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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.

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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."[1] 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 [. . .]."[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6] 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 Mittar 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."[7] 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.[8] For criticism of the golden-age paradigm

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 Gupta. 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."[9] 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."[10] 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.[11] 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."[12] 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.[13] 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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9 Romila Thapar, *Śākuntalā. Texts, Readings, Histories* (1999; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

13 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.[14] 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.[15]

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.[16] 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 Guptareich (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 Vākāṭakas. 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 (IVème–IXème 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 Plateua," in *Early Interactions between South*

important work has been done, particularly in the field of archaeology, to locate the material evidence of these processes.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] 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 archeological work has been done in South India by scholars such as Kathleen Morrison and Carla Sinopoli, by Julia Shaw at Sanchi, and by Sila Tripati 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.[20]

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

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

20 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."[21] 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.

21 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 Maṇippiravāḷam, 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 Dezső’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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