 770 (Cal BP 1290 to 1180)		δ13C(%) -27.3

\*Dating by Beta Analytics, November 2016, 2 sigma calibration.



**Figure 2:** Bronze ring from Sri Ksetra. With Prakrit place name for Sri Ksetra, ca. 6th century [author's photo].

Pyu language is thought to be a distant cousin of Myanmar language;<sup>15</sup> both belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. The paucity of bi- or multi-lingual inscriptions has hampered the translations of Pyu monolingual inscriptions, but it is clear that they became a very literate society, leaving a body of well-inscribed records from the 4th/6th to the 13th century written in Pyu, Prakrit, Pali, and Sanskrit. It is reasonable to assume, from the considerable degree of professional competence and sophistication visible in their earliest surviving inscriptions on durable materials, and the time needed to master three Indic scripts for four languages, including the non-Indic Pyu language, that the origins of Pyu literacy are earlier, possibly in the early 4th century. Major Pyu-language inscriptions have been found at Sri Ksetra, Halin, Myittha, Thandoway, and Pagan. The greatest number of Pyu inscriptions (in all four languages) come from Sri Ksetra, where

<sup>15</sup> See Marc Miyake in Arlo Griffiths, Bob Hudson, Marc Miyake, and Julian Wheatley, "Studies in Pyu Epigraphy, I: State of the Field, Edition and Analysis of the Kan Wet Khaung Gon Inscription, and Inventory of the Corpus," *Bulletin de l'école française d'extrême-orient* 103 (2017): 43–205.



their literary heritage also includes the preservation of the oldest surviving Pali texts in the world (written in Southern Brahmi script on gold, silver, and stone), a long royal genealogical inscription in Pyu (in a different, more ornamented form of Southern Brahmi), and a long royal bilingual inscription in Sanskrit and Pyu (in which the Sanskrit was written in Northern Brahmi and the Pyu gloss in a form of Southern Brahmi), among others.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Pyu numerals and letters stamped into bricks were widely used in their monuments and fortifications at Sri Ksetra and other sites, including Pagan. They provide glimpses of first-millennium Pyu social and economic structures that have yet to be explored. The first part of this chapter will present the evidence on the ancient environmental, economic, and social development that took place at Sri Ksetra *before* the local creation of written records. The second part will present the results of the excavations of the Yahanda Mound; the third part will place Yahanda in the wider context of elite monumental culture at Sri Ksetra, and consider the nature of the early written records and Buddhist art of the Pyu, and what light these sources combined throw on the overarching questions of Indianization, synergies, and creation.

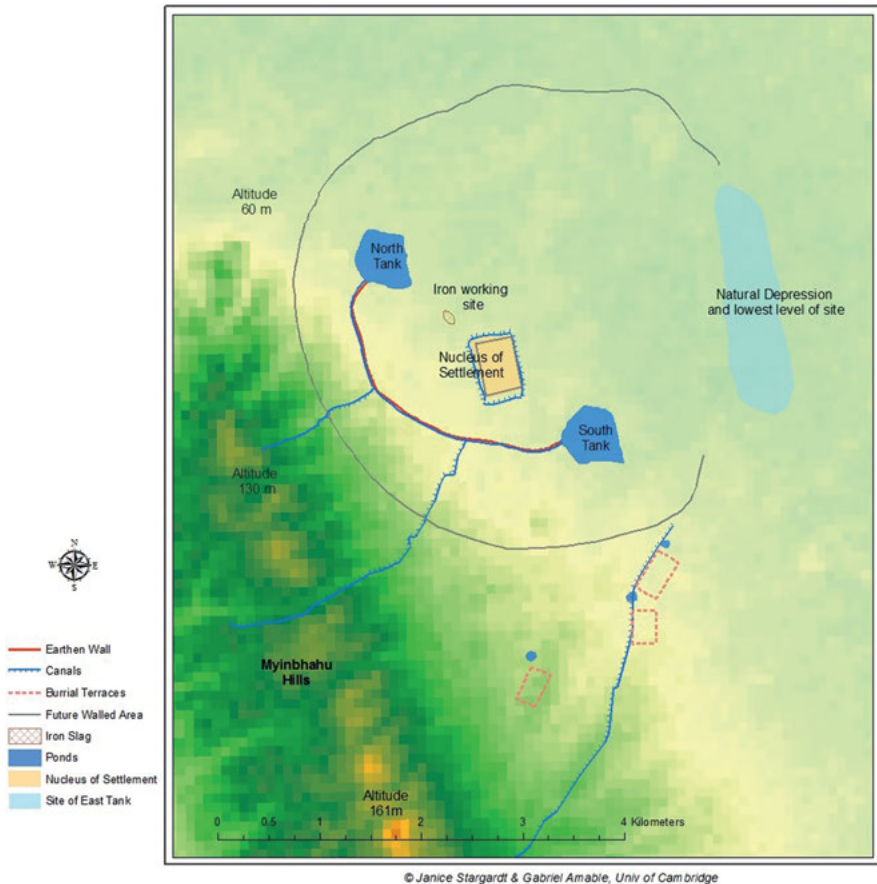
## 4 Environmental and Hydraulic Conditions at Sri Ksetra

Sri Ksetra is only 5.8 km east of the Ayeyarwadi River but sheltered from it by the Myinbahu Ranges (maximum altitude 161 m above mean sea level).<sup>17</sup> Pyu people seem consistently to have preferred to settle in the Dry Zone of Myanmar in proximity to small, perennial (but highly seasonal) rivers, which they skilfully controlled for irrigation and water storage (Figure 3). Even when apparently located close to the great Ayeyarwadi [Irrawaddy] River (as at Sri Ksetra, early Pagan and

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<sup>16</sup> Louis Finot, “Un nouveau document sur le bouddhisme birman,” *Journal Asiatique* 20 (1912): 121–36; Louis Finot, “Le plus ancien témoignage sur l’existence du Canon Pali en Birmanie,” *Journal Asiatique* 21 (1913): 193–5; C. O. Blagden, “The Pyu Inscriptions,” *Epigraphia Indica* 12 (1913–14): 127–32; Lu Pe Win, *Report of the Superintendent Archaeological Survey of Burma 1938–9* (Rangoon: Government Printing Office, 1940); Janice Stargardt, “The Four Oldest Surviving Pali Texts: The Results of the Cambridge Symposium on the Golden Pali Text of Sri Ksetra (Burma), April 1995,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 21 (1995): 199–213; Harry Falk, “Die Goldblätter aus Sri Ksetra,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 41 (1997): 53–92; Arlo Griffiths et al., “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy,” 43–205; comments on the scripts, based on Griffiths and Miyake.

<sup>17</sup> The coordinates of Sri Ksetra are 18 48’ 32.19”N x 95 17’12.25”E.



**Figure 3:** Sri Ksetra, Phase 1 of hydraulic works and wall building, ca. 3rd–1st century BCE [map: Janice Stargardt and Gabriel Amable].

old Tagaung), the Pyu were usually exploiting much smaller tributaries for their hydraulic networks. In the development of hydraulic works at Sri Ksetra, the Pyu mastered three difficult slope factors: a very steep slope from the Myinbahu Ranges descended from an average of ca. 140 to 63 m AMSL over the short distance of less than 3 km from the west and southwest of the site and produced a huge water force impacting on the site during and after the wet season; a much more gradual slope from the northeast allowed the Nawin River to flow westwards to join the Ayeyarwadi River at Pyay [Promé], passing close to the north side of the future walled urban area of Sri Ksetra through an easily defensible gap in the Myinbahu Ranges. Finally, a slope toward the south affected all land

outside the urban area on its low eastern side where lay the main storage and redistribution hub, the great East Tank. Within the complex parameters of the slopes, the ancient canal-moat system was constructed to flow in an almost complete circle – a remarkable piece of engineering skill.<sup>18</sup> While most of the Sri Ksetra hydraulic system moved in the auspicious clockwise direction, exceptions were the moats on the south side of the city, flowing a short distance from the east side of the Yahanda gate past the Mu Htaw gate into the East Tank. They were later triplicated to cope with the heavy water force impacting on this part of the city. The inflow of all hydraulic works was on a higher level, the outflow on a lower level, so that all water movements were gravity fed (Figure 4).<sup>19</sup>

The ancient Pyu hydraulic works were so accurately inserted into the complex environmental constraints of slope and climate just outlined that major elements still function both above and below ground now.<sup>20</sup> Though benefiting from more rain than Beikthano and Halin, Sri Ksetra, with an average of 1,200 mm per annum, is nonetheless inside the Dry Zone and does not receive enough rain to support traditional rain-fed rice types. Gradually the largest and most intensive of the Pyu irrigation systems developed in and around Sri Ksetra.<sup>21</sup> A close study of the hydraulic system at Beikthano and Sri Ksetra since the 1980s has led the author to two conclusions particularly relevant to this chapter and this volume: firstly, that Pyu hydraulic works belong to the general hydraulic technology practiced in the Dry Zones in Andhra, northern Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka, demonstrating synergy in this major aspect of technology,<sup>22</sup> and secondly, that in view of the challenges posed by the complex slope factors and rainfall conditions of Sri Ksetra, local experiments with water

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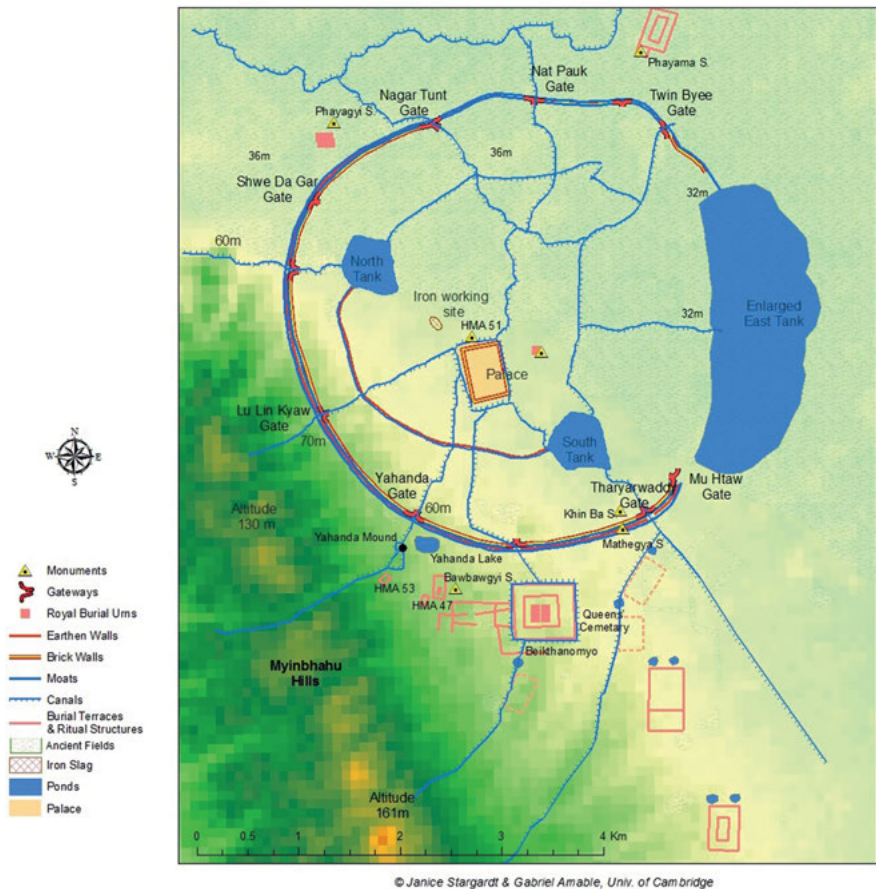
**18** Bernard-Philippe Groslier, “La Cité hydraulique angkoriennne: exploitation ou surexploitation du sol,” *Bulletin de l’école française d’extrême-orient* 66 (1979): 161–202; the hydraulic achievements of the Pyu also deserve attention.

**19** See Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities” for details on altitudes at specific points of the site re moat- and wall-building at Sri Ksetra.

**20** Janice Stargardt, Gabriel Amable, and Bernard Devereux, “Irrigation Is Forever: A Study of Post-Destruction Movement of Water across the Ancient Site of Sri Ksetra, Central Burma,” in *Remote Sensing: A New Tool for Archaeology*, vol. 16, eds. R. Lasaponara and N. Massini (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2012), 247–67.

**21** Win Kyaing has traced and mapped a hinterland with hydraulic system and Pyu artifacts extending south to Thegon and a considerable distance to the north.

**22** Janice Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu*, 45–142; Janice Stargardt, “Water for the State or Water for the People? Wittfogel in South and Southeast Asia in the First Millennium,” in *Water Societies and Technologies from the Past and Present*, eds. Y. Zhuang and M. Altaweel (London: UCL Press, 2018), 256–68.



**Figure 4:** Sri Ksetra, Phase 2 of hydraulic works and walls, ca. 1st–6th century CE [map: Janice Stargardt and Gabriel Amable].

control and soil and rice types must have taken place for some time in this locality to secure the necessary knowledge. The survival of early settlement depended on successful water control to protect the habitation areas and burial terraces from the effects of the powerful runoff from the Myinbahu Ranges during and immediately after the annual rains, from May/June to September, and to store enough water for use in the long dry season from October to May/June.

The earliest evidence of water control found so far is a trench running ca. 3,000 m along the 52 m contour line connecting two water storage tanks, each ca. 550 x 510 m (see Figure 3). This trench was associated with an earthen bund, later with massive brick walls on parts of it. The trench was laid out to capture

the water force from the Myinbahu Range in the wet season and lead it along a curved line to the two storage tanks. In the deepest part, the tanks were 3 m deep.<sup>23</sup> Taking 2 m as their average ancient depth, each tank at 510 x 550 x 2 m had a holding capacity of 560,000 cu m. Their original bases were lined with an impermeable material. They were thus significant achievements. The ovoid shape of the outer walls of Sri Ksetra contrast with the squarish or rectangular walls of Beikthano and Halin. But this early trench shows that already at some time ca. 3rd–1st century BCE, the ancient inhabitants understood that a curved trench and rampart were better able to withstand the strong seasonal water forces sweeping down from the range than straight alignments would have been. We consider that the ovoid alignments of all the external walls and moats of Sri Ksetra evolved initially in response to the challenges posed by the pluvial regime and slope factors peculiar to the site. They involved earth and later brick walls, eventually many stretches of moat-wall duplication and one area of triplication. The irrigated urban landscape may, at the peak of the city's prosperity ca. 6th–8th century, have also approximated to a microcosm of royal power.<sup>24</sup>

The massive southwestern and western walls of Sri Ksetra, built of fired brick with a brick-lined moat, initiated Phase 2, a more elaborate phase in water control. They ran approximately parallel to the earliest surviving trench, but ca. 550 m closer to the Myinbahu Range, along the 63 m AMSL contour, and now employed the great East Tank as the main water storage and redistribution point (see Figure 4). Through the use of fired bricks in the walls and eventually at least 7 to 8 km of brick-lined moat along the western side of the site, they represented works of resistance, water control, and storage capacity on a greatly increased scale and solidity. But firstly, they clearly grew out of the same accurate knowledge of the local environment embodied in the earlier trench, embankment, and storage tanks. Secondly, they developed slowly and experimentally. Their creation and coordination imply the development of greatly increased resources at Sri Ksetra and a corresponding growth in the socioeconomic complexity of the city and its hinterland. The dimensions of the great East Tank were ca. 2,800 x 1,000 x 2 m = 5,600,000 cu m. The early stages of the brick western walls and moats were probably begun in ca. 2nd century CE as related activities, but both were rebuilt, improved, and extended many times over the centuries thereafter, as can be seen by the variations in the thickness of the walls, the reuse of broken

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<sup>23</sup> Coring data Ne Win, Irrigation Department to author in January 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Janice Stargardt, "City of the Wheel, City of the Ancestors: Spatial Symbolism in a Pyu Royal City of Burma," *Indo-asiatische Zeitschrift* 6/7 (2002/3): 144–167; also Stargardt, "Le cosmos, les ancêtres et le riz," note 10.

bricks, and the bricks of different sizes. The earliest Pyu bricks at Sri Ksetra and Beikthano correspond to the Mauryan brick size, which had become a norm over much of India by the 2nd–1st century BCE – further evidence of technical synergy long before a religious one.<sup>25</sup> The brick western walls were duplicated by at least one earth wall outside the brick-lined moat, and extended around the northern and southern sides of the city to reach the East Tank.<sup>26</sup> The last wall to be built at Sri Ksetra was the low, poor-quality brick eastern wall, built in Phase 4, which falls outside the scope of this chapter.

I provisionally date Phase 1 as a gradual, experimental process involving the trench and two tanks from ca. 3rd century BCE to 1st century CE; Phase 2 was the period when the construction of brick walls, canals, some brick-lined moats, and gateways took place at Sri Ksetra. It marks a long period of urban development, from ca. 2nd–5th/6th century CE, and is the main focus of this study. It begins at approximately the same time as extensive ironworking inside the walled city,<sup>27</sup> and ends after the appearance of major inscriptions of kings and great spiritual leaders at Sri Ksetra,<sup>28</sup> in a context where Buddhism and to some extent Hinduism were already well established. Phase 2 at Sri Ksetra thus starts before, overlaps with the Gupta period in India, and extends into the early post-Gupta period. Their synergies will be further appraised below. Phase 3 (Figure 5) is basically an intensification of the existing network of moats, walls, and canals; it dates to ca. 6th–8th century and marks the peak of prosperity at Sri Ksetra in terms of the extent of the hydraulic system, monumental activity, and the creation of votive art.<sup>29</sup> Phase 4 (Figure 6) belongs to a period of regional aridity in mainland Southeast Asia, starting in the 8th and severe by the 9th century. The first three phases of the development of the walled and irrigated urban

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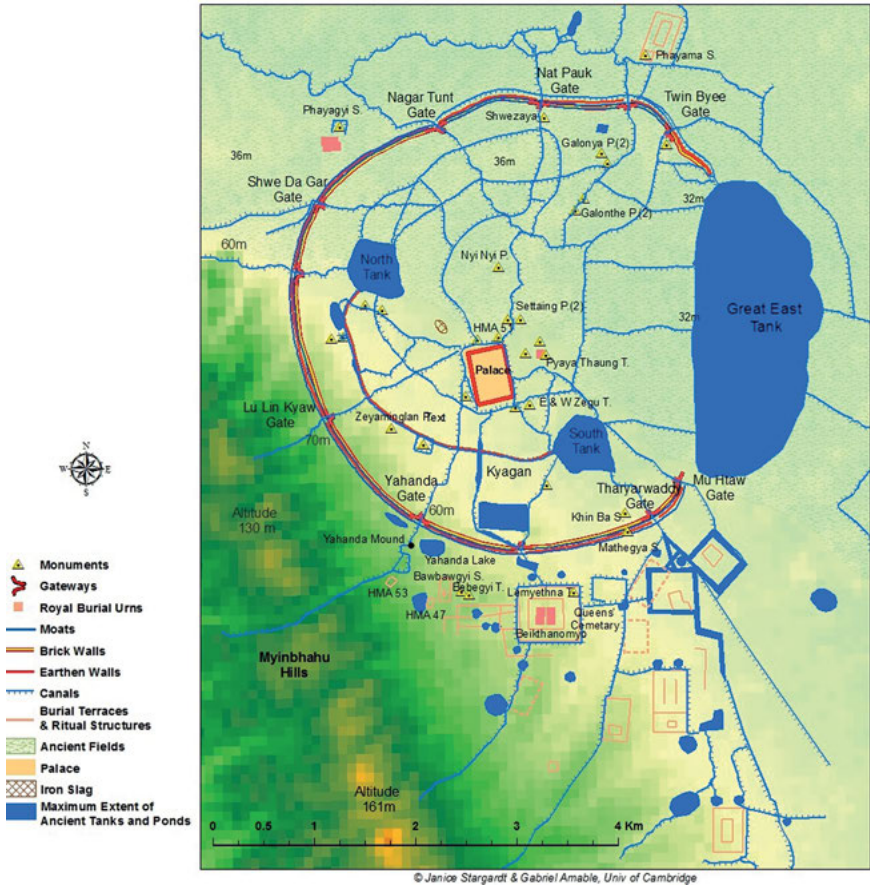
25 Cf. A. Ramalakshman, ed., *Andhra Pradesh Archaeology: A Review, 1987–2001* (Hyderabad: Department of Archaeology and Museums, 2002): e.g. West Godavari District and Guntur Districts, 69–77.

26 See note 14 above.

27 Bob Hudson, “A Thousand Years before Pagan: Radiocarbon Dates and Myanmar’s Ancient Cities,” in *Bagan and the World: Early Myanmar and Its Global Connections*, eds. G. Y. Goh, J. N. Miksic, and M. Aung-Thwin (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 88–121, figure 6.20, two phases of iron slag, 50–220 CE and 240–390 CE.

28 Stone urns inscribed with royal names and pedestal inscription with two royal names and a royal Guru, summarized below; see also Marc Miyake in “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy.”

29 G. H. Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), plates 10–49. NB, Luce follows Blagden in assuming urban development at Sri Ksetra began during the 7th century CE.



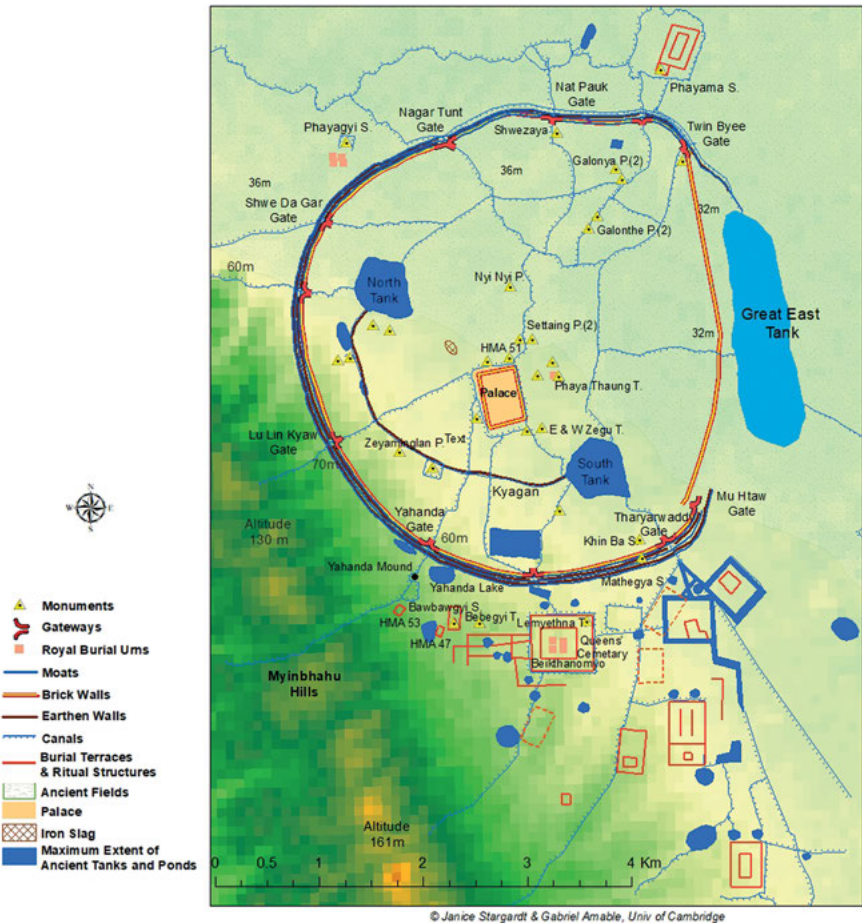
**Figure 5:** Sri Ksetra, Phase 3. Intensification of hydraulic works and walls, ca. late 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century [map: Janice Stargardt and Gabriel Amable].

landscape at Sri Ksetra were long, continuous processes that did not represent sudden changes, whereas Phase 4 did.<sup>30</sup>

The impact of irrigation water on traditional rice types and secondary crops in and around Sri Ksetra during Phases 1 to 3 would have been, despite short-term incidents, to greatly increase the security and abundance of at least one traditional

<sup>30</sup> Janice Stargardt, “Irrigation in South Thailand as a Coping Strategy against Climate Change: Past and Present,” in *Environmental and Climate Change in South and Southeast Asia; How Are Local Cultures Coping?* ed. Barbara Schuler (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014), 105–37.





**Figure 6:** Sri Ksetra, Phase 4, contraction of the hydraulic works and construction of the east wall ca. 9th century CE [map: Janice Stargardt and Gabriel Amable].

rice harvest and make possible the cultivation of fruits and other vegetables. The creation, expansion, intensification, and final contraction of the hydraulic system mirror the expansion and contraction of resources and power structures of the city itself. Bricks at Sri Ksetra, from their appearance in ca. 2nd century CE to the end of Phase 3, ca. 8th century, contained great concentrations of rice grains, as well as the usual rice husks for temper. They reflect ritual acts associated with making bricks and terra-cotta sculptures, made possible by the abundance of rice secured by irrigation. Irrigated agriculture must have made a vital contribution to the



prosperity and longevity of the city.<sup>31</sup> The seed cavities in the fired bricks of Sri Ksetra reveal the cultivation of several rice varieties, among which the slender long grains of *Oryza indica* types dominated.

From their experimental origins in ca. 3rd century BCE, the Sri Ksetra hydraulic system and irrigated agriculture increased in scale and sophistication in parallel with the scale of urbanization *before* the Pyu acquired writing. Pyu texts in Indic scripts, when they appeared, recorded some major cultural changes that had already taken place, but they did not cause the emergence of a complex society nor, so far as is known, did they contain references to the economy. Nor, indeed, did they represent the first significant contacts with parts of India, which took place many centuries earlier in agricultural exchanges, hydraulic and ceramic technology, brickmaking norms, and possibly ironworking. This is externally confirmed by Chinese primary sources of the 1st–2nd century CE that record that commercial relations existed between southwest Yunnan, the *Piaoyue* [the Pyu], and *Yuandu* [parts of India].<sup>32</sup>

## 5 The Yahanda Mound

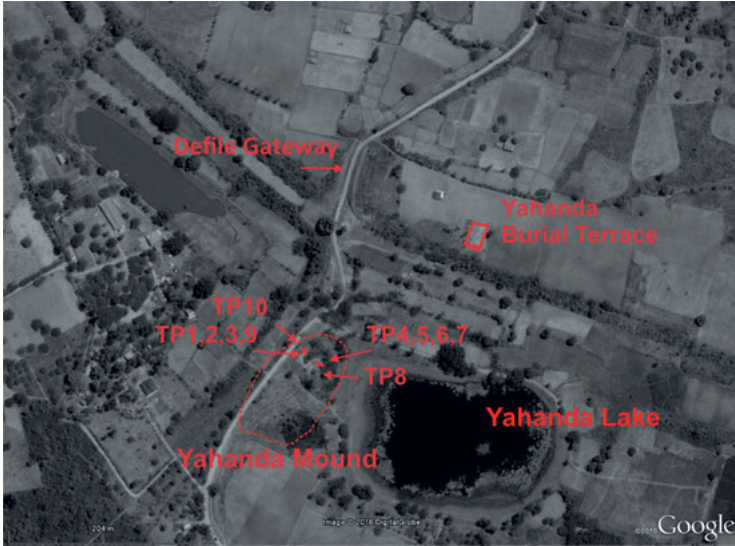
The Yahanda Mound is at present the only excavated early urban habitation site in Myanmar and rare in Southeast Asia in general as it was a nonelite community. Surveys and excavations took place there from 2014 to 2016, followed by analyses of the finds from 2016 to the present.

Yahanda is the Myanmar form of Pali, *arhant* (Sanskrit *arhat*), meaning a disciple of the Buddha. The mound is located just outside the southern walls of Sri Ksetra, within an important extramural cluster of previously known Pyu features (Figure 7a–7b). Its name derives from the Yahanda Gu, a brick-built Disciples' Meditation Cave, inexpertly restored in 1964 approximately to its Pagan-period form, but it has Pyu-period origins. The Yahanda Lake lies immediately to the

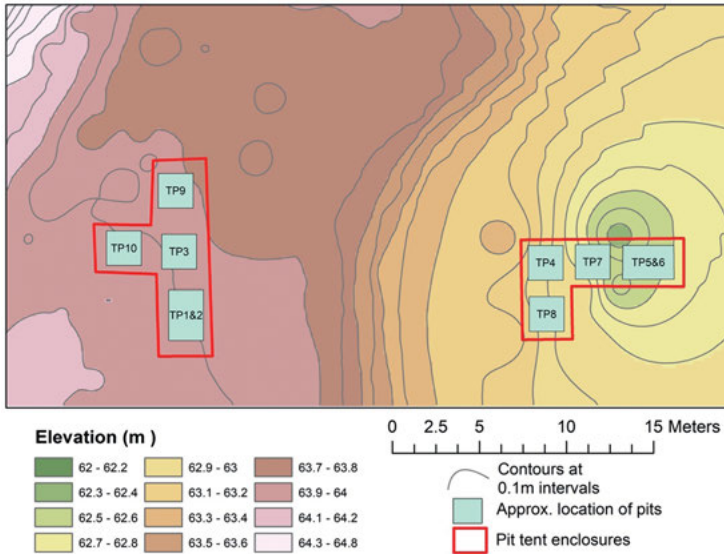
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<sup>31</sup> Data on the impact of irrigation on traditional rice harvests by Tichit for Dry Zone Cambodia are relevant: per 40 kg of traditional rice seeds sown/ha: unirrigated yield ca. 700 kg/ha; with limited irrigation 1000 kg/ha; with good irrigation 1600 kg/ha; cited from Janice Stargardt, *Satingpra 1, The Environmental and Economic Archaeology of South Thailand* (Oxford: BAR; Singapore: ISEAS, 1983), 108.

<sup>32</sup> Chang Qu, *Huayang guo zhi* [The Records of the Region in the South of the Hua Mountain], vol. 4, record of the Emperor Ming of the Later Han Dynasty, 58–76 CE; and Chen Shou (233–297 CE), *Sanguo zhi* [History of the Three Kingdoms], cited by Sun Laichen, “Chinese Historical Sources on Burma,” 10–11.



**Figure 7a:** Sri Ksetra, the Yahanda Mound with excavated areas and urban context [Gabriel Amable and Janice Stargardt].



**Figure 7b:** Sri Ksetra, the Yahanda Mound, elevations of excavated areas. Locations of burial terraces in HMA59: TP4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; wooden floors on pillars: TP1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9 [Gabriel Amable and Janice Stargardt].

east of the mound; an unnamed canal ran immediately to the west of the mound, and the Yahanda Gateway is just to the north, leading into the walled city.

Some 460 m to the southeast of the Yahanda Mound stands the lofty Bawbawgyi *stūpa*, the highest of the three conical or cylindrical *stūpas* that today mark the outside “corners” of the walled urban landscape of Sri Ksetra: Bawbawgyi, 44 m high; Phayagyi, 36 m high; and Phayamar, ca. 32 m high. All three originated in the Pyu period but have been enlarged many times. Some 380 m south of the Yahanda Mound stand two large Pyu stepped burial terraces, HMA47 and HMA53, respectively,<sup>33</sup> made of compacted earth with brick steps and brick facings. Their surfaces were originally sealed with impermeable materials. Excavations have only removed that covering and revealed the stepped surface layers directly beneath it, which contain groups of cremated burials in terra-cotta urns associated with Buddhist clay sealings in HMA53, and both Buddhist and Hindu clay sealings in HMA 47 (Figure 8).<sup>34</sup> Each burial terrace has a single AMS date of mid-1st millennium CE,<sup>35</sup> but each possibly has earlier origins in their lower layers that have not yet been excavated. Other unexcavated burial terraces are known to exist in this area, close to the Bawbawgyi *stūpa*.

The site number given to the Yahanda Mound is HMA59 and each pit and layer was also numbered. Thus HMA59/TP5/7 means Yahanda Mound, pit number 5, layer number 7. Figure 7b shows those excavated areas that contained burial terraces. The earliest human activities on the Yahanda Mound revealed so far were funereal, but the numerous iron nails suggest they were associated from an early period with wooden structures, possibly habitations. Burial terraces were found in HMA59/TP4, TP5, TP6, TP7, TP8, and TP9. Only TP1 to TP3 and TP10 did not contain burial terraces or burials. Large iron nails, 3 to 7 cm long, were found in HMA59/8/8-7, HMA59/4/7-6, and HMA59/9/8-7 in association with burials and burial terraces. In addition, all ten pits on the Yahanda Mound contained iron nails from former wooden structures either in that space or close by. The burial terraces at Sri Ksetra were carefully prepared sacred places. Bricks outlined only the later phases of burial terraces at the Yahanda Mound (3rd–5th century), but burials occurred through three lower geological layers, including in the basal layer of the mound which was pale sand. In all burial phases, the soil had been compacted and prepared as a ritual space. Brick steps and facings can be seen in HMA59/TP5-6/7 (Figure 9). Matching steps were

<sup>33</sup> *Inventory of Sites at Sri Ksetra. Annexe IV to the Nomination Dossier to the World Heritage.*

<sup>34</sup> See Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities,” Figure 6 for Hindu and Buddhist clay sealings from HMA53 and 47.

<sup>35</sup> Hudson, “A Thousand Years,” figure 6.20, 106: HMA47, 420–560 CE, and HMA53, 470–650 CE. All locations mentioned in this paragraph are shown on Figures 4 and 5 above.



**Figure 8:** Sri Ksetra, exposed upper surface of HMA53, a stepped burial terrace of compacted earth with brick facings and steps containing 280 cremated urn burials and Buddhist votive offerings [author's photo].

revealed in HMA59/TP7/7. Although many fragments of urns and iron nails were found in TP5, TP6, and TP7, no actual burials were found, probably owing to the factors mentioned below in relation to the basal layer in HMA59/TP8/9.

Pyu burials were always cremated but containers varied: at the Yahanda Mound, of the fourteen cremation burials excavated, five were found without containers (four in TP8 and one in TP4). Three of these may originally have been wrapped in cloth of which no traces remained; two in TP8 had definitely been placed in wooden bowls that had left a crust in the compacted soil of the burial terrace, although the wood itself had disintegrated (HMA59/TP8/7-8, Figure 10a).

These wooden bowls were of similar diameter and shape to the hemispherical, finely made pottery bowls used as urns in HMA59/TP8/8 and elsewhere as offering bowls, which show the first evidence of Indic ceramic technology, ca. 1st–2nd century CE (Figure 10b).

The lowest of the Yahanda burials (HMA59/TP8/9) are at present undated but, on the basis of their stratified geological context, probably date from ca. the 1st century BCE (Figure 11). They were placed, without surviving container, in the



**Figure 9:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound 2014/15 excavations: brick steps and facings of burial terraces, urn sherds and one cremated burial revealed in HMA59/4, 5, 6, and 6a (and in 2015/16, further burial terraces and thirteen additional cremated burials in HMA59/7, 8, and 9) [author's photo].

basal layer of the mound. The annual rise and fall of the water table through this layer dispersed the fragments of bone and carbon.<sup>36</sup>

The highest of the twelve burials in HMA59/TP8/7 has been dated to 270+/-30 CE (Table 1).<sup>37</sup>

No Buddhist or Hindu offerings were found in the burial terraces revealed in HMA59/TP4, TP5, TP6, TP7, and TP8 at the Yahanda Mound, but numerous small pottery oil lamps show that rituals were conducted there. Directly above the highest burial in TP8, and touching it, were traces of an ancient wooden floor built on wooden pillars that penetrated into the burial terrace (HMA59/8/6, Figure 11), indicating that the ancient inhabitants of the Yahanda Mound *chose* to preserve the proximity of the living with the dead, as already suggested by the iron nails from older wooden structures found in layer 8 of this pit. Directly above the floor in TP8 in layer HMA59/8/5, dated to 340+/-30,<sup>38</sup> occurred the first simple evidence of encounters, on a popular level, with Indic religious motifs – and presumably

<sup>36</sup> Regrettably neither AMS nor OSL samples have so far yielded dates for this layer.

<sup>37</sup> Beta Analytics, October 2016; dating conducted to 2 sigma range (Table 1).

<sup>38</sup> Beta Analytics, October 2016; and Table 1.



**Figure 10a:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, Burial 5 in TP8/8: soil impression of former wooden burial urn in burial terrace, ca. 1st–2nd century CE [author's photo].



**Figure 10b:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, HMA59/8/8-7: small hemispherical red bowl, diam. 11 cm (similar dimensions and shape to wooden bowl in Figure 10a); first evidence of Indic ceramic technology, ca. 1st–2nd century CE [author's photo].

Indian religious thought – in the form of symbols depicted on stamped ceramics (Figure 12 left, right, and below), but no inscriptions. In fact, although the ceramic evidence shows a strong awareness of visual communication through sacred symbols, no evidence of formal literacy was found in the long history of human activity on the Yahanda Mound, ca. 1st century BCE to 8th century CE.





**Figure 11:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, January–February 2016 excavations. Stratigraphy of HMA59/TP8 from bottom upwards: layers 9 to 7, 12 burials in a prepared burial terrace of compacted earth with brick facings in last phase; layer 6, ancient wooden floor and pillar (note rotting of floor and pillar and downward penetration of debris from layer 5 into 7); layers 5 to 3, habitation debris in hardened work surfaces [author’s photo].

In two other pits of the Yahanda Mound, cremation burials were found in higher layers than those in TP5, 6, 7, and 8. TP4 and TP9 also contained urn burials directly under an ancient wooden floor. For instance, in HMA59/4/5 a single cremation burial without surviving container was found in compacted earth among an alignment of brickbats delineating the edge of a burial terrace (including the earliest finger-marked brick at the Yahanda Mound). The burial was directly under a decayed pillar with the remains of other pillars, a wooden



**Figure 12:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, stamped ceramics: HMA59/8/5, (top left) just above the floor, a red-ware sherd stamped with śrīvatsa raised dots and wide triangles, mid-/late 4th century; (top right) Buddha on straight-backed throne with raised dots and double row of wide triangles, late 4th–early 5th century CE; (below) collection of sherds stamped with *kalaśa* pots sacred to Buddhism and Hinduism, plus open lotus, dancing man, and stylized conch – note the frames of raised dots and wide triangles, also freehand incised lines, late 4th century [author’s photos].

floor, and successive layers of domestic debris above.<sup>39</sup> This burial has been dated to 404+/-21 CE.<sup>40</sup> This date lies within the calibrated range for the earliest Buddhist and Hindu evidence found in TP8 close by. Although no religious offerings were found with this burial in TP4, its date shows that the Pyu practice

<sup>39</sup> Janice Stargardt et al., “Early Urban Archaeology in Southeast Asia: The First Evidence for a Pyu Habitation Site at Sri Ksetra, Myanmar,” *Antiquity* 89, no. 348 (December 2015): <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/stargardt348>. Accessed October 25, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Stewart Fallon, Radiocarbon Laboratory, Earth Sciences, Australian National University, March 2016.



of cremating the dead and burying them in proximity to the living survived contact with Indian religious thought on the Yahanda Mound. As we shall see in the third part of this chapter, there is abundant additional evidence that Pyu funereal culture remained a major feature at Sri Ksetra (and Beikthano and Halin) long after the adoption of Buddhism and Hinduism. The striking ability of the Pyu to assimilate Indian religions to their funerary culture led to the emergence of distinctively Pyu traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The last cremation burial on the Yahanda Mound to be discussed demonstrates this. Directly under the ancient floor of HMA/TP9/8-9, a very large, round-bottomed urn was found bearing four *śrīvatsa* stamps equally spaced around its shoulders (Figures 13, 14a, and b). It contained calcined bones and earth. Large sherds of a paddled-ware pot adhered to its body and encased its bas, but were removed for the conservation of the main pot. Again, the soil surrounding this urn showed signs of special compaction, but there were no other structural traces of a burial terrace.



**Figure 13:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, HMA59/9/8-9: large red-ware urn (after conservation) with four *śrīvatsa* symbols stamped around the body; note resemblance to Andhra Iron Age-early Buddhist red wares in raised lines on neck, neck and body shape and ceramic color, mid-5th century [author's photo].



**Figure 14a:** Yahanda Mound, HMA59/9/8-9, showing stratigraphic location: red-ware urn with four *śrīvatsa* stamps, as found with paddled-ware sherds adhering to body under rotting floor in TP9 (layer 7), [author's photo]; **Figure 14b:** close-up of Figure 14a showing details of large red-ware urn with paddled sherds adhering to body and sitting in paddled-ware base, mid-5th century [author's photo].

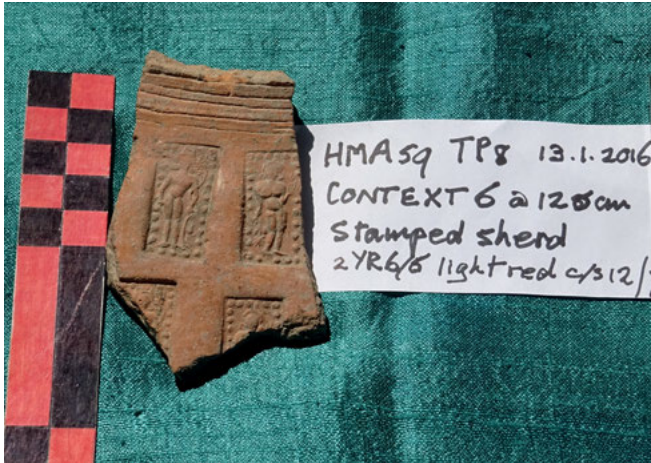
## 6 Encounters with Indian Religious Thought at the Yahanda Mound, Late 4th to 5th Century

The evidence of encounters with Indian religious thought is provided by locally made potsherds stamped with sacred symbols such as *kalaśa* pots and lotus flowers, common to both Buddhism and Hinduism, but also by some motifs that were specifically Buddhist (i.e. images of the Buddha) or specifically Hindu (such as the *śrīvatsa* and stylized conch symbols) (Figure 12). In addition, there were heroic and royal figures, some still not firmly identified (Figure 15). Some stamps may depict the powerful figures the potters saw in procession in the city around them; others probably depict local beliefs and rituals, such as the linked male and female spirit figures with high plumed headdresses [ancestors?], the dancing man, the dancing woman, and man racing bull (Figures 12, 16a, and 16b). The



**Figure 15a:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, HMA59/9/7, directly above the ancient floor: sherd stamp of heroic male nude holding long bow and standard. Image below showing same standard on the other side and arrows protruding behind figure?; stamps separated by double row of wide triangles, ca. late 5th century CE [author's photo].

stamped sherds formed a significant minority among the dense ceramic debris of Yahanda Mound, in which paddled wares predominated (Figure 17). Ceramics (all unglazed) were by far the most numerous artifacts found in the Yahanda excavations, in horizons associated with cooking fires and other domestic activities (HMA59/TP8/5-4, Figure 11). They were deposited on the man-made hardened work surfaces, regarded by others as impenetrable natural geological layers, which were built up over centuries, and occurred in all ten pits of the Yahanda



**Figure 15b:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, HMA59/3/7: stamped sherd with double row of male and female crowned figures wearing heavy earrings and anklets. Images framed by raised dots, with five lines incised freehand above; mid- or late 5th century [author's photo].

excavations and will prove a useful diagnostic feature in the future search for other habitation sites at Sri Ksetra.<sup>41</sup>

Evidence such as that provided by the Yahanda stamped ceramics is extremely rare in Southeast Asia: it shows the assimilation of Indic religious motifs (and religious thought) on a popular level, and the use of Indic ceramic techniques to produce images from the indigenous ritual repertoire. Attention (and therefore evidence) in South and Southeast Asia is usually concentrated on the monumental structures and sacred art of court cultures.<sup>42</sup> Indic ceramic techniques, noted already in the shapes and colors among the hemispherical burial urns and the *śrīvatsa* pot, were reinforced in this phase by the use of carved stamps made of bone or horn and used to create either isolated images (like the *śrīvatsa* in HMA59/TP9) or rows of stamped images in rectangular or square format. Many stamps were framed by rows of raised dots, like those framing both faces of Pyu

<sup>41</sup> Description of the formation of hardened work surfaces in Stargardt et al., "Early Urban Archaeology in Southeast Asia," <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/stargardt348>. Accessed October 25, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. John Guy et al., *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Art of Southeast Asia, 6th – 8th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), and contributors on Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.





**Figure 16a:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, HMA59/8/4: stamped sherd showing triple row of linked spirit couple (male and female ancestors?) wearing high plumed headdresses and heavy earrings; stamps framed by raised dots, ca. mid- or late 5th century [author's photo].

silver coins. Running rows of wide triangles<sup>43</sup> were also used to define registers of stamped surfaces. Stamps were employed mainly on the shoulders of ceramic pots, but one example of a cylindrical urn completely covered by rows of stamps is displayed in the Sri Ksetra Museum (Figure 17).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Monica Smith's term for a similar technique found at Sisulpalgarh, personal communication, December 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Sri Ksetra Museum Catalogue Worksheet: 2013/6/42.



**Figure 16b:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, surface find: stamped sherd showing man with heavy round earrings and raised whip racing humpbacked bull [author’s photo].

Although Indian archaeological reports contain many references to “stamped wares” and “impressed wares,” I have not, so far, noted any close relationships between published Indian sites and the major motifs of the stamped wares from Sri Ksetra.<sup>45</sup> The technique of using stamps themselves, however, is certainly a borrowing from Indic ceramic technology and resemblances can be seen in minor motifs and techniques.<sup>46</sup> Where the main Buddhist or Hindu motifs are concerned, other media may have served as the means through which knowledge of such major Indian religious symbols spread to the Yahanda potters. Evidence examined below relates to the golden Pali text and the mobility of Buddhist monks between Sri Ksetra and Southeast India. Small decorated artifacts could have traveled with

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<sup>45</sup> I gratefully acknowledge data and photographs provided by Monica Smith, December 2017.

<sup>46</sup> V. V. Krishna Shastry, *The Proto and Early Historical Cultures of Andhra Pradesh* (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1983), figures 21, 22a, and 22b.



**Figure 17:** Sri Ksetra Museum: cylindrical, slab-formed ceramic urn with three horizontal rows of stamped and incised motifs and four rows of wide triangles; among the stamps are four *śrīvatsas*, three stylized conches, three *kalaśa* pots, three flowers, and three twin fish: h. 19.2 cm, diam. 19.2 cm. Provenance Sri Ksetra, but exact location unknown (photo: Department of Archaeology and National Museums, hereafter DANM).

monks as aids to their teaching and meditation.<sup>47</sup> Other Indic ceramic techniques adopted by the potters of the Yahanda Mound were the use of bands of incised lines both on the necks of globular pots and on the inner surface of flat dishes. These were produced both freehand and on the wheel, and many of the red-ware cooking and storage pots of the Yahanda Mound have affinities with the red wares of South India's late Iron Age and early Buddhist periods. Medium-texture paddled wares of indigenous Southeast Asian type predominated in all pits and layers of the Yahanda Mound until the 7th century (Figure 18), when they ceded place to the poorly made, coarse ceramics of the late 7th–8th century.

The total weight of ceramics excavated from the Yahanda Mound was 1.3 tons – evidence of the intensity of human activities there. Significant patterns emerge from the Yahanda ceramic tables (not included here for reasons of space): firstly, the period of maximum diversity in ceramic types and greatest sherd weight occurred in the 4th–6th century CE; this was the period of maximum prosperity on the Yahanda Mound, when a total of 1.2 tons of sherds was recovered from the

<sup>47</sup> For the Pagan period, see the study of how the architecture of the Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya was spread through small-scale models: John Guy, "Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India," *Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1059 (June 1991).



**Figure 18:** Sri Ksetra, Yahanda Mound, TR2/19: typical medium-texture paddled pot used as an urn in this layer, but also commonly used for cooking and storage for centuries, ca. 2nd–7th century CE [author’s photo].

limited area excavated. The most productive pit was TP8, from which ca. one-third of the total sherd weight came. This was also the important period for monumental construction in the southern area of the city inside and outside the walls (discussed below). Secondly, paddled ceramic wares of medium texture were numerically dominant, but possibly made in more than one production center.<sup>48</sup> As noted, paddled wares were multifunctional on the mound, as urns and cooking and storage pots. Thirdly, a small number of sherds were deposited under the floors (excluding urns and oil lamps), compared with the habitation layers above the floors; and fourthly, there was a decline in number and quality of sherds in the highest occupation layers of the Yahanda Mound. As there are no indications of violence in the Sri Ksetra site as a whole, and none on the Yahanda Mound, the main Yahanda community must gradually have moved elsewhere, to another part

<sup>48</sup> Janice Stargardt et al., *From the Ancestors to the Buddha; Excavations on the Yahanda Mound 2014–16* (London, British Museum Research Publications, forthcoming).



of Sri Ksetra, or to Pagan. The presence of Pyu communities in Pagan is attested by Pyu-style *stūpas* from ca. 6th–7th century;<sup>49</sup> bricks stamped with Pyu letters and numbers; and from the 12th century, if not before, by Pyu-language inscriptions.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, Sri Ksetra attained an iconic status in the inscriptions and chronicles of Pagan, and was itself the scene of some monumental building in the Pagan period, often on top of mounds that contain the ruins of Pyu-period monuments.<sup>51</sup>

The *śrīvatsa* symbols stamped around the shoulder of the large inner pot from HMA59/TP9/7 (Figures 13, 14a, and 14b) reflect some knowledge of Hinduism in the Yahanda community. In fact, the *śrīvatsa* symbol appeared frequently on the stamped pottery of the Yahanda Mound and other areas at Sri Ksetra (Figure 12, top left; Figure 17). Moreover, the *śrīvatsa* was the symbol on the reverse of all Pyu silver coinage, which was probably the most widespread coin tradition of 1st-millennium mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>52</sup> Although Buddhist monuments, sculpture, and artifacts were far more numerous than Hindu in Sri Ksetra, from ca. 4/5th–9th century, Hindu symbols – *śrīvatsa*, conch, rising sun, sun and moon, altar, *svastika*, trident, and *vajra* – played a dominant role on both the obverse and reverse sides of Pyu coinage.<sup>53</sup> Vaiṣṇavite symbols appeared in a small number of large stone sculptures at Sri Ksetra with possibly royal associations,<sup>54</sup> and among the Pyu royal names discussed below. The appearance of Buddhist and Hindu artifacts at the Yahanda Mound and more widely in Sri Ksetra from ca. 5th century onwards may be better understood as complementary, rather than rival, elements in a joint tradition of sacrality.<sup>55</sup> Such a holistic interpretation finds strong support in the syncretic assimilation between the *śrīvatsa* symbols and the urn burial at TP9, the numerous Pyu cremation burials associated with Buddhist

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49 Data by Thin Thin Myint, Head of Thermoluminescence Laboratory at the Field School of Archaeology, Pyay; bricks are currently being dated there.

50 Cf. two pillars [Myazedi inscriptions] of the Kubyaukgyi Temple, inscribed in Pali, Mon, Pyu, and Myanmar languages, dated 1112 CE; cf. also Griffiths et al., “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy,” which lists many stamped and incised Pyu bricks.

51 Two major inscriptions of Kyansittha, king of Pagan, found close to Sri Ksetra, later stored in the Shwesandaw *stūpa*, Pyay.

52 Dietrich Mahlo, *The Early Coins of Myanmar/Burma: Messengers from the Past – Pyu, Mon and Candras of Arakan (First Millennium AD)* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2012), 33–59; Than Htun (Dedaye), *Auspicious Symbols and Ancient Coins of Myanmar* (Kelana Jaya, Malaysia: Ava House, 2007), 81–93.

53 Mahlo, *Early Coins*, 33–59; Niharranjan Ray, *Brahmanical Gods in Burma* (Calcutta University Press, 1932; repr., Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001), 9.

54 John Guy, “A Warrior-Ruler Stele from Sri Ksetra, Pyu, Burma,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 85 (1997), plates 1–2, 85–94 (stele ca. 4th century).

55 Nicolas Revire, personal communication, 2011.

monuments, and the presence of Buddhist and Hindu clay sealings inside and beside urns in burial terrace HMA47 at Sri Ksetra.<sup>56</sup>

## 7 The Significance of the Findings at the Yahanda Mound, Sri Ksetra

Adding together all the cremated human burials incidentally or deliberately noted in records of archaeology at Sri Ksetra from 1912 to 2012, at least 4,000 are recorded, including ca. 2,000 from a single burial terrace excavation in 1924 and a minimum of 280 on the top surface alone of burial terrace HMA53.<sup>57</sup> Many burial terraces have been listed but not yet excavated, thus 4,000 will not remain the total number of burials in and around the city, but they suffice to demonstrate the central importance of funereal rituals in Pyu culture. The burial terraces and habitations excavated at the Yahanda Mound have provided the first stratigraphic record of Pyu culture for ca. 900 years, and the first AMS dates for key points in that sequence; the first evidence of the close relationship between the living and the dead; and the basis for the first ceramic typology and chronology in Myanmar. While the importance of Pyu funereal traditions has been emphasized here, it should also be remembered that only the material aspects of those traditions have been recovered: the creation of sacred burial places,<sup>58</sup> urns, burials, and oil lamps. The intangible beliefs invested in them – veneration of the ancestors, probably represented by the couples on the ceramic stamps wearing tall plumed headdresses – and the rituals accompanying them (dancing men and women, bull-racing) remain glimpsed but not captured. One conclusion is, however, fully justified from the evidence that has been obtained: that the belief system of the Pyu before their encounters with Indian religions was sufficiently powerful to survive and embrace them.

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<sup>56</sup> Stargardt, “From the Iron Age to Early Cities,” Figure 6; Janice Stargardt, “Death Rituals of the Late Iron Age and Early Buddhism in Central Burma and South-East India: Whose Norms, Whose Practices?” in *Im Dickicht der Gebote; Studien zur Dialektik von Norm und Praxis in der Buddhismus geschichte Asiens*, ed. Peter Schalk, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Historia Religionum 26 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2005), 407–33; Pimchanok Pongkasetkan and Stephen A. Murphy, “Transitions from Late Prehistoric to Dvaravati Period Funerary Practices: New Evidence from Dong Mae Nong Muang,” in *Crossing Borders*, vol. 1, eds. Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, Andreas Reinecke, and Dominik Bonatz (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 75–89.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Duroiselle, *Archaeological Survey of Burma, Annual Report of the Superintendent 1923–4* (Rangoon: Government Printing Office, 1925), 25–27.

<sup>58</sup> Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu*, 177–90.

## 8 The Integration of Pyu Funereal Culture, Buddhism, and Hinduism at Sri Ksetra

I shall now place the evidence gained from the Yahanda Mound in the wider context of elite foundations at Sri Ksetra. At Sri Ksetra, a series of early Buddhist *stūpas* can be dated stylistically to the period from the 4/5th to the 6th century, and has visible affinities with Andhra.<sup>59</sup> They comprise HMA51 (Figure 19), (ca. the 4th–5th century);<sup>60</sup> the Mathegya *stūpa* (Figure 20a–20b), ca. 6th century; and the



**Figure 19:** Sri Ksetra, HMA51: a small cylindrical *stūpa*, ca. 5th century, originally with square platform of compacted earth with brick walls, and surrounded by cremated urn burials [photo: DANM].

<sup>59</sup> V. V. Krishna Sastry, *Culture of Andhra Pradesh*, 132–9; Ramalakshman, *Andhra Pradesh Archaeology*, 31–32; K. R. Subramaniam, *Buddhist Remains in Andhra and the History of Andhra between 225 and 610 AD* (Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1932; repr., New Delhi: Apex Publication Services, 1969).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. KKG2, 3, and 4 at Beikthano: Aung Thaw, *Excavations at Beikthano* (Rangoon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1968), 16; Stargardt, *The Ancient Pyu*, 322–40.



**Figure 20a:** Sri Ksetra: the Mathegya stūpa, on the southern wall/moat system, ca. 6th century, surrounded by seventeen cremated urn burials [author's photo].

three great stupas outside the southwest, northwest, and northeast walls of the city: the Bawbawgyi, Phayagyi, and Phayama, respectively. All of them were directly associated with multiple cremated urn burials, while at the same time exhibiting all the features of Buddhist monuments.

No burials were recorded around the largest *stūpa* at Sri Ksetra, but it may never have been excavated down to sterile soil. Certainly, Bawbawgyi is surrounded by Pyu burial terraces containing a large number of cremation burials (e.g., a minimum of 280 in HMA53 alone).<sup>61</sup> Pyu cremation burials were also found in proximity to the other two great *stūpas*, Phayagyi and Phayamar.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Win Kyaing, personal communication, 2015–7; also HMA47 and HMA10. See also Figures 3–5.

<sup>62</sup> Thein Lwin excavations, HMA52, near the Phayama *stūpa*.



**Figure 20b:** Sri Ksetra: urn found at the Mathegya stūpa.

## 9 The Pyu Literary Heritage at Sri Ksetra

Our task is now to relate the foregoing developments of Pyu urbanized culture to the knowledge of writing at Sri Ksetra. Early literacy there on durable materials dates stylistically to the period between the 4th and 6th century CE.<sup>63</sup> To this period belong three inscribed stone urns found close to the Phayagyi stupa and a very large inscribed stone urn found near the Phayahtaung temple. The script used on all these

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<sup>63</sup> Harry Falk, “Die Goldblätter aus Sri Ksetra.”

urns belongs to the Andhra palaeographic tradition of Southern Brahmi and dates to ca. 5th–6th century CE.<sup>64</sup> The inscriptions are in Pyu with some words and dates of uncertain meaning, but three royal names were separately recorded on the three Phayagyi urns, while seven or eight names formed a royal genealogy on the Phayahtaung urn inscription. Five of these names end in an Indic heroic epithet, *-vikrama*: H(a)rīvikrama, Sūryavikrama, Sihavikrama (Siṃhavikrama), Adityavikrama (Ādityavikrama), and Brithuvikrama (Pṛthuvikrama). If the possession of writing was *the* criterion of civilization, and above all the appearance of Sanskrit language in Southeast Asia was evidence of Indianization, then one would have to conclude that civilization began at Sri Ksetra in ca. 5th–6th century. But the *in situ* material evidence presented above (including dated stratified data from the Yahanda Mound), and supported by Chinese records, reveal significant pre-existing hydraulic, agricultural, and urban development at Sri Ksetra ca. 3rd century BCE–4/5th century CE. What the inscribed stone urns do record is the emergence of kingship at Sri Ksetra and the desire of its kings to associate themselves with the fame of the Guptas, notably with Chandragupta II, who adopted the style *vikramāditya*. This form of Indianization took place in a context quite different from that envisaged by Coedès (1964) and captures synergies between two cultures, not colonization.

From ca. 3rd century onwards, monks, merchants, and court emissaries traveled between several regions of India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Myanmar. The dynamic contexts in which such exchanges took place, however, were not *cultural colonization*. In Sri Ksetra, a literate elite had emerged by the 4th century, consisting probably of both foreign and local Buddhist monks. Inscriptions of Sri Ksetra belonging to the 4th–6th century show the monks had studied two Indic languages and several Indic scripts, and employed them to record the royal urns in Pyu, the golden text in Pali, and Pyu-Pali leaves of silver and gold and a long Pyu-Sanskrit stone inscription.

This long Pyu urn inscription of over 1,100 legible letters undoubtedly holds much information yet to be unraveled (Figure 21a – 21b). Living in the late Gupta, and early post-Gupta, period, the *-vikrama* kings of Sri Ksetra were clearly alert to Gupta fame and associated themselves with it: this too was synergy, not colonization.

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<sup>64</sup> Dr. Lore Sander, Berlin and Dr. Ingo Strauch, Lausanne, personal communication; date also implicit in Griffiths et al., “Studies in Pyu Epigraphy.”



**Figure 21a:** Sri Ksetra: cylindrical stone urn inscribed with royal genealogy in Pyu language, found near the Phayahtaung Temple, ca. 6th–7th century. National Museum, Yangon [author’s photo].

The last of the elite Buddhist monuments of Sri Ksetra to be considered here is the Khin Ba Mound, excavated 1926–7.<sup>65</sup> It is situated just inside the southeast walls of Sri Ksetra, 170 m north of the Mathegya *stūpa* discussed above, and 2 km east of the Yahanda Mound.<sup>66</sup> In it, in 1926, the only undisturbed relic chamber

<sup>65</sup> Charles Duroiselle, “Excavations at Hmawza,” in *Archaeological Survey of India 1926–7* (Calcutta: Government Printing Office, 1928), 172–81.

<sup>66</sup> Kyaw Myo Win et al., *Excavations at HMA64 (The Khin Ba Mound), Hmawza Village Tract, Pyay District, Bago Region* (Naypyitaw: Department of Archaeology and National Museums [in Myanmar], 2017).





**Figure 21b:** Sri Ksetra: close-up view of the ornamental script used to expertly inscribe the Pyu language on the cylindrical stone urn with five-line royal genealogy, ca. 6th century [photo: Marc Miyake].

of the whole city was found.<sup>67</sup> The two most precious objects in that deposit were a very large, gilded silver reliquary and a golden manuscript comprising twenty leaves of solid gold inscribed with sixty lines of Pali in a perfectly legible condition. The manuscript was held together by strong golden wires passing through crumpled sheets of gold, originally covering wooden end boards, which had disintegrated (Figures 22a and b).

<sup>67</sup> Janice Stargardt, “The Great Silver Reliquary from Sri Ksetra: Where Early Buddhist Art Meets Early Pali Inscriptions in the Pyu Culture of Burma (Myanmar),” in *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma*, British Museum Research Publication 218, ed. Janice Stargardt and Michael Willis (London: The British Museum, 2018), 89–105.





**Figure 22a:** Sri Ksetra: the golden Pali text from the Khin Ba Mound (HMA64), closed [photo from glass plate negatives of DANM, author's collection; color by Philip Stickler].



**Figure 22b:** Sri Ksetra: the golden Pali text from the Khin Ba Mound (HMA64), open, showing regular three-line inscriptions on eighteen of the twenty gold leaves [photo: DANM].

The golden Pali text has been carefully analyzed by Lu Pe Win and Harry Falk, and dated, palaeographically, by Falk to the period from the 4th–5th

century CE.<sup>68</sup> This makes it the earliest source of Pali in the world, and is presented briefly here because it documents the historical significance of Pyu literacy in preserving one of the two great Indian traditions of Buddhism: the Pali-based tradition.

## 10 Conclusion

The two principal objects of the Khin Ba relic chamber, the golden Pali text and the great silver reliquary (Figure 23), preserve the earliest Pali inscriptions in the world. In the 6th century, Pali inscriptions appeared at Dvaravati sites in Thailand, sometimes from the same texts as those cited by the Pyu.<sup>69</sup> Consider the historical consequences – for Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and later Cambodia – of the fact that the monks of Sri Ksetra adhered mainly to the Pali traditions of Buddhism at a time when, in India, Sanskrit was playing an increasingly important role,<sup>70</sup> even despite the fact that they knew Sanskrit. The great silver reliquary testifies to the deep attachment of the Pyu to Buddhism, which they had received from both Gupta and Andhra India; its inscriptions contribute to the Pyu Pali records, and above all, it exhibits the *creative* way the Pyu selectively adopted, adapted, and recreated rich Indian textual-artistic traditions. It is not known whether cremation burials were installed around the foundations of the Khin Ba *stūpa* platform, as at other Pyu *stūpas*, but fragments of burial urns were among the ceramics found there.<sup>71</sup>

The evidence presented here shows that technological contacts between specific parts of India and Pyu settlements at the future site of Sri Ksetra

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**68** Lu Pe Win, *Report of the Superintendent*; Janice Stargardt, “The Four Oldest Surviving Pali Texts,” 199–213; Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature. Indian Philology and South Asian Studies*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 205, note 737; Harry Falk, “Die Goldblätter aus Sri Ksetra”; Janice Stargardt, *Tracing Thought through Things: The Oldest Pali Texts and the Early Buddhist Archaeology of India and Burma. 7th Gonda Lecture* (Amsterdam: Monograph of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2000), Appendix, Contents of the relic chamber.

**69** Peter Skilling, “The Advent of Theravada Buddhism to Mainland South-East Asia,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 20, vol. 1 (1997): 93–108; and correspondence with the author, 2018.

**70** Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, *Handbook of Oriental Studies* 2/24 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011); Vincent Eltschinger, “Why Did the Buddhists Adopt Sanskrit?” *Open Linguistics* 3 (2017): 308–326.

**71** Kyaw Myo Win et al., *Excavations at HMA64*, 60 (illustration).



**Figure 23:** Sri Ksetra: the great silver reliquary from the Khin Ba relic chamber, HMA64, 1.2 m x 1.2 m, ca. 6th century [image of its original form created by Vicky Herring and the author, 2018]: the broken branches and leaves of the bodhi tree were found scattered among the objects in the Khin Ba relic chamber. This splendid object had no prototype elsewhere in the Buddhist world.

stretched back into the Iron Age, from before ca. 3rd century BCE. They embraced principles and techniques of hydraulic works, exchanges of crop plants in both directions, methods of ceramic production, norms of brick manufacture, and possibly ironworking. Into this pre-existing network linking many points in a mobile world, the phenomena of Indianization as conventionally understood – the appearance of Indic sacred languages, writing, religions, architecture, and art – appeared in traceable form only seven or eight centuries later. This chapter documents and dates some of the features of a complex society and economy that had emerged beforehand at Sri Ksetra. In conclusion, it emphasizes the enormous time lag between established technological contacts of the Pyu with India and their adoption and adaptation of Indic writing and religious culture; it points to the considerable agency of the rulers of Sri Ksetra between ca. 3rd and 5th/6th centuries CE, which prompted the selective assimilation and integration of Indic religious culture into their pre-existing beliefs with enduring, enriching

results. Without the evidence of the Yahanda Mound excavations, there would be no stratified sequence of Pyu culture for almost a millennium; the penetration of Buddhist and Hindu religious elements into a nonelite Pyu culture by the late 4th/5th century would all remain unknown. Yahanda has also shown that for centuries before then, the Pyu had been creating sacred spaces for their dead and conducting rituals there. After the 4th/5th century, the Yahanda potters employed techniques of ceramic decoration newly acquired from craftsmen of southeast and possibly northeast India to capture their world in new and vivid ways. Beside the standardized Buddha images and Buddhist/Hindu symbols, the human or divine figures depicted on the Yahanda pottery have no counterparts in the sculptures generated by court circles in South or Southeast Asia. Their vivacious stamped images of a world viewed from below recall the powerful ancestor figures with plumed headdresses depicted on Dongson bronze drums, or the three-dimensional tableaux on the bronze drums of Dian, in Yunnan. In the wider context of South and Southeast Asia, Sri Ksetra produced a unique combination of images of the mid-first millennium world: viewed from the court and from the Yahanda Mound, they created, by means of techniques adopted from Indian artists, things at once familiar and new.

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## **Part III: Religion, Ritual, and Empowerment**



Csaba Dezsó

# The Meaning of the Word *ārya* in Two Gupta-Period Inscriptions

## 1 Sanskrit Eulogistic Poetry

The composition of good poetry – as Bhāmaha, the oldest authority on classical Indian poetics, observed – brings about both pleasure (*prīti*) and fame (*kīrti*).<sup>1</sup> The latter benefit includes not just the poet’s fame, but also that of his patron. Kings, in particular, relied on poets to immortalize their glorious deeds and to transmit their fame to future generations. As Rudraṭa, a Kashmirian author on poetics, pointed out, once the temples and other foundations they have built are destroyed by time, not even the kings’ names would remain if there were no good poets to preserve them.<sup>2</sup>

*Praśasti*, Sanskrit eulogistic poetry, has as one of its principal goals the perpetuation of the memory of its patrons. It does not simply recount the battles fought and the foundations made by the king, but through praising his meritorious and valorous deeds it affirms his unique suitability for his position. As Sheldon Pollock has observed, “Fame may be the product of concrete practices, but it is not something that exists concretely, like a temple or a victory pillar. It remains amorphous until embodied in some language; it remains unintelligible unless that language can speak in the figures of speech that explain to us the otherwise inexplicable; and it remains transient if that language itself is transient.”<sup>3</sup> Cosmopolitan Sanskrit, the language of the gods, was uniquely fit for preserving and transmitting fame in the form of inscriptions throughout South and Southeast Asia. These inscriptions publicly proclaim the truth of the acts they relate as well as the truth of the qualifications of the kings they praise.

To illustrate the potency of poetic speech, this paper presents two uniquely important inscribed Sanskrit praise poems, *praśastis*, from Gupta India: the Allahabad pillar inscription, composed by Hariṣeṇa and celebrating the deeds of the Gupta king Samudragupta (r. ca. 335–376 CE), and the Bhitari inscription,

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1 Batuk Nath Śarmā and Baladeva Upādhyāya, *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra of Bhāmaha*, Kashi Sanskrit Series (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1928), 1, verse 2cd: *prītiṃ karoti kīrtiṃ ca sādhuḷkāvyānibandhanam*, “the composition of good poetry creates pleasure and fame.”

2 *Śrī-Rudraṭācāryaviracitaḷ Kāvyaḷaṅkāraḷ, Śrī-Namisādhupraṇitayā saṃskṛtaṭikayā samuṇetaḷ* (Delhi: Motilāl Banārsīdās, 1983), 3, verse 5.

3 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 146.

praising the achievements of Skandagupta (r. ca. 455–467 CE). We shall also touch upon the Junagadh inscription of the latter king. The Gupta empire held sway over much of the northern part of the subcontinent in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The Gupta period saw the production of long and elaborate Sanskrit *praśastis* inscribed on stone for the first time after the pioneering inscription of the Śaka ruler Rudradāman in the second century CE. As we shall see, in both the Allahabad and the Bhitari inscriptions, the poet used the multi-valent word *ārya* in a meaning that gives a special position to the king in the royal family.

## 2 The Bhitari and Junagadh Inscriptions of Skandagupta

Skandagupta, the son of Kumāragupta, is perhaps best known for his successful battles against the Huns. When we read his inscriptions, we may get the impression of a “self-made” king: there are many allusions to the victories he achieved by his own efforts and to the strength of his arms, by which he defeated his enemies and conquered the earth.<sup>4</sup> The Bhitari pillar inscription presents a genealogy of the Gupta kings and praises Skandagupta’s achievements in saving the tottering sovereignty of the dynasty. While the poet of the inscription refers to Skandagupta’s predecessors with the conventional expressions *tatparigrhīta*, “accepted by him (i.e. his father),” and *tatpādānudhyāta*, “approved by (his) respectable (father),”<sup>5</sup> indicating succession on the basis of the father’s favor, Skandagupta is said to be *pitṛparigatapādapadmavartī*,<sup>6</sup> “staying at his father’s lotus-feet, which have gone everywhere.” This might indicate that although he may have been close to his father, he was not the one whom he favored as heir to the throne.

<sup>4</sup> Bhitari inscription, line 7: *bhujabalāḍhyo guptavamśaikavīraḥ*; line 13: *bhujabalavijitāriḥ*, line 14: *bāhubhyām avanim vijitya*; line 15: *dorbhyām dharā kampitā*, in John Faithfull Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum 3 (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888), 53–54. Junagadh inscription, line 2: *svabhujajanitavīryo*, line 4: *avanim . . . cakāra ātmasaṁsthām . . . ātmaśaktyā*, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> On these expressions, see Cédric Ferrier and Judit Törzsök, “Meditating on the King’s Feet? Some Remarks on the Expression *pādānudhyāta*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 51 (2008): 93–113.

<sup>6</sup> Line 7 of the Bhitari inscription, Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 53.

The Junagadh inscription is on a famous rock at Girnar, in Gujarat, that also contains inscriptions of the Maurya king Aśoka (third century BCE) and the epigraph of the Śaka king Rudradāman (second century CE). The Gupta inscription was engraved by a local governor who restored the reservoir when its dam had broken. The poet of the Junagadh inscription claims that Skandagupta was chosen by the goddess of royal fortune, Rājyalakṣmī, herself:

*krameṇa buddhyā nipuṇaṃ pradhārya  
dhyātvā ca kṛtsnān guṇa-doṣa-hetūn |  
vyapetya sarvān manujendra-putrāṃl  
lakṣmīḥ svayaṃ yaṃ varayāṃ cakāra ||<sup>7</sup>*

Whom Lakṣmī herself chose after considering with her intellect in due order and carefully all the causes of virtues and faults, and after discarding all (other) sons of kings.

While in the genealogies of earlier Gupta kings not just their fathers but also their mothers are named, Skandagupta's mother remains anonymous in the sixth verse of the Bhitari inscription, in which he is said to hurry to his mother after restoring the ruined fortunes of the dynasty, just as Kṛṣṇa hurried to Devakī after killing Kāṃsa.<sup>8</sup> The anonymity of the mother might indicate, as Hans Bakker has observed, that Skandagupta was "a boy from the harem."<sup>9</sup>

The last *pāda* of the seventh verse of the Bhitari inscription has been read differently by various scholars. Fleet reads and translates it as follows: "*gītais ca stutibhiś ca vandakaja(?)no(?) yaṃ prā(?)payaty āryatām,*"<sup>10</sup> "whom the bards raise to distinction with (their) songs and praises."<sup>11</sup> Sircar adopts the same reading.<sup>12</sup> Basham interprets the word *āryatā* in the context of the *varṇa* system, and suggests that Skandagupta was the "son of a humble *śūdra* concubine."<sup>13</sup> Bhandarkar reads *vṛttakathanam* in place of *vandakajano* and translates the line as follows: "whom the narration of (his) mode of life, whether

7 Junagadh inscription, line 5, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 59.

8 For a fuller discussion of this verse, see Hans T. Bakker, *The Vākātakas. An Essay in Hindu Iconology* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 26–27.

9 Hans T. Bakker, "A Theatre of Broken Dreams: Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony," in *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, eds. Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 178.

10 Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 54.

11 Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 56.

12 Dines Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 1, *From the Sixth Century B. C. to the Sixth Century A. D.* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965), 323.

13 Arthur Llewellyn Basham, "The Date of the End of the Reign of Kumāra Gupta I and the Succession after His Death," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 17 (1957): 369.

with songs or with panegyrics, is raising to the dignity of an Ārya.”<sup>14</sup> Agrawala, following Jagannath, reads the line differently still: “*gītaiś ca stutibhiś ca [vṛttakathanaiḥ] yaṃ hrepyaty āryatā*,”<sup>15</sup> “whom (his) nobility causes to blush by reason of the narrations of his exploits through songs and eulogies.”<sup>16</sup>

Gupta, however, having examined the various copies of the inscription, concludes that “the reading of the line by Fleet stands where it was.”<sup>17</sup> But did the poet of the inscription really imply that Skandagupta was raised from the status of a *sūdra*? There is perhaps yet another interpretation, but first let us have a look at a comparable Gupta-period inscription in which the word *ārya* occurs.

### 3 The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta

The Allahabad pillar today stands in the city fort, but it may originally have been erected at ancient Kauśāmbī on the bank of the Yamunā. This pillar too contains inscriptions of Aśoka. The author of the Gupta inscription (fourth century CE) was Hariṣeṇa, the king’s minister of alliance and war (*sāndhivigrahika*). The text describes Samudragupta’s conquests in ornate poetic language. The fourth verse of the inscription, in which Candragupta transfers sovereignty to his son, Samudragupta, reads as follows in Fleet’s edition:

[ā]ryyo hīty upaguhyā bhāvapiśunair utkarṇṇitai romabhiḥ  
sabhyeśūcchvasiteṣu tulyakulaJamlānānanodvikṣi[ta]ḥ |  
sn[e]havyālulitena bāṣpaguruṇā tattvekṣiṇā cakṣuṣā  
yaḥ pitrābhīhito ni[r]ikṣ[y]a nikhi[lām pāhy eva]m [u]rv[v]im iti ||<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bhandarkar’s translation, in John Faithfull Fleet and Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, rev. ed., Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum 3, eds. Bahadur Chand Chhabra and Govind Swamirao Gai (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1981), 317.

<sup>15</sup> Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, ed., *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs. Guptādhirājalekhamaṇḍala* (Varanasi: Books Asia, 1983), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Jagannath’s translation, quoted in Bahadur Chand Chhabra, “Beauties of the Bhitari Inscription of Skandagupta,” in *Felicitation Volume. A Collection of Forty-Two Indological Essays, Presented to Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. V. V. Mirashi*, eds. G. T. Deshpande, Ajay Mitra Shastri, and V. W. Karambelkar (Nagpur: Vidarbha Samshodhan Mandal, 1965), 363.

<sup>17</sup> Parameshwari Lal Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas*, vol. 1, *Sources, Historiography & Political History* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974), 339.

<sup>18</sup> Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 6.

“For he is an *ārya*” – [with these words his father] embraced him with gooseflesh that betrayed his feelings, and when the people in the assembly breathed a sigh of relief, being watched by the sad faces of others who had been born in the same family, he was addressed by his father, looking at him with an eye that was tremulous with affection, heavy with tears, and observant of the truth: “Protect thus the entire earth.”

The revised edition of the third volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* reads [*ā*]ryy[ai]hīty, “*ārya*, come,” as the beginning of the verse.<sup>19</sup> Chhabra suggests a different reading of the first words – *ehy ehīty*, “come, come”<sup>20</sup> – which has been adopted by Sircar<sup>21</sup> and Agrawala.<sup>22</sup> This reading is certainly attractive, and Chhabra cites several parallels from Sanskrit literature, though he does not refer to what is probably the closest parallel, from the *Harṣacarita* (seventh century CE), in which the dying king, Prabhākaravardhana, beckons his son, Harṣa, with the same words:<sup>23</sup>

*avanipatis tu dūrād eva dṛṣṭvātidayitaṃ tanayaṃ tadavastho 'pi nīrbharasnehāvarjitaḥ  
pradhāvamāno manasā prasārya bhujau “ehy ehi” ity āhvayañ śārīrārdhena śayanād udagāt.*

As soon as the king perceived his darling son while still at some distance, swayed even in that extremity by overpowering affection, he ran forward in spirit to meet him, and putting out his arms, half rose from the couch, calling to him “Come to me, come to me.”<sup>24</sup>

And just as Candragupta transfers the protection of the earth to Samudragupta, Prabhākaravardhana addresses Harṣa in a similar way, e.g. *kṣitir iyaṃ tava*, “this earth is yours”; *gṛhyatām śnīḥ*, “accept royal majesty”; *prajāḥ parirakṣyantām*, “may the people be protected.”<sup>25</sup>

Instead of *āryyo*, Goyal suggests the reading *arhyo*, “worthy,”<sup>26</sup> while Thieme conjectures *varyyo*, “eligible, excellent.”<sup>27</sup> Both of these readings would imply that Samudragupta was eligible to the throne because of his outstanding qualities, some of which were probably mentioned in the preceding, fragmentary

19 Fleet and Bhandarkar, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 212.

20 Bahadur Chand Chhabra, “Chandragupta’s Abdication,” *Indian Culture* 14, no. 4 (1948): 143.

21 Dines Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, 263.

22 Agrawala, *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs*, 4.

23 Pandurang Vaman Kane, ed., *The Harshacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Text of Uchchhvāsas I–VIII* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1918] 1997), 79.

24 Translation by Cowell and Thomas, in Edward Byles Cowell and Frederick William Thomas, trans., *The Harṣa-Carita of Bāṇa* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1897), 141.

25 Kane, *The Harshacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa*, 86–87.

26 S. R. Goyal, *A History of the Imperial Guptas* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1967), 193, note 5.

27 Paul Thieme, “*ārya*,” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 79, nos. 3–4 (1965): 284.

verses; thus his learning seems to be the focus of such expressions as *śāstratattvārthabhartuḥ*, “who was the supporter of the real truth of the scriptures,” and *sphuṭabahukavitākīrtirājyaṃ bhunakti*, “who enjoys . . . the sovereignty of fame (produced) by much poetry.”<sup>28</sup> The “worthiness” of the heir is also emphasized in the *Arthaśāstra*, when it teaches that “a son who possesses the exemplary qualities of the self he should appoint as Chief of the Armed Forces or as the Crown Prince.”<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, if we follow Fleet’s (*āryyo hīty*) or Bhandarkar’s (*āryyahīty*) reading, we may pose the question of what exactly the word *ārya* refers to. The word *ārya* or *āryaputra*, as Thieme and Scharfe have pointed out, can mean “elder or eldest son or brother.”<sup>30</sup> We know from several inscriptions that Samudragupta was *Licchavi-dauhitra*, that is, the son of the daughter of the Licchavi king.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Manusmṛti*, “the daughter’s son (*dauhitra*) shall take the entire property of a man without son”<sup>32</sup> (9:131, *dauhitra eva ca hared aputrasyākhilam dhanam*);<sup>33</sup> therefore, Samudragupta was entitled to succeed his sonless maternal grandfather on the Licchavi throne. But the *Manusmṛti* also teaches that “the daughter’s son shall indeed take the entire estate of the father who is without a son”<sup>34</sup> (9:132, *dauhitro hy akhilaṃ riktham aputrasya pitur haret*).<sup>35</sup> Now in the case of Samudragupta, there may have been other contenders to the Gupta throne, as the expression *tulyakulaja*, “those born in the same family,” indicates: these might have included his brothers. But Manu also says that the eldest son alone may take the whole paternal estate (9:105, *jyeṣṭha eva tu gṛhṇīyāt pitryaṃ dhanam aśeṣataḥ*), and this might have been the case for Samudragupta: when Candragupta referred to him as *ārya*, he might have meant “eldest brother

28 Fleet’s translations, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 11.

29 R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra. Part I. A Critical Edition with a Glossary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 24 (1.17.43): *ātmasampannaṃ saināpatye yauvarāje vā sthāpayet*. Translation by Olivelle, in Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India. Kauṭīliya’s Arthaśāstra. A New Annotated Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90. The exemplary qualities of the self are listed in *Arthaśāstra* 6.1.6.

30 Paul Thieme, “*ārya*,” 284; Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 27, note 10.

31 For more details on the question of *dauhitra*, see Hartmut Scharfe, “Griech. θυγατρῖδοῦς, Sanskrit *dauhitra* ‘[Erb]tochtersohn,’” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 79, nos. 3/4 (1965): 265–284; Thomas R. Trautmann, “Licchavi-Dauhitra,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1972): 2–15.

32 Translation by Olivelle, in Patrick Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law. A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 196–197.

33 Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 770.

34 Translation by Olivelle, in Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 197.

35 Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 770.



among my sons,” and thus, as Thieme has already pointed out,<sup>36</sup> he confirmed with a legal argument Samudragupta’s right to the Gupta throne. The words of the king in the inscription, *nikhilāṃ pāhy evam urvīm*, “protect thus the entire earth,” seem to echo the *pitryaṃ dhanam aśeṣataḥ*, “the entire paternal estate,” of the *Manusmṛti*.

## 4 Conclusions

Returning to the problematic last *pāda* of the seventh verse of the Bhitari inscription, there, too, *ārya* might have the same meaning. Skandagupta was probably not the eldest son by a chief queen, and thus he was not the strongest candidate to the throne. Nevertheless, he fought for the throne and secured it for himself by the power of his arms. When the panegyrists sing the praises of his glorious victories, they elevate him to the status of an *ārya*, that is, “eldest son,” a rightful heir to the throne.

In the fourth verse of the Allahabad pillar inscription, Candragupta embraces his son Samudragupta and chooses him to be the protector of the earth, while those born in the same family (*tulyakulaja*) watch the scene with dejected faces. Here the selection is clearly made by the father, the reference to whose “eyes that observe the truth” (*tattvekṣiṇā cakṣuṣā*) indicates that he has decided after due deliberation. He addresses his son with the word *ārya*, which here probably means “eldest son,” and affirms Samudragupta’s right to the throne. Skandagupta, on the other hand, was chosen not by his father, but by the goddess of royal majesty herself, also after careful consideration. Skandagupta, who was probably not the eldest son of Kumāragupta, won the throne with his strong arms, and he was elevated to the status of an *ārya*, “eldest son” and heir, by his deeds and by the poets who sang the praises of his deeds.

These two verses of the Allahabad and the Bhitari inscriptions express the power of poetry from which kings can benefit. As Daṇḍin would write a couple of centuries later (*Kāvyaḍarśa* 1:5):

*ādirājayaśobimbam ādarśaṃ prāpya vāṇmayam |*  
*teṣāṃ asaṃnidhāne ’pi na svayaṃ paśya naśyati ||*<sup>37</sup>

Look! The image of the fame of ancient kings, reflected in the mirror of literature, itself does not disappear, even though they are not present.

<sup>36</sup> Thieme, “*ārya*,” 284.

<sup>37</sup> Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, *Kāvyaḍarśa of Daṇḍin. Sanskrit Text and English Translation* (Poona: The Oriental Book Supplying Agency, 1924), 1.

In Samudragupta's case, the *praśasti* publicly declares and affirms his right to the Gupta throne. In the case of Skandagupta, the unique power of the panegyrist goes beyond the assertion of the truth of facts: it creates facts when it invests the king with a status he did not actually have.

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Bryan J. Cuevas

# Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling: A Tibetan Vajrabhairava Practice from Recently Recovered Manuscripts of the “Lost” *Book of Rwa (Rwa pod)*

## 1 Introduction

In 2001, the late Elliot Sperling published a brief but incisive article entitled “‘Orientalism’ and Aspects of Violence in the Tibetan Tradition,” marking one of the first steps in the dismantling of a persistent romance, a fanciful stereotype of Tibetan Buddhism as the quintessential religion of peace and nonviolence and the Dalai Lamas, past and present, as paragons of Gandhian pacifism.<sup>1</sup> In Sperling’s effort in that essay to bring much-needed context and critical sensitivity to a challenging topic – and, in turn, to humanize Tibetans, their history, and their culture – he did well to remind us of the messy realities of the human condition, of worldly existence, of those “aspects of life that breed strife and discord.” And in that messiness, he argued, Tibetan Buddhism was made “a *vehicle for power* in the arena of world history, first for Tangut emperors, then for Mongol, Chinese, and Manchu rulers.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Tibetan Buddhism is rich with an abundance of methods and techniques for the attainment of power, both for religious *and* political ends.<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as there are Tibetan rituals, too numerous to count, for acquiring the wisdom and benevolence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, for achieving goodwill, peace, and healing, there are also nearly an equal number (if not more) designed for coercion, suppression, and violent harm. They include the usual tantric initiations, ritual offerings, ceremonies employing wrathful deities, and so forth; but also rituals to repel and suppress aggressive forces, intoning hostile *mantra* and *dhāraṇī* spells, casting ritual “cake bombs” (*gtor*

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1 In *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, eds. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rāther (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 317–29 [324]. This article was based on a paper presented in 1996 at an international symposium held in Bonn, Germany.

2 Sperling, “‘Orientalism’ and Aspects of Violence in the Tibetan Tradition,” in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, eds. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rāther (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 319 (emphasis added).

3 Several examples of the latter in Tibetan history are surveyed in Bryan J. Cuevas, “The Politics of Magical Warfare,” in *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Karl Debreczeny (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019), 171–89.

zor) made of dough or some other less wholesome ingredient (e.g. animal feces and the like), and preparing effigies personifying the enemy to be manipulated like some form of Buddhist voodoo doll.<sup>4</sup> In a word, these are the *weaponized* vehicles of Tibetan Buddhist power. And in the interests of cross-cultural comparison, we could reasonably describe them all as examples of Buddhist *magic* and perhaps more appropriately, as Buddhist *sorcery* – a fair though not entirely unproblematic rendering of the Tibetan word *mngon spyod*, Sanskrit *abhicāra*.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 The Vajrabhairava Sorcerer

In Tibetan Buddhist history there is one exemplary master of such rites who became the archetype of the Buddhist sorcerer, notorious across the centuries as

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4 On the ritual use of effigies (Tib. *liṅga*), see Bryan J. Cuevas, “Illustrations of Human Effigies in Tibetan Ritual Texts: With Remarks on Specific Anatomical Figures and Their Possible Iconographic Source,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 1 (2011): 73–97 and sources cited therein.

5 The two classic introductions to the category of magic and sorcery in the Indian Sanskrit traditions remain Teun Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human: A Study of Magic and its Religious Foundations in Sanskrit Texts, with Particular Attention to a Fragment on Viṣṇu’s Māyā Preserved in Bali* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978) and Hans-Georg Tüerstig, “The Indian Sorcery Called *Abhicāra*,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 29 (1985): 69–117; also of value is Gudrun Bühnemann, “The Six Rites of Magic,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 447–62 and various articles in Knut A. Jacobsen, ed., *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). For magic in Buddhism generally, see Luis O. Gómez, “The Bodhisattva as Wonder-Worker,” in *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, ed. Lewis Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1977), 221–61; Phyllis Granoff, “The Ambiguity of Miracles: Buddhist Understandings of Supernatural Power,” *East and West* 46, nos. 1/2 (1996): 79–96; Bradley S. Clough, “The Higher Knowledges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, nos. 1/2 (2010/2011): 409–33; and most recently, Thomas Nathan Patton, *The Buddha’s Wizards: Magic, Protection, and Healing in Burmese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). On magic and sorcery in Buddhist tantric traditions, see especially Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973); Peter Schwieger, “Black Magic in Tibetan Buddhism,” in *Historical and Philological Studies of China’s Western Regions*, no. 3, ed. Shen Weirong (Beijing: Science Press, 2010): 169–85; Bryan J. Cuevas, “The Calf’s Nipple (*Be’u bum*) of Ju Mipam (‘Ju Mi pham): A Handbook of Tibetan Ritual Magic,” in *Tibetan Ritual*, ed. José I. Cabezón (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 165–86; and Iain Sinclair, “War Magic and Just War in Indian Tantric Buddhism,” *Social Analysis* 58, no. 1 (2014): 149–66.

a fearsome “lord of magical power” (*mthu stobs dbang phyug*) as well as a consummate translator (*lo tsā ba*) of esoteric Buddhist scripture, specifically the tantras of the fierce divinities Vajrabhairava and Yamāri/Yamāntaka. This is Rwa lo tsā ba Rdo rje grags, who began his career in the early eleventh century in the southwestern Tibetan valley known today as Nyalam (*gnya’ lam*), near the Nepalese border. In the legends of his unusually long and wondrous life, he is said to have made four extended trips to Nepal and twice visited India to obtain and translate these tantras and their attendant practices (*sādhana*, *maṇḍala*, *yantra*, *homa*, etc.). His translations of the Vajrabhairava cycle in particular (later accepted as authoritative and officially incorporated into the Tibetan Canon)<sup>6</sup> were accomplished under the tutelage of two nebulous Nepali scholars referred to in the literature by the rather generic names Guru Bha ro phyag rdum (“Bha ro maimed hand,” Skt. alias *Dīpaṃkaraśrī*) and *paṇḍita* Bal po Thugs rje chen po (Skt. *Mahākaruṇika*, alias *Dīpaṃkararakṣita*; also Tib. Me tsa/Mi dza/Maṅja [g]ling pa).<sup>7</sup> Confused by these names, some early Tibetan biographers of the Rwa tradition (*rwa lugs*) mistakenly conflated the two as one teacher, as we shall see in one example below.

In Tibet, Rwa lo is most famous, infamous in fact, not so much for his translation efforts but for having “liberated” (i.e. killed) through magical means more than a dozen of his Buddhist rivals and others he perceived as antagonistic to his

<sup>6</sup> Translations and revisions by Rwa lo tsā ba in the Kangyur: Derge 467, *De bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku gsung thugs gshin rje nag po’i rgyud* (*Sarvatathāgata-kāya-vāk-citta-kṣṇayamāritantra*), rgyud, ja, 134v1–151v4; Derge 468, *Dpal rdo rje ’jigs byed chen po’i rgyud* (*Śrī-vajrahābhairava-tantra*), rgyud, ja, 151v4–164r1; Derge 472 (cf. Derge 1996), *Te’u lo pa’i cho ga* (*Cucchundara-kalpa*), rgyud, ja, 174r2–174v7; Derge 473, *Gshin rje’i gshed dgra nag po’i ’khor lo las thams cad grub par byed pa’i rgyud kyi rgyal po* (*Yamārikṣṇa-karmasarvacakra-siddhakara-tantrārājā*), rgyud, ja, 175r1–185v7. Tengyur translations: Derge 1976, *Rdo rje ’jigs byed zhal gcig phyag gnyis pa’i sgrub pa’i thabs* (*Vajrabhairavaikānanadvibhuja-sādhana*), rgyud, mi, 147v5–150r2; Derge 1983, *Dkyil ’khor gyi cho ga* (*Maṇḍalavidhī*), rgyud, mi, 166r7–171v4; Derge 1994, *Dpal rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi sgrub pa’i thabs* (*Śrī-vajrabhairava-sādhana*), rgyud, mi, 190r2–190v4; Derge 1995, *Rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi tshogs kyi ’khor lo* (*Vajrabhairava-gaṇacakra*), rgyud, mi, 190v4–192v5; Derge 1996 (cf. Derge 472); *Tstshu tstshunda ra’i rtog pa* (*Cucchundara-kalpa*), rgyud, mi, 192v5–193v5; Derge 1997, *Rdo rje ’jigs byed chen po’i sbyin sreg gi cho ga* (*Mahāvajrabhairava-homavidhī*), rgyud, mi, 193v5–196v3; Narthang 1700, *Las kyi gshin rje chos kyi rgyal po’i bsgrub thabs* (*Karmayama-dharmarāja-sādhana*) rgyud ’grel, pi, 422v6–424v4; Narthang 3589, *Gshin rje gshed nag po’i ’khor lo’i gsal byed* (*Kṣṇayamāri-cakroddyota*), rgyud ’grel, zhu, 95v5–98r4.

<sup>7</sup> For further details about these two teachers with references to relevant primary sources, see Bryan J. Cuevas, “Rwa lo tsā ba and His Biographers,” in *The Illuminating Mirror: Tibetan Studies in Honour of Per K. Sørensen on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. Olaf Czaja and Guntram Hazod (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2015), 57–79; also, Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat: The Life of Ra Lotsawa*, trans. Bryan J. Cuevas (New York: Penguin Classics, 2015), xxx–xxxiii.

spiritual mission. He did this by utilizing the tantric procedures centered on Vajrabhairava and his alter ego Yamāri/Yamāntaka. It is well known that the tantras, broadly speaking, offer a vast assortment of ritual mechanisms for achieving a seemingly limitless array of supernormal powers (*siddhi*) to be used for a variety of objectives, both worldly (*laukika*) and otherworldly (*lokottara*). In the Buddhist tantras, such goals include, but are certainly not limited to, obtaining the elixir of longevity and achievement of the status of “wizard” (*vidyādhara*); flying through the sky and ascending into the heavens of the *devas* and *asuras*; assuming multiple forms; destroying the defilements (*āśravakṣaya*) that prevent liberation; realizing the stages of a bodhisattva; achieving eloquence and great physical strength; becoming invisible; traveling long distances swiftly and without exhaustion; controlling demons and other harmful forces; prevailing over others; punishing wicked people and vanquishing enemies; and achieving so many other similarly magical and wondrous feats.

What is unusual in the case of Rwa lo tsā ba, however, is that his biographers consistently glorify the more aggressive and ethically ambiguous of these tantric ritual aims – Buddhist sorcery, in other words. Without question, the Vajrabhairava tantras, to which Rwa lo was so fervently devoted, are replete with measures for coercing (*nigraha*), immobilizing (*stambhana*), causing dissension (*vidveṣaṇa*), eradicating and driving away (*uccāṭana*), bewildering (*mohana*), inflicting illness (*vyādhikāraṇa*), and annihilating (*māraṇa*).<sup>8</sup> The long-established justification for these sorts of hostile actions, which is cited explicitly and repeatedly both in the tantras themselves and in the literature promoting Rwa lo tsā ba’s legacy, is that such apparent violence actually signals a profound compassionate wisdom that directly perceives the emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the nonduality (*advaya*), of self and other, friends and enemies. On the level of practice, moreover, Rwa lo tsā ba’s apparent deviant actions are proffered as an expedient strategy, a bodhisattva’s skillful means (*upāyakauśalya*) to liberate beings who are dangerously deluded or confused and to place them on the path to buddhahood. When, in this way, nondual wisdom or gnosis (*advayañāna*) is combined with the compassionate skillful means of the bodhisattva, as these Buddhist texts consistently remind us, there is ultimately no violence committed, since there is no *real* victim of the act and no *real* agent of the action. Put another way, again from the tradition’s point of view, the primary object signified by Rwa lo tsā ba’s lethal behavior is not literally his exercise of brute physical harm, but rather his

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<sup>8</sup> For examples, see translation in Bulcsu Siklós, *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian Versions, English Translation and Annotations* (Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996), esp. 31–35, 44–47, 55–56, and 75–76.

enlightened experience of nondual gnosis. Such experience is invariably claimed by his devoted followers as verification of Rwa lo tsā ba's status as a fully enlightened and compassionate buddha. This is precisely how the tradition sympathetic to Rwa lo as a saintly Buddhist hero makes sense of his seemingly hostile and violent deeds. We see this earnestly dramatized in the celebrated *Rwa lo nam thar* ("The Life of Rwa lo"), an extravagant hagiographical work ascribed by tradition to Rwa lo tsā ba's grandnephew, Rwa Ye shes seng ge (fl. ca. 1150), but of uncertain date and provenance.<sup>9</sup> Rwa Ye shes seng ge hailed from the valley of Khu lung in Gtsang and became known as the first patriarch of the Western Rwa tradition (*rwa nub lugs*).<sup>10</sup>

The *Rwa lo nam thar* is mostly acclaimed for its sensational and occasionally alarming stories of Rwa lo tsā ba's adventures in Nepal and India and across the Tibetan heartland (Dbus and Gtsang), the myriad displays of his thaumaturgic powers, his wrathful acts of liberation, his inspired songs of realization (*mgur*), and his (tantric) dalliances with several young female consorts. But also of keen interest, for our purposes here, are the specific rituals and ritual techniques introduced in the biography that Rwa lo is said to have relied on to achieve his objectives. One such practice, appearing in several episodes, is called "Vajrabhairava's Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling" (*rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi yi ge bzhi pa'i gsad bzlog*), which I shall come back to shortly. In addition to practices like this, which Rwa lo had received from his Nepali teachers, the biography is noteworthy, moreover, for its references to the numerous works of ritual instruction and tantric exegesis that Rwa lo is said to have written himself. In Tibet, these writings came to be known collectively as the *Rwa pod* (or *poti*), "The Book of Rwa."

### 3 The "Lost" *Book of Rwa*

The *Rwa pod*, including the written texts of rites like the "Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling" and works by the earliest authors of the Rwa tradition, has long been assumed by scholars to have disappeared in Tibet, forever lost to

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<sup>9</sup> Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo nam thar* [=Mthu stobs dbang phyug rje btsun rwa lo tsā ba'i nam par thar pa kun khyab snyan pa'i rnga sgra] (Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1989); Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*. For speculation on the possible date of the biography, see Cuevas, "Rwa lo tsā ba and His Biographers," 71–76.

<sup>10</sup> On Rwa Ye shes seng ge, see Cuevas, "Rwa lo tsā ba and His Biographers," 58–59 and sources cited therein.



history, existing only as references and citations preserved in sources like the *Rwa lo mam thar*, in several prominent Tibetan histories of the Vajrabhairava transmissions, and in a few traditional booklists.<sup>11</sup> Recently, this situation has changed for the better.

In August 2018, I was excited to learn from Jann Ronis, executive director of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC, formerly TBRC), that one of their field representatives in Mongolia, working with the Asia Classics Input Project (ACIP) at the National Library in Ulaanbaatar, had recently discovered and photographed what was believed to be four unique manuscript collections of the *Rwa pod*. The importance of the “discovery” of this long-absent anthology, in multiple versions no less, is not to be underestimated.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the core writings and translations of *Rwa lo tsā ba*, these collections of manuscripts also contain works that have never before been available to modern scholars, including tantric commentaries, ritual manuals, and textual histories by important lineage figures such as *Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan* (fl. ca. 1250), a principal steward of the *Rwa* family practice and patriarch of the Eastern *Rwa* tradition (*rwa shar lugs*) who was the first to compile and propagate the *Rwa pod*; *Rgya ston Kun dga' brtson 'grus* (fl. ca. 1300), a prolific but relatively unknown Sa skya scholar named in some sources as *Rwa lo tsā ba*'s fourth incarnation and the first to spread the *Rwa* transmissions to Khams in eastern Tibet and as far north as Tangut (Ch. Xixia);<sup>13</sup> and 'Bri gung dpal 'dzin Nyi ma 'od zer dpal bzang po (fl. ca. 1350), the self-professed “Tibetan Śrīdhara” (*bod kyi dpal 'dzin*), disciple of

**11** See, for example, the list reproduced in Lokesh Chandra, ed., *Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature*, (repr., Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., [1963] 1981), 3:15 and 729–35 [863–70]. Chandra's list appears to be derived almost entirely from the seventeenth-century *Thob yig* of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho), *Zab dang rgya che ba'i dam pa'i chos kyi thob yig gang ga'i chu rgyun*, in *Gsung 'bum* (Dharamsala: Nam gsal sgron ma, 2007), 1:263.6–279.3.

**12** In September 2018, I received the digital files of these manuscripts from the BDRC and began cataloging them in detail, cross-checking their contents against several reliable Tibetan booklists, especially the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Thob yig* and the histories of the Vajrabhairava cycle by 'Khon ston Dpal 'byor lhun grub (1561–1637), Tāranātha (1575–1634), and 'Jam mgon A myes zhabs (1597–1659), as well as the more recent inventories of the 'Bras spung libraries in Tibet, on which see 'Bras spungs dgon du bzhugs su gsol ba'i dpe rmying dkar chag, ed. Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2004), 1:448–531, nos. 4700–5731. My publication of the completed catalogue is forthcoming.

**13** Cuevas, “*Rva lo tsā ba* and His Biographers,” 73–74. *Rgya ston*'s father, Ru 'tshams Dbang phyug grags pa (sometimes Dbang phyug rgyal mtshan) was a direct disciple of *Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan*, from whom he received the *Rwa* transmissions. See, for example, the Fifth Dalai Lama, *Zab dang rgya che ba'i dam pa'i chos kyi thob yig gang ga'i chu rgyun*, 1:288.2, 288.5, 292.1–2, and 293.1.

the Jo nang master Zhang ston Bsod nams grags pa (1292–1370).<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, the collected writings of 'Bri gung dpal 'dzin on Vajrabhairava, which, like the *Rwa pod*, is referred to simply as *Dpal pod* or “The Book of Dpal,” was also presumed to have been quite scarce until recently.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.1 Manuscript Collection I: Rwa's Guiding Instructions (RP2)

Three of the four *Rwa pod* versions acquired by the BDRC bear the catalog title *Rwa khrid mkha' 'gro snyan brgyud* (“Rwa's Guiding Instructions, Whispered Lineage of the *ḍākīnis*”), a title that is cited once in the *Rwa lo mam thar* in reference to Rwa lo's special teachings and also in various traditional Tibetan bibliographies.<sup>16</sup> The largest of these manuscript collections (W4CZ302660, henceforth abbreviated RP2) is in three volumes and comprises approximately

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**14** Alias Bdud sde rab tu 'joms pa 'bar ba'i gzhi brjid dpal bzang po. According to details recorded in the colophons, he was active in Gtsang rong and Mal gro, among other places, and was closely affiliated with the monastic centers of Mtshur phu, Shambhara, Thang skya, and Lhun grub rdzong. It should be noted, furthermore, that 'Bri gung dpal 'dzin is also the name of the obscure author of a controversial anti-Rnying ma polemical tract entitled *Chos dang chos ma yin pa nmam par dbye ba'i bstan bcos* (BDRC W1CZ885); for details see, most recently, Leonard van der Kuijp, “The Bird-Faced Monk and the Beginnings of the New Tantric Tradition, Part One,” in *Tibetan Genealogies: Studies in Memoriam of Guge Tsering Gyalpo (1961–2015)*, eds. Guntram Hazod and Shen Weirong (Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 2018), 403–50 [446] and “The Bird-Faced Monk and the Beginnings of the New Tantric Tradition, Part Two,” *Journal of Tibetology* 19 (2018): 86–127 [97–100]. Whether these two authors are the same person remains a question for further study.

**15** Contents of the *Dpal pod* are also listed in Chandra, *Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature*, 3:735–38 [870–73], again derived from the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Thob yig*. See Fifth Dalai Lama, *Zab dang rgya che ba'i dam pa'i chos kyī thob yig gang ga'i chu rgyun*, 1:279. 3–284.3. Photographic images of a separate (incomplete) manuscript version of the *Dpal pod* in cursive script (*dbu med*) of uncertain origin have recently been made available (under restricted circulation) by the BDRC, registered with the title *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyī man ngag gi chos skor* (W3CN2615).

**16** Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo mam thar*, 235; Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 214. Interestingly, 'Jam mgon A myes zhabs indicates that this title, *Rwa khrid mkha' 'gro snyan brgyud*, is actually a well-known name for the specific Rwa lineage issuing from the sixteenth-century Sa skya master Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502–67), a leading promoter of the Eastern Rwa tradition. See 'Jam mgon A myes zhabs Ngag dbang kun dga' bsod nams, *Dpal gshin rje'i gshed skor gyi dam pa'i chos byung ba'i tshul legs par bshad pa 'jam dpal chos kun gsal ba'i nyin byed*, in *Collected Works* (Kathmandu: Sa skya rgyal yongs gsung rab slob gnyer khang, 2000), 15:231.

168 individually titled manuscripts copied on 1,344 leaves in a clear “headed” script (*dbu can*). The first volume opens with forty-nine works attributed to ‘Bri gung dpal ‘dzin (i.e. the *Dpal pod*), which in all probability were composed between the years 1384 and 1397.<sup>17</sup> The remainder of the volume contains all the standard texts of the *Rwa pod* with a few additions. The second volume is made up of mostly duplicate titles written in different hands from those in the first volume and display other markers indicating the texts belong to at least two separate and unique *Rwa pod* witnesses. These are unidentified in the BDRC records, but should be distinguished from RP2 and assigned their own catalog numbers. The third volume is comprised of only a single manuscript documenting a specific lineage of the reading transmission (*lung*) of the *Rwa pod*, which passed directly through the famous Amdo scholar A khu ching Shes rab rgya mtsho (1803–75), one of Tibet’s great antiquarians.<sup>18</sup> All the manuscripts in RP2

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**17** The Tibetan years listed in the colophons are *shing pho byi* (=1384?), *shing pho khyi* (=1394?), *me pho byi* (=1396?), and *me mo glang* (=1397?). The colophons also record that a number of these texts were composed at the request of two individuals: a monk named Kun dga’ dbang phyug (who also appears to have served as scribe) and a disciple named Rtogs ldan Bsod nams dpal from Mdo khams. I have yet to identify them in the available lineage records. The BDRC, without citing its source, identifies this Kun dga’ dbang phyug as the Fourth Ngor chen Kun dga’ dbang phyug (1424–78; see records P4CZ75592 and P1040), but his floruit does not correlate well to the plausible dates of ‘Bri gung dpal ‘dzin in the mid-fourteenth century. The latter must have been mature and active at least a decade or more before 1370, the year his principal teacher died, Zhang ston Bsod nams grags pa. If, however, we were to assume the BDRC’s identification to be correct, and adjust the composition years one *rab ’byung* cycle forward to 1444–57, we would then be left with the unrealistic possibility of ‘Bri gung dpal ‘dzin composing these texts at the ripe old age of 100, or even older!

**18** The title of this work in six folios is *Yi dam rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi chos skor rwa pod du grags pa’i lung thob pa’i bryud thob bzhugs so* (RP2, 3.001). A khu ching’s name appears in the lineage handwritten in cursive and marked by a swastika at the end of the manuscript. After him, the list continues with Mkhan chen Ngag dbang thub bstan rgya mtsho (1836–89), Rje dam pa Bsam gtan rgya mtsho, Sngags rams pa Blo bzang dge ’dun dpal bzang po, and one self-identified as Blo ring, the supposed author of the text. As for who this Blo ring is, I can only speculate that he was likely affiliated with Bla brang bkra shis ’khyil, Sku ’bum, or both in the late nineteenth century. Blo ring is an obvious abbreviation, but I have not found any names at these institutions from the period that would suitably fit. One other potentially fruitful lead: the text mentions the *gsan tho* (“list [of teachings] received”) of Rgyal ba Blo bzang skal bzang rgya mtsho, whom I identify as the Fourth Gro tshang brag (b. 1876). He became abbot of Sku ’bum in 1899 (tenure 1899–1901). For a brief summary of his career, see Joachim Günter Karsten, “A Study of the Sku-’bum/T’a-erh ssu Monastery in Ch’ing-hai” (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 1996), 471–73.

appear to be based on both Sa skya and Dge lugs transmissions and some texts, particularly in the last two volumes, may be traced back to Bla brang Bkra shis 'khyil or Sku 'bum monasteries in Amdo, probably early 1900s.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.2 Manuscript Collections II and III: Rwa's Guiding Instructions (RP3 and RP4)

The second and third BDRC versions of the *Rwa pod* registered by the title *Rwa khrid mkha' 'gro snyan brgyud* (W4CZ58529, henceforth RP3, and W8LS29654, RP4, respectively) are mostly identical. They comprise the same core content in two volumes, with 59 individually titled manuscripts copied on 346 leaves in a fine cursive calligraphy (*dbu med*). By style, at least, these appear rather old, perhaps from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Different scribal hands are evident throughout the collection. Of particular note in the beginning of the first volume of RP3 is the language of its *dkar chag* ("list of contents"), which matches almost verbatim the *Thob yig* ("Record [of Teachings] Received") of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82). Also, on a few of the manuscript folios are written interlinear annotations (*mchan bu*) that cite the Fifth Dalai Lama explicitly by name. Thus, I suspect the compiler or editor of this collection used the Fifth Dalai Lama's booklist as a guide for identifying and arranging the texts. Given that the *Thob yig* was written between 1665 and 1670, we can be assured that these manuscripts could not have been produced before the 1670s. As for RP4, on closer inspection, its first volume is a duplicate of RP3; the manuscript pages are identical, except that the digital files in RP4 are collated in a different order. Moreover, many of its scanned folios are mixed up between individual manuscripts, in disarray, or missing altogether. The second volume of RP4 contains ten unique b/w photocopied manuscripts in 161 folios arranged four folios per page. These comprise liturgical writings on Vajrabhairava, following the Rwa tradition, by Ngor chen Dkon mchog lhun grub (1497–1557), originally composed at Ngor evam chos ldan in 1547. The provenance of these manuscripts is unknown. In the end, unfortunately, the version of the *Rwa pod* represented here in RP3/RP4 is incomplete, missing several of the core works.

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<sup>19</sup> See previous note.

### 3.3 Manuscript Collection IV: The “Faded Document” (RP1)

The fourth manuscript version of the *Rwa pod* (W8LS32375, henceforth RP1) is a single volume of 155 leaves containing 79 texts arranged continuously with no separate title pages and largely copied by a single distinctive hand in mostly legible *dbu can* script (abundant ink stains throughout the collection render many lines difficult to decipher). This version forms a complete and coherent “book.” Moreover, in comparison with the other manuscript collections, this one most closely matches the content and ordering of the thirteenth-century *dkar chag* of Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, which is included in the collection as text no. 002 (described below). Consequently, I have tentatively classified this manuscript as the “master version,” since it very likely approximates the *Rwa pod* in its original form. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that many of its texts conclude with a proofreader’s notation (indicated by some variation of the phrase *ma dpe ltar gcig zhus dags*) confirming that the present copy matches an exemplar (*ma dpe*) that we do not have. That this exemplar could have been very old remains a possibility, but unless or until such an earlier witness becomes available, we cannot be certain. Regrettably, the extant manuscript materials do not allow any conclusive statement on this matter, though it may be significant that the volume as a whole very likely derives from the Ngor branch of the Sa skya tradition.

The library title given to this master version of the *Rwa pod* is borrowed from the first text that appears in its volume: *Rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi rwa’i thim yig rwa los mdzad pa* (“Rwa’s Faded Document on Vajrabhairava Produced by Rwa lo”). This peculiar one-folio “Faded Document” or *Thim yig* – more frequently cited in later sources as *Dkar chag tshigs bcad ma* (“Verse Catalog”) – presents an index of the titles of Rwa lo tsā ba’s original compositions written in narrative verse.<sup>20</sup> The work, as its former title makes clear, is claimed to have been written by Rwa lo himself, and thus in the table of contents reproduced therein, we find the core structure of the *Rwa pod* as it must have initially been conceived.<sup>21</sup> That core structure consists of the following sixteen integrated works attributed to Rwa lo

<sup>20</sup> Versions of the *Thim yig* are found in RP1 (001, 1–2r; RP2 (1.002 and 2.009); and RP3 (1.002). Its colophon specifies that the document was composed by Rwa lo tsā ba himself and that (later?) it was copied from the dictation of a certain Rje btsun Kun dga’, who may very well have been Rgya ston Kun dga’ brtson ’grus. The Tibetan reads: *ces lo tstsha ba rdo rje grags rang nyid kyi thim yig bkod pa’o / bcu drug gi grangs ’di rje btsun kun dga’i zhal las bris so*.

<sup>21</sup> Virtually the same title list is reproduced in Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo mam thar*, 222–23; Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 201–2.

tsā ba and based on his translation of the *Śrī-Vajramahābhairava-tantra* (Tib. *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed chen po'i rgyud*, Derge 468), the root tantra of the Vajrabhairava cycle in seven chapters (*Rgyud kyi rgyal po rtog bdun*).<sup>22</sup> Versions of all the numbered texts listed here are found in the RP1 manuscript:

[1] *Nag 'grel* (“Black Commentary”)<sup>23</sup>

[2] *Dkar 'grel* (“White Commentary”)<sup>24</sup>

[3] *Bcud thigs* (“Elixir Drop”)<sup>25</sup>

[4] *Gsod pa'i mtshon* (“Killing Weapon”) or *Ha la nag po'i shog dril gsum* (“Three Scrolls of Ha la nag po”)<sup>26</sup>

— *Khar rgyud yi ger ma bkod* (“Verbal Transmissions Not Recorded in Writing”)

[5] *Bsnyen sgrub dgra srog dbang bsdud* (“Ritual Approach and Evocation Subjugating the Life-Force of Enemies”)<sup>27</sup>

— *Mngon rtogs rim pa lnga* (“Fivefold Manifest Realization” = *sādhana*, listed as follows:)

[6] *Yid bzhin gter mdzod* (“Wish-Fulfilling Treasury”) [= *sādhana* for the thirteen deities]<sup>28</sup>

[7] *Dri med snang ba* (“Stainless Illumination”) [= *sādhana* for the solitary deity]<sup>29</sup>

[8] *Khams gsum za byed* (“Devourer of the Three Worlds”) [= *sādhana* for the three-faced six-armed deity]<sup>30</sup>

<sup>22</sup> English translation in Siklós, *The Vajrabhairava Tantras*, 27–49.

<sup>23</sup> RP1 (010), *Rtog pa bdun pa'i nag 'grel rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi tshig don mam bshad*, 44r7–57r6; cf. RP2 (1.058 and 2.014); missing in RP3/RP4.

<sup>24</sup> RP1 (011), *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi rgyud kyi dkar 'grel pa*, 57r7–77r4; cf. RP2 (1.059 and 2.013) and RP3 (1.012).

<sup>25</sup> RP1 (012), *Bcud kyi thigs pa*, 77r5–82v6; cf. RP2 (1.060, 2.001, and 2.023) and RP3 (1.013).

<sup>26</sup> RP1 (013–015), *De'i gsung ha la'i shog dril dang po'i rtsa ba*, *Shog dril gnyis pa'i rtsa ba*, *Shog dril gsum pa'i rtsa ba*, 82v6–84v3; cf. RP2 (1.082, 1.085b, 1.085c, 1.100, and 2.048) and RP3 (1.014). *Ha la nag po* is an esoteric form of Avalokiteśvara (Skt. Hālāhala). The term also refers to a lethal poison.

<sup>27</sup> RP1 (016), *Rtog pa bdun pa'i dka' 'grel [bsnyen sgrub dgra srog dbang sdud kyang zer]*, 84v3–92r2; cf. RP2 (1.061, 1.062, 1.078, 2.002, and 2.066); missing in RP3/RP4.

<sup>28</sup> RP1 (017), *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi mngon par rtogs pa yid bzhin gyi gter mdzod*, 92r2–105r7; cf. RP2 (1.063 and 2.008) and RP3 (1.015).

<sup>29</sup> RP1 (018), *Gtso bo'i bsgrub thabs dri med snang ba zhes bya ba rwa lo tstsha ba rdo rje grags pas mdzad pa*, 105r7–109r5; cf. RP2 (1.064 and 2.003) and RP3 (1.016).

<sup>30</sup> RP1 (019), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed zhal gsum phyag drug pa'i mngon rtogs khams gsum za byed*, 109r5–110v4; cf. RP2 (1.065 and 2.004) and RP3 (1.017).

- [9] *Dri med chu rgyun* (“Pure Flowing River”) [=sādhana for the one-faced four-armed deity]<sup>31</sup>
- [10] *Rin chen don bsdus* (“Precious Synopsis”) [=sādhana for the one-faced two-armed deity]<sup>32</sup>
- *Las bzhi'i sbyin sreg cho ga* (“Burnt Offering Rites for the Four Actions” =homa, listed as follows:)
- [11] *Mi mthun kun sel* (“Elimination of All Discordances”) [=homa for pacification]<sup>33</sup>
- [12] *'Dod pa kun 'phel* (“Proliferation of All That Is Desired”) [=homa for enrichment]<sup>34</sup>
- [13] *Gnad kyi lcags kyu* (“Crucial Iron Hook”) [=homa for subjugation]<sup>35</sup>
- [14] *Dgra bgegs kun 'dul* (“Vanquishing All Enemies and Obstructors”) [=homa for fierce assault]<sup>36</sup>
- [15] *Smin byed dkyil chog* (“Ripening Empowerments and maṇḍala Rites”) or *Dbang chu chen mo* (“Vast River of Initiations”)<sup>37</sup>
- [16] *Dmar po mda' bzhu 'gengs pa* (“Drawing Back the Red One's Bow and Arrow”) or *Dug dbang rma bya rgyas pa* (“Elaborate Poison-Powered Peacock”)<sup>38</sup>

31 RP1 (020), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed zhal gcig phyag gzhi pa'i mngon rtogs dri med chu rgyun zhes bya ba rwa los mdzad pa*, 110v4–112r3; cf. RP2 (1.066 and 2.005) and RP3 (1.018).

32 RP1 (021), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed zhal gcig phyag gnyis pa'i mngon rtogs rin chen don 'dus*, 112r3–113r7; cf. RP2 (1.067, 1.101, 2.006, and 2.049) and RP3 (1.019)

33 RP1 (022), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi las bzhi'i sbyin sreg bzhugs so [zhi ba'i sbyin sreg mi mthun kun sel]*, 113r7–114r2; cf. RP2 (1.068 and 2.007); missing in RP3/RP4.

34 RP1 (023), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi rgyas pa'i sbyin sreg 'dod pa kun 'phel*, 114r2–6; cf. RP2 (1.068 and 2.007); missing in RP3/RP4.

35 RP1 (024), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi sbyin sreg gnad kyi lcags kyu*, 114r6–114v4; cf. RP2 (1.068 and 2.007); missing in RP3/RP4.

36 RP1 (025), *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi drag po'i sbyin sreg gi cho ga cha lags dang bcas pa*, 114v4–121r6; cf. RP2 (1.068 and 2.007); missing in RP3/RP4.

37 RP1 (030), *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi dbang ki chu bo*, 142v2–167v5; cf. RP2 (1.072 and 2.018) and RP3 (1.022).

38 RP1 (026–027), *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed chen po'i dug dbang rma bya rgyas pa'i chos skor zab cing cha tshing ba gcig*, 121r7–140r2 and *Dmar po mda' gzhu 'gengs pa'i dbang sdud*, 140r2–5; cf. RP2 (1.069, 1.070, 2.015, and 2.016) and RP3 (1.020). Immediately following these in RP1 are two other short texts that may also turn out to be a part of this larger cycle; see RP1 (028–029), *'jigs byed dmar po zhal gcig phyag gnyis bsgom thabs*, 140r6–142r3 and *Nag po mda' gzhu 'gengs pa'i sngags*, 142r6–142v1. A more thorough inspection of the contents of these texts should help to clarify the specific relationships between them. Note that Tāranātha is skeptical that the *Dmar po mda' gzhu 'gengs pa* was actually composed by Rwa lo tsā ba, suggesting instead that it evolved from the oral tradition and was only later preserved in writing. See Tāranātha, *Rgyud rgyal gshin rje gshed skor gyi chos 'byung rgyas pa yid ches ngo mtshar*, in

### 3.4 The Expanded Catalog of Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan

This core listing in the *Thim yig* was elaborated (*rgyas bshad*) by Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan to include a much more complete range of Rwa lo tsā ba's writings and translations, incorporating also some of Rwa lo's purportedly autobiographical notes and recollections, again written all in narrative verse. This extended catalog is variously titled *Rwa lugs kyi gshin rje gshed nag po'i rgya bod kyi yig cha'i dkar chag* ("Catalog of the Indian and Tibetan Books on Kṛṣṇayamāri of the Rwa Tradition"), or often simply *Dkar chag tshigs bcad ma'i 'grel ba* ("Commentary to the Verse Catalog"), and appears as the second text in manuscript RP1.<sup>39</sup> Its colophon records that the catalog was compiled and preserved in writing at a monastery called Ga gon [gong] dpal, presumably in central Tibet. The *Dkar chag* is divided into six sections:

- (1) Rwa lo tsā ba's translations of the Indian works on Kṛṣṇayamāri (*'jam dpal nag po'i rgya ba gzhung*) – these include the root tantra, its commentaries, and ritual practices by Śrīdhara (ca. 950–1050)<sup>40</sup> and Buddhaśrījñāna (ca. 750–830),<sup>41</sup> and Rwa lo's revisions of previous translations by Tibetans Nag tsho lo tsā ba (1011–64) and Zangs dkar lo tsā ba (1012–97), among others.
- (2) Rwa lo tsā ba's writings he produced himself (*bdag nyid kyi mdzad pa'i yi ge yod tshul*) – these are mainly Rwa lo's ritual manuals based on the works of Śrīdhara and his own notes on esoteric instructions he received personally from Guru Bha ro dealing with a variety of magical procedures, which are divided here into two collections:
  - (a) Sixteen writings labeled *Zin bris chen mo* ("Substantial Notes") – these include instructions on procuring the medicinal eye ointment (*mig sman*),

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*Collected Works by Jonang Master Jetsun Tāranātha* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2008), 11:132–33.

<sup>39</sup> RP1 (002), 2r2–6r1; RP2 (1.049 and 2.011); RP3 (1.003 and 1.024). Citations of the *Dkar chag* are found in several Tibetan histories of the Rwa transmissions, but Tāranātha, characteristically, is the only one among them who offers his own critical analysis and commentary. See Tāranātha, *Rgyud rgyal gshin rje gshed skor gyi chos 'byung*, 128–35.

<sup>40</sup> On Śrīdhara, see Kuranishi Kenichi, "Śrīdhara and His Works on the Yamāri Cycle," in *Esoteric Buddhist Studies: Identity in Diversity Proceedings of the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studies, Koyasan University, 5 Sept.–8 Sept. 2006* (Japan: Koyasan University, 2008), 179–83.

<sup>41</sup> Alias Buddhajñānapāda (Tib. Sangs rgyas ye shes zhabs), preceptor of the Pāla emperor Dharmapāla (r. ca. 775–812). See Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period," in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, ed. Shingo Einoo (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009), 93–94.



methods for deploying the magic wheel devices (*'khrul 'khor*, Skt. *yantra*),<sup>42</sup> measures for embracing and dividing (*kha sbyor dbye ba*), uncommon explanations on the “sixty-four” [*gtor ma*] (*drug bcu rtsa bzhi pa*),<sup>43</sup> a system for directing the mind toward awakening in the intermediate state (*bar do'i byang chub sems*), as well as such mysterious teachings as “Legend of the Fool of Magadha” (*ma ga ta'i glen pa'i gtam rgyud*), “Heruka’s Grand Exegesis” (*he ru ka'i rnam bshad chen mo*), and the like.

- (b) Twenty-five writings titled *Las 'phrad ['phrod] zab mo* (“Profound Compilation of Ritual Actions”) – these include rites for decidedly more mundane purposes, for example, procedures for making rain, causing leprosy, curing snakebite, relief from headaches, stopping floodwaters, animating corpses (*ro langs*, Skt. *vetāla*), achieving swift-footedness and invisibility, subjugating demons, invoking the children of *devas* and *nāgas*, and so on.
- (3) Texts not included in the catalog of Rwa lo tsā ba’s writings (*bla ma'i gsung gi dkar chag na mi bzhugs*) – these are briefly the writings of Rwa lo’s family members who served also as his chief lineage holders, namely, nephew Rwa Chos rab and Chos rab’s two sons, Rwa Ye shes seng ge and Rwa Dharma seng ge, as well as texts related to Six-Faced Yamāntaka (*Ṣaṅmukha*, Tib. *Gdong drug*).<sup>44</sup>
- (4) Rwa lo tsā ba’s translations of the Indian works on Vajrabhairava (*rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi bzhung*) – these include the root tantra, its commentaries, and ritual practices (e.g. *sādhana*, *maṇḍala*, *homa*, *yantra*, etc.) attributed to Śrībhadrā, Amoghavajra, Dīpaṅkara, Ratnākaraśānti, and Guru Bha ro.

<sup>42</sup> For a brief discussion of *yantra* rites in the tantras of Yamāri/Yamāntaka, especially Kṛṣṇayamāri, see Kuranishi Kenichi, “Yantras in the Buddhist Tantras – Yamāritantras and Related Literature,” in *Puṣpikā: Tracing Ancient India through Texts and Traditions. Contributions to Current Research in Indology*, vol. 1, *Proceedings of the First International Indology Graduate Research Symposium (September 2009, Oxford)*, eds. Nina Mirnig, Péter-Dániel Szántó, and Michael Williams (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 265–81.

<sup>43</sup> A special offering to the protector of the Vajrabhairava tantras, the fearsome Karmayama (Tib. *Las kyi gshin rje*), aliases Dharmarāja and Kālarūpa.

<sup>44</sup> Tāranātha is critical of Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan in this section, specifically the latter’s claim that Rwa Chos rab had never composed any of his own writings. Tāranātha argues, on the contrary, that Rwa lo tsā ba’s nephew had apparently written a text (*yig sna*) on the ritual approach and evocation of Kṛṣṇayamāri (*Nag po'i bsnyen sgrub las gsum = Śāntijñāna's Bsnyen sgrub las gsum kar ston pa'i sgrub thabs?*) and that Rwa Ye shes seng ge and his son 'Bum seng ge later expanded the text a little bit. See Tāranātha, *Rgyud rgyal gshin rje gshed skor gyi chos 'byung*, 131 (and 126 on Śāntijñāna’s work).

- (5) Rwa lo tsā ba's Tibetan works on Vajrabhairava (*bod kyi yi ge yod tshul*) – these are the sixteen texts listed in the *Thim yig*.
- (6) Rwa lo tsā ba's writings on Vajrabhairava in his own words (*bla ma'i zhal nas rdo rje 'jigs byed*) – this is a duplication of the *Thim yig* in full with a variant rendering of its concluding verses.

On examining the various *Rwa pod* collections recently acquired by the BDRC, it is evident that some effort was made to organize the manuscripts on the basis of these two formative catalogs – Rwa lo tsā ba's own index, the *Thim yig*, and its subsequent expansion by Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan. As would be expected, both texts are typically placed first in these collections.

## 4 “Vajrabhairava’s Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling”

Having now briefly introduced the *Rwa pod* and its various extant manuscript versions, it would be worthwhile to highlight one short but particularly illustrative example of the type of work that one finds in these newfound writings of Rwa lo tsā ba and associated texts by the earliest propagators of his tradition – I refer again to the aforementioned “Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling.” This intriguing document is not only available in two versions of the *Rwa pod* (Figs. 1 and 2) and in another independent witness (Fig. 3),<sup>45</sup> but it also features in two

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<sup>45</sup> RP1 (053), *Yi ge bzhi ba'i bsad bzlog*, 266v4–267v1; RP2 (1.086); missing in RP3/RP4. The independent version, titled *Rwa lo'i bzlog pa bsam gtan nyal chog*, is the opening text of a larger compilation in eleven folios containing two or more additional Vajrabhairava rituals of a similar type (see BDRC W1CZ1303, henceforth RCN). The text of the “Four Syllables” in this manuscript concludes with the following short transmission lineage (fol. 3v2–3): Rgya [ston?] rin po che [break?] Dpal ldan grags pa, Rje btsun dam pa Nam mkha' lhun grub bzang po [=Jo gdan Nam mkha' lhun bzang?], “me” [b]tsun pa Bkra shis rin chen [=teacher of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456)?]. A second lineage transmitted through Khro phu ba [=Khro phu lo tsā ba (ca. 1172–1236)] is given in the next section of the manuscript (fol. 3v6): Khro phu ba, Rgya ston dbang phyug rgyal mtshan, Rgya ston Kun dga' brtson 'grus, Chos kyi grags pa. This is the transmission line for a practice associated with the esoteric instructions (*man ngag*) of Ba ri ba [=Ba ri lo tsā ba?] described as *phyir bzlog 'khor lo / byad ma bsod pa'i lag cha / bon po'i gshed ma shes cho ga'i man ngag zab mo mthar thug pa*.

I should mention also the existence of a slightly longer variation of the “Four Syllables” that is markedly different from the three versions examined here. This extended version in three folios is included in the *be'u bum* (“handbook of magical rites”) of 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–92), compiled in the late nineteenth century, and bears the title *Gshin*

prominent episodes in the *Rwa lo mam thar*. With this brief example, I hope as well to draw attention to the threads that inextricably tie a tantric tradition's rituals to its stories, and vice versa, passed down through the ages from one generation to another.

## 4.1 Story of the “Four Syllables”

In the *Rwa lo mam thar*, we read of numerous conflicts and magical battles that Rwa lo tsā ba wins through Vajrabhairava sorcery. Two of these episodes are worth noting for reference to the practice of the “Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling,” versions of which are now accessible in the *Rwa pod* and translated in appendix 1.

### 4.1.1 Contest with a Vajrakīla Master

The first episode involves a prominent Tibetan master of the Buddhist wrathful deity Vajrakīla named Lang lab Byang chub rdo rje. In Rwa lo's initial contest with Lang lab, the Vajrakīla master succeeds in magically defeating him. Stunned by this unexpected outcome, and prompted by a vision of the goddess Tārā, Rwa lo returns to Nepal to receive further instructions from his teacher, Guru Bha ro. The biography then describes the following:

From there Rwa lo and the rest went to Nyi ma steng monastery and met with Master Bha ro. Rwa lo offered eight ounces of gold as a gift to him, and Bha ro was extremely pleased. He said to Rwa lo, “It is good that you've come to dispel doubts about the Dharma. Prepare a communal feast (*tshogs 'khor*, Skt. *ganacakra*) and I'll give you the instructions.” Then, after Rwa lo related the story of Lang lap and how much he detested him, Bha ro added, “I have the instruction called ‘Slaying and Repelling with the Four Syllables of Vajrabhairava’ that is most effective for rendering you invincible against a whirlwind of ritual attacks, no matter what they are, even the sorcery, spell casting, and

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*rje yi ge gzhi pa'i srung bzlog bsad pa'i man ngag rdo rje pha lam* (“Esoteric Diamond Instructions on Yama's Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling”). The colophon indicates that the text was granted in secrecy to Rwa lo tsā ba by the Nepali Mahākaruṇika upon being offered one hundred (!) ounces of gold (rather than the mere eight ounces noted in all the other versions). The Tibetan reads: *gshin rje yi ge bzhi pa'i srung bzlog bsad pa'i man ngag zhal shes dang bcas pa rwa lo tsā ba rdo rje grags kyis bal po thugs rje chen po la gser srang brgya 'bul bar dam bcas nas gnang ba'i gdams pa chig brgyud shin tu zab mo*. See 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, *Man ngag gces btus sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsgrigs pa 'dod rgu kun 'byung dbang rgyal nor bu'i phreng ba*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of the Great 'Jam-dbyaṅs Mkhyen-brtse'i-dbañ-po* (Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten, 1977–1980), 20:532.5–537.1.

counterspells of a hundred thousand Buddhist, Bon po, and Hindu (*mu stegs*, Skt. *tīrthika*) tantric priests. In addition to that, I have a further series of instructions for defense, repelling, slaying, and suppressing, and many ritual applications (*las tshogs*) for pacifying, increasing, and controlling, as well as the oral instructions on the eight dhar-mas of necessity (*dgos pa'i chos bryad*) and the three cherished essentials (*gces pa mam gsum*). Since I have so many of these sorts of marvelous instructions, I shall give them all to you.<sup>46</sup>

The episode concludes with Rwa lo returning to Tibet and engaging Lang lab in a second round of magical combat, only this time it is Lang lab who succumbs to Rwa lo's Vajrabhairava powers, driven by the "Four Syllables" in particular. Lang lab is then said to have grown ill with a bloody pox (*dmar shal gyi rims kyis bsnyun*) and to have died soon thereafter.<sup>47</sup>

As we see in appendixes 1 and 2, the manuscript versions of this harmful rite from the *Rwa pod* open similarly to the scene quoted above: Rwa lo offers his teacher eight ounces of gold for further instructions on Vajrabhairava, which he receives in the form of the "Four Syllables." We should note, however, a discrepancy in the name of Rwa lo's Nepali teacher: the ritual text identifies him as Guru Mahākaraṇika (Tib. Thugs rje chen po) rather than Guru Bha ro, as he is named in the *Rwa lo mam thar*. Earlier I had mentioned that this confusion over the identity of Rwa lo's mentor(s) was common among the early biographers and historians of the Rwa tradition. Rgya ston Kun dga' btson 'grus, for example, failed to differentiate the names Bal po Thugs rje chen po, Mahākanika [Mahākaraṇika], Dīpaṃkara, Bha ro phyag rdum, and Mi dza gling pa in his *Lo rgyus gyi yig gi don gsum pa* ("Three-Part Historical Document"), alternatively titled *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi rgyud dang bla ma bryud pa'i byon tshul* ("History of the Glorious Vajrabhairava Tantra and Its Lineage of Teachers") – the earliest known history

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46 Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 56–57 (modified for consistency of style); Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo mam thar*, 60–61: *de nas nyi ma steng dgon par byon / slob dpon bha ro dang mjal te gser srang bryad phyag rten du phul bas / bha ro yang shin tu dgyes par gyur te / khyod chos kyi sgro 'dogs bcad du 'ongs pa legs tshogs 'khor bshoms shig gdams pa bya yi gsungs / der lang lab dang 'gras pa'i lo rgyus zhus pas / nga la dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi yi ge bzhi pa'i gsad bzlog ces bya ba ban bon sngags pa mu stegs 'bum gyi mthu gtad sel gsum 'go chog rlung 'khor gang gis kyang mi tshugs pa gcig yod / gzhan yang bsrung bzlog gsad man mnan gyi rim pa dang / zhi rgyas dbang gsum gyi las tshogs mang po dang / dgos pa'i bryad dang gces pa mam gsum la sogs pa'i gdams ngag ngo mtshar can mang du yod kyis khrod la sbyin no gsungs.*

47 Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo mam thar*, 88; Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 81.

of the Vajrabhairava cycle extant in two of the *Rwa pod* collections.<sup>48</sup> Part of the confusion seemed to be due to the fact that both of Rwa lo's teachers were from Nepal (Bal po in Tibetan) and held the aristocratic title “Bha ro,” used commonly in post-eleventh-century Nepal for persons of high standing.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, both shared a similar alias, Dīpaṃkaraśrī (Bha ro phyag rdum) and Dīpaṃkararakṣita (Mahākaraṇḍika). The mistake appears to have persisted into the seventeenth century before certain astute historians of that period, such as Tāranātha and the Fifth Dalai Lama, were able to correct the record.<sup>50</sup> That the ritual text of the “Four Syllables” displays this conflation of identities should give us a clue as to the text's early date and possible authorship.

#### 4.1.2 Contest with Three Hayagrīva Yogins

In a second episode much later in the biography, Rwa lo is challenged by three yogins – 'Bre Shes rab bla ma, Sum pa Dbang tshul, and Rkyang po Grags pa byang chub – who had just earlier uncovered as treasure (*gter ma*) a tantric cycle of Hayagrīva from the region of Yer pa in central Tibet.<sup>51</sup> Rwa lo was

<sup>48</sup> RP1 (034), *Dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi rgyud dang bla ma brgyud pa'i byon tshul*, 183v2–187v5; RP2 (1.076 and 2.021); missing in RP3/RP4. Rgya ston is explicit about the identifications: *de slob ma bal thugs rje chen po / mtshan gyi nmam grangs la / mahā ka ni ka dang / di paṃ ka ra dang / bha ro phyag bsdum [=rdum] dang / mi dza gling pa zhes pa nmams so / de yang mu stegs kyi paṃḍi ta yin te*. See RP1, 186v5; cf. also RP2 (1.076), 5v3–4 and RP2 (2.021), 4v5.

<sup>49</sup> On this status designation in Nepal, see Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 135.

<sup>50</sup> References in Cuevas, “*Rwa lo tsā ba* and His Biographers,” 64, note 41.

<sup>51</sup> The first yogin is 'Bre Shes rab 'bar, a student of Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109). He appears again at various points in the biography, and in other lineage records, as a devout and influential Bka' gdams pa disciple of Rwa lo tsā ba. Sum pa Dbang tshul is known to have been a disciple of Zur chen Śākya 'byung gnas (1002–62). Rkyang po Grags pa byang chub is a minor “treasurer-revealer” (*gter ston*) mentioned in 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's (1813–1900) *Gter ston brgya rtsa'i mam thar [=Zab mo'i gter dang gter ston grub thob ji ltar byon pa'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus bkod pa rin chen vaiḍūrya'i phreng ba]*, in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2007–16), 1:534–36. Here, in fact, Kong sprul gives a variant account of this very same story of the three Hayagrīva yogins in reference specifically to the later *gter ma* revelations of 'Dar phyar ru pa (namely, the *Rta mgrin padma dbang chen yang gsang khros pa* cycle), but with no mention at all of Rwa lo tsā ba. The story is probably an old legend that was passed down with the Hayagrīva teachings and inserted at some point into the biographical traditions of Rwa lo tsā ba and perhaps also of 'Dar phyar ru pa. My thanks to José Cabezón for helping me to clarify my thoughts about the possible origins of this story, which I had initially assumed (incorrectly) to have been connected to the charter myth of a famous

unimpressed by their miraculous demonstrations and left them for the nearby district of Snye thang to tour the sacred sites associated with Atiśa (980–1054). As Rwa lo was there making his pilgrimage rounds, the following occurred:

Meanwhile, 'Bre Shes rab bla ma, Sum pa Dbang tshul, and Rkyang po Grags pa byang chub, the three of them, had grown envious of Rwa lo and performed elaborate rites of sorcery (*mthu rgyas byas*) against him. 'Bre performed a burnt offering (*sbyin bsreg*, Skt. *homa*), Sum pa hurled sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma*, Skt. *bali*), while Rkyang po cast a curse (*gtad rgyab*) and sent the Bla ma [Rwa lo] frightening apparitions (*cho 'phrul*, Skt. *prātihārya*). In response, the Bla ma meditatively cultivated the practice of “Slaying and Repelling with the Four Syllables,” which foiled their sorcery. It is said that 'Bre went insane, Sum pa died, and Rkyang po was infected with leprosy. What happened to these three was kept secret by their followers.<sup>52</sup>

Here in this account of magical assault we see again the fearsome power of the “Four Syllables,” capable of effecting the most destructive of outcomes, truly a “most profound dark counteracting force” (*yang gsang mthu bzlog nag po*) as the text of the ritual itself describes it. On first reading, Rwa lo’s fierce reaction to his three antagonists seems to be justified by some unspoken ethics of retribution, a sort of “eye for an eye” in Tibetan ritual code. But more likely, in the end, at least for Rwa lo’s faithful supporters, his deeds must be viewed as founded on the principle of *compassionate violence* so emblematic of the Buddhist tantras. It is hardly surprising then that Rwa lo tsā ba was such an ambivalent sensation in Tibet, straddling as he did the dagger’s edge separating the justifiable acts of a benevolent and wise but formidable bodhisattva from the condemnable abuses of a murderous villain.

There are other similarly powerful rites recounted in the *Rwa lo nram thar* that are now also available in the recently acquired *Rwa pod* collections; notable among them, the *Uṣṇiṣa’i bzlog pa zab mo* (“Profound Repelling Rite of [Wrathful] Uṣṇiṣa”), which Rwa lo received from Guru Bha ro during his first visit to Nepal as a means to counter the magical onslaught of the nefarious

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relic at Se ra monastery, the *Se ra phur zhal* dagger (e-mail communication, May 25, 2018). Much more research needs to be done on the history of this intriguing story and its transmission.

52 Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 233 (modified for consistency of style); Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo nram thar*, 258–59: *de’i tshe ’bre ban tshul gsum gyis bla ma la phrag dog lang te mthu rgyas byas / ’bres sbyin bsreg byas / sum pas gtor ma ’phangs / rkyang pos gtad rgyab nas cho ’phrul gtang ba la / bla mas yi ge bzhi ba’i bsad bzlog bsgom pas mthu phar log ste ’bre smyo / sum pa ’das / rkyang po la mdze byung skad / der khong gsum po rjes ’jug nams kyis gsang ste.*

Śaiva yogin Pūrṇa nag po (“Full of Darkness”).<sup>53</sup> Another is the *Dug dbang rma bya rgyas pa* (“Elaborate Poison-Powered Peacock”), which is the sixteenth and final title among Rwa lo’s compositions listed in his *Thim yig* (see 3.3 above).<sup>54</sup> It comprises an extensive collection of more than fifty individual methods for neutralizing the “poison” (*viṣa*) of demons and other material and psychological evils.

## 5 Conclusion

Among the multiple traditions of Vajrabhairava and Yamāri/Yamāntaka that have existed in Tibet from as early as the tenth century (e.g. Zhang, Gnyos, Rwa, Skyo, Mal, etc.),<sup>55</sup> the tradition of Rwa lo tsā ba has long been distinguished as superior, but until recently almost nothing was known of its earliest literature; that is, of course, beyond Rwa lo tsā ba’s canonical translations and the elaborate hagiography of his controversial life and mission. The several individual manuscript versions of the *Rwa pod* that are now available reveal a

<sup>53</sup> See episode in Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo nam thar*, 15–17; Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 13–15. The text can be found in RP1 (054), *Uṣṇīṣa rwa lugs kyi gdams pa*, 267v1–271v1; cf. RP2 (1.087 and 2.033). The deity here is Uṣṇīṣacakravartī (Tib. Gtsug tor ’khor los sgyur ba), specifically in the form of Vajroṣṇīṣacakravartī, one of the ten wrathful guardians (*krodha*, Tib. *khro bo*). He protects the zenith of the *maṇḍala*. See Lokesh Chandra, ed., *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1999–2005), 13:3747–58.

<sup>54</sup> See Rwa Ye shes seng ge, *Rwa lo nam thar*, 206 and 223; Ra Yeshé Sengé, *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, 188 and 202. For references in the *Rwa pod*, see note 38 above.

<sup>55</sup> These are namely the traditions (*lugs*) originating with the early translators Zhang cog gru lo tsā ba Shes rab bla ma (tenth/eleventh century), Gnyos lo tsā ba Yon tan grags (b. ca. 973), Rwa lo tsā ba Rdo rje grags, Skyo ’od kyi ’byung gnas (eleventh/twelfth century), and Mal gyo lo tsā ba Blo gros grags pa (eleventh/twelfth century), sometimes referred to also as the Sa lugs after Mal gyo lo tsā ba’s most famous disciple, Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251). Other traditions include the Nag tsho lugs of Nag tsho lo tsā ba; the Ba ri lugs of Ba ri lo tsā ba Rin chen grags (1040–1112); the ’Gar [Mgar] lugs of Chos sdings pa Gzhon nu rdo rje (alias Śākya dpal, 1180–1240), a subset of the Gnyos lug; and the Ldong lugs of Ldong ston Shes rab dpal (thirteenth century), a subset of both the Rwa and Skyo lugs. Histories of these traditions, in varied detail, can be found in Tāranātha, *Rgyud rgyal gshin rje gshed skor gyi chos ’byung*, 78–120 and 136–38; ’Jam mgon A myes zhabs, *Dpal gshin rje’i gshed skor gyi dam pa’i chos byung ba’i tshul legs par bshad pa ’jam dpal chos kun gsal ba’i nyin byed*, 141–63 and 209–33; and ’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje (1648–1722), *Dpal rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi chos ’byung khams gsum mam par rgyal ba dngos gnub kyi gter mdzod*, in *Gsung ’bum of ’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje* (Karnataka, India: Drepung Gomang Library, 2015), vol. 5 (*ca*), 116–25 and 129–53.

complex of vital works – tantric commentaries, instructional guides, and an extensive array of ritual texts (*abhiṣeka*, *sādhana*, *maṇḍala*, *yantra*, *homa*, etc.) – that illuminate the hitherto enigmatic contours of this unique transmission in Tibet, once considered lost; its full story remains to be told. I have offered in this chapter merely a sketch of some of its salient features in the hope of encouraging further research into Rwa’s seminal tradition and the original works that helped to shape it.

## Appendix 1: Translation

### *The Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling* *[Rwa’s Resting Concentration Practice]*<sup>56</sup>

Homage to the Guru and Glorious Vajrabhairava.

[*Narrative:*] After requesting the Nepali Guru Mahākaruṇika for the complete instructions on Vajrabhairava, Rwa lo tstsha [tsā] ba Rdo rje grags offered him eight ounces of gold. Upon accepting the offer, [the Guru] bestowed on [Rwa lo tsā ba] the oral instructions [called] “The Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling,” a rite of fierce magical assault, a wondrous secret oral instruction, a most profound dark counteracting force. Wishing to cultivate this, [Rwa lo tsā ba] began at sunset the following day. He visualized Vajrabhairava [arising] from the state of emptiness, his body black with one face, two arms, three eyes, holding with both hands at his heart a blazing sword, a sharp golden ax with

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<sup>56</sup> In his eighteenth-century history of the Vajrabhairava cycle, ’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa lists a text entitled *Bsam gtan nyal chog* (“Resting Concentration Practice”) among the writings of a certain ’Phags pa, who may very well have been the eminent Sa skya scholar and holder of the Rwa transmissions ’Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235–80). Whether this title refers to the same work translated here is uncertain. It is curious, though, that the “Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling” is not listed by title in either the *Thim yig* of Rwa lo tsā ba or in Rwa Shes rab rgyal mtshan’s expanded *Dkar chag*, suggesting that Rwa lo tsā ba may not have actually authored the text. The text’s narrative voice seems to point to that conclusion as well. So the fact that ’Phags pa or someone other than Rwa lo could have been its author (or one of its authors) remains a very real possibility. For the reference in ’Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, see his *Dpal rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi chos ’byung khams gsum rnam par rgyal ba dngos grub kyi gter mdzod*, 143 and also 514, where the same title and its attribution appear in a list of Vajrabhairava teachings received by ’Jam dbyangs chos rje Bkra shis dpal ldan (1379–1449), an important disciple of Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) who was the founder and first abbot of ’Bras spungs monastery.



his huge left thumb, [and] a thick silver anvil (*ḍngul gyi gtan pa mkhregs pa*) [between] his fingers; [he had] long matted black hair, half of which concealed his body, the [other] half fluttered in the sky above; atop his sword blazed a roaring world-destroying cosmic fire (*bskal pa'i me*) scorching all harmful enemies and obstructors; [he stood] baring his fangs, rolling his tongue, his two enormous legs the size of Mt. Meru spread wide apart. At the deity's heart, [Rwa lo tsā ba] visualized a black HŪṂ, from which radiated immeasurable rays of light. These light rays transformed into countless ferocious *ṭakkirājas* (*'dod rgyal*),<sup>57</sup> [each] with one face and two arms, brandishing iron hooks in their right [hands] and nooses in their left. He visualized them summoning the Dharma Protectors and, with their iron hooks, grabbing by the heart the Buddhist and Bon po priests and other enemies and obstructors who had caused him harm, and binding them at the waist with their nooses. [Rwa lo tsā ba] visualized them being carried to [Vajrabhairava's] silver anvil and with his golden ax reducing entirely their flesh and bones to a bloody pulp.

[*Instruction:*] When protecting your own guru, friends, and companions, your defenses will become supreme by meditating on [the figure of Vajrabhairava] from his matted hair to his body. Concentrate also on the demons (*'dre*) present, the “king” spirits (*rgyal po*) and others of that sort; summon them and then imagine they are subdued. This is the *mantra* to be spoken: E S[V]A BHYO BZLOG. Count this out using an actual *mālā*. If you are competing against a powerful *māntrika* or find yourself in terrible danger, do a thousand recitations of this *mantra*, or at the very least a hundred of them. To merely defend yourself, a hundred [recitations], or at least twenty, but it is enough just to remember it. Recite it without interruption on the twenty-ninth day of the month.<sup>58</sup> There is no need to establish a formal meditation session, nor invite the deity at the start, nor [maintain a state of] nonconceptuality, and so forth. [This] is also called “Rwa's Resting Concentration Practice” (*rwa'i bsam gtan nyal chog*). It is a *māntrika*'s tool for killing, so it is crucial not to let it fall into the hands of a shady person (*mi nag pa*). Since [this practice] can harm anyone who wields its string [of *mantra* syllables], it should be kept secret. When the time comes to transmit this [practice], bestow it [only] after you have

57 The text clearly indicates the plural here, even though Krodha Ṭakkirāja (alias Kāmarāja) is usually rendered as a single deity (either blue or red with two or four arms) commonly depicted in the retinue of Mahākāla but also as one of ten wrathful guardians of monasteries and other sacred Buddhist spaces. For descriptions and sample images, see Lokesh Chandra, *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography*, 12:3498–3502.

58 Traditionally in Tibet, the twenty-ninth day of the lunar month is the special day for requesting the Dharma Protectors to dispel demons and remove obstacles. See Philippe Cornu, *Tibetan Astrology*, trans. Hamish Gregor (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 275.

offered a communal feast (*gaṇacakra*) to the *ḍākinīs* and a *maṇḍala* of gold to the guru. Profound. *Ithi* [Skt. *iti*].

[*Colophon:*]<sup>59</sup> In accordance with the seal of secrecy, [I] received [this] after offering Rje btsun seng ge a *maṇḍala* of gold. If some vow-keeper other than me<sup>60</sup> wishes to have this [practice] bestowed, he should bring with him a large and exalted *maṇḍala* of gold. When that occurs, and if the recipient is a worthy vessel, the teaching that is to be granted will be singularly pure.

## Appendix 2: Transcription

### Abbreviations

RP1: *Rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi rwa'i thim yig rwa los mdzad pa*. [266v.4]

RP2: *Rwa khrid mkha' 'gro snyan brgyud*, vol. 1 (no. 086). {1v.1}

RNC: *Rwa lo'i bzlog pa bsam gtan nyal chog*. <1v.1>

yi ge bzhi ba'i bsad bzlog bzhugs so  
[rwa'i bsam gtan nyal chog]

[266v.4] bla ma<sup>a</sup> dpal rdo rje 'jigs byed la phyag 'tshal lo / bla ma bal po thugs rje chen po la / rwa lo tstsha ba rdo rje grags kyi rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi gdams pa ma lus par zhus pa<sup>i</sup>b mthar<sup>c</sup> gser srang<sup>d</sup> brgyad 'bul bar zhal gyis bzhes nas gngang ba'i gdams ngag<sup>e</sup> yi ge bzhi pa'i gsad bzlog / drag po mngon spyod kyi las / gsang ba'i man ngag rmad du byung ba / yang gsang mthu bzlog nag po 'di bsgom par 'dod pas / dus<sup>f</sup> nyi ma nub khar<sup>g</sup> kha nub tu phyogs te / stong pa'i ngang las<sup>h</sup> rdo rje 'jigs byed sku mdog nag po zhal gcig phyag gnyis pa / spyan gsum pa phyag<sup>i</sup> gnyis<sup>j</sup> thugs kar ral gri me<sup>k</sup> 'bar ba bsams <2r> pa g.yon pa mtheb<sup>l</sup> chen gser gyi sta re<sup>m</sup> rno<sup>n</sup> ngar dang ldan pa / mdzub mo dngul gyi gtan<sup>o</sup> pa mkhregs pa<sup>p</sup> rgya bde<sup>q</sup> ba / ral pa nag po ban bun gyi phyed kyi lus khebs<sup>t</sup>

<sup>59</sup> This colophon is not included in manuscript RCN. In its place is inserted a brief transmission lineage. See note 45 above.

<sup>60</sup> I have yet to identify the “me” in this passage, but it is plausible that the teacher named here as Rje btsun seng ge might refer to Rong pa Shes rab seng ge (1251–1315), son and chief disciple of Rong pa Rgwa lo rnam rgyal rdo rje (1203–82), both of whom were influential patriarchs of the Western Rwa tradition. But, alas, without some other more satisfying piece of evidence, there are just too many different “Seng ge’s” listed in the Rwa lineages down through the ages to make a conclusive determination.

pa / phyed nam mkha' la yeng yeng phyo ba / ral pa'i phyi la bskal pa'i me dmar  
 'ur 'ur<sup>s</sup> 'phro<sup>t</sup> bas dgra bgegs gnod byed thams cad bsreg pa [267r] mche pa<sup>u</sup>  
 nmam par gtsigs zhing ljags 'dril ba zhabs gnyis bsgrad pa shin tu che ba'i<sup>v</sup> ri  
 rgyal tsam du bsgom pa'i thugs kar hūṃ nag po<sup>w</sup> gcig bsgom / de las 'od zer  
 dpag tu med pa 'phros pas / 'od zer rnams khro bo 'dod<sup>x</sup> rgyal<sup>y</sup> zhal gcig phyag  
 gnyis<sup>z</sup> g.yas lcags kyu dang g.yon <2v> zhags pa thogs pa grangs med par gyur<sup>aa</sup>  
 nas de rnams kyis bdag la gnod pa'i ban bon dang dgra bgegs<sup>ab</sup> sogs kyis chos  
 {2r} skyong rnams bkug<sup>ac</sup> lcags kyus snying<sup>ad</sup> nas bzung / zhags pas sked<sup>ae</sup> nas  
 bdams<sup>af</sup> dngul gyi gtan<sup>ag</sup> pa'i kha<sup>ah</sup> phyen<sup>ai</sup> 'ongs pa dang / gser gyi sta res sha  
 rdzogs rus pa<sup>aj</sup> rdzogs<sup>ak</sup> tu<sup>al</sup> dmar mdag<sup>am</sup> dum bur gtubs<sup>an</sup> par bsam / rang gi  
 bla ma dang gnyen<sup>ao</sup> grogs<sup>ap</sup> bsrung na<sup>aq</sup> ral pa<sup>ar</sup> dang lus kyi<sup>as</sup> bar du bsgom  
 pas bsrung ba'i mchog tu 'gyur ro / rgyal po la sogs pa'i 'dre<sup>at</sup> yod kyang<sup>au</sup> dmigs  
 pas bkug nas<sup>av</sup> btul<sup>aw</sup> <3r> bar bsam<sup>ax</sup> / sngag ni / e sa<sup>ay</sup> bhyo bzlog / ces pa 'di  
 phreng ba phyr la<sup>az</sup> phul zhing<sup>ba</sup> bgrang / sngags pa<sup>bb</sup> mthu<sup>bc</sup> 'gran<sup>bd</sup> pa'am /  
 nyam nga ba che<sup>be</sup> na stong ngam<sup>bf</sup> brgya rtsa re tsam<sup>bg</sup> bzla / rang bsrung ba<sup>bh</sup>  
 tsam la brgya'am nyi shu rtsa re'am<sup>bi</sup> / dran pa<sup>bj</sup> tsam gyis<sup>bk</sup> kyang chog / zla ba  
 mar ngo'i nyer dgu la ma chag par bzlas / thun 'jog khar lha gshegs gsol dang  
 mi dmigs pa sogs kyang mi dgos<sup>bl</sup> / rwa'i bsam gtan nyal chog ces kyang<sup>bm</sup>  
 bya<sup>bn</sup> / sngags pa gsod pa'i lag cha yin pas / mi nag pa'i<sup>bo</sup> lag tu mi btang  
 ba<sup>bp</sup> gal che<sup>bq</sup> / 'phreng thogs yongs la gnod pas<sup>br</sup> gsang bar bya<sup>bs</sup> / 'di<sup>bt</sup> spel  
 ba'i dus su / mkha' 'gro tshogs 'khor<sup>bu</sup> dang / bla ma la gser gyi<sup>bv</sup> maṇḍala  
 phul nas<sup>bw</sup> zhu'o<sup>bx</sup> <3v> / zab ithi [sic] / bka' rgya bzhin du / rje btsun sengge  
 la gser gyis<sup>by</sup> maṇḍala phul nas zhus pa yin pas / dam ldan 'ga' zhig bdag las  
 'di dtsal par<sup>bz</sup> 'dod na gser gyi maṇḍala rgya che la dpangs mtho ba khyer la  
 shog cig / de byung zhing snod [267v] dang ldan na sbyin<sup>ca</sup> par bya ba'i chos  
 yang dag pa gcig go<sup>cb</sup> //

<sup>a</sup> add. *dang* RNC

<sup>b</sup> def. *zhus pa'i*, add. *bsan pa dang* RNC

<sup>c</sup> 'thar RNC

<sup>d</sup> add. *lnga* RNC

<sup>e</sup> add. *rdo rje 'jigs byed drag po khros pa'i* RNC

<sup>f</sup> *dus* not in RNC

<sup>g</sup> *khar* not in RP2

<sup>h</sup> add. *rang di* [?] RNC

<sup>i</sup> *phyag pas na* RNC

<sup>j</sup> *gnyis* not in RNC

<sup>ar</sup> *ral pas*, add. *lus khyobs pa'i ral pa* RNC

<sup>as</sup> *lus pa'i* [?] RNC

<sup>at</sup> add. *tshabs can dang gdon yang* RNC

<sup>au</sup> *yod kyang* not in RNC

<sup>av</sup> def. *nas*, add. *la dum bur* RNC

<sup>aw</sup> *rdungs* RNC

<sup>ax</sup> *bsam mo* RNC

<sup>ay</sup> *sva* RNC

<sup>az</sup> def. *phyr la*, add. *lag pa g.yon pa* RNC

<sup>ba</sup> def. *zhing*, add. *la* RNC

- <sup>k</sup> *me* not in RNC  
<sup>l</sup> *mthob* RP2; *'theb* RNC  
<sup>m</sup> *re chen po* RNC  
<sup>n</sup> *rno ba'i* RNC  
<sup>o</sup> *brtan* RNC  
<sup>p</sup> *mkhregs pa* not in RNC  
<sup>q</sup> *che* RNC  
<sup>r</sup> *khyebs* RNC  
<sup>s</sup> *bun bun* RNC  
<sup>t</sup> *phros* RNC  
<sup>u</sup> *mche ba* RP2; *'che ba* RNC  
<sup>v</sup> *che ba* RNC  
<sup>w</sup> add. *chen po* RNC  
<sup>x</sup> *'dod pa'i* RNC  
<sup>y</sup> *rgyal po* RNC  
<sup>z</sup> *gnyis pa* RNC  
<sup>aa</sup> def. *gyur*, add. *sprul* RNC  
<sup>ab</sup> def. *ban bon dang dgra bgegs*; add. *gnod pa'i dgrong dang gnod byed* RNC  
<sup>ac</sup> add. *nas* RNC  
<sup>ad</sup> add. *kha* RNC  
<sup>ae</sup> *ske* RP2  
<sup>af</sup> *bsdams* RP2; add. *nas* RNC  
<sup>ag</sup> *brtan* RNC  
<sup>ah</sup> *khar* RNC  
<sup>ai</sup> *khyer* RP2; *khyer nas* RNC  
<sup>aj</sup> *pa* not in RNC  
<sup>ak</sup> *rjog* RP2  
<sup>al</sup> def. *tu*, add. *la* RNC  
<sup>am</sup> *'dag 'dag* RNC  
<sup>an</sup> *rdungs* RNC  
<sup>ao</sup> *dang gnyen* not in RNC  
<sup>ap</sup> *grog po*, add. *nye grog* [?] *chen 'khor g.yog la sogs* RNC  
<sup>aq</sup> add. *rang gi* RNC  
<sup>bb</sup> def. *pa*, add. *nag* RNC  
<sup>bc</sup> *thu* RNC  
<sup>bd</sup> def. *'gran*; add. *can dang 'dres* RNC  
<sup>be</sup> *yod* RNC  
<sup>bf</sup> *ma* RNC  
<sup>bg</sup> *tsam* not in RNC  
<sup>bh</sup> *ba* not in RNC  
<sup>bi</sup> def. *'am*, add. *bzla* RNC  
<sup>bj</sup> *dran pas* RNC  
<sup>bk</sup> *tsam gyis* not in RNC  
<sup>bl</sup> lines *zla ba . . . mi dgos* inserted as *mchan bu* handwritten in *dbu can* script at bottom of folio in RNC  
<sup>bm</sup> *kyang* not in RNC  
<sup>bn</sup> *bya ba 'di* RNC  
<sup>bo</sup> def. *pa'i*, add. *gi* RNC  
<sup>bp</sup> def. *mi btang ba*, add. *ma shor ba* RNC  
<sup>bq</sup> *che'o* RNC  
<sup>br</sup> add. *kun tu* RNC  
<sup>bs</sup> *bya'o* RNC  
<sup>bt</sup> add. *la bka' dam po yod pas* RNC  
<sup>bu</sup> def. *'khor*, add. *gtor* RNC  
<sup>bv</sup> *gyi* not in RP2; *gser gyi* not in RNC  
<sup>bw</sup> def. *nas*, add. *la* RNC  
<sup>bx</sup> def. *'o*, add. *zhing bla ma'i ngag las bzung ba ma gtogs pa yi ger mi 'bri ba'i bka' rgya yod / phyis kyang 'di* [?] *rgya yod ces kyang bsang bar bya'o // rwa nas brgyud nas / rgya ston rin po che das [= des?] dpal ldan grags pa / rje btsun dam pa nam mkha' lhun grub bzang po / des bdag [b]tsun pa bkra shis rin chen la gngang pa'o // dge sogs 'phel* RNC  
<sup>by</sup> *gyi* RP2  
<sup>bz</sup> *rtsal bar* RP2  
<sup>ca</sup> *spyin* RP2  
<sup>cb</sup> concluding lines *zab ithi [sic] . . . gcig go* not in RNC
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# Appendix 3: Figures

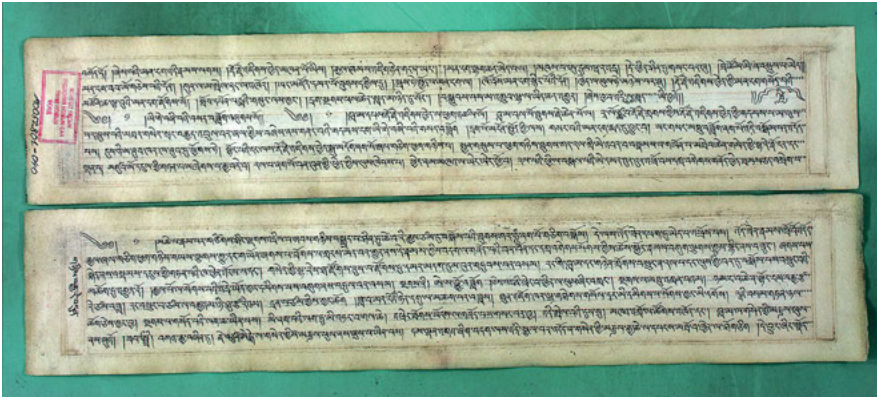


Figure 1: Folios 266v and 267r of the *Yi ge bzhi ba'i bsad bzlog* (“Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling”) from *Rwa pod* manuscript RP1. Image courtesy of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC). <https://www.tbrc.org/#!rid=W8LS32375>.

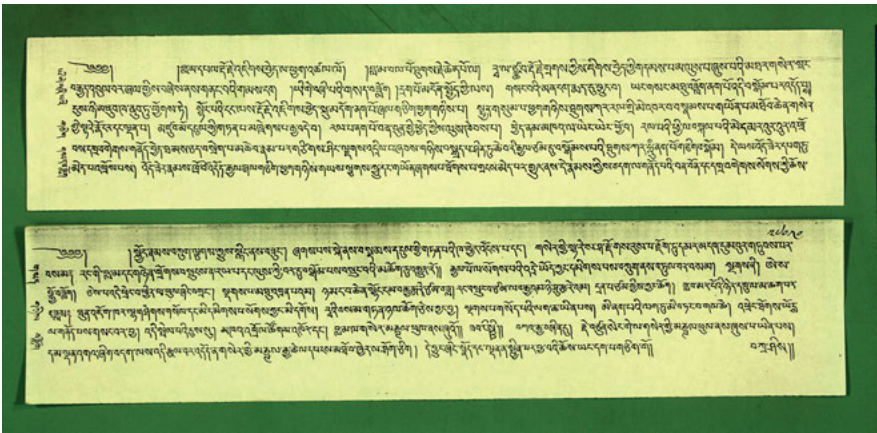


Figure 2: Folios 1v and 2r of the *Yi ge bzhi ba'i bsad bzlog* (“Four Syllables for Slaying and Repelling”) from *Rwa pod* manuscript RP2. Image courtesy of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC). <https://www.tbrc.org/#!rid=W4CZ302660>.



Figure 3: Folios 1v and 2r of *Rwa lo'i bzlog pa bsam gtan nyal chog* ("Rwa's Repelling Rite, Resting Concentration Practice") from independent manuscript RCN. Images courtesy of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDR). <https://www.tbrc.org/#!rid=W1CZ1303>.

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Amy Paris Langenberg

# Love, Unknowing, and Female Filth: The Buddhist Discourse of Birth as a Vector of Social Change for Monastic Women in Premodern South Asia

Despite its ubiquity in the classical tradition, the premodern South Asian Buddhist tale of the suffering fetus in the filthy female womb is often read as medical, a pseudobiological interpolation in the “religious” canon of classical Buddhism. Leaving aside theoretical questions about how well categories like “science” and “religion” serve us in understanding premodern South Asian Buddhist cultural worlds, this essay argues that Buddhist narratives about the suffering fetus and the foul female womb have important and broad implications for the contestation of gender in South Asian Buddhist contexts. An oft-repeated trope, Buddhist descriptions of birth have been a powerful means – in language suggested by the editors of this volume – of “perennializing” a certain classical Buddhist ideology of the female reproductive body. They have also operated, as I argue here and elsewhere, as a “vector of social change” (again, using the language of the editors), albeit in ways both indirect and paradoxical.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the profound suffering of birth (the central message of this ubiquitous trope), women’s fertility and sexual desirability or readiness are not to be coveted and devoutly wished for. For this reason, men and women contemplating, reproducing, and circulating the Buddhist discourse of birth may have found it easier to conceive of women living another kind of life besides motherhood and wifehood.

Here, I argue that the Buddhist tale of the impure, disgusting, and violent female body and the suffering of the fetus within the womb, so seemingly negative toward women, in fact operated discursively and affectively to support premodern female Buddhist monasticism by helping to generate a moral-social imaginary in which female fertility and sexuality cannot be the highest good of womanhood. A discourse that denies the auspiciousness and sexual desirability of women as fundamental truths – as classical Buddhism does – would have posed a disruption to authoritative customs and norms regarding female nature and female virtue in premodern South Asia, customs and norms that many

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Paris Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom* (Abingdon-Thames: Routledge Press, 2017).

Buddhists themselves would also have shared at some level. In particular, this essay explores nuns' *vinaya* texts related to menstruation and same-sex affection, in order to illuminate the radical social-moral space of female Buddhist asceticism and draw connections between virulently negative Buddhist descriptions of sexual reproduction and women's role in it, on the one hand, and the embodied, affectively rich lives of premodern monastic women on the other.

## 1 The Gender-Radical Potential of the South Asian Buddhist Rhetoric of Birth

Though it permeates classical Buddhist literature, the fullest expression of the Indic Buddhist rhetoric of birth is an early-first-millennium Buddhist *sūtra*, originally composed in Sanskrit, that assembles various authoritative Buddhist statements about conception, gestation, and childbirth in one place. Different versions go by different names, but, for the purposes of this essay, I will call this textual tradition the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* ("Descent of the Embryo Scripture"). The core of this tradition is an embryological narrative of human birth that evocatively describes the gestation of new life in the womb, week by week.<sup>2</sup> The *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* survives in three Tibetan and three Chinese translations of what were, according to Robert Kritzer's philological history of this tradition, most likely four original Sanskrit versions.<sup>3</sup> No Sanskrit version has survived, though apparent quotations do occur in several extant Buddhist scholastic works in Sanskrit.<sup>4</sup> Quotations from or references to the text also appear in Chinese

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2 This is quite unlike other Indic embryologies, which trace fetal development only month by month. See, for instance, Robert Kritzer, "Life in the Womb: Conception and Gestation in Buddhist Scripture and Classical Indian Medical Literature," in *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Vanessa Sasson and Jane Marie Law (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73–90.

3 For a detailed history of the text, see Robert Kritzer, "Tibetan Texts of *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*: Differences and Borrowings," *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism* 15 (2012): 131–45; Robert Kritzer, "*Garbhāvākṛāntau* ('In the *Garbhāvākṛānti*): Quotations from the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* in Abhidharma Literature and the *Yogācārabhūmi*," in *The Yogācārabhūmi and the Yogācāras*, ed. Ulrich Timme Kragh (Cambridge: Harvard University, Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, 2013), 728–71; and Robert Kritzer, *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra: The Sūtra on Entry into the Womb* (Studia Philologica Buddhica, XXXI. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2014), 3–10.

4 Namely, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and *Yogācārabhūmi*. See Kritzer, "*Garbhāvākṛāntau*," 749, 751, 754, 757, 761 for a detailed analysis of specific passages.

translations of yet other scholastic treatises.<sup>5</sup> These various references and redactions allow Kritzer to propose that versions of the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* were in circulation by the middle of the second century CE.<sup>6</sup>

As just mentioned, various Indian scholastic texts appear to quote either the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* itself or shared source traditions about the birth process. Tibetan teachers and scholars also knew the *sūtra*. Additionally, it was a major source of embryological knowledge in the Tibetan medical tradition and is frequently cited in the embryology chapter of the seventeenth-century Tibetan medical scholar Desi Sangyé Gyatso's important medical commentary, *Baidurya nGonpo (The Blue Beryl)*.<sup>7</sup> One or several versions of this text also had a role to play in Chinese Buddhist and Daoist treatments of the process of birth.<sup>8</sup> In short, while not a famous Buddhist *sūtra* text in Western scholarship, the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* was certainly well known in the learned circles of

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5 Kritzer, “*Garbhāvakrāntau*” provides a superbly detailed study of quotations from the *sūtra* found in the various texts surviving in Chinese translation. For some observations regarding the relationship between the *Yogācārabhūmi* attributed to Asaṅga, other *Yogācāra* texts extant in Chinese, and the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra*, see Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “Parallel Passages between the *Manobhūmi* and the *Yogācārabhūmi* of Saṃgharakṣa,” in *The Foundation for Yoga Practitioners: The Buddhist Yogācārabhūmi Treatise and Its Adaptation in India, East Asia, and Tibet*, ed. Ulrich Timme Kragh (Harvard Oriental Series 75. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2013), 596–737.

6 Kritzer, *Garbhāvakrāntisūtra*, 3. The earliest Chinese translation, the “Womb-Dwelling *Sūtra*” (*Pao-t'ai ching*) by Dharmarakṣa, which is based on a short version of the text, dates to either 281 or 303 CE. Two other translations were made during the Tang dynasty, one by Bodhiruci, the other by Yijing. The former was apparently based on a second version of the short “Descent of the Embryo,” the latter on a longer version of the text. Two Tibetan translations, respectively based on Bodhiruci and Yijing's Chinese texts, were produced during the early ninth century in Dunhuang. The only Tibetan translation made from a Sanskrit original occurs in the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* and also dates to the ninth century. The latter is the longest version of the text we have in any language. In 2014, Kritzer completed his exhaustive comparative study of all Chinese and Tibetan translations and produced a critical edition and translation of the Tibetan *Kṣudrakavastu* text. In my study of this text, I rely upon Kritzer's edition as my primary source for this complex textual tradition, but I also use my own translation of the longer Dunhuang text (hereafter referred to as Tōhoku 57), the embryological portion of which has been published: Amy Paris Langenberg, “Fetal Suffering in the *Descent of the Embryo Sūtra*,” in *Buddhism and Medicine: A Sourcebook*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero (New York: Columbia University Press: 2017), 41–47.

7 For Tibetan embryological theories, see Frances Garrett, “Ordering Human Growth in Tibetan Medical and Religious Embryologies,” in *Textual Healing: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Medicine*, ed. Elizabeth Lane Furdell (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 31–52 and Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2008).

8 Jesse Choo, “That ‘Fatty Lump’: Discourses on the Fetus, Fetal Development, and Filial Piety in China Before the Eleventh Century CE,” *Nan Nü* 14 (2012): 177–221.

premodern Buddhism as an authoritative source for the Buddha's teachings on embryology and the birth process – no small topic in Buddhist thought. Moreover, echoes of the themes and content of the *garbhāvākṛānti* occur across premodern South Asian texts: for instance, in a passage from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*,<sup>9</sup> as a *pallava* of Kṣemendra's *Bodhisattvādānakalpalatā*,<sup>10</sup> and even in an acerbic poem by the fifteenth-century *bhakti* poet Kabir.<sup>11</sup>

The *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* covers a range of related topics, including the appearance and behavior of the intermediate state of a being, various diseases of the womb, the necessary elements of conception, how the gender of the fetus is determined, the effect of good or bad past actions on one's physical appearance, the four levels of awareness a being can experience while occupying the womb ranked according to level of spiritual attainment, the sensory experiences of the newborn child (which are akin to torture), and the stages of life from infancy to old age. Its centerpiece, however, is a compelling embryological narrative in which the misadventures of the human fetus growing in the womb is told with great emotion and lush descriptive language.

<sup>9</sup> *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.5.9–35. For a translation, see Wendy Doniger, ed., *Norton Anthology of World Religions: Hinduism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 270–271. For a similar motif, see Lakshmi Kapani, *Garbhopaniṣad* (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1976). Scholarly works on embryology and religious depictions of the fetus in premodern South Asia include Rahul Das, *The Origin of the Life of a Human Being: Conception and the Female according to Ancient Indian Medical and Sexological Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003); Eva DeClercq, “The Great Men of Jainism in Utero: A Survey,” in *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Vanessa Sasson and Jane Marie Law (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33–54; André Couture, “The Story of Saṃkārṣaṇa's and Kṛṣṇa's Births: A Drama Involving Embryos,” in *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Vanessa Sasson and Jane Marie Law (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 11–31; Martha Selby, “Narratives of Conception, Gestation, and Labour in Sanskrit Āyurvedic Texts,” *Asian Medicine* 1, no. 2 (2005): 254–75; Frederick Smith, “Narrativity and Empiricism in Classical Indian Accounts of Birth and Death: The *Mahābhārata* and the *Saṃhitās* of Caraka and Suśruta,” *Asian Medicine* 3, no. 1 (2007): 85–102; O. H. Wijesekera, “Vedic Gandharva and Pāli Gandhabba,” *University of Ceylon Review* 3, no. 1 (1945): 73–107.

<sup>10</sup> This literary collection of *avadānas* by the eleventh-century Kashmiri poet includes the *Garbhāvākṛāntiyavadāna*. See Amy Paris Langenberg, “Kṣemendra's *Garbhāvākṛāntiyavadāna* through a Tibetan ‘Looking-Glass,’” in *In Vimalakīrti's House: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert A. F. Thurman on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Christian Wedemeyer, John D. Dunne, and Thomas Yarnall, *Treasury of the Buddhist Sciences (AIBS)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 119–130.

<sup>11</sup> Kabir writes: “Mix red juice, white juice and air – a body bakes in a body. As soon as the eight lotuses are ready, it comes into the world. Then what's untouchable? Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels decay into dust, while the potter keeps slapping clay on the wheel, and with a touch cuts each one off. We eat by touching, we wash by touching, from a touch the world was born. So who's untouched? Asks Kabir” (Doniger, *Norton Anthology*, 404).

According to the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*'s embryological narrative, the fetus begins as a viscous blob that hardens and gels like an egg yolk frying in a pan. It then develops five bubble-like protrusions and is blown up like a balloon. A hard wind blows open the nine orifices (one of the clues that the fetus is paradigmatically male). All of the dimensions and features of its body then manifest one by one, including fingers and fingernails, the system of channels that allow it to breathe and circulate blood, the skin and hair, and so forth. The continuing growth and development of the fetus, relentlessly impelled by one karmic wind after another, is a long, painful process characterized by growing sensory acuteness and ever-worsening mental and physical discomfort. Moreover, this unpleasant process takes place in the space of the human womb, which is described as a pus-and-blood-filled cesspool.<sup>12</sup>

Many rhetorical evocations of the emotion of disgust<sup>13</sup> pepper the text, culminating in long hyperbolic descriptions of the fetal experience of the womb:

Covered just by skin, a piled-up mass of excrement, growing hair and nails and teeth and body hair [ . . . ] (it sits,) [ . . . ] in (a place) rotten with the moistness of rancid snot and putrid, completely filled with fat, pus, the stench of sweat, saliva, bile, phlegm, lungs, small intestine, colon, spleen, bladder, and many varieties of filth, a dwelling for many thousands of types of worms that has two very foul-smelling openings, that has many bone holes and pore holes, and that is defiled by a mass of urine, brains, brain membrane, and marrow. Because menstrual fluids come forth each month it expands. Because the various foods of the mother are chewed fine by the two rows of teeth and swallowed in the throat, and the flavor of the food, which moistened from below with the filth of the wound that is the mouth and with spit and, filled with cranial membrane from above, is like vomit, enters inside from a hole in the umbilical cord, it grows and transforms [through the embryological stages] [ . . . ] and its arms, legs and jaws are wrapped in a thin skin covering. It wanders above and below in a foul-smelling, horrible-smelling, dark, slimy (place) which is like a toilet.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly drawn-out, equally hysterical descriptions of the womb experience are repeated five times in the text. If he survives the many difficult, bewildering, and unpleasant transformations in the hellish environment of the womb, finally managing to descend the birth canal intact without suffering dismemberment at the hands of a panicky midwife,<sup>15</sup> the fetus then faces the ministrations

<sup>12</sup> Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*; Langenberg, "Fetal Suffering."

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller, theoretically-informed discussion of disgust in the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, see Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*, 75–93.

<sup>14</sup> Kritzer's translation (Kritzer, *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, 90–91).

<sup>15</sup> Kritzer has written on the midwife figure of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*. His unpublished paper, entitled "'Women who Know about That': Midwives and Wise Women in Buddhist Literature," is available at [https://www.academia.edu/38300468/For\\_Academia\\_revised\\_4.7\\_](https://www.academia.edu/38300468/For_Academia_revised_4.7_)

of mothers, grandmothers, and nurses. These careless and ignorant women torture his raw and sensitive body, just as insects torture a wounded animal, in their efforts to bathe, swaddle, and feed him.

Although it may strike the modern reader as weirdly medical, clammily paranoid, and only marginally “religious,” the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* should not be regarded as an anomalous outlier text in the Buddhist corpus. Assertions that birth is the origin of human suffering, that the enlightened state is the state of being unborn (*ajāta*) or of eliminating the fetters that bring birth (*uppattipaṭilābhika-saṃyojana*), and that the human birth process is fueled by ignorance and tainted by impurities are ubiquitous in the canonical tradition.<sup>16</sup> For instance, *sutta* texts from the Pāli corpus place birth (*jāti*) at the head of a conventional list of experiences (along with aging and death) that define the unsatisfactoriness of existence.<sup>17</sup> Texts such as the *Aggañña-sutta* mock the putative purity of Brahmins with reference to their birth from human wombs (not the mouth of Brahmā!) and nourishment at human breasts, thereby positing birth as a universal equalizer and slayer of pretensions.

Discourses in which the Buddha explicates the doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) are particularly relevant as parallels and precursors to the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*. In the “Great Discourse on Origination” (*Mahānidāna-sutta*), from the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the Buddha actually inaugurates his teaching on causality with the topic of birth itself: “If, Ānanda, there were no birth at all, anywhere [ . . . ] then, with the cessation of birth, could ageing-and-death appear?” “No, Lord,” Ānanda replies. “Therefore, Ānanda, just this is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition for ageing-and-death – namely, birth.”<sup>18</sup> This text also illustrates several of the causal links of the dependent arising doctrine (consciousness and mind-and-form) phenomenologically in terms of the birth process: “‘Ānanda, if consciousness, once it descended into the mother’s womb, were to depart, would the name-and-form be reborn to this state?’ ‘It would not be, Lord.’ ‘Ānanda, if the consciousness of such a tender young boy or girl baby were to be severed, would name-and-form increase, grow, or develop?’ ‘It would not be, Lord.’”<sup>19</sup> The “Great Discourse on the Destruction

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Submission\_Women\_who\_Know\_about\_That\_-\_Midwives\_and\_Wise\_Women\_in\_Buddhist\_Literature.docx. Accessed October 22, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN) i.163, i.167, i.139; and *Saṃyutta-nikāya* (SN) i.88.

<sup>17</sup> See MN i.48, ii.249; *Dīgha-nikāya* (DN) ii.305; *Vinaya* i.10; and *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN) i.76, iii.416.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Walshe, Maurice, *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 224.

<sup>19</sup> DN ii.63. My translation with reference to Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard*, 226.

of Thirst” (*Mahātaṇhāsaiṅkhaya-sutta*), from the *Majjhima-nikāya*, also elaborates on the phenomena of birth and human development within the context of its explication of dependent arising: “Monks, it is a threefold coincidence that results in the descent of the embryo (*gabbhassāvakkanti*). When there is the union of the mother and father, the mother is in a fertile period, and the *gandhabba* is present, this threefold coincidence results in the descent of the embryo. With great trepidation, the mother holds that embryo in her belly for nine or ten months, a heavy burden. When nine or ten months have passed, the mother gives birth to that heavy burden with great trepidation.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, while the unfolding of phenomena that result from ignorance and craving is said to occur at all registers (human and nonhuman, physical and psychological, sentient and nonsentient, political and moral), the most immediately relevant of these to the Buddhist path, it seems, are the material processes of human embodiment within a woman’s womb.

Later Indian scholastic authors from the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition, the textual milieu of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, also appear to regard detailed knowledge of the birth process as highly relevant to travelers on the path to awakening. For instance, in a passage rich with material descriptions that are reminiscent of the medicalized language of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, the *Manobhūmi* of the *Yogācārabhūmi* describes the *ālayavijñāna* (the “storehouse consciousness,” a concept central to the Yogācāra school) as penetrating the sexually united couple’s semen and blood, which has “coalesced in the mother’s womb” and “bind[s] together as a creamy substance,” and abides “as a single lump, like cooked-down milk being cooled.” This charged entity – semen, blood, and intermediate-state consciousness – then experiences a small death and is instantly born again, this time with subtle and gross aspects of the sense faculties combined with and wedded to consciousness. “To the conscious being established in this state is affixed [the descriptor] ‘conception’ (*pratisaṃdhi*),” reads the text.<sup>21</sup> Picking up a thread from the earlier *sutta/sūtra* tradition, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, attributed to Vasubandhu, articulates the doctrine of dependent arising in terms of anthropomorphic cycles of birth and death. The *nidāna* (causal factor, the third of twelve), consciousness, is identified with the new embryo in the mother’s womb at the time of conception. The embryo developing into a full-fledged fetus is used as an illustration of consciousness giving rise to name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*), and so forth through all twelve *nidānas*.<sup>22</sup> Vasubandhu’s text also contains an unidentified quote from the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* describing what happens when the fetus dies

<sup>20</sup> MN i.265–266. My translation.

<sup>21</sup> Yamabe’s translation, with modifications (Yamabe, “Parallel Passages,” 649–651).

<sup>22</sup> Prahlada Pradhana, ed., *Abhidharmakośa-Bhāṣyam* (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967), 130–133.



and is cut out of the womb, which is “an excrement-hole, a cruelly foul-smelling dark pool of ordure, the home to many thousands of families of worms, permanently oozing, constantly in need of care, drenched in semen, blood, mucus, and impurities, decayed, steaming, and slimy, terrifying to behold,” by a knife-wielding midwife.<sup>23</sup>

The sordid *garbhāvākṛānti* tale of birth is most properly read against the Buddha’s own famous birth story. These two tales of birth are twin aspects of the same Buddhist rhetoric of birth; in fact, they can be regarded as linked narrative traditions. The *Saṅghabhedavastu* version of the Buddha’s life from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* tradition, for instance, presents us with a picture of enlightened birth as an extraordinary exception to the squalid processes of embodiment generated from ignorance and desire.<sup>24</sup> Whereas ordinary birth is violent, humiliating, disgusting, unpredictable, and undergone in ignorance – the quintessential example of helplessness in relation to the impure and disgusting female reproductive body – the Buddha’s birth is just the opposite in every respect. In the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, the Buddha’s conception, gestation, and birth are represented as regular, predictable, and dignified, hygienic and sweet-smelling, relying very little on Māyā’s physical body, and undergone in a state of perfect awareness.<sup>25</sup>

In order to appreciate the distinctive nature of the Buddhist *garbhāvākṛānti* discourse within the context of ancient South Asia and its potential as a “vector of social change,” it is helpful to compare it with other influential Indic treatments of birth and the female reproductive body. The *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* places great emphasis on the violent and repugnant nature of the female reproductive body, and the antagonistic relationship between fetus and mother. One passage describes the developing fetus’s experience as follows:

<sup>23</sup> Pradhana, *Abhidharmakośa-Bhāṣyam*, 130; Kritzer, “*Garbhāvākṛāntau*,” 757.

<sup>24</sup> The longest, most complete version of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* that exists, and the one that is closest in terms of its literary origins to the original Sanskrit, is also from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition, so text-historically close to the *Saṅghabhedavastu* version of the Buddha’s life. For the latter, see Raniero Gnoli and T. Venkatacharya, *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu: Being the 17th and Last Section of the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin*, vol. 1 (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> The version of the Buddha’s birth story that emphasizes the differences between his extraordinary birth and ordinary birth most dramatically is found in the *Lalitavistara*, which describes the fetal bodhisattva gestating inside of the *ratnavyūha*, a fragrant, softly lined, jeweled pavilion made of gemstones, sandalwood, and gold that protects the bodhisattva from the birth impurities of Māyādevī’s womb. Paraśurāma Vaidya, ed., *Lalita-Vistara* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1958), 47.11–14, 49.10–11.

The fetus is located below the stomach and above the bowels. The fetus will be pressed down upon by the undigested matter and forced upward by the digested matter. It is like being bound in five places and then penetrated by the tip of a sharp wooden lance. If the mother eats a lot of food or too little food, the fetus suffers. Similarly, if the food is very oily, or very dry, or very cold, or very hot, or has a very salty flavor, or no flavor, or is bitter, or sour, or sweet – in all cases, if such food is eaten, the fetus will suffer. If the mother has sex, moves violently, runs, stays in a scary place, sits for a long time, sleeps for a long time, or jumps up and down – in all cases, the fetus will suffer. Nanda, you should understand that while in the womb the body is oppressed by various sufferings of this sort that are beyond description.<sup>26</sup>

The Buddhist characterization of the mother-fetus relationship as hostile stands in contrast, for instance, to the *Caraka-saṃhitā*'s understanding of this relationship. In this roughly contemporaneous Āyurvedic text, the gestational relationship is epitomized by a “feeling of two-heartedness” (*dvaihydayya*). Here, mother and fetus share an intimate affective bond because their two bodies are considered to be linked by channels that carry thoughts and feelings as well as life-sustaining nutrition. The mother expresses the child's needs and desires through her moods and cravings, thereby providing for and protecting her child. “Satisfying the mother's every desire is the same as satisfying the needs of the embryo,” Caraka advises. “Therefore, it is prudent to diligently provide a pregnant woman with whatever she desires or needs.”<sup>27</sup>

Discussions of female impurity in the Brahminic legal tradition are also a relevant point of comparison for the Buddhist *garbhāvakrānti* and related traditions.<sup>28</sup> Although Buddhist critiques of Brahminic ritual categories and classical Buddhist teachings' replacement of the body with the mind as a primary locus of impurity has led many scholars of Indian Buddhism to attribute talk of female foulness in Buddhist contexts to Brahminic influence, a comparison of Brahminic legal sources with Buddhist sources reveal distinctly different rhetorics of female impurity. In general, Brahminic legal texts attribute female impurity to the god Indra's wrongdoing (not to the sins of women), treat female birth

<sup>26</sup> Langenberg, “Fetal Suffering,” 46.

<sup>27</sup> *CS Śārīrasthāna* 4.15. My translation. Vaidya Jādavaji Trikamji Ācārya, ed., *The Carakasamitā of Agniveśa* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> For a fuller, theoretically informed discussion of blood impurity in premodern South Asia, see Amy Paris Langenberg, “Buddhist Blood Taboo: Mary Douglas, Female Impurity, and Classical Indian Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 1 (2016): 157–191.

and menstrual impurity as temporary and washable, and frequently declare married women to be inherently pure. *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.4.4, for instance, regards monthly menstruation as so powerfully purifying that women “never become sullied,” even in the case of rape, abduction, or adultery.<sup>29</sup> *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 28.8–9 declares wives to be so cleansed by the marriage ritual and their monthly menses that their purity surpasses the back of a cow and the feet of a Brahmin.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the *garbhāvākṛānti* tradition and multiple other Indian Buddhist texts written from the perspective of male asceticism depict the impurity of women’s bodies as the source of all human bodily impurity in general and a lifelong indelible state. According to the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, the womb is a “filthy, rotting, smoldering swamp,”<sup>31</sup> “always putrid with semen, blood, filth, and pus,”<sup>32</sup> a “foul-smelling, horrible-smelling dark, slimy (place) which is like a toilet.”<sup>33</sup> Echoing the *Aggañña-sutta* and paraphrasing, it would seem, the language of the *garbhāvākṛānti* tradition, the important Indian philosopher Candrakīrti asserts, several centuries later, that all of us are equally impure by virtue of our squalid origins: “Someone before he was born lived inside his mother’s womb – which is like an outhouse – between intestines and stomach. Like a dung worm, he was nourished by the fluid of her waste products. It is only from ignorance that he thinks ‘I am pure.’”<sup>34</sup> Whereas Brahmin lawgivers regard the three-day prohibition on sex during menstruation as protection for the husband against Indra’s sin, not the wife’s own sin, and sex with an auspicious wife as pure by definition (except during menstruation and just after birth), the famous Nālandā monk Śāntideva quotes the *Inquiry of King Vatsa of Udayana*, mocking fools who, in having sex with a woman, “are infatuated like crows drawn to filth. Greedy for an idea of enjoyment, living in filth like worms, they are in Māra’s domain [. . .] The Buddhas criticized women for being foul-smelling, like dung. Therefore, only lowly men have intercourse with women, who are lowly.”<sup>35</sup> As this brief but representative sampling indicates, the rhetorical intensity of Buddhist texts on the topic of an indelible and primevally female impurity is a

29 Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *Dharmasūtras: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003), 257.

30 Olivelle, *Dharmasūtras*, 459.

31 *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* (GS) 252.3–4. My translation.

32 Kritzer, *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, 91.

33 Kritzer, *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, 91.

34 Karen Christina Lang, *Four Illusions: Candrakīrti’s Advice for Travelers on the Bodhisattva Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 180.

35 Charles Goodman, ed., *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva: A Translation of the Śikṣā-samuccaya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 84–85.

departure from, not continuous with or imitative of, Brahminic ritual taboos around female blood.

The *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*'s articulation of a punitive physically repugnant feminine also contrasts dramatically with a more or less concurrent North Indian visual program of displaying gorgeous and inviting female auspiciousness in public religious spaces.<sup>36</sup> For instance, from before the turn of the first millennium, sensuous, fecund women were regularly included in the sculptural programs of Buddhist *stūpas*. As the historian D. D. Kosambi has put it, "magnificent women in opulent but highly revealing costumes, and their handsome male companions, stretched unbroken from Gandhāra and Bhārhut to Ajanta and Amarāvati."<sup>37</sup> These "magnificent women" commonly graced the gateways and outer walls, often in a *śālabhañjikā* or "branch bending" pose, and, scholars believe, may have performed an apotropaic function.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between an obviously sexual *śālabhañjikā* figure and the erect flowering tree around which she twines – and which, it is implied, responds to her touch – is suggestive of her fecundity. Interestingly, *śālabhañjikās* are sometimes described as *dohada* (a Prakritized term with the same linguistic roots as *dvaiḥṛdayya*) because of the heart connection they share with their tree companions.<sup>39</sup> The *śālabhañjikā* motif comes to be closely associated with Māyādevī, the Buddha's mother, who is unfailingly represented as a graceful "branch-bender" in sculptural depictions of the Buddha's birth. Thus, even in certain Buddhist contexts, and in marked contrast to the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*'s view, women's fertility and sexuality are generally auspicious (a female-inflected wealth-and-power-generating ritual property).

Another productive point of contrast between the primary message of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* and contemporaneous Buddhist culture in premodern India concerns monks' involvement in the ritual protection of pregnant women

<sup>36</sup> For a fuller discussion of auspiciousness in Indian Buddhism, see Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*, 94–132.

<sup>37</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *Ancient India: A History of Its Culture and Civilization* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 179.

<sup>38</sup> Claudine Bautze-Picron, "The Lady under the Tree – A Visual Pattern from Māyā to the Tārā and Avalokiteśvara," in *The Birth of the Buddha*, eds. Cristoph Cueppers, Max Deeg, and Hubert Durt (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), 193–237; Vidya Dehejia and Thomas B. Coburn, *Devi: The Great Goddess: Female Divinity in South Asian Art* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in association with Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad and Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1999), 369–77.

<sup>39</sup> Dehejia and Coburn, *Devi*, 370; Gustav Roth, "The Woman and Tree Motif: *Śālabhañjikā-Ḍālamālikā* in Prakrit and Sanskrit Texts with Special Reference to *Śilpaśāstras* Including Notes on *Dohada*," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 23, no. 1 (1957): 91–44.

and young children.<sup>40</sup> Aimed, at least in its near frame, at the cultivation of aversion in male ascetics, the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* is frankly and overwhelmingly negative toward pregnancy and childbirth as a project of human becoming. Addressing his handsome, wealthy, and sexually fulfilled half-brother, Nanda, in hopes of convincing him to leave behind his beautiful young wife (with whom Nanda presumably intends to father sons) and devote himself to the monastic life, the Buddha of the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* comments:

Nanda, I do not praise the conception of a life even a little bit. I do not praise the conception of a [new] life for even one moment. Why is that? The conception of life is suffering. In the same way that even a little vomit stinks, Nanda, even the momentary conception of a tiny life is suffering. Nanda, a being for whom there is arising of material form, establishment [in the womb], development, emergence [from the womb], sensation, intellect, volitions, consciousness, indeed, any being at all that is established, develops, and emerges, is miserable. Abiding [in the womb] is sickness. Emerging [from the womb] is old age and death. Nanda, for this reason, what profit is there for the one lodged in the womb, craving life so deeply?<sup>41</sup>

As was argued above, this perspective is not unique to the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, although it is expressed there with particular force and verve; indeed, statements regarding the inferiority of a life centered around reproduction and the miserable nature of embodied existence are ubiquitous in South Asian Buddhism.

Nevertheless, textual and material sources give evidence that Buddhist ascetics and ritualists were just as involved in promoting conception, safeguarding pregnancy, and protecting very young children as their non-Buddhist counterparts. In her important work on Jain ritualism, Phyllis Granoff has suggested that Buddhists and Jains did reject rituals performed for the purpose of procuring children, at least in theory, as part of their efforts to distinguish themselves from Vedic Hindus, but that ritual practice is not a stable marker of sectarian identity and we should not be surprised to find descriptions of Jains (or Buddhists) performing the same rituals they reject in principle.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, minor rules from the *vinaya* tradition studied by Gregory Schopen mention (either to proscribe or allow) monks' and nuns' participation in certain rituals that promote fertility.<sup>43</sup> A Buddhist text from

<sup>40</sup> For a full treatment of Buddhist fertility rituals, see Langenberg 2013.

<sup>41</sup> GS 251.3–12. My translation.

<sup>42</sup> Phyllis Granoff, "My Rituals and My Gods: Ritual Exclusiveness in Medieval India," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2001): 109–34.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory Schopen, "The Urban Buddhist Nun and a Protective Right for Children in Early North India," in *Pāsādikadānam: Festschrift für Bhikkhu Pasādika*, ed. M. Straube (Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 2009), 359–380.

the classical period called the *Abhisamācārikā*, studied by Karen Muldoon-Hules, contains dedicatory verses to be recited at marriages and births, indicating that monks attended householder life-cycle rites.<sup>44</sup> The cult of the Buddhist protectress, Hārītī, often found in the porticos or side shrines of Buddhist monasteries, was widespread in northern India during the period in which the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* was composed and for centuries after. Inscribed images and the reports of the Chinese pilgrims Yijing and Xuangzang give evidence of her importance in local cults of fertility and child protection and monks' ritual mediation between the goddess and the laity.<sup>45</sup> Later sources from Dunhuang also give evidence of monastic involvement in rituals of fertility and child protection. For instance, a ninth- or tenth-century spell book written in Tibetan and studied by Sam Von Schaik mentions "thread-winding magic" to cure "women with inverted wombs,"<sup>46</sup> as well as another, more elaborate ritual involving a mandala and meditative visualization to place a child in a woman's womb or protect her life after birth.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, so pervasive were concerns about fertility, so acknowledged and supported the desire for healthy children, that Buddhist monks appear always to have routinely practiced ritual interventions in the reproductive lives of householders. While monks' fecundist ritual activities could potentially be a source of doubt about the social impact of the Buddhist birth discourse epitomized by the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra*, the fact of these seemingly routine clerical interventions in matters of fertility and childbirth also underscores that discourse's profoundly radical nature and its disruptive potential for women should they come to know of it.

Postmodern and postcolonial developments in feminist thought have been helpful in their insistence that gender and gender-based oppression are discursively constructed and historically specific experiences.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, if, in tacitly

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**44** Karen Muldoon-Hules, "Avadānaśataka: The Role of Brahmanical Marriage in a Buddhist Text," in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192–220.

**45** Samuel Beal, ed., *Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1958); Richard Cohen, "Nāga, Yakṣiṇī, Buddha: Local Deities and Local Buddhism at Ajanta," *History of Religions* 37, no. 4 (1998): 360–400; Anna Maria Quagliotti, "An Inscribed Image of Hārītī in the Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 6 (1999): 51–60.

**46** Sam Van Schaik, "A Tibetan Book of Spells," *Early Tibet: Notes, Thoughts, and Fragments of Research on the History of Tibet* (blog), February 2, 2009, <https://earlytibet.com/2009/02/19/a-tibetan-book-of-spells/>. Accessed October 22, 2019.

**47** Sam Van Schaik, "A Tibetan Book of Spells" (unpublished manuscript, accessed September 4, 2018), pdf file.

**48** For detailed treatments of postcolonial and poststructural feminist thought in relationship to female Buddhist monasticism, see Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*, 1–25; and Amy Paris Langenberg,

assuming that the social category “woman” flows organically from biology, one fails to examine in detail the complex processes by which womanhood was continuously and locally negotiated and performed in ancient India, one is likely to produce a purely flat and negative reading of the *garbhāvakrānti* tradition, a mere surface judgment that this way of thinking is rather hard on women and their female bodies. However, as feminist thinkers and historians have amply illustrated, misogynistic or androcentric discourses do not always translate straightforwardly into misogynistic or androcentric realities, and egalitarian discourses rarely translate into social equality. Moreover, various kinds of female power, autonomy, and freedom emerge even in patriarchal social environments.<sup>49</sup> While apparently hard on women, the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* is harder on coveted South Asian *ideals of womanhood*: namely, the auspiciousness of married women, the cyclical purity/impurity of menstruating women, and the sexual desirability of young women. In the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* and related traditions, the reproductive woman is perennially ugly, she is perennially impure, and her fertility is no longer auspicious or apotropaic, but a passageway to death. This ascetic dismantling of mainstream norms of female virtue certainly posed a risk that women under its influence would lose whatever social influence, ritual power, and robust identity they might otherwise have garnered within a conservative patriarchal system that mainly valued their potential as breeders and sexual partners. But the Buddhist critique of birth also inserted a question mark, a potent unknowing, into the identity category “woman”: if the powerfully inauspicious, abject, and impure woman-icon of the *Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra* renders all properties at the heart of womanhood – beauty, auspiciousness, purity – impossible or a lie, what, then, is a woman? In a world in which everyone seemed to agree about how important and valued women were as sexualized persons and childbearers, the thoroughgoing critique of female beauty, auspiciousness, and purity that Buddhist ascetic discourses such as the *Garbhāvakrānti* offered would have been a portal into another world for female seekers and questioners, however frightening and risky. I argue that monastic women stepped eagerly

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“An Imperfect Alliance: Feminism and Contemporary Female Buddhist Monasticisms,” *Religions* 9, no. 190 (2018): 1–24.

49 For a fascinating example of the complexities of ancient gender, see Alice Collett’s research on the Sātavāhana queen Nāgaṇṇikā. Nāgaṇṇikā is featured in an inscription at Nāneghāt that apparently describes her sponsorship and performance of Vedic rituals, something she, a woman, was not supposed to be able to do, according to scriptural orthodoxy. Alice Collett, “Reimagining the Sātavāhana Queen Nāgaṇṇikā,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 41 (2018): 329–358.

into, discovered a rare sort of freedom within, and built new social worlds inside this imaginative space of questioning and unknowing.

Material and textual sources give evidence that nuns were a significant and thriving sector of premodern Buddhist communities. Preeminent early nuns are lauded and their accomplishments listed in canonical texts preserved both in Pāli and Chinese.<sup>50</sup> Up through the fourth or fifth centuries CE, inscriptions indicate that nuns were active donors at sites such as Sāñchī, on a par with monks,<sup>51</sup> and may have been powerful enough to compete with monks' communities for resources.<sup>52</sup> Manuscript colophons and illustrations of female donors indicate that Buddhist nuns were and continued to be active as donors and sponsors well into the medieval period.<sup>53</sup> Inscriptions also describe nuns as the direct students of male teachers, and as themselves lineage teachers of other women.<sup>54</sup>

Material and textual evidence that women were teachers, patrons, and respected practitioners of the Dharma provides an important framework for thinking historically about the premodern nun community, but tells us less about

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**50** Anālayo, “*Anṅuttara-nikāya/Ekottarika-Āgama*: Outstanding Bhikkhunīs in the Ekottarika-Āgama,” in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97–115; Anālayo, “*Samyutta-nikāya/Samyukta-Āgama*: Defying Māra-Bhikkunīs in the *Samyukta-Āgama*,” in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 116–39; Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998); Alice Collett, “Therīgāthā: Nandā, Female Sibling of Gotama Buddha,” in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 140–159.

**51** Nancy Barnes, “Nuns at the Stūpa,” in *Women’s Buddhism, Buddhism’s Women*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), 17–36; Matthew D. Milligan, “The Economic Power of Women in Early South Asian Buddhism,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 56, no. 1 (2019): 1–25; Kumkum Roy, “Women and Men Donors at Sanchi: A Study of Inscriptional Evidence,” in *Position and Status of Women in Ancient India*, ed. L. K. Tripathi (Varanasi, 1988), 209–23; Gregory Schopen, “On Monks, Nuns, and ‘Vulgar’ Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism,” in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 238–57.

**52** Gregory Schopen, “The Suppression of Nuns and Ritual Murder of Their Special Dead,” in *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 329–59.

**53** Jinah Kim, “Unheard Voices: Women’s Roles in Medieval Buddhist Artistic Production and Religious Practices in South Asia,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 200–232.

**54** Alice Collett, “Women as Teachers and Disciples in Early Buddhist Communities: The Evidence of Epigraphy,” *Religions of South Asia* 9, no. 1 (2015): 28–42.



the social and political dynamics or the affective texture of their daily embodied lives as ascetic women. Legal literature (*vinaya*) associated with premodern nun communities affords a more intimate glimpse of women's lives in what I am calling the radical moral-social space of female monasticism, a space in which womanhood was being renegotiated. Textual scholarship on *vinaya* materials has shown that female monastic culture was distinctive<sup>55</sup> and, though problematic for the male community in certain ways, legally accommodated by monastic authorities nonetheless.<sup>56</sup> Here I attempt to draw on texts from *vinaya* literature related directly to the affective and the embodied in order to make more visible a few aspects of the moral-social space of renunciation that would have been important for nuns' sense of self and daily experiences as Buddhist ascetics: namely, menstruation and affective bonding. In doing so, I hope to also make visible a delicate line of connection between the antifecundist imaginary of the *Garbhāvākraṅti-sūtra* and the alternative moral-social environment of premodern female Buddhist monasticism.

## 2 Menstruating in the Nunnery

Menstruation is a disciplinary issue unique to the nun community, and one operating against the previously referenced background of the South Asian ritual and symbolic tradition of venerating and abominating female blood. All of the sectarian *vinaya* traditions contain texts that promulgate rules regarding the management of monthly bleeding. For instance, *bhikṣuṇī prakīṛṇaka* 15 from the Prakritized Sanskrit *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* reads:

The lord was staying at Śrāvastī. The nuns got their menstrual periods month after month. The blood ruined the bedding and seating. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī briefed the lord about this matter. “Is it suitable, lord, to wear a cloth shaped like an axle pin (*āṅicolaka*) for the purpose of protecting the bedding and seating?” The lord replied, “A cloth shaped like an axle pin is suitable. The one whose period has come and whose blood flows is to wear a cloth shaped like an axle pin, that is, a bundle of scraps. Pushing

<sup>55</sup> Damchō Diana Finnegan, “For the Sake of Women, Too”: *Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009); Amy Paris Langenberg, “Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya: The Intersection of Womanly Virtue and Buddhist Asceticism,” in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80–96.

<sup>56</sup> Shayne Neil Clarke, *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Mari Johanna Jyväsjärvi, *Fragile Virtue: Women's Monastic Practice in Early Medieval India* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011).

it in too shallowly is not suitable but neither is pushing it in too deeply in order to dispel the passion of desire. On the contrary, it should be pushed into the orifice (*vraṇamukha*; literally, “mouth of the wound”) loosely. Whichever nun inserts it too deeply, or too shallowly, in that way slaking her lust, commits a gross sin.” This is said regarding the matter of the cloth shaped like an axle pin.<sup>57</sup>

The *Pāli-vinaya* also contains a prescription to wear the *ānīcolaka*.<sup>58</sup> A roughly corresponding *prāyaścittika* rule from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* prescribes a cloth tied on with a string, but not one shaped “like an axle pin.”<sup>59</sup> Another rule in the *Pāli-vinaya* says, “When a nun uses the household cloth without relinquishing it, it is an offense requiring expiation.”<sup>60</sup> *Āvasathacivara*, the relevant Pāli term here, is translated here as “household cloth” following Hüsken, who argues that *āvasatha* refers to a roadside lodging where ascetics stay overnight. Hüsken also suggests that the *āvasathacivara* is a publicly kept menstrual cloth to be used by visiting nuns for three nights, then washed on the fourth and relinquished to another nun.<sup>61</sup> The idea of the “household cloth” as such is missing from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, though there is a rule about relinquishing the communally owned menstrual cloths.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* does not reference the “household cloth” as such, although it does mention relinquishing communally owned menstrual rags in a series of texts about where and how nuns should wash their menstrual cloths.<sup>63</sup>

A passage from Guṇaprabha’s *Vinayasūtra*, an important *vinaya* digest from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition, gives the Sanskrit term for the special cloth worn by menstruating *Mūlasarvāstivāda* nuns as *rajaścoḍa* (“that which

57 Gustav Roth, ed., *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya Including Bhikṣuṇī-Prakīrṇaka and a Summary of the Bhikṣu-Prakīrṇaka of the Ārya-Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin* (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1970), 309, §268.

58 I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-piṭaka)* (1938–1966; repr., Bristol: The Pali Text Society, 2012–2014), 5:374.

59 Derge Kangyur, ’dul ba, *ta* 299a7–299b6.

60 *Vinaya sutta-vibhaṅga*, *pācittiya* 47. My translation, with reference to I. B. Horner’s translation and Ute Hüsken, “Pure or Clean?” *Traditional South Asian Medicine* 6 (2001): 85–96. Hüsken further proposes that *āvasathacivara* is, at least in the context of this rule, a nod to Brahminic practice, which requires the menstruating wife to use a “stained cloth” (*malavadvāsas*) for three days and wash it on the fourth, signaling to her husband the return of her sexual availability (Hüsken, “Pure or Clean?” 89–90).

61 Hüsken, “Pure or Clean?” 86–87.

62 *Prāyaścittika* 171 at Derge Kangyur, ’dul ba, *ta* 299b6–300a6. My translation.

63 *Prakīrṇaka* 18 at Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, 310, §271. See Langenberg, “*Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda*,” 92–3 for a translation of this series of rules.

conceals the menstrual flow”).<sup>64</sup> Tibetan translators rendered this term *sme gab*, literally, “a cover for sorrow,” but the story from the canonical commentary accompanying the relevant *prāyaścittika* rule hints at the possibility that the nuns themselves may have chosen to understand and experience their menses differently than some others in their social environment:

For women, every month blood trickles out due to the degenerative force of previous karma. Because of this, the lord advised (nuns) to wear a special cloth (*sme gab*) for concealing the menstrual flow. At the time he said to “keep a special cloth,” [the Lord knew] it was sure to fall if [a nun] put it on and walked, so at the same time he instructed [nuns to] “keep a special cloth,” he [also] said to “attach it with a string.” Because nobody stopped her, Sthūlanandā went out to beg for alms with blood trickling down her calf. Brahmins and householders, seeing her, asked, “Venerable lady, why is there blood on your calf?” She answered, “If you don’t know, ask your mother! Ask your sister! Ask your daughter!” “You insult all of our homes!” they complained, muttering and recriminating. At that time, the nuns told the lord, and the lord [. . .] established a further precept: “If nuns don’t keep a special cloth, it is an offense.” Even then, Sthūlanandā said, “What is called a ‘special cloth’ (*sme gab*) is a cover for the unhappiness of women. What if I don’t wear one?” [The lord said,] “If you don’t acquire one, ‘it is an offense,’ as stated before.”<sup>65</sup>

Here, Sthūlanandā seems to perform what amounts to an act of political theater in the streets of the town, then produces a brief, sardonic commentary on the social meanings and uses of female blood and the heavy-handed intrusions of men into women’s management of their own bodies. Ultimately, she resists even the interventions of the Buddha himself. The Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin *prakīṛṇaka* rule referenced above also includes some commentary on nuns’ use of menstrual technology when it cautions against “pushing it in too deeply” in order to “dispel the passion of desire.” This comment appears to be an intratextual reference to definitions of sex as penetrative, as found in *pārājika* 1, and may reflect the disciplinary concerns of monastic lawyers or senior women in the community.

Small differences between *vinaya* traditions on the subject of menstruation can be taken as evidence of Buddhist communities making adaptations in response to practical problems within the community and social pressures coming from the wider social environment. It seems that female Buddhist monastic communities formally incorporated a range of technologies into their disciplinary

<sup>64</sup> *Vinayasūtra* 2.2343. “Vinayasutra. Preliminary transliteration of the ms. found in Tibet by Rahula Sankrityayana,” Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL), accessed July 29, 2019, [www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene\\_1/fiindolo/gretil/1\\_sanskr/4\\_rellit/buddh/vinsutrc.txt](http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_1/fiindolo/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/vinsutrc.txt).

<sup>65</sup> Derge Kangyur ’dul ba, *ta* 299a7–299b6.

regime – the *ānicolaka*, the *āvasathacīvara*, and the *rajaścoḍa* – all different from the *malavadvāsas* (“stained cloth”) of Brahminic menstrual law. As is customary in *vinaya* writings, these innovations are attributed to the Buddha; however, from a historical point of view, the Buddha is not likely to have been responsible for them. Male monastic lawyers may have conceived and handed down these provisions for nuns’ monthly bleeding independently of the nuns’ input. Given their much greater experience with menstrual hygiene and the politics of female blood from a woman’s perspective, however, it seems far more likely that the nuns developed practical and socially appropriate solutions to the problem of monthly bleeding themselves, perhaps in consultation with the male *saṅgha*. These practices would then have been codified by monastic lawyers and included in the monastic disciplinary canon.

The Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin *prakīrṇaka* rule referenced above, whose narrative framing is limited to the statement that menstruating nuns “ruined the bedding and seating,” is focused mainly on practical and moral management, not derogatory representations of gender, worry about blood taboos, or the venting of male sexual cathexis. In general, *vinaya* passages on menstruation are practical, straightforward, and include little engagement in gendered symbolism, or, notably, the poetics of disgust, especially compared to other classical Buddhist texts in which female blood is mentioned. The Mūlasarvāstivāda passage cited above, describing Sthūlanandā’s brassy behavior and salty commentary, is perhaps an exception to the practical tone of most *vinaya* menstruation texts, but there, by my reading, it is the perspective of women, not the anxiety of elite men, that is made visible. Where the issue of blood impurity is raised, as in, for instance, rules proscribing washing out menstrual rags at public bathing areas, the concern seems to center on lay rather than monastic anxiety regarding the management of impurity. In general, the tone of menstrual texts in the *vinaya* stands in marked contrast to the ritual awe expressed in the Brahminic tradition and the exceptionally robust tradition of negativity toward the reproductive female body (with all of its oozing fluids) found in Buddhist texts such as the *Garbhāvakraṅtisūtra*. They are remarkable in their unremarkableness, affording a glimpse, I suggest, of a female monastic culture that situated itself outside of androcentric South Asian traditions of venerating and abominating female blood. Thus, with regards to menstruation, ancient nuns did not necessarily align their bodily regimes and self-understanding with the concerns of elite male priests and ascetics, a radical social reality in and of itself.

### 3 Having Friends in the Nunnery

Another interesting *vinaya* text from the Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin tradition illuminates a further dimension of the moral-social space unique to premodern female Buddhist monasticism, a field of moral becoming made ready, I would suggest, by Buddhist antifecundist discourses such as the *Garbhāvakraṅti-sūtra* that first clear and purify through a process of slash-and-burn. In an imaginative realm in which heterosexual reproductivity is polluting, inauspicious, and ugly, affective connection between people – let’s call it love – puddles in places other than the heteronormative. Female monasticism, with its communal living structures and ethical self-distancing from heterosexual marriage, was apparently an arena within which affectionate relationships between women could develop and thrive, although not without perceived risk. *Saṅghātiśeṣa* 17<sup>66</sup> of the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravāda bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* criticizes two nuns in Śrāvastī for “spending time together intimately (*saṃṛṣṭā*<sup>67</sup> *viharanti*) mingled in body (*kāyikena saṃsargeṇa*)” and “mingled in speech (*vācikena saṃsargeṇa*).” Feeling that they are guilty of collusion, the other nuns criticize their relationship and living arrangement, eventually reporting them to the Buddha. The Buddha rules that two nuns shall not spend time together intimately “concealing one another’s faults (*anyonyasyāvadya-praticchādikā*).”

It is not clear whether this text responds only to the risks to discipline of a close emotional and social coupling between nuns, or also indirectly addresses sexual intimacy between nuns. The rule itself emphasizes the concealing of faults as well as the fact of spending time intimately mingled in body and speech. The Chinese translation of the *Mahāsāṅghika bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* does give

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66 Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, 155–56, §270. The *saṅghātiśeṣa* are the second category of rules in the *prātimokṣa* and are therefore second in severity. There are two types of *saṅghātiśeṣa* rules: one type that goes into effect immediately, and another that goes into effect only after three admonitions. This rule is of the second type. Transgressions of this type require a formal meeting of the community and a fortnight of *mānatva* discipline before the transgressing nun can be rehabilitated. *Mānatva* discipline is a penance imposed after the *varṣa* retreat and including, as part of its ceremonial, a formal show of respect to the community of monks (or nuns).

67 The *Kāmasūtra* uses *saṃṛṣṭa* at one point specifically with reference to a young girl’s intimate relationship with a nun. The nun is suggested to be a good candidate for advancing a naive girl’s sexual education (1.3.14). In other places in the *Kāmasūtra*, it is clearly used to denote sexual intimacy (1.5.8, 1.5.8, 1.5.16, 2.8.29). In other places there, it merely connotes close association, but not necessarily of the sexual kind. See “Vatsyayana, Kamasutram,” Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL), accessed July 29, 2019, [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskr/6\\_sastra/6\\_kama/kamasutu.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/6_sastra/6_kama/kamasutu.htm); Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, eds., *Kamasutra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

some detailed information on this rule's *nidāna* (introductory frame story) regarding the nature of these two nuns' relationship. In Hirakawa's translation, "To be close together in action"<sup>68</sup> [i.e. *kāyikena saṃsargeṇa*] means: to sleep together on a couch,<sup>69</sup> to sit together on a couch, to eat from the same bowl, to put on each other's robes,<sup>70</sup> to go in and out together. 'To be close in speech' [i.e. *vācikena saṃsargeṇa*] means: to speak with a defiled and passionate mind."<sup>71</sup> This explanation is missing from the Sanskrit text, even though both are of Mahāsāṅghika derivation.

The Pāli and Dharmaguptaka versions of this rule seemingly displace the emphasis further from any suggestion of intimacy to the problem of collusion in other forms of nonvirtuous behavior.<sup>72</sup> The Pāli text specifies that the two who "live in company" (Horner's tepid translation of the Pāli *saṃsaṭṭhā viharanti*) are pupils of the famously transgressive nun, Thullanandā, are of "evil habits, evil repute, of evil ways of living" and are in the practice of concealing one another's faults.<sup>73</sup> The Pāli text does not include the phrase "with mingled body" or "with mingled voice," nor does it include any details about what "living in company" (as Horner translates it) actually means. The Dharmaguptaka version (translated by Heirman) is similar to the Pāli in its emphasis on the evil reputations and habits of the two nuns, which they conceal from the larger *saṅgha* while living together "in each other's community."<sup>74</sup> The Dharmaguptaka

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68 Akira Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns: An English Translation of the Chinese Text of the Mahāsāṅghika-Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya* (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1982), 176. Hirakawa translates a word as "action" that usually means "body" (*śen*). I am indebted to my colleague, Andrew Chittick, for his generous help with exploring the Chinese parallels of these texts. All following notes on Chinese terms are based on personal communication with Chittick.

69 The word Hirakawa translates as "couch" is really a bed, as it is where one sleeps.

70 The reference here is to sharing clothes, not necessarily to dressing one another.

71 The two Chinese words used as descriptors here mean "contaminated" and "defiled" or "dirty." They do not literally denote passion.

72 According to Andrew Chittick (personal communication), the language in the Dharmaguptaka is sharper than in the parallel Mahāsāṅghika passage. For instance, the word that is used in the latter tradition for what is being covered up or concealed means "transgression" or "fault" (*guo*), whereas in the Dharmaguptaka passage, the word used for what is being covered up or concealed is "crime" (*zui*).

73 Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 3:207.

74 Ann Heirman, *Rules for Nuns according to the Dharmaguptakavinaya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2015), 2:360–367. The Chinese term used here connotes a family-like relationship (*qin*) and does not have a negative connotation. This tradition also mentions the influence of Thullanandā (Sthūlanandā) on these two nuns' living arrangement (Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 2:368).

text also omits any specific mention of bodily merging. It does, however, provide some commentarial unpacking of what, exactly, these two wayward nuns are supposed to be getting up to. Apparently, they “make fun together, often to incite each other.”<sup>75</sup> They also plant flowering trees, pluck flowers, make garlands, and “walk around [with garlands].” They also sit “together with men or boys of the village,” sometimes on the same bed; they drink and eat from the same receptacle; they sing, dance, act, play instruments, adopt silly positions; and so forth.<sup>76</sup>

There are some internal contextual clues to what might be implied or understood but not explicitly said in the Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin version of *saṅghātīṣeṣa* 17. For instance, the Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin version of number 7 of the *bhikṣuṇī pārājika* rules (rules entailing defeat) also concerns concealing the faults of others. In the *nidāna* of this rule, the nun Kālī is given a young girl to raise and teach by a lay family from the Licchavi clan with the understanding that they will provide material support to Kālī. This young girl grows into a young woman under Kālī’s care but, being of a passionate nature and harassed by mental impurities (*kleśas*), she does not desire to go forth. Kālī advises her, “Daughter, householders suffer. According to the lord, desire (*kāma*) is similar to a coal and cow-dung fire. What use to you is being a householder?” Privately, Kālī thinks, “if she runs away then my benefits and hospitality will come to an end.” Unable to endure her mental defilements, Kālī’s young charge becomes “mixed up” (*miśri-bhūtā*) with ascetics and monastic servants (*ārāṃika-parivṛājaka*). Her womb is filled; her stomach becomes big. She is expelled by the nuns. When Kālī confesses that she had encouraged her young charge to stay in the monastic community in order to protect her own access to requisites, the Buddha establishes the *pārājika* that nuns should not conceal the serious faults of others.<sup>77</sup>

In both cases, *saṅghātīṣeṣa* 17 and *pārājika* 7, words that connote mixing or merging or union or intimacy are used to describe problematic forms of relationships. The heterosexual nature of this problematic relationship is clear in the *pārājika* rule, as the Licchavi girl becomes pregnant. In the case of the *saṅghātīṣeṣa* rule, mention of *saṃsṛṣṭa* and *kāyika saṃsarga* could also potentially be taken to connote sexuality. For instance, both are used in *kāmasāstra*

<sup>75</sup> Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 2:365.

<sup>76</sup> Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 2:365. Many of these actions are specifically proscribed elsewhere in the *vinaya*. See, for instance, a *prakīṃṇaka* text about making garlands (Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 402). Only the detail about eating and drinking from the same receptacle resembles the details given in the Chinese Mahāsāṅghika text.

<sup>77</sup> Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, §131, 92.

literature to indicate sexual intimacy.<sup>78</sup> In the *saṅghātīśeṣa* case, of course, any physical intimacy that is hinted at is between two women, not between a woman and man.<sup>79</sup>

*Pācattika* 86 of the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, which resembles the *pārājika* rule concerning the nun Kālī, adds further complexity to the picture.<sup>80</sup> In this rule, the nun Kālī initiates her charge at the *pravrajyā* ordination level. The young female novice becomes intimate (*saṃsṛṣṭā*) with householders and mendicants, causing the Buddha to lay down the rule that if a nun becomes intimate with a householder or mendicant, even a novice monk or layperson attached to the temple, for a day or a moment, it is a *pācattika* offense (a level of offense requiring confession and expiation). The word-for-word commentary of this rule supplies the same language used in *saṅghātīśeṣa* 17, defining becoming intimate as “mingled in body and speech” (*kāyikena saṃsargeṇa vācikenā saṃsargeṇa*).<sup>81</sup> Nothing about concealing faults is ever mentioned.

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**78** Both words are from *saṃ- vsṛj*: to be joined or united or mingled or confused, come into contact with, meet (as friends or foes, also applied to sexual intercourse . . .). The *Kāmasūtra* uses *saṃsṛṣṭa* at one point specifically with reference to a young girl’s intimate relationship with a nun. The nun is suggested to be a good candidate for advancing a naive girl’s sexual education (1.3.14). In other places in the *Kāmasūtra*, it is clearly used to denote sexual intimacy (1.5.8, 1.5.8, 1.5.16, 2.8.29). In still other places, it merely connotes close association, not necessarily of the sexual kind. This language is one that is used in a range of *vinaya* contexts to refer to close relationships with inappropriate people (but not necessarily sexual ones); see Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 3:207, note 1. The *Kāmasūtra* uses *saṃsarga* for kissing (2.8.6), oral sex (2.9.26), “close contact with loose women” (5.6.45; Doniger and Kakar, *Kamasutra*, 130), sexual intercourse (6.4.32), and associating with a man (6.5.33).

**79** In general, the *saṅghātīśeṣa* section of the *vinaya* is a typical place to find serious, legally important, but not defeating sexual infractions, at least in the case of monks. For instance, rules about masturbation using a hand, using inappropriate suggestive language when talking to women, soliciting pious laywomen for sex and billing it as a form of meritorious offering, and nonsexual physical intimacy, such as touching the hair or hands of a woman, are all found in the *saṅghātīśeṣa* section of the *bhikṣu vinaya*. It might be possible to argue, then, that this nun’s *saṅghātīśeṣa* rule is also put in this section of the *vinaya* to deal with another legally important sexual infraction.

**80** Kālī and her Licchavi maiden also appear in yet another *pācattika* rule concerning not sending away a disciple who has transgressed the discipline (Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 319).

**81** Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, §200, 225. Hirakawa translates the corresponding Chinese phrase as “to live together so close that they can touch each other mouth to mouth, or that they can touch each other body to body, or that they can touch each other body to body and mouth to mouth” (Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 277). The Chinese, however, is the same as in *saṅghātīśeṣa* 17 and translates literally as “body habitually close-living, mouth habitually close-living, mouth body habitually close-living.” In other words, Hirakawa’s translation is deceptive and this passage adds no new information. What really is not clear is who has



Intriguingly, this *pācattika* text includes some further commentary, seemingly as an afterthought, specifying that should two nuns stay intimately with one another, spending time delighting in one another, they must be separated.<sup>82</sup>

Rules governing sexual or romantic behaviors for *bhikṣuṇīs* are often found in a different category of offense than the parallel rules for monks. For instance, non-penetrative physical intimacy between a *bhikṣuṇī* and a man is a *pārājika*, but a *saṅghātīseṣa* in the case of a *bhikṣu* and a woman. On the other hand, the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* categorizes masturbation by nuns using devices, water, or root vegetables merely as a “transgression of the *vinaya*” (*vinayātikrama*),<sup>83</sup> while masturbation is a *saṅghātīseṣa* for monks, an offense requiring a formal meeting of the order. And, while *pārājika*-worthy sex is defined as penetrative in nature, the *vinaya* does not conceive of penetrative sex between two women as counting as a *pārājika*. In fact, such an act is not specifically mentioned in the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* or the *Pāli-vinaya* as far as I know, though it is mentioned in the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* and, apparently, in

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committed a *pācattika*. It is the Licchavi daughter who is culpable, but in this version of the scenario she is not a *bhikṣuṇī*, only a *śramaṇerī*. Therefore, the *prātimokṣa* rules cannot apply to her, as she holds only the *dasāśila* (tenfold discipline or ten novice precepts). Technically, only Kālī is eligible to commit a *pācattika*, and yet she has not committed the acts that are criticized in this text.

**82** Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, §200, 225. See also Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 3:248 for a reference to female-female erotic behavior in the *Pāli-vinaya*. Horner’s translation of the term of art in this passage (*pācattiya* 3), *talaghātaka*, may not be accurate according to Perera, who thinks it refers to two women engaged in “tribadism”; see L. P. N. Perera, *Sexuality in Ancient India: A Study Based on the Pali Vinayapitaka* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993), 202–203. The *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin* text makes it pretty clear, however, that the term *talaghātapratisaṃyukta* means they are putting pressure on the pubic area with the palm of the hand (*hastatalenāṅgajātaṃ prasphoṭayanti*).

**83** These rules are found in the *prakīrṇaka* section (Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, 306–311; Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 392–398). The Chinese translation of the *Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya* seems to change the rule about *talaghātapratisaṃyuktam* (Roth, *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, §265, 306–307) into a story about a single woman, whereas the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottaravādin* rule speaks of nuns masturbating in the plural. The *Pāli* parallel specifies that two nuns are involved and implies they are mutually “patting” or whatever *talaghāta* means. Collectively, these rules about masturbation are categorized as *pācittiya* offenses (offenses requiring confession and expiation) in the *Pāli-vinaya* and in the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* (Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 3: 248–51; Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 594–601). *Vinaya* traditions also include rules against nuns being rubbed and massaged by laywomen, nuns, novice nuns, and so forth, except in case of illness (see for instance Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 347–351), or rules about nuns sharing a bed or a coverlet (Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline*, 347–351; Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 3:304; Perera, *Sexuality*, 204).

the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* (though in neither case is it considered a highly serious offense).<sup>84</sup>

In Buddhist *vinaya* traditions, then, the same-sex passions of women are somewhat dimly, briefly, and vaguely noted as compared to the extensive cataloging of all varieties of male sexuality one finds, for instance, in *bhikṣu pārājika* 1 and the *bhikṣu saṅghātiśeṣa* rules, and the similar cataloging of women's sexual acts with men or third-sexed individuals in the *bhikṣuṇī pārājika* texts.<sup>85</sup> They are also lightly punished in the *vinaya* compared to male homosexual or heterosexual sex or, one might say, penetrative sex involving semen. Given the assumed centrality of the Buddhist critique of desire and pleasure in all of its forms, why would this be the case? It may have something to do with what we could characterize, using contemporary terminology, as a marginalization of female queerness in Buddhism combined with a lack of focus on or pure ignorance of modalities of female intimacy by male monastic lawyers.<sup>86</sup> It may, however, have more to do with the socially, religiously, and economically endorsed forms of heterosexuality that celibacy is defined against in premodern South Asian Buddhism; that is, the iron cage of reproduction and marriage. As Janet Gyatso exhaustively details, the *vinaya* catalogs sexual acts and places them in hierarchies of transgression, the “gold standard” for which is the quintessentially heterosexual act of a monk's member inserted into the vagina of a woman.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, José Cabezón observes, “What makes penetrative sex weightiest is the fact that it represents a devolution of the monk to the life of

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**84** Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 2:597; José Ignacio Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Press, 2017), 329, note 840. Here, Heirman back-translates the Chinese term, *yin shi* (“lewd acts”) into Sanskrit as *maithuna* (which is definitely a reference to the sexual union of a couple; Heirman, *Rules for Nuns*, 663, note 217). This seems to reverse the standard Sanskrit-Chinese translation practice: *maithuna* is often rendered as *yin shi* (see, for instance *pārājika* 1; Andrew Chittick, personal communication).

**85** Derrett also notes, “The *Vinaya* is not specifically interested in sexual relations between women in nunneries [ . . . ]”; see J. D. M. Derrett, “Monastic Masturbation in Pāli Buddhist Texts,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (2006), 1–13. Cabezón notes, “Although the breadth of women's desires and pleasures is acknowledged in the *Vinaya*, for a nun (a woman), sex is not *real* sex unless it is with a biological male” (Cabezón, *Sexuality*, 329).

**86** Vatsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* mentions women's sexual activities with one another in two places. At 5.6.2–4, women of the harem are described as using dildos, bulbs, roots, fruits, etc. to satisfy each other. The implication of the text is that they are compensating for inadequate male attention, not acting on same-sex sexual preferences. At 7.1.20, the *Kāmasūtra* mentions girls penetrating one another prior to marriage. See Doniger and Kakar, *Kamasutra*.

**87** Janet Gyatso, “Sex,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 280.

the phallus – a life devoted to dominance and conquest in the service of phallic pleasure.”<sup>88</sup>

It is a basic principle of *vinaya* hermeneutics that monastic proscriptions exist because situations were happening. In other words, Buddhist monastic women were living together intimately, mingled in body and speech. What the *vinaya* heavily regulates is two nuns living mingled in body and speech *while concealing clearly proscribed faults*, not all forms of female-female intimacy per se. Notably, in the *Mahāsāṅghika-lokottara Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*, we find a more general statement ruling against two nuns living together intimately and taking sexual pleasure from one another only as a footnote to a *pācattika* rule. Penetrative sex between two women using a device or nonphallic body part, while usual in same-sex sexuality and arguably meeting the *pārājika* definition of sex as insertive, is not even mentioned in that context. It is evident that, while female Buddhist monastics are not supposed to be giving each other (or themselves) sexual pleasure, the classical Buddhist legal tradition does not police such behaviors with the utmost rigor. What is of great legal concern, however, is nuns’ romantic and sexual behaviors with men, especially monks, and their collusion with one another to “conceal faults.”<sup>89</sup>

In fact, the central problematic of South Asian Buddhism and other South Asian celibate traditions may not be guarding against desire for emotional and physical intimacy and the pleasure that accompanies it, at least not in the simplistic way we have tended to understand it.<sup>90</sup> Building on (but departing somewhat from) Gyatso’s insights, I would argue that classical Buddhist critiques of sexuality take special aim at certain and specific configurations of reproductively obsessed heteronormative sexuality, something also severely critiqued in the *Garbhāvakraṅti-sūtra*.<sup>91</sup> Cabezón makes a related point when he notes the

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**88** Cabezón, *Sexuality*, 331.

**89** Focusing mainly on the *Pāli-vinaya*, Cabezón makes several of the same observations (Cabezón, *Sexuality*, 326–333).

**90** While she is making a point about the importance of consent or giving into sex in determining culpability, not the point I am making about celibacy creating a space for higher-order desires, Gyatso similarly notes the fact that, in the *vinaya*, “a desire for sex is not really the problem. The problem is rather the moment of letting or making sex happen” (Gyatso, “Sex,” 285).

**91** These comments are inspired in part by the work of Madhavi Menon, a queer theorist and literature scholar. In her work of popular scholarship, *A History of Desire in India*, Menon writes, “Less a giving up of desires than a different organization of one’s desire, celibacy suggests a way out of the ritualistic longing for and loathing of sex. Its alternative organization moves us away from a communal monitoring of desire to a more private enjoyment. Getting rid of the rituals for marriage and reproduction laid down by an oppressive community amounts to a radical call for freedom. Celibacy becomes desirable as a way of escaping religious control over one’s

gaps and fissures and loopholes in disciplinary regimes through which people inevitably slip, thereby “constructing alternative sexual lifestyles” that “are the byproducts of the gender-differentiated nature of desire and sexuality.”<sup>92</sup> I would argue more positively, however, that, especially for women, Buddhist ascetic discipline is *for the purpose of* generating a space of purified joy and love, not an emotionally flat space of no pleasure, no love. Read in this light, the *saṅghātīśeṣa* 17, with its language of mingling and intimacy, and its concern that women living closely together may be conspiring to conceal faults, is in part about negotiating the gray area between undharmic sexual activity and dharmically acceptable or even beneficial same-sex intimacy and love. The latter is a possibility that emerges within the burned-over, emptied-out spaces of anti-fecundist constructions of womanhood.

These Buddhist texts on affective connections between nuns suggest Buddhist celibacy to be a spiritual practice whose most distinctive marker is not emotional austerity and bodily isolation, as is sometimes assumed, but rather the refusal of the heterosexual and reproductive practices associated with marriage in patriarchal settings, and by extension any insertive sexual acts that involve the emission of semen. In this refusal is born a shadow space of female-female intimacy,<sup>93</sup> one that appears to have been regarded with suspicion by male monastic lawyers and probably female community leaders also as a potential opportunity for sexual misconduct and female collusion. The *vinaya* literature clearly recognizes female monastic communities to be social-moral-affective spaces in which, as in the king’s harem, expressions of same-sex sexuality may inevitably occur on occasion. These are to be pragmatically disciplined but without extreme rigor. This is in contrast to

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desires and asserting independence in the face of repression. Resisting the dominant call to marry and reproduce can be a liberating experience. By definition, then, celibacy is seen as the antisocial choice, the one that flies in the face of what the Brahmans have prescribed. Such an appreciation of celibacy suggests that desire cannot be understood narrowly only as sexual desire; desire is often at its most intense in its renunciation of sex.” See Madhavi Menon, *A History of Desire in India* (Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing, 2018), 124. John Powers notes the manner in which the classical tradition lauds Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana as a monastic couple whose relationship is faithful, long-lasting, and characterized by physical, emotional, and intellectual intimacy. Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, for instance, always shared a cell during the long weeks of the rainy-season retreat; see John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 152–160. John Garret Jones argues for what he describes as the homoerotic intimacy of Ānanda’s relationship with the Buddha throughout their previous lives together as depicted in the Jātaka collection (noted in Cabežon, *Sexuality*, 88–89).

92 Cabežon, *Sexuality*, 330.

93 As well as male-male intimacy. See Cabežon, *Sexuality*, 333, note 850.

penetrative forms of sex involving semen, which are regarded as much more serious offenses. Hence, an adjusted understanding of celibacy as mainly constructed contra-hetero-reproductive forms of sexual intimacy opens up a view of female monastic space as emotionally rich and in which what might be characterized as higher-order passions and purer forms of intimacy can be nurtured and coexist with or even be constitutive of Buddhist monastic life.

## 4 Conclusion: Love, Unknowing, and Female Filth

The *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* and related Buddhist texts about birth suffering rhetorically decimate the goods that were traditionally the purview of women in premodern South Asia: namely, sexualized beauty, cyclical purity, and the auspiciousness that comes with powers of fertility. They do this by transforming the young reproductive mother and her older female helpers (the midwives, aunts, and grandmothers) into heartless purveyors of torture, death, and filth. The victim in this story is the fetus, who is implicitly male and a future Buddhist ascetic. This dramatic Buddhist narrative of birth cedes no higher ground to women. Concealed in the desolate, sharply gendered moral-social landscape of birth suffering, however, is gender-radical potential for women brave enough to enter. Because their conventional value had been denied, I argue, monastic women were free to embrace and explore new notions of the good. They would have found most of these new goods within the formal teachings of the Buddha Dharma. Others, I argue, particularly those associated with their embodied communal lives as women, they would have discovered on their own within the alternative moral-social space of the nunnery. *Vinaya* literature, with its unusually pragmatic treatment of female blood and interestingly tolerant legislation of female-female affection, affords an intimate glimpse of what that new space of being and becoming might have felt like and been like for premodern monastic women living in community. Following the thread from the *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* to *prakīrṇaka* 15 and *saṅghātiśeṣa* 17 illuminates an alternative world of embodied female living in which menstrual blood is merely a practical problem, not a fragment of *śakti* or a cosmic disaster, and love is possible beyond the strictures of the reproductive, the heteronormative, and the patriarchal.

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Elizabeth A. Cecil

# A Natural Wonder: From Liṅga Mountain to Prosperous Lord at Vat Phu

## 1 Introduction

Sanskrit inscriptions are replete with poetic allusions to the monuments commissioned by rulers. While eulogizing King Karkkarāja's temple on Mt. Elāpura, for instance, the poet describes the astonishment of the gods, who are awestruck before the wondrous edifice. Such a temple, they conclude, must be *svayambhu*, a manifestation of the divine in the landscape, since no human-made construction could inspire such wonder.

*elāpurācalagatādbhutasanniveśaṃ /  
yad viṅśya viśmitavimānacarāmarendrāḥ /  
eta[t\*] svayambhu śivadhāma na kṛtrime śrīr  
dṛṣtedṛṣīti satataṃ bahu carcayanti // 12 //  
bhūyas tathāvidhakṛtau vyavasāyahāni[r]  
etan mayā katham aho kṛtam ity akasmāt /  
karttāpi yasya khalu vismayam āpa śilpī  
tannāmakīrttanam akāryyata yena rājñā // 13 //*

The marvelous excavation in the mountain of Elāpura was commissioned by the king as a monument to his famous name. When they saw it, while cruising by in their celestial chariots, the gods were amazed, saying again and again, “This abode of Śiva is a natural wonder; beauty like this is not seen in human constructions.” When the work was done, even the artist exclaimed in amazement, “Wow! How did I make this? I could not make such a thing again.”<sup>1</sup>

The genius of the epigraphic description is evident when read in view of the temple itself, a vertical excavation hewn from the living rock.

In another inscription engraved on a monolithic column in Pahari, the poet describes a cohort of deities who, when confronted with the monument, are at a loss to explain its striking perpendicularity. Like the gods at Elāpura, they wonder if the object could be an epiphany.

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1 Baroda Copper Plate Inscription of Rāṣṭrakūṭa Karkkarāja [II] (812 CE); edition by Salomon and translation by author. See Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and other Indo-Aryan Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 286.

*viṣṇoḥ kiṃ caraṇas trivikramakṛteḥ stambhākṛter vṛvā vapuḥ,  
sthāṇor bhūvivara[rā]t phaṇīndraripuṇā śeṣo thavā proddhṛtaḥ /  
itthaṃ bhūri vi[cāra]yadbhir amarair ālokya ni[ścī]yate,  
stambhaḥ śuddhaśilāmayāḥ parava(ba)la[kṣmā]pālākīrtipradaḥ // 27 //*

“Is this Viṣṇu’s foot making three strides, or the body of the ‘Immovable’ Śiva in the form of a pillar, or the serpent Śeṣa pulled out of a hole in the ground by the eagle Garuḍa, the enemy of the snakes?” Examining it thoroughly, the gods realize that it is, in fact, a column made of bright polished stone, conferring fame upon Parabala, the protector of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

Though artfully executed hyperbole, these verses preserve significant clues about the *desired* effect of monumental architecture in the Sanskrit imaginary. The monuments described are visually and physically arresting. Even the gods, no doubt accustomed to all sorts of celestial wonders, stop and do a doubletake. The source of this cognitive dissonance is the encounter with something seemingly divine in the mundane world of mortals. By virtue of their other-worldly artistry and scale, the monuments confer “fame”<sup>3</sup> upon their royal sponsors by disguising the work of the human agents who created them. Even the artist from Elāpura experiences his creation as a material “other.” As a result, the monuments are initially misapprehended as spontaneous manifestations of divine presence in the natural world. This strategy for cloaking human agency reflects an effort to “naturalize” power, that is, to make the institutions that manifest social dominance and reinforce hierarchical relationships – like royal temples, for example – extensions of a natural order that manifests the very *telos* of the land. Following this rhetoric, we can conclude that a ruler’s ability to transform physical geography (particularly in ways that appeared divine) served as a potent exercise of power. The creation of monuments was an act of political thaumaturgy.

These verses also play on a defining feature of “Hinduism”: a religious ecology expressed in the celebration of the natural world and the spiritual magnetism of prominent geographic features. More than just eye-catching landmarks, distinctive mountain peaks, natural springs, rivers, etc. are understood as manifestations of divine presence – called *svayambhu* (natural or self-existent) deities in

<sup>2</sup> Pahari Pillar Inscription of Yuvarājadeva II (861 CE), vs. 27; edition by Kielhorn and translation by author. See L. F. Kielhorn, *Epigraphia Indica* vol 9 (1907–1908): 248–56.

<sup>3</sup> The term *kīrti*, translated as “fame” in both examples above, is, more literally, a “good report.” In both passages, the monument is the material trigger for the verbal reports first uttered by the gods. The inscription eternalizes that “good report” in Sanskrit. Finally, as permanent interventions in the landscape, monuments are material triggers for continued verbal exclamations of wonder and admiration over time and, therefore, effect the “conferring of fame” (*kīrtipradaḥ*).

Sanskrit. The sites of these manifestations are often places of pilgrimage called *tīrthas*, terrestrial and cosmic “crossings” that confer a multitude of rewards to those people who visit them – ranging from material wealth and physical well-being to ultimate beatitude (*mokṣa*).<sup>4</sup> These natural wonders were considered more ritually efficacious than constructed shrines or images because they were spontaneous revelations, and not the work of human hands. The power inherent in *svayambhu* deities was recognized widely across early South and Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> In the context of premodern Cambodia, these natural wonders were often connected specifically with the God Śiva and his iconic emblem, the *liṅga*. Perhaps more than any other deity of the Indic pantheon, Śiva was adopted and adapted throughout the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods to serve as the patron and tutelary deity of aspirational rulers, and the *liṅgas* that these rulers installed were the ritual foci of polities and urban centers. The epigraphic and iconographic programs that developed within these monumental spaces aided in publicizing the intimate association between deity, landscape, temple, and ruler.

This study uses landscape as a primary source to show how a religious ecology, in which the physical geography was fully saturated with power and agency, became the basis for the development of a political ecology in which the landscape was similarly understood as a source of empowerment. My definition of “landscape” maps closely onto the Sanskrit word *kṣetra* (“field”). A *kṣetra* is not *only* a field for growing crops, but is also used to designate a theater of human and divine activity. Landscape, by this definition, is not simply physical terrain. It is physical terrain designed to serve human aims and ambitions. More specifically, I argue that built interventions designed to claim prominent landscape features served as effective agents of empire because they enabled control of natural places that were widely recognized as sources of divine presence, and they could be used as performative spaces in which that domination could be ritually re-enacted over time.

To explore these hypotheses in detail, the present article traces the development of a foundational political landscape within the nascent Khmer Empire located in what is today southwest Laos. Looking specifically at epigraphic and material evidence, I examine the political claims to and religious investments in a landmark mountain between the fifth century, when the site was first identified

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<sup>4</sup> On the powers of *tīrthas* see Diana Eck, “India’s Tirthas: Crossings in Sacred Geography,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 323–344.

<sup>5</sup> On this see also Alexis Sanderson, “Śaiva Religion Among the Khmers (Part 1),” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 90–91 (2003): 349–462 [410–412].

as a *svayambhu* manifestation of Śiva, through the eleventh century CE, when development culminated in an immense Angkorian-period temple complex known today as Vat Phu.<sup>6</sup> Exploring what these sources tell us about the divinization of this particular mountain, the cultural agents engaged in the transformation of this landscape feature, and the assumptions about the power of place that informed their practices, has the potential to enrich our conceptions of the historical formation of political geographies in premodern Southeast Asia and beyond.

## 2 Old Gods, New Landscapes

From as early as the fifth century CE, regional mountain landmarks were reimagined as manifestations of Śaiva divinity and invoked as sources of divine empowerment for emerging rulers and polities. Yet while these manifestations of Śiva were embedded in local contexts,<sup>7</sup> a significant number were given names that echoed those of celebrated *liṅgas* from Indic mythology and epic political landscapes. The redeployment of these names, and the powerful deities that they invoke, in the context of premodern Cambodia (i.e. the land of the Khmer, *Kambujadeśa*) has been described by Alexis Sanderson as a “Śaivization of the Land.” A practice designed, in his words, to “transfigure the Khmer realm by creating a Śaiva landscape whose sacred enclaves could be seen as doubles of those of the religion’s Indian homeland.”<sup>8</sup>

While it is clear that the memory of powerful manifestations of Śiva from South Asia informed naming practices and provided an influential conceptual map of sacred geography in many cases,<sup>9</sup> the language of “doubling” implies a form of mimicry whereby the Khmer religiopolitical landscape was designed to

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6 This temple complex was one of a number of significant architectural projects, settlements, and hydrological systems undertaken in the greater region. See Michel Lorrillard, “Par-delà Vat Phu. Données nouvelles sur l’expansion des espaces khmers au môn anciens au Laos,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 97–98, (2010–2011): 205–270; “Settlement and Spatial Planning around Wat Phu,” unpublished paper and slides presented at the 15th EurASEEA conference (accessed via academia.edu on April 1, 2019).

7 The many *liṅgas* established within the temples complexes of these polities represented specific, localized instantiations of the ultimate and transcendent deity. Often, they were linked to local rulers as patron deities through the practice of naming *liṅgas* after the donative agent followed by the suffix *-īśvara*. This practice was also common in early South Asia.

8 Sanderson, “Śaiva Religion Among the Khmers,” 403.

9 For specific examples and lists, see Sanderson, “Śaiva Religion,” 403–409; Peter C. Bisschop, *Early Śaivism and the Skandapurāṇa: Sects and Centers* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2006), 34–37.

imitate an Indic exemplar. This model offers too straightforward and narrow a description of what was a more complex set of cultural and political processes. Reconsidering the epigraphic sources in the context of the monumental spaces and landscapes in which they functioned indicates that these interventions were part of a larger repertoire of spatial and material practices designed to transform regional geographies into urbanized political landscapes and, in doing so, introduce and enforce an increasingly differentiated and stratified model of social relations. The introduction of Sanskrit toponyms and deities, particularly those linked with a Śaiva religious geography, were tools that supported a new social order in which power was concentrated in the figure of the ruler and his affiliates and enacted in imposing monumental complexes situated around important regional landmarks.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of Sanskrit names and Śaiva titles for local places was not only intended to create an affinity with South Asian sacred geography; India's *tīrthas* would have been virtually unknown and their titles utterly foreign to all except an initiated few.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely the point. Śaivism aided in the intentional "othering" of local landscapes for the vast majority and, by doing so, supported the introduction of

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**10** Paul Wheatley describes this mode of sociopolitical change as "urban generation," a process occasioned in large part by pressures internal to a given society. This remains a useful model, although he relies upon the problematic language of "Indianization" to describe changes in early Cambodia through which indigenous social structures and political units were shaped or replaced by Indic ones. See Paul Wheatley, "Urban Genesis in Mainland Southeast Asia," in *Early Southeast Asia: Essays in Archaeology, History, and Historical Geography*, eds. R.B. Smith and W. Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 288–303. Recent studies have complicated this model to better understand the forms of urbanism that existed in both pre-Angkorian and premodern Southeast Asia. Miriam Stark emphasizes the material aspects of these early cities and the spaces for the performance of power that were integral to their design; see Miriam Stark, "Southeast Asian Urbanism: from early City to Classical State," in *The Cambridge World History*, vol 3, *Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE–1200 CE*, ed. Norman Yoffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 74–93. On the development of early cities across Southeast Asia, see John N. Miksic, "Heterogenetic Cities in Premodern Southeast Asia," *World Archaeology* 32, no. 1 (2000): 106–120.

**11** Considering that these toponyms would have been almost entirely unfamiliar or "foreign" in a Southeast Asian context makes the reuse of such names quite different from the phenomena of remapping or reproducing sacred spaces in South Asia. The former is intentionally and strategically alienating, while the latter is designed to promote participation and affinity by encouraging geographic cohesiveness. On practices of reproducing or transposing sacred geographies in South Asia, see Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 283 and Benjamin J. Fleming, "Mapping Sacred Geography in Medieval India: The Case of the Twelve *Jyotirlingas*," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009): 51–81.

new power structures that presided over these ideationally transformed lands.<sup>12</sup> This is not to imply that the sociopolitical model was necessarily an Indic one; rather, that particular linguistic and cultural forms adapted from Indic contexts and agents provided a means for rulers to control local geographies.<sup>13</sup> The practices of localization intrinsic to Śaivism<sup>14</sup> provided a template that allowed ruling elites to claim and control places that were already regarded as powerful, some of them are described enigmatically as the “old gods” in epigraphic sources. Mountains were particular foci of royal interventions, as will be shown below. Importing sacred toponyms and geographies from the Indic world was a tactic that allowed aspiring rulers to claim places of power in the regional landscape and use the “old gods” as bases for the establishment of new political regimes.<sup>15</sup>

The mountain that came to orient the Khmer polity is located in what is today the Champassak district of southwest Laos, a collection of small villages on the bank of the Mekong River over which the distinctive peak of a mountain known locally as Phu Kao presides (Figure 1). The mountain is part of the Dangrek Range, connected with the larger Khorat Plateau, which was an important meeting place

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**12** It is also important to note that linguistic developments in nomenclature for deities recorded in the Khmer sections of epigraphic texts, particularly from the pre-Angkorian period, also document processes of social change and stratification. See Michael Vickery, *Society, Economics and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, The Toyo Bunko, 1998), 140–151.

**13** Important work has been done to show how the introduction of Indic cultural models in Southeast Asia was ideologically and aesthetically driven and catalyzed by Sanskrit registers of artistic and political production – modes of cultural production that created what Sheldon Pollock has termed the “Sanskrit cosmopolis.” Yet this rarified world of Sanskrit discourse remains untethered from physical geography and alienated from the very people, places, and polities that it supposedly linked. Also missing from this picture are the infrastructures of social, economic, and gender domination that supported the implementation of elite ambitions on the ground. See Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

**14** On the emplaced nature of early Śaivism in South Asia, see Elizabeth A. Cecil, *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Place, and the Śaiva Imaginary in Early Medieval North India* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

**15** Julie Estève has drawn attention to this pattern of reinscribing indigenous landscapes through the establishment of Indic deities and the importance of spatial analysis as a tool for charting the development of religious geography in early Cambodia. See Julia Estève, “Mapping the Sacred: Towards a Religious Geography of Ancient Cambodia Through a Toponymic Atlas of Cambodian Inscriptions,” in *Writing for Eternity: A Survey of Epigraphy in Southeast Asia*, ed. Daniel Perret (Paris: EFEO, 2018), 87–108.





**Figure 1:** Mt. Phu Kao/ Liṅgaparvata (author photo).

for overland trade and travel in mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>16</sup> The significance of this area began in the fifth century and continued in the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods when sacred sites and settlements developed along the Mekong River and its many tributaries. The presence of these remains points further to routes that would have linked the Phu Kao mountain region with other sites of transregional significance, specifically Preah Vihear and Sambhor Prei Kuk.<sup>17</sup> The regional importance of the mountain derives from its two remarkable features: the peak is crowned by a natural stone monolith approximately 60 feet tall, which serves as a landmark for both overland and riverine travel; the second feature is a natural spring that flows from the mountain top and emerges as a small stream from the rocks at its base.

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Lorrillard, “Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley,” in *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, eds. Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (Bangkok: River Books, 2014), 186–215.

<sup>17</sup> Lorrillard, “Pre-Angkorian Communities,” 194–195.

### 3 Naming the Mountain God

The political manipulation of this mountain, the spring, and the land surrounding it began in the fifth century, when a Sanskrit inscription reimagined it as a *svayambhu* deity presiding over a new sacred landscape called Kurukṣetra – a reference to the famous Indian *tīrtha* and site of the *Mahābhārata* epic’s final battle. This inscription also initiates the transformation of the mountain into the Hindu God Śiva. First, through the introduction of the title “Liṅgaparvata” (Liṅga Mountain), a name that homologizes the mountain’s crowning stone monolith – its “characteristic mark,” which is the meaning of the term *liṅga* – with the *liṅga* of Śiva, which is often represented as a phallic emblem. This Śaiva connection is developed further in subsequent inscriptions that identify the deity enshrined on the mountain as Bhadrēśvara, the “Prosperous Lord,” the five-headed, ten-armed anthropomorphic Śiva whose image, still standing at the base of the mountain, is emblematic of Śaiva Siddhānta, a trans-regional Hindu religious institution. Manifested as the Prosperous Lord, the divine mountain became the tutelary deity of the region’s rulers and, eventually, the patron deity of the emergent Khmer empire. The expansive eleventh century terraced temple complex, originally dedicated to Bhadrēśvara, still stands at the foot of the mountain, where it is currently dedicated to the Buddha. Today called simply Vat Phu (Temple Mountain), this was the geographic heart and sanctified center from which the Khmer political landscape extended south to, what is today, Cambodia.<sup>18</sup>

#### 3.1 Ritual and Renewal

The inception of the political landscape that developed around the mountain is marked by a monumental late-fifth century inscription (K. 365)<sup>19</sup> found at an ancient settlement site called Vat Luong Kao. The site occupied an area of

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Lorrillard, “Du centre à la marge: Vat Phu dans les études sur l’espace khmer ancien,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 97–98 (2010–2011): 187–204. A number of later K-numbered inscriptions refer back to this heartland in ways that connect the religious and political authority of the Angkorian rulers to their engagement with the sacred mountain and its monumental temple complex. And, as Lorrillard mentions, the road leading from Vat Phu to Angkor was punctuated with monuments, water tanks, and inscriptions that served as an institutional link that materialized this cultural memory and connected the later rulers to the mountain.

<sup>19</sup> George Cœdès, “Nouvelles données sur les origines du royaume khmèr: la stèle de Vat Luong Kâu près de Vât P’hu,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 48, no. 1 (1956): 209–220.



**Figure 2:** Satellite map showing ancient settlement site (Vat Luong Kao) and temple complex at the base of Liṅgaparvata (Google Earth).

approximately one square mile on the western bank of the Mekong River (Figure 2). Excavations undertaken in the 1990's by the French Archeological Mission to Laos reported ramparts enclosing numerous foundations of ancient structures, water tanks, levees, and other material remains including a remarkable pre-Angkorian temple lintel, which is now preserved in the Vat Phu site storage.<sup>20</sup> The inscription was discovered near the confluence of the Mekong and a smaller tributary, the Houay Sa Houa, flowing inland along the northern boundary of the settlement. The text, in Sanskrit language and Brahmi script, is carved on the four faces of a massive (approx. 6 ft.) stone stele that resembles a boundary marker used to demarcate sanctified areas (Figure 3). This inscription introduces the mountain as Liṅgaparvata, a reference to its crowning monolith, and a play on the phallic verticality of that feature. The inscription is remarkable in a number of respects including its early date, knowledge of theological concepts

<sup>20</sup> Marille Santoni, Christine Hawixbrock, Viengko Souksavatdy, “La Mission archéologique française et le Vat Phu: recherches sur un site exceptionnel du Laos,” in Y. Goudineau et M. Lorrillard (ed.), *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos* (Vientiane/Paris: EFEO, coll. “Études thématiques” 18, 2008), 81–111; Marielle Santoni, Christine Hawixbrock, “Laos. Fouilles et prospections dans la région de Vat Phu (province de Champassak, sud du Laos),” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 85, no. 1 (1998): 387–405.



**Figure 3:** Inscribed stone stele (K. 365), c. fifth century CE, Vat Phu Site Museum (author photo).

current within Brahmanical Hinduism, and familiarity with canonical Sanskrit texts, like the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this study, I emphasize the significance of the inscription for the history of the regional landscape. The Sanskrit title initiates a larger process of transformation that situated this regional landmark within a “Hindu” landscape by claiming it as a natural (*svayambhu*) manifestation of Śiva.

The agent behind this inscription is Devānīka – described as “the great king of kings, the illustrious Śrī Devānīka” in the epigraph. In constructing the persona of this king, Devānīka’s (presumably Brahmin) poet portrays him as anointed by the gods themselves (Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Brahmā) and models him on

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<sup>21</sup> The connections between this inscription and the *Mahābhārata* have been studied by Claude Jacques, “Notes sur l’Inscription de la Stèle de Vat Luong Kau,” *Journal Asiatique* 250, no. 2 (1962): 249–256.

the heroes of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Yet this movement toward a construction of an idealized and universal sovereignty is grounded within a particular geographic context. We are told that King Devānika came from a distant country (*dūradeśāt*) and obtained royal power by the grace of the venerable Śrī Liṅgaparvata.

(12) . . . *pūrvamatena bhagavatā śrīliṅgaparvvatenāsmīn dūradeśād ā(13)nitādhiṣṭhito mahādhīrājayaiśvārye viśiṣṭavispaṣṭāṣṭārddhākṣara(14)maṅgalanāmadheyo dviṣadanekānikāvāptavijayo vijaya iva (15) mahārājādhīrājaś śrīmāñ chrīdevānikaḥ*

. . . The great king of kings, the illustrious Śrī Devānika – whose name, clear and distinguished, is comprised of an auspicious set of four syllables; (who) like Arjuna is victorious over numerous enemy armies – brought from a distant land, he was established in this position of supreme Lordship by the “Old God,” the venerable Śrī Liṅgaparvata . . .<sup>22</sup>

Previous studies have taken this reference to a distant land literally and attempted to determine King Devānika’s ancestry and place of origin; Coedès links him with the kingdom of Champa, while Jacques suggests the early settlement at Si Thep in Thailand.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that we interpret the reference to the “faraway land” as a rhetorical device that styled Devānika as the figure of the “stranger king” explored by Graeber and Sahlins in their recent study on the institution of kingship.<sup>24</sup> In this interpretation, the distance is not alienating; rather, it gestures to a kind of universality that provides a needed distinction between the ruler claiming power and the people and region he claims to rule.<sup>25</sup> Devānika’s superior “otherness” is indicated in other ways as well, by his affinity to the gods and

<sup>22</sup> This and subsequent passages from K. 365 are reproduced from the edition of Coedès. The translations are my own.

<sup>23</sup> George Coedès, “La stèle de Vāt Luong Kâu,” 212–213; Claude Jacques and Philippe Lafond, *The Khmer Empire: Cities and Sanctuaries Fifth to Thirteenth Centuries* (Bangkok: River Books, 2007), 68–69.

<sup>24</sup> We could compare this with the tradition of Indic kings being descended from the sun, moon, or from epic heroes in a way that is similarly distancing.

<sup>25</sup> As they explain, “Native rulers assume the identity and sovereignty of exalted kings from elsewhere and thus become foreigners – as in the Indic kingdoms of Southeast Asia – rather than foreigners becoming native rulers. The polity is in any case dual: divided between rulers who are foreign by nature – perpetually so, as a necessary condition of their authority – and the underlying autochthonous people, who are the ‘owners’ of the country. The dual constitution is constantly reproduced in narrative and ritual, even as it is continuously enacted in the differential functions, talents, and powers of the ruling aristocracy and the native people [ . . . ] The hero manifests a nature above, beyond, and greater than the people he is destined to rule – hence his power to do so.” See David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

heroes of Indic literature and theology,<sup>26</sup> and by his deeds that distinguish him as “superhuman” (*atimānuṣakarmman*).<sup>27</sup>

Devānika’s spatial distance (expressed by *dūra*) from the area he claimed to rule is countered in the inscription by an affiliation with the mountain, the area’s venerable geographic feature, which is described as *pūrvamata* (ancient).<sup>28</sup> The term (or variants of) *pūrvamata* has been noted by Michael Vickery in his study of Khmer inscriptions as a way to refer to localized deities that are integrated within the Hindu pantheon (typically as forms of Viṣṇu or Śiva).<sup>29</sup> Analyzing patterns of nomenclature in both Sanskrit and Khmer, Vickery argues that the introduction of Indic deities did not constitute a “new religion” *per se*, but reflected the politically motivated adoption of Sanskrit terms to

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26 (5) *ity evāyam śrīśaṅkarānārāyaṇapitāmahādisarvadeva*(6)*prasādābhiṣiktahpūrvvenārjitaśubhakuśalanimittasamḥā* (7) *vitasarvvakarmmatimānuṣakarmmā yudhiṣṭhira iva saddharmmasthitau* (8) *[vivu]dhanarapatir iva prajāpālāne dhanañjaya iva ripugaṇa* (9) *vijaye indradyumna iva bhūriyajñavidhāne śibi iva dāne mahā*(10)*dāne bhagavanmahāpuruṣabrahmaṇyatānucārīva brāhmanyabhāve* (11) *kanakapāṇḍya iva nyāyarakṣaṇe mahodadhīr iva gāmbhūrye meru iva* (12) *sthairyē*

“ . . . Anointed by the grace of all the gods, beginning with Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Brahmā. Whose deeds are superhuman since all his actions are resplendent, as a result of the good and auspicious state of his previous birth. Dedicated to the norms of the good like Yudhiṣṭhira; like the Lord of the Gods in protecting the people; like Dhanamjaya (Arjuna) in defeating troops of enemies; like Indradyumna in the performance of extensive sacrifices; like Śibi in the donation of great gifts; in his disposition to the rank of Brahmin(s), he is like a follower of the piety of the blessed *mahāpuruṣa* (Viṣṇu); who protects according to rule like Kanakapāṇḍya[?]; (he who is) deep like the ocean (and) like Mt. Meru in stability.”

27 Wolters also observed that these descriptions of Devānika style him as an ideal warrior and king in the “Hindu” tradition, or what he terms a “Hindu” man of prowess. It is also important to note, however, that this self-fashioning is enacted in the highly rhetorical context of a public Sanskrit inscription and we should not assume, as Wolters does, that these are necessarily expressions of personal devotion or piety. See O.W. Wolters, “A ‘Hindu’ Man of Prowess,” in *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), 226–228.

28 The language of distancing and superseding (*ati/pūrva*) is also evident in the line that praises the king’s super-human qualities as a result of positive deeds in previous births (see above).

29 It is possible that the designation of *pūrvamata* could refer to a specific classification of local deities. Michael Vickery surveys a number of early K.-numbered inscriptions in which “old” deities are mentioned and associated with deities like Viṣṇu, Śiva or the Buddha. Although the precise terminology used differs, the idea of local deities being elevated or transformed through their integration into the Hindu tradition is not uncommon and merits further consideration in this case. See Vickery, *Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, 139–149.

characterize familiar tutelary deities and powerful spirits that defined the indigenous religious landscape.<sup>30</sup> So, while the new ruler pays deference to the old mountain deity, he does so with a new, Sanskrit appellation that works to transform the local landmark into the emblem of Śiva and, in doing so, the sanctified center of a new political territory. This change in name also serves to integrate the mountain into the sphere of Śaiva ritual and devotional practice. The object, understood as a manifestation of the Lord, was ritually lustrated and garlanded. In both text and image, great emphasis is placed on the efficacy of these rites, the necessity of their proper performance (typically by initiated religious specialists), and the manifold rewards that Śiva offered his devotees – from quotidian benefits like health, well-being, and fertility, to the fortune, power, and military prowess desired by rulers.

In addition to expressing Devānika's ties to the regional landscape, the inscription makes a second, significant geographic claim. The area in which Devānika is making his political investment is designated the “new Kurukṣetra” referring to the sanctified landscape *par excellence* in the canon of Brahmanical Hinduism. The establishment of this locale is described as a ritual event undertaken for the welfare and well-being of the nascent polity (the term used for this is *kuśalavidhi*). The history and nature of this rite are obscure since we lack other

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30 Looking specifically at changes in the use of terms like *vraḥ kamratān aṅ ta acas* and *vraḥ kanmiṅ kuruṅ aṅ* (and related variants) to describe “old” and “young” deities, respectively, through the adaption of the honorific title *vraḥ kamratān aṅ* used to refer to Indic deities, Vickery presents evidence that these titles were used to refer to local deities often associated with particular places or natural features of the landscape, while also being named in inscriptions as the principal deities honored by religious foundations. Some of these deities likely correspond with *neak tā/ nak tā*, guardian spirits that are still worshipped in contemporary Southeast Asia. Sanskrit terms were introduced to echo these Khmer terms. Vickery mentions *bhagavān pūrvaḥ* and *vṛddheśvara* as ways of expressing the indigenous concept of the “old god” in Sanskrit language. Claude Jacques has discussed the honorific title *kamrateṅ jagat* and argued that this is not an adaptation of an Indic concept, but a term used to refer to local protective deities or lineage deities with an affinity to *nak tā*. See Vickery, *Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, 139–149; Claude Jacques, “The *Kamrateṅ Jagat* in Ancient Cambodia,” in *Indus Valley to Mekong Delta: Explorations in Epigraphy*, ed. Noboru Karashima (Madras: New Era Publications, 1985), 269–286. The links between indigenous religious geographies and Indic sacred landscapes are discussed by Paul Mus in the context of Champa, where he also emphasizes the divinization of landscape features in ways that parallel the Khmer examples; see Paul Mus, “Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 33 (1933): 367–410. This topic is also addressed briefly by Stephen A. Murphy and H. Leedom Lefferts, “Adoption of Buddhism and Brahmanism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*, ed. Tamar Hodos (London: Routledge, 2017), 768–789, 783. On *neak tā*, see Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les neak ta* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992).

references or descriptions other than this unique case. From the descriptions offered in the inscription, the central act is that of a solemn pronouncement made by Devānīka to sanctify a particular region in his realm. Significantly, the language used to describe this place is not that of a political center, but a place of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*). More specifically, we are told that he fashions a “new Kurukṣetra” along the bank of the Mekong and invokes one of the holiest sites in Indic cultural geography, one celebrated in the *Mahābhārata* epic, to colonize a new space. We are first told in general terms what the ruler has done.

*saṃvarddhanam mahāpāpapāvanam mahātīrtham. ñ cakāra (9)*

He established [this] great *tīrtha* which effects prosperity and the purification of serious wrongdoings.

In Sanskrit, a *tīrtha* marks a point of crossing both terrestrial and cosmic. Typically oriented around remarkable features – a river confluence, mountain, etc. – *tīrthas* are destinations for pilgrimage that confer salvific rewards on human visitors. The findspot of the inscription at the confluence of two rivers conforms to the geographic parameters of a *tīrtha*, and adds further support to the king’s claims to rule by divine favor. Devānīka, and/or his Brahmin agents, are well-aware of the importance of Kurukṣetra as a *tīrtha* and quote a number of verses from the *Mahābhārata* to praise it. They may have also been aware of the connection between this *tīrtha* and the office of kingship. In the epic, the archetypal ruler Kuru performed austerities at Kurukṣetra and these acts catalyzed the salvific potential of the land.<sup>31</sup>

The act of sanctifying a new space is integral to the *kuśalavidhi* that the inscription commemorates and is expressed as the foundational pious pronouncement (*ādipranidhiḥ*) of the king.

*yan mayopārjītapuṇyaṃ ya[[c ca]]<sup>32</sup> deve[śo]tthitaṃ /  
tad evāst[u] \_ \_ \_ \_ tīrthani \_ U \_ phalam // 4 //*

Let that merit, which has been acquired by me and which derives from the Lord of Gods . . . be the fruit . . . of the *tīrtha*!

*ye vasanti mahātīrthe tatra ca ye mṛtā narāḥ /  
snavanaṃ ye ca kurvanti tatphalam prāpnuvantu te // 5 //*

Let those who dwell at the great *tīrtha*, those who die there, and those who bathe [there], obtain this fruit!

<sup>31</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.89.43.

<sup>32</sup> The conjectures of Coëdès are marked in the text with single square brackets. My additional conjectures, based on contextual readings, are marked with double square brackets.



*yat tat puṇyopamaṃ phalaṃ prabhāsādiṇīpurākṛteḥ /*  
*-- nāma tad evātra bhavatu dhṛtam adya me // 6 //*

Let this fruit, which is equal to merit of those deeds undertaken earlier at Prabhāsa and other (*tīrthas*), certainly come to be held by me here today!

*ye devā yajñabhāgārthā[m ā]gatā rohitā divi /*  
*brahmopendreśvarādyaś te tan nāma pradīśantu vai // 7 //*

Let the Gods who have come for the sake of a share in the sacrifice [and who] ascend to heaven, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the others, apportion that [fruit], indeed!

*[itye]vam ādīpraṇidhī rājñāc cintayas tadā /*  
*nāmagataṃ kurukṣetra[[m] pratiṣṭhā]]pya phalais samam // 8 //*

This is the foundational pious pronouncement of the king, thinking thus at that time when he had established [the *tīrtha*] named Kurukṣetra, equal in merit:

*yat pūrvābhīhitaṃ svargyaṃ phalaṃ devaśikīrtitaṃ /*  
*[kurukṣe]tre tad evāstu kurukṣetre navotthite // 9 //*

Let that fruit earlier declared as leading to heaven and praised by the divine sages at Kurukṣetra be at the newly arisen Kurukṣetra!

*ṛṣiṇā kuruṇā pūrvvaṃ [[dharma]]kṣetrīkṛtaṃ satām /*  
*tasmād iti kurukṣetraṃ khyātaṃ tīrthaṃ mahāphalam // 10 //*

Earlier, by the sage Kuru, it was made into the Field of Dharma of the Good. Therefore, it is called Kurukṣetra, the greatly rewarding *tīrtha*.

*kurukṣetraṃ gamiṣyāmi kurukṣetre vasāmy aham /*  
*ye vasanti kurukṣetre te vasanti triviṣṭape // 11 //*

I will go to Kurukṣetra; I will remain in Kurukṣetra.

Those people who dwell in Kurukṣetra dwell in the highest of the three heavens.<sup>33</sup>

This inscription is extremely rich in important details about the mapping of political and religious landscapes and my presentation is far from exhaustive. For the purpose of this study, there are two central points to make. The first concerns the demarcation of a new political geography through the imposition of Indic topographic markers. Here we see the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” at work in specifically grounded and locally inflected ways. The venerable old god of the mountain is transformed into an emblem of Śiva through a public act of (re)nam- ing that alters its official identity. The emblem of the new polity is accompanied

<sup>33</sup> *Mahābhārata* 3.81.175cd-176ab, but with the order of the two lines reversed.

by the (re)establishment of another venerable old landmark, the *mahātīrtha* hailed as the “new Kurukṣetra.” While both instances involve the importation of Sanskrit titles and Indic models to transform local geographies, these transformations operate in distinct ways. The introduction of Liṅgaparvata introduces a new Sanskrit title (i.e. one that is not known from Indic sources) to claim an existent locale and venerable feature of the regional landscape. The imposition of Kurukṣetra as the name of Devānīka’s ritually established *tīrtha* actively creates a new sacred geography where one had not previously existed. Taken together, these two interventions in the local geography are intended to establish and promote the power of the ruler and support a model for a place-based kingship that participates in, yet transforms, Indic models in an effort to colonize new spaces.

While the text of the inscription proclaims the pious effort to transfer the sanctity of the South Asian epic Kurukṣetra to a local point of “crossing,” the stone object that bears this text communicates a different message. The shape of the stone echoes a traditional boundary marker, but on a much grander scale.<sup>34</sup> It is a monumental reflex of this familiar object. The imposition of this boundary initiates a process of transformation of a vernacular landscape into a bounded geography and, I argue, the center of a political landscape. Covered with a Sanskrit inscription on all four faces, the object is the material linchpin for the ideological claims it publicizes. It is the stake in the ground that anchors the canopy of a universal sacred and political geography in the here and now. At the same time, the object also recalls the shape of the *liṅga* and makes material reference to the mountain deity from which Devānīka derives his political authority. Although I would not argue that the object was intended as a *liṅga* – in the strict sense of a ritually installed object of worship – I do suggest that the monument was designed in such a way as to call forth both the boundary stone and the devotional icon in material form.<sup>35</sup>

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**34** This hypothesis may be supported further by evidence that suggests that the Vat Luong Kao stele was not an isolated object. Michel Lorrillard has reported that another monumental stele of nearly identical shape and proportions was excavated nearby. This inscription, cataloged as K477, is severely damaged and has not yet been studied. See Michel Lorrillard, “Research on the Inscriptions in Laos,” in *Writing for Eternity: A Survey of Epigraphy in Southeast Asia*, ed. Daniel Perret (Paris: EFEO, 2018), 87–108.

**35** The possibility that the inscription was designed with a *liṅga*-like shape was also observed by John Guy, although I think he goes too far in then designating the object as an “inscribed *liṅga*.” This judgement appears to be based on Coedès’s report that the object had a “tripartite structure” with a square base, octagonal section, and crowning round section. This structure

## 4 Linked Geographies: Liṅgaparvata and Liṅgapura

In the late-fifth century inscription of Devānika, we are introduced to two toponyms: the mountain Liṅgaparvata and the *tīrtha* of Kurukṣetra. Inscriptions from the seventh century add new layers to the epigraphic stratigraphy of the landscape through geographic references that attest both to the intensified use of Śaivism as a language of political power, as well as to the prestige accorded to Liṅgaparvata and its surroundings within a developing transregional religious and political geography. Inscriptions of this period also utilize a new toponym, Liṅgapura, in reference to a settlement or administrative zone that appears closely tied to Liṅgaparvata.<sup>36</sup> The following discussion focuses on two seventh-century examples.

### 4.1 The Śivapāda Mountain

One set of inscriptions is preserved at a site called Prasat Neak Buos, located along the Dangrek mountain range that flanks the modern Thai-Cambodia border. Although a considerable distance southwest (approx. 125 miles) of Liṅgaparvata, these locales were linked through systems of overland routes. It seems these routes also served as conduits for the spread of memories and practices that echo those of the Devānika inscription and suggest that the sanctified space at Liṅgaparvata served as a kind of exemplar. A pair of fragmentary inscriptions in Sanskrit verse and Old Khmer (K. 341), dated 589 and 622 Śaka/673 CE and 699 CE, respectively, are important in this regard since they suggest practices aimed

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would seem to suggest the form of a *liṅga*; however, the object on display in the Vat Phu site museum lacks the square base that Guy reports. To describe the inscribed object as *liṅga*-like is justified and was perhaps intended, but describing the object as an “inscribed *liṅga*” suggests a formal ritual function that cannot responsibly be inferred from the evidence. See John Guy, “Tamil Merchants and the Hindu-Buddhist Diaspora,” in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia. Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 243–262.

<sup>36</sup> As Santoni, Hawixbrock, and Souksavatdy comment, it is plausible that Liṅgapura was the name of the settlement where the Vat Luong Kao stele was found, although there is no clear epigraphic evidence to prove this association. See Santoni, Hawixbrock, and Souksavatdy, “La Mission archéologique française et le Vat Phu.”

at mapping a Śaiva religious geography on a local landscape in ways that recall key aspects of the Devānīka inscription.<sup>37</sup>

The opening *śloka*s refer to a mountain on which the Lord Śiva (as the “Immovable”) was manifest through a pair of footprints (*pada*). The mountain on which this occurred is known as Śivapāda.<sup>38</sup>

*yatra sthānumatā sthānan dṛśyamānaṃ padadvyaṃ  
sthi U U durggayātasya U U nāma prakāśyate // 1 //*

*tenāgraśivapādākhyo bhaviṣyan teṣu bhūdharaḥ  
upāśya U U U smaratām api pāvana(/m) // 2 //*

*yatraiva pivatān same divyasarga U\_dhruvam  
U U U U U U U U U U ti viśrutaḥ // 3 //*

Given the fragmentary nature of the text, I will summarize rather than attempt to translate the verses. The landscape feature in question is, again, a mountain and a

<sup>37</sup> George Cœdès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* vol. 6 (Hanoi: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, 1937–1966), 23–26. There has been some debate about the reading of the dates for the inscriptions on the northern and southern doorframes. I follow the dating provided by Cœdès.

<sup>38</sup> Much has been written on the veneration of footprints in the Indic and Khmer contexts. See, in particular Sachchidanand Sahai, *Shivapada in Khmer Art: Rediscovering Angkor in the Footprints of Shiva* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2011); John Guy, “Shiva’s Land: Brahmanical Sculpture in the Religious Landscape of Early Southeast Asia,” *Orientalism* 45, no. 3 (2014): 50–57. It is interesting to note that the praise of Śivapāda seems to be aware of and echo certain Indic examples. For example, in the early *Skandapurāna*, the authors celebrate a particular *āyatana* of Śiva located on a peak of Himavat called Mahālaya. It was on Mahālaya Mountain that Śiva placed his footprints and, by virtue of that act, the locale is considered to be a preeminent salvific space (*mahatkṣetra*). So great is the power of this place that even the intent to visit it is sufficient to release a person from prior sins. See Peter Bisschop, *Sects and Centers*, SP 167.28–36:

*saṃsiddhā munayaś caiva ye ca yogīśvarā bhuvī /  
samabhyarcya haraṃ bhaktyā tad avāptāḥ paraṃ padam // 29 //*  
*yatra sāksān mahādevo nyastavān padam ātmanaḥ /  
yaṃ praṇāmya narāḥ sarve mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ // 30 //*  
*dehabhedam samāsādya yatra tatra yathā tathā /  
na punar jāyate jantur yātaḥ siddhim anuttamām // 31 //*  
*tasya saṃkalpanād eva drakṣyāmīti mahālayam /  
karmabhir mucyate jantur mahāpātakasamjñitaiḥ // 34 //*

As reported by Alexander Cunningham, there is a site in Bihar called Rudramahālaya where a pair of Śiva’s footprints are worshipped. Rudramahālaya is also used as the name of a *lūga*, seemingly inspired by the Indic locale, in two pre-Angkorian inscriptions of the seventh century (K. 493 and K. 109), although neither of these inscriptions refer to the worship of footprints.

specific place where two footprints were manifested by the agency of Śiva (Sthāṇu). The author of the inscription is adept at homologizing this particular mountain to Lord Śiva through the use of the term *sthāṇumat* (*sthānumat*): this reference to an entity that effects “immovability” or “motionlessness” is well suited to describing the mountain (i.e. the *bhūdhara*; “supporter of the earth”) while also invoking a familiar epithet of Śiva. That the immovable Lord was manifest at this mountain suggests, as was observed at Liṅgaparvata, a *svayambhu* manifestation – that is, rather than a human agent, the deity is the agent behind this manifestation. Padas c and d of the first verse suggest that these footprints were difficult to access and, perhaps because of that, they were known by a particular name (U U *nāma prakāśyate*). The two syllables preceding the “*nāma*” are missing, but we could perhaps supply “*agra*” (foremost; prominent) which is used to characterize the mountain provided in the following verse. It is also interesting to note that Coedès suggests we understand the reference to *agraśivapāda* in the Sanskrit inscription as synonymous with the expression *śivapāda pūrva* that appears in later Khmer inscriptions, where it is used to designate the “eastern” Śivapāda.<sup>39</sup> This may be, but the use of *agra* (as foremost, first, or prominent) could also imply a temporal primacy, in the sense of something supremely ancient or old, that recalls the use of *pūrvamata* in the description of Liṅgaparvata in K. 365. Perhaps Śivapāda, too, was an old god of the indigenous landscape undergoing a renaissance as a *svayambhu* manifestation of Śiva and the center of an emergent political landscape.

In addition to proclaiming the mountain’s new name and Śaiva affiliation, the second verse tells us that for those who have performed worship, presumably of the mountain marked by the footprints, it is purifying even for those who merely call it to mind. This description recalls a similar description of the power of Śiva’s footprints in the early *Skandapurāṇa* (see note 38). Finally, the third verse suggests that, in addition to the venerable footprints, there was also a body of water, perhaps conceived of as a *tīrtha*, on the mountain.<sup>40</sup> The first half of the verse promises something fixed (*dhruvam*) in divine heaven for those who drink this water. If we supply “*padam*” (place; position) to qualify *dhruvam*

<sup>39</sup> Coedès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* 6, 25 fn. 2.

<sup>40</sup> In his discussion of *pada* worship in India, Hans Bakker mentions that these mountain-top shrines often had sacred lakes associated with them. These lakes are understood as hollows made by the footstep of the deity and that subsequently filled with water. While Bakker’s analysis focuses on Viṣṇupada sites, it is plausible that similar practices were observed in the worship of Śiva’s footprints. Hans Bakker, “The Footprints of the Lord,” in *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India, Studies in Honor of Charlotte Vaudeville*, eds. Diana L. Eck and François Mallinson (Groningen: Egbert Forsten/EFE0 Paris, 1991), 19–37.

we can understand that those people who drink the water there obtain a fixed place in divine heaven.<sup>41</sup>

The Khmer part of the inscription provides further details about the religious installations and practices at Śivapāda Mountain, including a reference to the king's order to a religious specialist that he should "offer worship (*pūjā*) to the deity as done at Liṅgapura and to install there a *liṅga* of gold."<sup>42</sup> Subsequent lines delineate a measure of land that extends east up to the boundary of Liṅgapura and repeat the injunction that *pūjā* at Mt. Śivapāda should be done as in Liṅgapura. Contemporaneous epigraphic references, along with those of later sources, indicate that Liṅgapura was a settlement area and administrative zone in the vicinity of Liṅgaparvata.<sup>43</sup> With the recommendation that worship at Śivapāda emulate that at Liṅgapura, K. 341 offers further evidence that Liṅgaparvata provided a model for sanctifying a political landscape.

## 4.2 Remembering Liṅgaparvata at Iśānapura

The second seventh-century inscription that is relevant to this discussion comes from the site of Sambhor Prei Kuk, the ancient pre-Angkorian capital of Iśānapura that was founded by Iśānavarman (c. 616–635) in the first half of the seventh century. The Śaiva affiliation of the polity is clear from its name (i.e. the reference to Iśāna as an epithet of Śiva) and other inscriptions found at the

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<sup>41</sup> Such a construction would certainly fit the context; the poet's play on the idea of stability and fixity, and the centrality of "*pada*" understood both as the mark of the presence of Śiva and the ability of that powerful presence to elevate devotees to a higher place (*pada*). This idea of obtaining a fixed or permanent place echoes verse 58 (in M.R. Kale's edition) of the *Meghadūta* which celebrates a Himalayan locale where the footprint of Śiva is worshipped. People who worship the footprints obtain a "*sthiraṅgaṇapada*" (the stable position of being a *gaṇa*).

<sup>42</sup> In Coedès's edition, Liṅgapurva and Liṅgapura are both attested. He understands *-pura* for both. The term *pūrvva*, however, is also used in descriptions of Śivapāda as explained above.

<sup>43</sup> The earliest reference to Liṅgapura as an area affiliated with Liṅgaparvata comes from an inscription (mid-to-late seventh century) carved on the side of a cliff along a waterfall called Phou Pae, located behind the Vat Phu temple complex. Inventoried as K. 1059, the inscription is currently blocked by fallen rock, but a pamphlet by David Bazin of the Vat Phu World Heritage Office records that it praises officials serving in the court of Bhavavarman II and Jayavarman I, particularly one who was the overseer (*svāmi*) of Liṅgapura. A number of later inscriptions mention Liṅgapura in the context of Liṅgaparvata. For example, the 12th century K. 1297 records a donation made to the "great Śambhu (Śiva) of Liṅgapura" (*liṅgapuramahāśambhu*) with a reference to the mountain's defining *liṅga*. See also Claude Jacques, "Two notes on Vat Phou," published online <http://www.vatphou-champassak.com/index.php/publications/scientific-publications#cjacques>. Accessed May, 2020.

surviving temples and gateways. One of the earliest of these, K. 440, has been dated to the period of Īśānavarman's reign and records the installation of a golden *liṅga* called Prahasiteśvara.<sup>44</sup> Referring to the patron deity of the king, the name of this *liṅga* also repeats that of another significant *liṅga* from the Indic world, installed at the capital of Pāṭaliputra.<sup>45</sup> Īśānavarman or his advisors must have had this potent example of the merging of political and religious power in mind when installing Śiva in their capital. The record of Prahasiteśvara's installation, along with images of other deities and forms of Śiva, was placed prominently in the eastern gateway of the enclosing wall of the temple complex designated the "S-group" by scholars. The western gateway contains another significant inscription, inventoried as K. 441,<sup>46</sup> but rather than praising religious foundations and deities enshrined within the city of Īśānapura, this epigraph refers to Liṅgaparvata and the sacred landscape surrounding it (Figure 4). The function of this inscription within the larger epigraphic and iconographic program of the site remains obscure—Coedès calls it 'enigmatic.' Composed in the



**Figure 4:** K. 441 in the western doorframe at Īśānapura (author photo).

<sup>44</sup> Coedès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* 4, 5–11.

<sup>45</sup> Bisschop, *Sects and Centers*, 36–37.

<sup>46</sup> Coedès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* 4, 14–17.

first person, a rarity in royal epigraphic writings, the speaker is matter-of-fact in proclaiming his intention to provide an oral cartography of a sacred landscape.

*liṅgādri[kūṭa]liṅgasya tathā liṅgapure gireḥ  
pramāṇam abhidhāsye 'ham ārohapariṇāhataḥ // 1 //*

I will explain the measure of the *liṅga* on the peak of Liṅga Mountain, likewise of the mountain at Liṅga City, in terms of circumference and height.

*sārdhāx pañcadaśavyāmā liṅgam ārohato mitam  
vyāmāx pañcāśad aṣṭau ca parito pariṇāhataḥ // 2 //*

In terms of height, the *liṅga* measures 15 *vyāmas*<sup>47</sup> together with a half (i.e. 7.5);  
In terms of circumference, it encompasses 50 and 8 *vyāmas*.

*ā liṅgamūlād ā bhūmer girir ārohato mitaḥ  
dve sahasre ca viṅśāni vyāmāḥ saptaśatāni ca // 3 //*

From the ground up to the base of the *liṅga*, the mountain measures  
2,000 + 700 + 20 *vyāmas* in height.

*ārohatax parimito giriśākhyapure giriḥ  
sahasram ekadhanaṃ ṣadvīṅśati saptaśatāni // 4 //*

The mountain at Giriśa City measures 1,000 + 700 + 26 + 1 in height.

*nirjharāx puṇyasalilā munivṛṇḍaniṣevitāḥ  
sadā tatrānukurvanti trayas tripathagāminīm // 5 //*

The three waterfalls there, with purifying waters that are attended by crowds of sages,  
constantly imitate the course of the three-streamed Gaṅgā.

*tadadriśṛṅgasānoś ca māne vistāramānataḥ  
saṃkhyam dvāvīṅśati vyāmās triṅśad āyamatax punaḥ // 6 //*

The summit of the peak of the mountain, in terms of its two dimensions,  
numbers 22 *vyāmas* in breadth and 30 *vyāmas* in length.

The tone of the communication is akin to the didactic registers of *śāstra* rather than the eulogistic tone of *prāśasti*. The speaker begins by stating the intention to declare the dimensions of the *liṅga* on the peak of *liṅgādri* – a clear synonym of the Liṅgaparvata introduced in K. 365 – and proceeds to enumerate these dimensions in detail. This mountain is further specified as being located at Liṅgapura, which again suggests a larger settlement or administrative zone oriented around the sacred mountain. Following Coedès and others, I understand

47 This measurement is explained in Coedès's edition of the inscription.



K. 441 as referring to the sanctified landscape around Vat Phu. In addition, another mountain, clearly associated with Śiva, is mentioned from the same region, Giriśa, that also appears to be the center of a settlement area or *pura*.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned above, the inscription does not explicitly state the reason or motivation for its pronouncement or the prominent display of the inscription within the Prahāsīteśvara temple complex. That said, I think some valuable information can be gleaned even obliquely. As in the case of K. 341 from Śivapāda, K. 441 invokes the venerable Liṅgaparvata in the context of establishing another, new site of Śaiva political religion. It aims to participate in the sanctity of this locale, which, although located at a considerable distance, clearly looms large in the religious and political memory of the agents behind the creation of Īśānapura. Who might have been the agent (or agents) behind this proclamation? The first-person voice and direct unadorned style of address does not suggest a royal persona, but perhaps an administrator or religious specialist closely associated with the court. The reportage style could also suggest a kind of pilgrim's inscription, whereby an official visitor to Liṅgaparvata reports the details of the sacred landscape that he has learned. The tone and presentation of the information, however, indicate that this was not a recreational visit. The speaker displays a mastery over the information – the measurements are not mere estimations but are presented with a mathematical precision. This display of comprehensive knowledge should be understood as an act of control or an exercise of power.

Bracketing off these essentially unresolvable questions, I hypothesize that the intent that motivated the creation and display of the inscription was participation. K. 441, like K. 341, records the acts of historical agents for whom the prestige and memory of Liṅgaparvata was a powerful force. K. 341 is perhaps more transparent in this by explicitly stating the desire of the ruler to emulate the acts of *pūjā* performed at Liṅgapura and to identify a prominent mountain as the site of another *svayambhu* manifestation of Śiva. Īśānapura is, by contrast, located in a riverine plain rather than a mountain locale, and the golden *liṅga* of Prahāsīteśvara is not homologized to any natural feature, but is named after the *liṅga* of the famed capital of Pāṭaliputra. Despite these significant differences, K. 441, displayed in the

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<sup>48</sup> The mention of Giriśa, as a mountain located near Liṅgaparvata, is also found in one of the 7th century inscriptions of the ruler Mahendrarman, K. 363, which records the installation of a *liṅga* on the mountain Giriśa. Here we can observe repeated the pattern of sanctifying mountains using Śaiva toponyms and the connection between these newly named mountains and political geography. See Auguste Barth, "Inscription sanscrite du Phou Lokhon (Laos)," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 3 (1903): 442–446. On the other Mahendrarman inscriptions in the region around Vat Phu see Lorrillard, "Inscriptions in Laos," 90.

central temple complex, indicates a clear desire to affiliate the site with a locale of significant prestige and, in doing so, position Īśānapura within a developing network of politically prominent Śaiva sites.

## 5 Sanctifying Liṅgaparvata: The Ascetic Ideal

The concluding verses of K. 441 add to the ideational construction of the sanctified landscape around Liṅgaparvata through the introduction of new associations. The waterfalls that flow at the mountain are described as purifying and likened to the three-streamed Gaṅgā, invoking the holy river *par excellence*.<sup>49</sup> New characters are also introduced in the form of the ascetics and religious specialists (*muni*) who perform worship of these holy waters.<sup>50</sup> While there are a number of waterfalls that flow around the mountain, this inscription may refer to a particular feature of the immediate landscape of Liṅgaparvata – namely, a natural spring still celebrated today for its healing prosperities. The development of the temple complex at the base of the mountain suggests that it was, in fact, oriented around this water feature and excavations at the site have revealed hydrological systems for the collection and adduction of spring water, as well as small shrines and brick foundations around its two outlets<sup>51</sup> (Figure 5). As reported by the French Archaeological Mission, the efforts to further sacralize the area around the spring began in in the pre-Angkorian period, when a brick platform and portico were constructed around the natural rock shelter that encloses the spring area.<sup>52</sup>

These built interventions designed to amplify the area around the spring are roughly contemporaneous with an inscribed stone stele from the second

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**49** The reference to the three streams recalls a foundational myth in the Śaiva tradition first recorded in *Mahābhārata* 3.107–108. As a reward for Bhagiratha’s penance, Śiva agrees to facilitate the Gaṅgā’s descent to earth in three streams.

**50** I understand verses 5 and 6 of K. 441 as referring back to the primary subject of the inscription, Liṅgādri, rather than as a description of Giriśa Mountain. In addition, the poet states the intention to explain three sets of measurements in relation to Liṅgādri; these are provided in verses 2, 3, and 6. This is a further indication that verse 6 should be read as a continuation of the subject introduced in verse 1.

**51** The spring continues to be a center of religious activity for local ritual specialists and healers as well as the Buddhist community, which now controls the site.

**52** The publications of the archaeological team mention finds of pre-Angkorian sculpture, ritual objects, and a range of pottery and ceramic material that suggests the active use of the spring area much before the development of the architectural temple in the tenth to eleventh century. For these details and illustrations see Santoni, Hawixbrock, and Souksavatdy, “La Mission archéologique française et le Vat Phu.”



**Figure 5:** Remains of stone temple and water basin at source of sacred spring, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

half of the seventh century and issued in the time of the ruler Jayavarman I (K. 367),<sup>53</sup> that was discovered buried under one of the terraces of the later temple complex (Figure 6). The purpose of the inscription was to ensure the sanctity of the area by aiding in its development as a space for ascetic practice. The opening lines of the five-verse record invoke Śiva as the deity who incinerated the god of Love, Kāma, when the latter dared to distract him from his asceticism by shooting him with the arrow of desire.<sup>54</sup>

*śakrādīr vviḷito mayā mama śarā moghaṃ gatā na kvacit  
so [']vaddhyaś ca madhus sakhā mama sadā vaśyañ ca nṛṇāṃ manaḥ [/\*]  
ity evaṃ viḡaṇayya mānasabhavo vyaddhuṃ gatas tatkṣaṇaṃ  
yadroṣekṣaṇajātabhasmanicayo rudreṇa jeḷiyatām [//1//]*

Let Rudra (Śiva) be perpetually victorious! Whose furious gaze made the mind-born god (i.e. Love) but a heap of ashes with just a glance when Love took aim to shoot him with the

<sup>53</sup> I use the edited text published by Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 280–283. The translations are my own.

<sup>54</sup> This scene is an innovation of Kalidāsa's fifth-century *Kumārasambhava*. This story and motif become part of the standard repertoire of Śaiva narrative icons in later Khmer art.



**Figure 6:** Inscribed stone stele of Jayavarman I (K. 367) (photo courtesy of Bertrand Porte, National Museum of Phnom Penh, Cambodia).

assumption, “I have conquered Indra and the other gods; my arrows never miss their target; my partner, Springtime, is invincible; and human hearts are eternally under my control.”

This sobering preamble sets the tone for the austerity measures that the inscription recommends. Following two verses in praise of Jayavarman, the second half of the record includes a series of interdiction aimed at circumscribing residential, agrarian, and recreational activities on Śrī Liṅgaparvata. The articulation of these rules in the highly aestheticized language of Sanskrit, in metrical verse, and in stone, indicates their perceived necessity and gravity. I interpret this inscription as evidence of a premodern process of gentrification that displaced undesirable people and practices to make way for a new and pious elite. These efforts to amplify the sanctity of the land also introduced new modes of demarcating space that were not present in the earlier inscription of Devānīka; these spatial categories include the Śaiva *āśrama* and the *bhūmaṇḍala*, about which I say more below.

In Verse 4, the inscription designates the venerable Liṅgaparvata as a place of non-violence where living creatures should not be harmed.

*tasya śrījayavarmabhūpater ājñāubhāvoda[yā]d  
 atra śrīmati liṅgaparvva[tava]re ye sthāyinaḥ prāṇi[naḥ] [/\*]  
 vaddhyantān na janena kenacid api prāptāparādhāḥ kadā devāya  
 pratipādītam yad iha taddhemādīkam siddhyatu [// 4 //\*]*

As a consequence of the firm command of the Lord of the Earth, the illustrious Jayavarman, those living beings who dwell on the most excellent and illustrious Liṅga Mountain should not be harmed by any person even if, at times, they misbehave. May the offerings of gold and other things presented to the God here be efficacious!

*devasyāsya yathābhilāśagamanā gacchantu naivāśra[me]  
 yānārohadhṛtātapatraracanābhuyutsiptasaccāmaraiḥ [/\*]  
 poṣyāḥ kukkurakukkuṭā na ca janair ddevasya bhūmaṇḍalesv  
 ity ājñāvanīpasya tasya bhavatu kṣmāyām alaṅghyā nṛṇām [// 5 //\*]  
 (Śārdūlavikrīḍita)*

In the sanctified area belonging to the God, people may not move about freely, they should not go around seated in palanquins, holding opened umbrellas, or while waving fancy yak-tail fans overhead. Within the territories belonging to the God, people should not keep dogs nor raise chickens. This command of the king is inviolable for the people of the earth!

In verse 5 the term *āśrama* is introduced to refer to a sanctified area specific to the deity of the mountain. An *āśrama* does not necessarily imply the presence of a structural temple, although it could, what it more clearly suggests is a sanctified space of devotional activity and ascetic practice. The second new term introduced in Verse 5 is *bhūmaṇḍala*. Again, the exact parameters of this designation are unclear, but I take it to refer more broadly to an area over which the deity had “juridical control,” which could also include temple agrarian lands and other spaces used for the support of the deity and the people associated with his worship. The *bhūmaṇḍala*, then, is a more expansive area that not only included, but also extended significantly beyond the sanctified area of the *āśrama*. The introduction of these terms assists in the demarcation of an ascetic landscape, yet it is important to note that the command of Jayavarman I designates this a political act as well. As Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif have shown, the *āśrama* becomes a powerful tool for rulers that aided in the mapping of political boundaries as well as the sanctification of spaces within a polity. The ruler Yaśodharman I, known for the establishment of *āśrama* throughout the Khmer realm, provided for two of these establishments in the vicinity of Liṅgaparvata.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Jayavarman’s civilizing

<sup>55</sup> Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, “Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d’empire et bornes sacrées Conformité et spécificité cités des stèles digraphiques khmères de la région de Vat Phu,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient*, 97–98 (2010–2011): 331–355. The authors present two inscriptions from the area: K. 1005 and K. 362. The former is an unedited fragment that

mission initiated a process of politically regulating the sanctified space that later rulers were compelled to expand.

Their precise parameters notwithstanding, the prohibitions put forth in verses 4 and 5 work to sanctify these spaces by cultivating a “reverential attitude.” The explicit articulation of these rules also suggests that such behaviors were not intuitive, that is, that the space of the deity was not widely understood in this way or as requiring such behaviors and practices. These rules were intended, I would argue, to limit access to and use of the mountain for residential or recreational purposes. Hunting, for example, is not permitted. Given the sanctity of the *āśrama*, the inscription declares that this is a place where people should proceed on foot (i.e. not mounted on vehicles). Displays of material wealth or emblems of social prestige are also prohibited (i.e. people should travel without parasols or other insignia of royalty and emblems of social prestige like chowries). I interpret the ban on keeping chickens or dogs as a move to maintain ritual purity by restricting residential and perhaps also agrarian usage. As the composers of the inscription clearly express, these measures were made to ensure the efficacy of devotional and donative practices at the site.

Much of this ceremonious language would have fallen on deaf ears, however, since Sanskrit poetry was inaccessible to the majority of the population. The ruler (or the religious specialists or ascetics who commissioned the inscription) certainly would have had to employ people to communicate and enforce these admonitions. This linguistic distance is another expression of social disparity that served to further amplify the distinction between the sanctified space and the quotidian landscape.

I think we may also read a visual gesture to the transformation of the mountain into a sanctified Śaiva space in the decorative accolade of the stele. The crowning point of the stone has been broken, but it would have had a pointed shape that recalled the peak of a mountain. This “mountain space” is filled with stylized swirls of lush foliage, at the center of which stands the trident – the weapon emblematic of Śiva – set upon a small pedestal. The curvilinear design of the trident’s three prongs blends easily into the foliage, which serves to naturalize

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mentions the deity Bhadreśvara, which becomes the official name of the Śiva enshrined at Vat Phu. The second was recovered from a temple complex on the opposite side of the Mekong known as Huei Tomo and refers to the deity Rudrāṇī. On this temple and its relationship with Liṅgaparvata, see Oscar Nalesini, “The Sanctuary of Huei Thamo, and the Historical Problems Raised by its Survey,” in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998: Proceedings of the 7th Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, W. Lobo & S. Reinemann, eds. (Hull, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies and Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2000), 123–138.

its presence by suggesting that the imposition of Śiva, though subtly menacing, is intrinsic to the mountain itself.

## 5.1 Ascetics and the Mountain Caves

This theme or ideal of renunciation was definitive of the architectural space that developed around Liṅgaparvata – images of long-haired, bearded ascetics, their knees bound in a meditational posture, appear throughout the temple complex and their figures adorn the bases of numerous columns, where they offer support to the crowning lintels that feature figures of royalty brandishing weapons: an architectural metaphor for the reciprocal socio-political relationship between ruler and religious specialist. Note the small *maṇḍapas* that frame the ascetics in the pillar images. Remains of collapsed stone cellas, perhaps intended as meditational cells or dwellings for religious specialists, are preserved in the forested area of the mountain behind the temple complex (Figures 7 and 8).

In addition to constructed cells, ascetics also developed the natural caves near the spring. Slightly later than the record of Jayavarman, cave inscriptions K. 723 and K. 724 attest to the development of the *āśrama* as the abode of ascetics (Figure 9). This example, edited and dated paleographically to the late eighth/early ninth century by Dominic Goodall, is engraved on the overhang of a natural cave on the northeast slope of the mountain (Figure 10).<sup>56</sup>

- (1) *samādhaye sarvvatapodhanāṅā(2)ṃ*  
*iyam guhā vaktraguheti nāmnā*  
 (3) *sā nirmmitā vaktraśivena śaktyā*  
 (4) *vibhāti bhadreśvaraśailapārśve //*  
 (5) *kaṃ to chdyās guhā kaṃ ti ruḥ pñān doṣa*

This cave, named “Vakra’s Cave,” which was prepared with great effort by Vaktraśiva as a sanctuary for all of the ascetics, shines forth from the side of the Bhadreśvara Mountain. [Old Khmer] Don’t obstruct the cave! Don’t damage the partition! (It would be) a fault.

<sup>56</sup> Dominic Goodall, “On K. 1049, A Tenth-Century Cave Inscription from Battambang, and the Sectarian Obedience of Śaiva Ascetics of Non-Royal Cave-Inscriptions in Cambodia,” *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* 13 (2015): 3–34. Goodall’s study presents a number of ascetic inscriptions and a revised edition of K. 723 and K. 724 (discussed on pp. 21–22), which I have reproduced in the quoted passage.



**Figure 7:** Brahmanical ascetic sculpted on pillar base, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

*kaṃ pi tve gāra le guhā*

[Old Khmer] *Don't use the cave as a dwelling!*

This cave inscription introduces an individual with a name ending in *-śiva*, a characteristic initiation name given to religious specialists of the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition.<sup>57</sup> Vaktraśiva invests in the preparation of a cave as a space available to all ascetics. Since the cave in which the inscription was engraved is a natural rather than a man-made excavation, Vaktraśiva's work of preparing it likely involved augmenting the natural feature, cleaning the surrounding area of overgrowth, building around the enclosure, and ensuring that those using it respected its transformed state as a sanctuary or place for meditation (*samādhi*). This was

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<sup>57</sup> Goodall discusses this initiation name and explains that the prefix, *Vaktra-*, would have been ritually chosen by the initiate's *guru*, and that the *-śiva* suffix was a common marker of Saiddhāntika affiliation. See Goodall, "On K. 1049," 21–22.





**Figure 8:** Collapsed stone cella, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

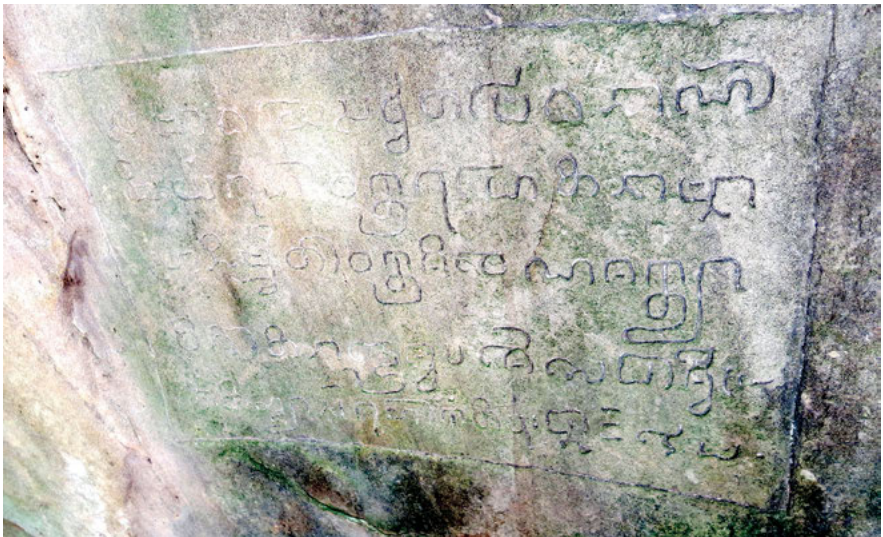
apparently not an easy task; the inclusion of *śaktyā* suggests something achieved with effort or hard work. The additional prohibitions in Khmer that direct the visitor to maintain these efforts and respect its sanctity by refraining from using the cave as a dwelling echo the behavioral changes commanded in Jayavarman’s inscription. And while there is not explicit mention of a ruler in the epigraph, Vaktraśiva’s renovation of the territory of the deity was likely supported by those in power. His transformation of the natural cave into a space for Śaiva ascetics certainly seems to fit within the purview of Jayavarman’s efforts to amplify the sanctity of the landscape through the imposition of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Vaktraśiva’s inscription also introduces a significant new detail: the mountain is no longer referred to as Liṅgaparvata or as the generic “*deva*” of Jayavarman’s record. We are now introduced to the mountain known as Bhadreśvara. The introduction of the name Bhadreśvara (the “Prosperous Lord”) identifies a specific deity and does so using the suffix *-īśvara* commonly applied to *liṅgas* ritually installed for worship in temples. In this case, however, the “personal name” refers uniquely to the mountain itself, the *svayambhu* manifestation of the Lord Śiva.

I hypothesize that the presence and activities of the religious specialists occasioned this important change in the nomenclature and way of envisioning the



**Figure 9:** Site of K. 723 and K. 724 cave inscriptions (author photo).



**Figure 10:** K. 723 on cave overhang (author photo).



deity. The Śaiva Siddhanta teachers also carried with them specific modes of envisioning and representing the anthropomorphic Śiva in iconography, in particular, the five-headed Sadāśiva – a distinct icon specific to these Śaiva practitioners, for whom each head (representative of an aspect of the deity) corresponded to one of their five Brahma mantras. Considering this Śaiva Siddhānta influence helps to contextualize and analyze one of the most central icons at the site, which can be dated to approximately the same period as the cave inscriptions: a bas-relief carving on a large boulder representing Śiva flanked by the deities Brahmā and Viṣṇu (Figure 11). Previous studies have identified the sculpture as a *trimūrti* – i.e., a representation of the three primary male deities of the Hindu pantheon in which each represents a distinct, yet equal and interconnected, phase of the cosmological process.<sup>58</sup> This description is not accurate; the image communicates the supremacy of Śiva. Brahmā and Viṣṇu occupy subordinate positions in the composition,



**Figure 11:** Relief carving of Bhadreśvara flanked by Viṣṇu and Śiva on natural boulder, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

<sup>58</sup> The image is referred to as *trimūrti* in Jacques, *The Khmer Empire*, 74 and Santoni, Hawixbrock, and Souksavatty, “La Mission archéologique française et le Vat Phu,” 8.

flanking the central deity and bowed in gestures of reverence. This is not a representation of three equally powerful gods, but rather, an icon demonstrating the victory of Śiva in his full five-headed and ten-armed glory.

I interpret this image as a distinctive representation of the *liṅgodbhava* (“Manifestation of the Liṅga”) myth, a foundational narrative in which Śiva manifests himself as a fiery *liṅga* of light. Brahmā and Viṣṇu are challenged to find the beginning and end, respectively, but they fail and admit the supremacy of Śiva. Śiva then emerges in anthropomorphic form from the *liṅga* and Brahmā and Viṣṇu worship him. Icons that represent this narrative typically depict the moment of emergence (i.e., the icons show both the *liṅga* and the anthropomorphic form, as is common in South Indian images of the same period). In the image from Liṅgaparvata, the figure of Śiva emerges from a natural boulder in the mountain landscape. By representing the manifestation of Śiva as Bhadreśvara, the artists made a bold theological statement in an iconographic style characteristic of the Śaiva Siddhānta, emerging from Liṅgaparvata itself: the “old god” of the local tradition was now fully transformed into the Prosperous Lord Śiva of the Hindu tradition.

## 6 The “Prosperous Lord” in the Land of the Khmer

Pictures of the rock-cut image of Śiva published in the archeological mission’s reports reveal a brick terraced platform surrounding the boulder that was accessed via a small staircase. This brick foundation provided a space for ritual worship and may have been covered by a *maṇḍapa*, conforming with the characteristic structure of the earliest Southeast Asian temples.<sup>59</sup> The excavation also revealed the foundations of a long, pillared hall and a wall, contemporaneous with this brick platform, that extended between the rocky outcrop with the Śiva icon to another large boulder to the south.<sup>60</sup> This wall blocked the eastern approach to the natural spring. On the south side, a retaining wall was built between the rock face of the mountain and a large boulder. Large boulders blocked the approach from the north. The construction of these walls and

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<sup>59</sup> Parul Pandya Dhar, “Monuments, Motifs, Myths: Architecture and Its Transformations in Early India and Southeast Asia,” in *Cultural and Civilisational Links between India and Southeast Asia: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions*, ed. Shyam Saran (New Delhi: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 325–344.

<sup>60</sup> See the site diagrams provided in Santoni, Hawixbrock, and Souksavatdy, “La Mission archéologique française et le Vat Phu.”

porticos directed access to the spring via one primary route – a long straight hall. These architectural features orchestrated movement to the spring and through the site and serve as a further indication of its centrality and sanctity to those designing the space.

The enclosing of the spring area was followed by the construction of a stone temple (likely completed around the eleventh century) built atop the foundations of a pre-Angkorian structure. The cult object of this later temple has been replaced by images of the Buddha, so we can only hypothesize as to the form of the deity it housed: perhaps an icon of Bhadrēśvara or a *liṅga* fashioned from a piece of stone from the mountain, a practice attested in later Khmer inscriptions (see below). The temple received water from the spring via an underground aqueduct that channeled the flow of water to the back of the central shrine, where it could be used for the lustration of the cult image. The fashioning of the aqueduct is yet another example of the ways in which the design of the site was predicated on the manipulation of this landscape for political purposes. No longer part of a public space that could be accessed via multiple paths and for various reasons, the architecture silences that multivocality by showing that the flow of water serves a sole purpose: to bathe the Lord Śiva.

The area surrounding the shrine was further developed on an axis,<sup>61</sup> from the flat surrounding plain to the base of the mountain through a prolonged ascent consisting of five terraced levels. The visitor to the site first encounters three vast water tanks (only two of which still hold water) and proceeds along a processional path lined by a stone balustrade and flanked by two smaller water tanks. The surrounding water mirrors the mountain in the distance, creating a reflection that serves to create an experience of interiority, as if one is actually venturing inside the mountain. The collection of water served the practical purpose of storage for the dry season, but this demonstration of control over natural resources is also a potent symbol of power. The water furthermore gestures to religious and ritual concerns surrounding purification and serves as a visual lustration of the *liṅga* mountain through landscape design. The processional path regulates access to the temple and the spring and effectively eliminates alternative approaches or informal routes (i.e. those paths often referred to as “desire lines”) by submerging them in water. The imposing administrative buildings that line the processional path also serve to control access and limit spaces for participation (Figures 12, 13, and 14).

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<sup>61</sup> A feature of landscape design that Paul Wheatly has termed the “Axis of Power”: see *Nagara and Commander: Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, Dept. of Geography, 1983).



**Figure 12:** View of ascent to central shrine from upper terraced level, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

The aspirations to mastery expressed in the built landscape are echoed in another monumental Sanskrit inscription – a four-sided stele – discovered buried beside the entrance to one of the administrative buildings in the course of renovations at the site in 2013 (K. 1320).<sup>62</sup> This tenth century record, edited and translated by Dominic Goodall and Claude Jacques, provides important evidence regarding the development of the mountain and the surrounding area as a zone of political control under Īśānavarman II and corresponds to the Angkorian-period temple landscape that survives today. A primary purpose of the inscription is to record taxes in the form of goods, objects, and animals to the deity Bhadreśvara, designated as the Śiva here in this place (*iha, atra*).

<sup>62</sup> Dominic Goodall, “Sanskrit Text and Translation of K. 1320, a Tenth-Century Edict of the Khmer King Īśānavarman II About Annual Taxes to be Paid by Liṅgapura,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 103 (2014): 1–25. This article is based on an earlier edition and French translation of this inscription. See Dominic Goodall and Claude Jacques, “Stèle inscrite d’Īśānavarman II à Vat Phu: K. 1320,” *Aséanie* 33 (2014): 395–454.



**Figure 13:** Reflection of Liṅgaparvata in one of the water tanks framing the processional path, Vat Phu Temple Complex (author photo).

V(7)

*pāyād apāraduritād iha śaṅkaraś śrībhadreśvaro bhuvanabhadrakaraś ciraṇ vaḥ (8)*  
*yasyāṅghrinīrajarajo 'vajayad rajāṃsi tejāṃsi tejayati bhaktibhṛt(ā)m adabhram //*

May the Śiva of this place, Śrī Bhadreśvara (the “Prosperous Lord”), long protect you from endless want, he who effects prosperity (*bhadra*) in the world, the dust of whose lotus feet conquers impurities [and] intensely empowers the energies of the upholders of devotion/of those who support his worship.

V(60)

*(39) sa kamvujendro nijarājyaśāke jitān nṛpād dāyam upājahāra (40)*  
*jitas tu bhaktyātra hare 'nuvaṛṣalabhyaṃ karaṃ liṅgapurād vyatārīt //*

In the era of his sovereignty, The Khmer Lord was offered gifts from conquered prince(s); but, since he was himself conquered by devotion, he donated the taxes acquired each year from Liṅga City to the Śiva of this place.

The Liṅgapura administrative zone provides the goods donated in honor and support of the deity. For this deity is not only an object of veneration, but an independent juridical personality capable of owning property and commanding





**Figure 14:** Administrative buildings lining processional path, Vat Phu Temple complex (author photo).

his own micro-economy: for example, in verse 92 the servants and slaves of the deity and those who live in in his *āśramas* are exempt from doing labor for the king and from paying taxes to government officials.<sup>63</sup> This list of donated items is extensive, so I mention only a few highlights: 10 elephants, 12,000 peacock tail feathers, 100 parakeets, and 200 monitor lizards; fragrant woods, spices, resins, and herbs from the surrounding mountains; agrarian surplus, like paddy, millet, and mung beans from the cultivated lowland areas; and gold and other precious materials sourced from the Mekong River. The donative and economic realia of epigraphs are typically understood as practical or administrative, but the list given here is also ideological since it is a textual performance of the king's control of the landscape. This comprehensive list shows the ruler's ability

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**63** *ye kiṅkarā lokatamonudaś śrībhadreśvarasyāpi tadāśramāṅām (34)*  
*te rājakāryeṣu na yojanīyā na dāpyadāyā viṣayādhipādyaiḥ //*



to mobilize resources from every geographic zone under his rule and to make those resources available to the deity as surplus.

## 7 Conclusions – Moving Mountains

As the center of power in the land of the Khmer shifted to the south, the rulers colonized new mountains and claimed new landscapes in the name of Bhadrēśvara, who was no longer tied exclusively to Liṅgaparvata, but elevated to the status of a state deity presiding over the political landscape in its entirety.<sup>64</sup> Despite this geographic expansion, the Khmer rulers also actively maintained ties to the original sacred geography through donative practices, and the maintenance of infrastructure, such as royal roads that linked the site with the greater Angkorian landscape.<sup>65</sup> The presence of a remarkable bronze image of Sadāśiva, the quintessential Saiddhāntika deity, from the region bears striking resemblance to the Bhadrēśvara relief at Liṅgaparvata and could suggest that portable images of the mountain deity were also in circulation (Figure 15). Through these various links, a religious tradition so thoroughly fixed in the regional landscape and the mountain became portable and was used as a tool to anchor a transregional political formation.

The divinization of natural landscape features is certainly not unique to the Khmer realm or to Hinduism, nor is the connection between the God Śiva and mountains an unexamined topic. What is perhaps insufficiently understood and theorized are the ways in which the spatial and material practices articulated in and through the worship of Śiva were adapted by those aspiring to power. Though far from exhaustive, the study presented here has shown how significant landscape features reimagined as *svyambhu* manifestations of Śiva have served as a source of empowerment for rulers. Rather than passive ground waiting to be vivified by human actions, the inscriptions and sites surveyed above indicate that control over landscape functioned as an integral part of a ruler's political repertoire. Moreover, situating the epigraphic sources in their physical and material contexts reveals that recourse to the aesthetic power of

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<sup>64</sup> The preeminence of Bhadrēśvara and his elevation to state deity in the Angkorian period is discussed in Sanderson, "The Śaiva Religion," 409–421.

<sup>65</sup> A number of inscriptions from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries record donations of prestige goods by rulers and religious specialists in honor of Bhadrēśvara and Liṅgaparvata: for example, K. 136, K. 418, and K. 963.



**Figure 15:** Bronze Sadāśiva image (Bhadreśvara?), c. 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century, Champasak Provincial Museum, Pakse (author photo).

Sanskrit or the cultural cache of Brahmanical forms of knowledge is insufficient to explain the widespread adoption of Hindu deities and ritual practices. Rather, as exemplified in the case of Liṅgaparvata, conceptions of and claims to political authority were conditioned by understandings of the power of place that preceded the introduction of Śiva or other deities of the Indic pantheon. Considering landscape as a primary source highlights these connections and permits a contextualized history of Khmer political geography that is seen as shaped equally by indigenous conceptions of empowerment, Sanskrit-inflected models of sovereignty, and material strategies for manifesting dominance.

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