Review of Davis, R.H. (2024) Religions of early India: a cultural history

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Richard H. Davis, *Religions of Early India. A Cultural History*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024. xviii, 587 pp. $39.95. ISBN 978-0-691-19926-9.

In the preface of this major new publication Davis mentions that his book project was inspired by A.L. Basham's all-time classic *The Wonder That Was India* (1954) and the sense that nothing like it has appeared in the meantime, viz. 'a broad and general account of the cultural history of early India' (p. xvi). With this substantial book, he aims to fill this lacuna and provide a 'New Wonder', one which 'incorporate[s] the new research done in the decades since Basham's' and which takes a more pluralistic approach compared to Basham's interpretation of a 'singular Indian "civilization"' (p. xvi). Given the name and fame of Basham's work, it sets a high goal. For a start, I would mention at least one potential candidate, namely *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India* by Upinder Singh, which is a remarkably accessible work introducing the student to a broad range of aspects of early Indian cultural history with good references to contemporary scholarly debates and findings.[1] In many respects it stays closer to the ideal of Basham's original 'Wonder', if only because it is not just concerned with the topic of religion—religion notably only formed one out of ten chapters of Basham—but with the whole gamut of early Indian civilization. To be fair, Davis engages with much more alongside his main theme—for example, the first chapter already includes a long section on the 'poetic landscape' of the *Meghadūta* and other examples can be easily multiplied—but the focus is emphatically on religion. The continuous interactions between the three major religious cultures of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism within a shared social, political and religious landscape form the guiding thread of the book.[2]

In fact, the differences with Basham's 'Wonder' are more striking than the similarities. What it really is is 'a *narrative history* of religious cultures in early India' (p. 2, my emphasis). Davis is a good storyteller. This quality comes through already in the first paragraphs of the Introduction, where he introduces his subject matter through the epic story of the churning of the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*), or in the chapter that follows ('The Living Landscape of India'), which smoothly moves from the stories of the cutting of the mountains' wings and the descent of the Ganges river[3] to the deep time perspective

1 Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008.

2 In this regard it may be more favorably compared to Friedhelm Hardy, *The Religious Culture of India. Power, Love and Wisdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

3 There is an error on p. 14 where after introducing the episode of the stealing of Sagara's sac-

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of earth scientists.[4] The same chapter nicely links the *Mahābhārata* episode of the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest to the clearing of the forests of the early South Asian landscape, especially the Gangetic plains. Davis has more to say about the charged relations between the civilizing Indo-Aryans and the inhabitants of the forests later, when he deals with the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic (chapter 8), which he reads as an allegory on political encounters and imperial integration. On the other hand, the same feature also makes the work rather bulky compared to that of Basham, who had a much more comprehensive and concise manner of presentation. This is what has always made Basham's 'Wonder' such an outstanding resource, including especially its simple but effective appendices, covering aspects as wide apart as cosmology and geography, the calendar, weights and measures, or the alphabet and its pronunciation (the present book notably has no guide to pronunciation and refrains from the use of diacritic marks). Sometimes the storytelling gets the better of Davis. One wonders if 21st-century students still need to be introduced to the life of the Buddha via Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (chapter 4). In this time of dwindling attention spans they might be better served by Basham's more concise treatment.

In terms of sources, Davis pays equal attention to texts and material culture, which applies throughout the book. Importantly, with respect to the former he identifies the need for a 'sociology of textual transmission': 'religious history primarily reflects the productions, not necessarily of the historical victors, but of those who have been most able to transmit their voices and visions over long periods of time, much as a species procreates its DNA through time' (p. 5). To recover what the surviving sources leave out requires reading against the grain and identifying subaltern voices where possible, or if not, at least identifying the lack of these voices to open space for a more complete and more balanced historical enquiry. As for material culture, this comes with its own set of problems, being 'fossilized results of human behaviour' (p. 6, citing archaeologist Gordon Childe) which tend to favor elites. To counteract the force and discourse of the elitist perspectives offered by inscriptions on stone pillars or copperplates, Davis dedicates significant sections of the book to the discussion of archaeological remnants that may represent more popular forms of

rificial horse it is said that 'the horses were nowhere to be found.' This should obviously not be plural but singular. Overall, the book is relatively free from such trivial errors and appears to have been carefully proofread. Some typos I have noted: Tumburo (p. 416) for Tumburu; Sumadhi (p. 468) for Sumati; Jitendra (pp. 499, 500, 539, 576) for Jinendra; Von Steitencron (p. 534) for Von Stietencron.

4 Cf. Pratik Chakrabarti, *Inscriptions of Nature. Geology and the Naturalization of Antiquity*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020.

religion, including Yakṣas, Nāgas and terracotta figurines of what he calls 'little goddesses' (to distinguish them from the later Śākta paradigm of the Great Goddess). One such terracotta figure from Kaushambi, labeled 'Goddess of Abundance', deservedly graces the book's cover.

As for the general organization of the book, there are no big surprises. It follows a fairly conventional paradigm of two millennia of cultural history of the Indian subcontinent, as the following list of chapter titles should make clear: 1) The Living Landscape of India; 2) Indo-Aryans and the Vision of the *Rig Veda* Poets (1300–1000 BCE); 3) The World of Sacrifice (1000–600 BCE); 4) A New Urban Culture and Renunciatory Religion (600–300 BCE); 5) The Mauryan Empire: Religious Cultures of Empire (321–187 BCE); 6) Disciplinary Communities and Religious Quests; 7) Popular Religious Cultures during the Shunga Era (200 BCE–0 CE); 8) The Sanskrit Epics: Imagined Empires of the Hindus; 9) The Kushana Era and Pan-Asian Buddhism (0 CE–300 CE); 10) Visual Religion: Icons, Worship, and Devotion; 11) The Four Human Aims: Guides for the Good Life; 12) The Gupta Era: Religious Cultures of Court and Beyond (300–500 CE); 13) The Puranas: Varieties of Hindu Theism; 14) Homes for Gods (460 CE–700 CE). It ends around 700 CE, 'a point of great transition', both globally and on the Indian subcontinent itself, with the first arrival of Islamic political and religious groups in the eight century and 'the myriad interactions of the many groups we have designated as Hindu with the complex and equally diverse Muslim community' (p. 12). Davis thus ends considerably earlier than Basham, who continued into the medieval period.[5] The book is accompanied by 9 color plates, 60 illustrations and 18 maps, which have been carefully selected and contribute to the accessibility of the historical narrative. It also comes with an excellent index. Striking by its absence is a historical timeline.

Davis's own scholarship is most manifest in chapters 10 and 14, where he lays out his model of the development of 'visual religion' and 'temple Hinduism'. He has a good knack for coining captivating phrases, including, for example, 'homes for the gods', 'devotional guides', or 'gift-givers in charge'. Davis is very well read (although largely in literature published in the English language) and gives a balanced overview of the field, without striving for completeness, which would be well-nigh impossible. Instead, he presents a sweeping narrative through individual examples or case studies. Overall, this strategy works well and is an attractive way of presentation. This applies in particular to the discussion of material culture, for example in chapter 7, which starts with the

5 No mention is made of the follow-up of Basham's 'Wonder': S.A.A. Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India. Vol. II: A survey of the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent from the coming of the Muslims to the British conquest, 1200–1700*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987.

massive Yakṣa image from Vidisha, moves on to discussing the 'little goddesses' depicted on terracotta and then elaborates on the iconography and setting of the *stūpa*s of Sanchi. Likewise in chapter 10, where he returns to the subject of Yakṣas, this time through the Maṇibhadra from Parkham, and then discusses the introduction of the representation of images of Jinas, the Buddha and Hindu deities on stone. The same chapter also includes a discussion of early guides for the worship of images, particularly the *Baudhāyanagṛhyapariśiṣṭasūtra*. In other cases the treatment is perhaps less successful, for example chapter 11, where the four *puruṣārtha*s are discussed with reference to the *Kāmasūtra*, the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* and the *Brahmasūtra* and *Yogasūtra*, which is a rather bland way of treating the subject (one may also question if these texts, in particular the former, really belong in a work dedicated to religions), or chapter 13, where the subject of theism in the Purāṇas is treated through the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (Vaiṣṇava), the *Kūrmapurāṇa* (Śaiva) and the *Devīmāhātmya* (Śākta). The presentation here is rather standard and there is comparatively little engagement with contemporary research. While the *Skandapurāṇa* is referred to in a later chapter (chapter 14, in a section on Pāśupatas and the iconography of Lakulīśa), the findings from the critical edition could have been easily incorporated here to illustrate the remarkable fluidity and adaptability of the Purāṇic text corpus.[6] Moreover, firmly dated to the sixth-seventh century, it falls squarely within the time frame of the book while the *Kūrmapurāṇa* and the *Devīmāhātmya* almost certainly take us beyond 700 CE.[7]

The book incorporates many of the new insights and theories that have been developed since the time of Basham. To name but a few obvious candidates, the Kuru formation of the Vedic canon (Michael Witzel), the Sanskrit cosmopolis (Sheldon Pollock),[8] Aśoka's kingship as a target of the *Mahābhārata* (multiple scholars) or the development of Buddhist monasticism (Gregory Schopen) are all mentioned and discussed. There are some striking omissions too. For example, there is no mention of the Greater Magadha thesis of Johannes Bronkhorst (in fact nothing of his extensive output made it to the book's bibliography), not

6 Starting with Rob Adriaensen, Hans T. Bakker and Harunaga Isaacson (eds.), *The Skandapurāṇa. Volume 1: Adhyāyas 1–25*. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998.

7 For a later dating of the *Devīmāhātmya* (early eight century) than has long been assumed, see Yuko Yokochi, 'The Warrior Goddess in the *Devīmāhātmya*.' *Senri Ethnological Studies* 50 (1999): 71–113.

8 Davis is critical, however, of Pollock's notion of the 'desacralization' of Sanskrit: 'Desacralization, however, may not be the best term. As the Sanskrit language was decoupled from its Vedic boundaries, it could also become the linguistic medium for multiple religious cultures. Despecialization of Sanskrit is more apt. This is most striking in the case of the Buddhists.' (p. 317).

even in chapter 4, where the new concepts of rebirth, *karman*, transmigration and liberation are introduced in the context of the urban culture of the northeast. Likewise, one would have expected at least a mention of the theory that the Indus Valley script may not be a script at all in the section 'puzzle of Indus script' (pp. 56–60) in chapter 2.[9] Buddhologists no doubt would have liked to see reference to the discovery of the Gandhāran Buddhist texts, which constitute the oldest surviving Buddhist manuscripts, or to the rich archaeological site at Kanaganahalli. And one could go on.

In the end, however, you cannot have it all and it is easy to find shortcomings or things missing in a book on a subject matter as large as this. Davis has written a rich and accessible introduction to a fascinating field of studies. Finally, and importantly, he makes the past visibly present by his clear introductions to the location and setting of the various sites he has visited, whether it be the Garuḍa pillar of Heliodorus, the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, the Śiva cave temple complex at Elephanta, or the rock-shelter paintings of Bhimbetka, which brings us to the very start of the story.[10]

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9 Steve Farmer, Richard Sprout & Michael Witzel, 'The Collapse of the Indus-Script Thesis: The Myth of a Literate Harappan Civilization.' *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 11.2 (2004): 19–57.

10 While the book's first color plate is of the rock formations at Bhimbetka, no example of the paintings themselves is shown. As a consequence, the first human artefact depicted is that of settled agrarian society. Figure 1 displays the famous 'priest-king' of Mohenjo Daro. The contrast with the hunter-gatherers' perspective could hardly have been bigger.