Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia

Edited by Juliane Schober

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Stūpa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Asokan India

Jonathan S. Walters

In “The Many Lives of Buddha: A Study of Sacred Biography and Theravāda Tradition,” Frank Reynolds sketched out a dynamic conception of the Buddha biography in which Buddhist life stories are viewed, not as comparatively accurate or inaccurate reflections of the events in “the historical Buddha’s” life, but as a locus for creativity and change within the streams of Buddhist history. In this essay I want to develop Reynolds’ view that Buddhist biographies both reflected and shaped the historical situations in which they were composed, by examining a set of three biographical texts in Pāli verse that were produced in Buddhist India during the second century B.C. Reynolds has already pointed to two of these texts—Cariyāpitaka and Buddhavamsa—as especially important for a historical reconstruction of the cultural role that Buddhist biography played in the early post-Asokan period. Adding a third, closely related text called Apadāna, I intend to nuance Reynolds’ account of this particular period within the general framework that he sets out. Specifically, I shall analyze these three texts in light of what Reynolds calls “the most crucial problems which are amenable to future investigation,” namely, the issues that “cluster around the identification of the various levels or stages in the development of the biographical tradition, the question of the structure of the various biographical fragments and texts, and the role which these fragments and texts have played within the broader tradition.”

These texts, in and of themselves, cannot reveal the historical situation that is to be reconstructed. They are poems about inconceivably ancient periods of time, not scientific histories. I make this fairly obvious point because it is not always grasped in Buddhology. The tendency in Buddhological studies to weave history directly out of literary remains, as though the authors of sacred texts were trying to describe objectively the times and places in which they lived, has elicited a devastating critique, in various forms over the last ten years, by Gregory Schopen, who has challenged fundamental pillars of the Buddhological construct—including various distinctions between monks and layfolk and the origin of the Mahāyāna—with an appeal to epigraphic evidence that can be dated centuries earlier than the notoriously recent extant textual manuscripts. With good reason Schopen has insisted that, except for certain ancient manuscript finds mostly from Central Asia, epigraphy and archaeology provide us with the only objects for reconstructing the first two millennia of the Buddha era that actually survive intact from the periods they are supposed to be talking about.

I agree with Schopen that epigraphy must now take the lead in a critique and new construction of ancient Buddhist history; but I am equally convinced that epigraphy cannot do without the textual evidence entirely. Among other things, these texts have been vital to the project of reconstructing epigraphic languages and dating and identifying the kings in whose reigns the epigraphs were incised. Schopen’s critique starts to reach fruition only when the epigraphs bring new questions to bear on the texts and, it is important to add, when the texts are then enabled to raise new questions about the epigraphs. Together, the work of epigraphers and historical linguists allows us to identify certain epigraphs and textual compositions as coeval; both textual and epigraphic studies are reenergized when we can see particular texts as products of particular ages that can be reconstructed on the basis of (epigraphic and archaeological) evidence that is partially external to the texts themselves. As Schopen’s work so clearly shows, situating textual studies within epigraphic history opens whole new frontiers for Buddhology. This paper follows Schopen’s lead in its attempt to situate the texts in question within the history that can be reconstructed on the basis of “hard” evidence. In fact, Schopen himself has treated the Apadāna and related jātaka texts as potentially valuable for the epigraphic and archaeological study of early post-Asokan India.
The three biographical texts that I shall discuss in this essay are especially well suited to the development of both Reynolds’ and Schopen’s methodological projects. In terms of Buddhist life stories, they are the only comprehensive canonical tellings of the Buddha biography that contain descriptions of previous lives in addition to the present life, a completeness that remained the sine qua non for all Buddhist biography until the nineteenth century, and that still remains dominant in large parts of the Buddhist world today. These texts constituted, in other words, the first crucial transformation of the Buddha biography in its long and varied history; these texts constituted the rules for post-Asokan Buddhist anthropology. From the perspective of epigraphy, the period in which these texts were written is extremely rich: well over two thousand epigraphs from the last two centuries B.C., inscribed in varieties of the early Brahmī script that adapted Asoka’s Mauryan alphabet to new purposes, and discovered throughout the ancient Indic world, from Sri Lanka to Śrāvasti, have been published. As the Cariyāpitaka, Buddhavamsa, and Apadāna eked out what was to become the foundation for all subsequent Buddhist biography, so the early Brahmī inscriptions of Sāñchi and Sarnāth, Anurāhapura and Amāvati, effected the first major transformation—political as well as palaeographical—of that discourse in stone that, inaugurated by India’s first emperor, Asoka, was to dominate all subsequent Indian imperial practice.

But Buddhist India just after Asoka is especially important for the light it potentially can shed on the overlap of textual and epigraphic/archaeological histories. Here more than anywhere else in the vast world of Buddhistology, the work of epigraphers and textual specialists has closely overlapped for more than a century. The discovery of the labeled carvings at Bāhūra merely confirmed what had been obvious even to the earliest Orientalists: the Buddhist monuments from which the inscriptions come contain illustrations of biographical stories that are also told, always in greater detail, in the texts. Moreover, the language of the inscriptions and that of the texts is so close that until recently it was standard practice among epigraphers to call most inscriptive Prakrit “Pāli.” The result has been an enormous industry in all countries that host Indological studies, an industry that has attempted to describe the carvings and interpret the inscriptions on the basis of the texts, on one hand, and that has attempted to describe the development of the textual tradition on the basis of the carvings and inscriptions, on the other.

Ironically, it is a rare thing that Reynolds and Schopen should consider the Cariyāpitaka, Buddhavamsa, and/or Apadāna especially important for a reconstruction of early post-Asokan Buddhist history. The enormous industry that I just described has in fact largely ignored the texts that historical linguists actually date to the period under discussion. Almost with-out exception these texts remain unmentioned in the works of even the best scholars concerned with this period, including the likes of Alexander Cunningham, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Albert Fouche, John Marshall, and Paul Mus. Instead, texts that postdate the early Brahmī inscriptions by centuries have been treated as though they had been the sources for the carvings that the inscriptions label: the most prominent texts cited in the scholarly discourse on the great stūpas and their carvings have been Divyavādāna and Lalitavistara (ca. first century A.D.), Mahāvaṃsa (ca. second century A.D.), Jātakamāla (ca. fourth century A.D.), and Jātakaṭṭhakatha and Dhammapadamālākha (after the fifth century A.D.).

This anachronism between text and epigraph obscures the historical position of the various biographies that Reynolds has called for scholars to reconstruct. For the early period, we are left with a catalog of biographical fragments cut off from the framework(s) in which they have meaning (for even if we accept that the narrative details belong to some timeless oral tradition, we surely cannot look to the later texts for the ideological frameworks of the earlier period). In terms of the later biographies, too, the project is undermined: the interpretations and ideologies that they exhibit are treated as though they belong, not to the times and places in which the actual texts were written, but to the timelessly ancient oral tradition! Despite these epistemological difficulties, to this day only the later texts have been examined for the reconstruction of the Buddha biography as portrayed in the earlier carvings.

There are two main reasons that this anachronism in the Buddhological construct has gone unnoticed, except by Reynolds (in an analysis of the development of biographical tradition) and Schopen (in an analysis of the relationship between literary and epigraphic remains). First, the biographical texts that date to the time of the inscriptions—Cariyāpitaka, Buddhavamsa, and Apadāna—do not tell the Buddha biography with all the sumptuous detail that is found in the later texts and that scholars like to see in the ancient carvings as well. The later texts have been privileged because only they tell the stories with enough detail to make the identification of the carvings believable.

A second major reason for the absence of the Apadāna and related texts in the vast scholarship on early post-Asokan Indian Buddhism has to do with certain prejudices and scholarly presuppositions that have dominated the history of Pāli studies. Since the time of T. W. Rhys-Davids, founder of the Pāli Text Society (PTS), there has been widespread disdain for the texts in question. Their inclusion in the canon seems to mar an otherwise purely rational, secular humanist corpus. “The historical Buddha” is obscured, the standard argument runs, by the submission to “popular” needs for fairy tales, magic, ghosts, gods, and demons. The Apadāna and related texts represent
the beginning of the end of the pristine "early Buddhism" that scholars of Theravāda have until recently been exclusively interested in reconstructing. As a result, the Buddhavamsa and Cāriyāpiṭaka—although among the earliest PTS publications and available in translation for years—seldom appear in the extensive secondary work on the canonical period to which, in the eyes of those traditions that preserved that canon, they rightfully belong. The Āpadeva has never been translated into a Western language, and the PTS (Roman script) edition of the Pāli is long out of print and hopelessly confused. Dating these texts to the post-Asokan period has had the effect of driving Pāli specialists to ignore them as late corruptions, rather than using them to situate the texts in light of what else is known about the post-Asokan period. Non-specialists for whom the texts might prove relevant—such as epigraphers and art historians—are denied access to them as a result of their dependence on the work of textual specialists.

I hope to reconcile this anachronism by addressing the contemporaneity of the texts (Āpadeva, Buddhavamsa, Cāriyāpiṭaka; henceforth "the ABCs") and the epigraphic and archaeological remains (of the first stages in the development of the major Buddhist stūpas during the early post-Asokan, i.e., Śunga and early Sātavāhana, period). This essay is, to this end, an extended demonstration of the fact that Reynolds and Schopen both were right in their suppositions about the relevance of the ABCs: there is a complex and remarkable correspondence between the two bodies of evidence, textual and archaeological, which my narrative will clarify in some detail. But my primary aim is to reconcile the nature and cultural context of Buddhist biography in the second century B.C., and to demonstrate that epigraphic and textual studies together provide an exciting basis for that reconstruction.

**Picturing the Path**

The stūpas (huge dome-shaped monuments that enshrine the corporeal relics of the Buddha and his most famous disciples) are well known, even outside professional scholarly circles, and they need little initial introduction from me. I shall focus upon the stūpas of Madhya Pradesh (especially Śāñchī and Bāhrūt) and Andhra Pradesh (especially Amarāvatī), which, perhaps constructed originally by Emperor Asoka himself, survive as the most important evidence of early post-Asokan sculptural and architectural excellence. Descriptions and photographs of these sites abound in even the most general studies of Indian art. The texts, however, as I have already stated, remain neglected in the scholarly tradition. So I shall begin with a few general words about the ABCs as a foundation for my discussion of their relationship to the epigraphic and archaeological remains.

There has been a consensus among scholars, who have studied the traditional accounts of the ABCs, their vocabulary, their grammatical and metrical structures, and their philosophical and mythological content, that these texts postdate Asoka. Indeed, the Āpadeva makes reference to the Rākhavatthu, which is held by Theravādins to have been composed only at the Third Great Council, during the time of Asoka. Āpadeva incorporates verse after verse from pre-Asokan works, including Sutta-Nipāta, Dhammapada, and Thera-Therigāthā, and even quotes large segments from other post-Asokan texts, including Buddhavamsa and Cāriyāpiṭaka.

In fact, there seems to be a direct line of appropriation and expansion from Cāriyāpiṭaka to Buddhavamsa to Āpadeva. Cāriyāpiṭaka is a jātaka text, or biography of the Buddha that focuses almost exclusively upon his actions during (here thirty-five) previous lives. The colophon describes Cāriyāpiṭaka as Buddhāpadānīya (a "Great Story" or "legend biography" of the Buddha). Many of its pādas are incorporated into Buddhavamsa, Āpadeva then quotes the concluding verses and colophon of Cāriyāpiṭaka while it also quotes from Buddhavamsa extensively.

This line of appropriation and expansion is not simply a matter of plagiarized verses and borrowed names. A central ideological theme was being appropriated and reworked in the process. I have already remarked that Cāriyāpiṭaka is the earliest known complete biography of the Buddha on a cosmic scale, that is, the first that understands the Buddha’s present life as the result of actions performed in a series of previous lives. Whichever view scholars take on the ultimately unanswerable question of whether jātakas predated this period or not, Cāriyāpiṭaka is the earliest definite evidence we have that Buddhists conceived of the Buddha biography in such cosmic terms. The concluding verses of Cāriyāpiṭaka, which reappear in Āpadeva, state succinctly the single revelation that the whole text makes in extenso: during the Buddha’s previous lives, he cultivated some of the Ten Perfections (dasa-pāramī) that fully developed, constituted in the present life his ultimate liberation.

This revelation was the answer to a major question that emerged for Buddhists only after the Asokan impetus to universalism had created the new, cosmopolitan atmosphere that characterized post-Asokan India. In the pre-Asokan tradition, as far as we can know about it at all on the basis of the texts preserved in the rest of the Pāli canon, the paradigmatic Buddha biography, and the parallel early saints’ biographies (as in Thera-Theragāthā), were conceived in noncosmic, this-life-only terms. The paradigmatic biography begins with renunciation of the world, continues with religious exertion, and concludes with the attainment of nirvāṇa. While such a biography is paradigmatic for renunciates (and lay people whose own religiosity is predicated on serving them), it leaves unaddressed the soteriological
potential of most human beings, who will not renounce the world in this life and attain the goal, but will instead continue to transmigrate in a time conceived according to a devolutionary cosmology. Surely if the Buddha’s teaching was true, the Path he guided humanity along is wide enough to include more than the handful of humans who are already near its end; it must be wide enough for universal society to stand upon. And by a remarkable logic—that if the Buddha’s present life is paradigmatic for being at the end of the Path, then his previous lives must be paradigmatic for being at the beginning of the Path—Caryāpiṭaka starts to chart out this widened, cosmicized soteriology. It reveals that the Buddha, long ago when he was still just a king or a Brahmin or a trader (or even an animal), turned his lives into opportunities for cultivating, in increasingly profound ways, the Ten Perfections that, when fully cultivated, are equivalent to the end of the Path. And the concluding verses drive the point home: the Buddha’s advice (buddhamuṣṭiṣāṃ) is that everyone start doing the same thing.31

_Buddhavamsa_ investigates the implications of this central revelation. It opens with a very familiar scene: the Buddha is beneath the Tree of Enlightenment and Brahmā Sahampati is there, begging him to preach the Dharma for the sake of those who have “little dust in their eyes.” The Buddha consents, but wishing to show just how powerful a buddha is, he does not, as in the familiar early story, get up, seek out his teachers, find that they are dead, then proceed to Sāmāth in order to Turn the Wheel of Dharma.34 Instead, the Buddha magically creates an enormous gem walkway (ratanaśamakama) that spans all of space, and he walks up and down on it without the passing of time. A magnificent festival ensues, in which all the beings in the universe praise the Buddha with songs, dances, perfume, musical instruments, flowers and, above all, delicious happiness. Those with little dust in their eyes, for whom the Buddha preached the Dharma, are not merely renunciates at the end of the Path. The Buddha preached his Dharma for everyone in the universe.

Sīriputta arrives and asks the Buddha to explain what the gem walkway symbolizes. The answer is that this universal soteriology is the cosmic Buddha biography itself: the Buddha proceeds to elaborate a cosmic autobiography along the lines of Caryāpiṭaka, but greatly expanded. He reveals that he first took refuge in Buddhism one hundred thousand kalpas (eons) ago (Caryāpiṭaka concerns only the present kalpa),35 and that in the process of his transmigration across this unfathomable amount of time he participated in twenty-four previous Buddhisms before becoming Buddha and starting his own, which is the twenty-fifth “Buddha lineage” (Buddhavamsa). _Buddhavamsa_ gives the biography of each previous Buddha in whose Buddhism “ours” (amāhāsim) Gotama Buddha performed acts that cultivated the Ten Perfections and culminated in his Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, the setting in which the _Buddhavamsa_ is supposed to have been revealed. The Buddha’s own biography becomes the most recent of a type. All Buddhas live for a certain period, attain nirvāṇa in certain ways, initiate certain numbers of people into various stages of Path-life, are treated postmortem in particular fashions, etc. The categories have become so stereotyped by the time _Buddhavamsa_ gets around to Gotama’s recapitulation of this paradigmatic biographical structure that they are referred to in a shorthand which is extremely cryptic unless one has already read the biographies of the previous twenty-four Buddhas.

_Buddhavamsa_, in the process of drawing this map of cosmic time, reveals with far greater specificity what the Caryāpiṭaka revelation of Buddha’s cosmic biography means for humanity. It is not just that people must cultivate the Ten Perfections now, in small ways, if they hope to achieve the fulfillment of the Ten Perfections at some future point in their transmigrations. That cultivation must occur within a specifically Buddhist context: the Buddha in the _Buddhavamsa_ gives alms to Buddhists and worships Buddhhas. It is this specifically Buddhist action that patterns people for cultivation of the specifically Buddhist achievement, nirvāṇa.

There are two levels of soteriological potential at work in _Buddhavamsa_. On the one hand, we are all still living in a Buddha era, a period in which a Buddha and his Buddhism are known and can be practiced, worshiped, and admired. Specifically, Buddhist acts performed in the present will bear fruit in the time of future Buddhas, just as Gotama’s actions in the time of previous Buddhas culminated in his present Buddhahood. In the penultimate chapter, _Buddhavamsa_ reveals that the next of these Buddhas, Metteya (Maitreya), has already been predicted by Gotama.36 On the other hand, it is not only Gotama Buddha and the present Buddhism that are populating the soteriological march across cosmic time. All Buddhas reveal a _Buddhavamsa_ and declare soteriology universal. People who entered the Path but did not attain its end in the times of previous Buddhas, too, may achieve the _summa bonus_ in the time of Metteya. In fact, the two classes overlap: many people in the present, especially those who connect themselves with the Buddha and his dispensation, must already have been practicing Buddhists during previous eons (that will be remembered only after the end is achieved).

The Buddha of _Buddhavamsa_ is quite explicit about the fact that his Buddhism, like all those previous ones, will eventually disappear. But, like those previous Buddhisms, this one will disappear only after the Path has been pointed out for “countless creoles of other” beings who, transmigrating now, will attain the fruit of their Buddhist practices in the future.37 A universally accessible teleology intersects the devolutionary cosmology at those rare moments in time—twenty-five of them in one hundred
thousand eons—when a Buddha has been born in the world; the universe brims with soteriological potential as a result. The Buddhavamsa was composed during such a rare moment in time.

The Apadāna utterly presupposes Buddhavamsa, for its actual verses as well as for its map of cosmic time, its Buddha biography, and its attempt at describing the specifically Buddhist acts that lead to eventual enlightenment. Here the expansion of the central Cariyāpiṭaka revelation is carried in new directions. The “Great Story” tells not only the biographies of the Buddhas, nor only of the Buddhas and Paccekabuddhas. Those are tiny fragments compared to the entire corpus of five hundred-odd biographies of monks and about forty of nuns. These saints’ life histories, which incorporated and revised the verses of Thera-Therīgāthā, allowed the Apadāna author(s) limitless room for expansion of the Buddhavamsa’s (meager) catalog of which specifically Buddhist acts have which specifically Buddhist results. Apadāna provides such a catalogue, in extenso, with a completeness unknown in any other text of the period or earlier. The actual content of the biographies is fairly limited—most of the monks and nuns are known only by their acts, i.e. “Rev. One Lamp,” “Rev. Stūpa Worshiper,” “Rev. Bowl Filler,” “Rev. Flag Raiser,” etc.—it is the acts themselves that are elaborated, explored, explained, and valorized.

Apadāna begins with the Buddhāpadāna, named from the colophon of Cariyāpiṭaka. Here too we find a Buddha who enters the Path unfathomably many eons ago, cultivates the Ten Perfections, then attains the goal in the present and advises everyone else to do the same thing. But this time his original, root act, of which all the subsequent perfection is ultimately the fruit, is a simple imaginative endeavor: in an unfathomably previous life the Buddha thought about a universe populated with countless Buddhas and saints all interacting with each other.14 The fruit of this mental action (manasā pathanupaphalam)15 is realized when the Buddha, under the Tree of Enlightenment at Gayā, actually becomes part of this wonderful universe he had imagined so long ago. And this act is precisely what any thinking person does when he or she hears the Buddhavamsa (or the remainder of the Apadāna); imagining in one’s own mind the revelation of previous Buddhas and Buddhas and their mutual interconnection is itself the ultimately salvific act. Those who are familiar with Buddhavamsa or who hear the Apadāna have already performed that act.

Additionally, the Apadāna listener—the texts are directed at a plural “you” enjoined to listen16—learns in the process of listening that this mental action is only the first among many diverse kinds of specifically Buddhist and extremely efficacious acts that are possible so long as there exists a Buddha or the memory of him and his teachings, or his relics, or his monks and nuns. The texts assure listeners in no uncertain terms that all seeds of kamma will bear the appropriate fruit in the future,17 an assurance proved in the biographies of each monk and nun who attained the goal in the dispensation of Gotama as the fruit of actions performed eons earlier. And in all the apaddanas, we find that this extremely gradual Path is at least pleasant: in the intermediate eons, the performers of pious acts revel in heavenly palaces, rule the gods or are married to the rulers of gods, and likewise are born as human Wheel-Turning Monarchs, time and time again.

In Apadāna the Buddha biography has become a full-blown revelation of universal soteriology. The Path that it pictures cuts across all of time; the acts that it catalogues occur throughout the Indian world and are performed by people of all castes, occupations, ages, sexes, social statuses; by animals and gods and demons as well as humans. The Apadāna demonstrates biographically what the Buddha’s “Gem Walkway” demonstrates symbolically: Buddhism is not only for renunciates; the Buddha’s life made it possible to direct every conceivable walk of life toward attainment of the soteriological goal, nīvanā.

Buddhas of Bricks

It is here that we begin to see the overlap between the ABCs and the famous stūpas of early post-Aśokan India. The Apadāna is replete with specific descriptions of stūpa construction and relic worship,18 always conceived within this cosmic soteriological framework, which to my knowledge are found nowhere else in the Pāli canon, yet which clearly parallel the actual practices at stūpas in early post-Aśokan India, as I shall demonstrate below. The inscriptions in turn are replete with indications that the patrons of these elaborate stūpas mirrored the universality of the Apadāna: kings and āghoras, artisans and Brahmins, householders and millionaires, men and women, young and old, monks and nuns contributed to the creation of these magnificent works of art. And the stūpas themselves are ornamented with the central conception that underlies the ABCs: carvings that illustrate a cosmic Buddha biography.

But the case is not so simple as it may appear. We cannot assume that the texts objectively reflect actual practice any more than we can assume that actual practice was a transparent enactment of the stories in the texts. The texts are traces of a particular way of thinking about the Buddha biography; the inscriptions and carvings are traces of particular human actions. The ideology and practice presuppose each other—why write a text about stūpas unless they exist, or build a stūpa without an idea of why that is a good thing to do?—and I have been trying to reconstruct the situation(s) in which they were, simultaneously, produced/used/thought about. In the present section I want to develop a few themes about the process by which
several post-Asokan stupas came to be constructed, which have emerged in my study of the early Brahmi epigraphs and which have special importance in this attempt of mine to reconstruct the context in which these biographical texts and those actual stūpas practiced coexisted.

The first important topic that needs to be reconsidered is that of historical agency. It is well known that the inscriptions record information about donors, which has made possible analyses of the people who built and ornamented the early post-Asokan stūpas. Barea has talked about their sectarian orientation,13 Schopen has talked about their religious status,14 Chakravarti has talked about their social status.15 But an analysis of the individual donors as individual donors only takes us so far. It cannot explain, for example, how all these donors of such diverse backgrounds came together to donate sculptures, pillars, or carved friezes that happen to match each other precisely, that even form links in a single stone railing. Nor can it explain the process by which the donors enabled themselves to make the donations (even extremely rich people belong to families, polities, and economic organizations that constrain the flow of wealth). In both these instances, it is useful to posit the existence of what R. G. Collingwood calls “complex agency,” an agency that involves groups of people joining together for some common goal.16

Many of the inscriptions make this complex agency apparent: the donors of certain objects are not individuals but networks of friends and families,17 guilds,18 committees,19 villages20 and mercantile towns,21 of which single individuals were often the representatives but certainly not the sole agents. Many of the monastic donors, too, were standing as representatives of such social groups.22 And these are only the donors who recorded the fact that they gathered together their friends, relatives, or whomever in order to finance the donation (which is a very common trope in Apaḍāṅga stories about stūpa worship):23 we have no way of knowing how many of the supposedly individual donors also participated in complex agencies that were not mentioned in the epigraphic record.

Even this broader vision of the complex agency that erected and decorated the stūpas at Sāñchi, Amaravati, or Bhārhat is incomplete. For we still must imagine a larger complex agency organizing these specific donors/complex agents into a unitary whole: building the Sāñchi railing or producing the Bhārhat medallions must have involved commissioning artists and financial overseers, organizing participant donors and allotting their shares of money (or whatever), then keeping track of that allotment in order to have the inscriptions carved properly (again, in matching scripts that cannot have been willy-nilly graffiti). In the Apaḍāṅga, many such major additions to Buddhist monuments are made in this way: a single individual organizes a festival (malla) in order to have the thing constructed or the pūjā performed to it.24 Each of the various spectacular additions to the great stūpas was probably produced as the result of such highly organized occasions in which the donors, for all their diversity (and differing personal motivations), came together and financed the project; festivals that occurred at least when the resources were first mobilized and when the specific project was declared complete. Illustrations of various sorts of royal festivals abound in the extant carvings, although they all have been considered representations of the same handful of historical stories: all royal processions are Ajatasattu’s relic march, all royal tree worship is Asoka’s bodhi pījā, etc. The truth may be far more straightforward than that: these are illustrations of the very festivals that have left as traces of their occurrence precisely the carvings, stūpas, and texts in question.25

This leads me to the second major point about the epigraphs and other archaeological remains that I want to make. Although the stūpas in their final form appear as a wild hodge podge of carvings, inscriptions, rails, umbrellas, and pillars, it is important that we think of the finished product as a series of layers that resulted from very specific, organized additions to whatever already existed at a specific point in time.26 For example, it is well known that the Sāñchi rail (around the Mahācātura) was built later than the stūpa itself, and that the famous carved gateways were added later than the rail. Architectural and art historical study, as well as palaeography, confirm this point. So the finished stūpa is the composite creation of successive complex agents who organized smaller units of collective agency at different points in time. Much work remains to be done, distinguishing and collating these “layers.” But the work is vital, because in the process of distinguishing stages it is possible to be precise about dating and situating particular conceptions of, among other things, the Buddha biography.

Let me suggest how this is the case, even though I am not yet entirely satisfied with my own thoughts on the subject (mostly because there is an enormous amount of material that needs to be classified differently than it is currently classified). I have already mentioned that the Apaḍāṅga catalogues a wide range of ritual acts. It includes many that are mentioned in pre-Asokan sources such as the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: alms-giving, listening to the Buddha, etc., thinking about the Triple Gem, and constructing stūpas and worshiping them with garlands, wreaths, paint, and anjali. But Apaḍāṅga adds to these a number of specific acts that are otherwise known only in the inscriptions: presenting lamp-stands, erecting stone pillars, balustrades, throne-stands, ornamental umbrellas and dharmic-celulas, participating in or organizing the construction of Buddhist rails, and making reliquaries out of precious substances.29 This catalog will be datable with a great deal of precision once the parallel development of the inscriptive technical discourse of pious acts has been
charted out. The palaeographic stages show certain characteristics: the Mauryan inscriptions at Sāñchi and Amaravati know only of “pillar gift” or simply “gift”; subsequently new technical terms emerged: “cross-bar gift,” “railing gift.” With the passing of time more terms were added to this language: “lion-throne gift,” “dharma-cakra gift,” “lamp-stand gift,” “coping stone gift,” “carved slab gift,” “entrance pillar gift.”

My point in providing this detail is not to suggest that I have worked out the line of development of this language; I have not. In fact, the “line” will also have to include considerations of space, because certain terms in this liturgical discourse occur first at different times in different places (e.g., a technical language of cave-gifts emerges first in the western cave temple sites; many stūpa ornamentation terms are unique to Andhra). My point is simply that the Āpadāna is situated in the same discourse. It represents and participates in the development of the stūpa cult at a particular stage that can be discerned on the basis of “hard” evidence. For example, there are a number of specific donative gifts described in the Āpadāna that appear as technical terms only in the inscriptions at Amaravati, whereas a number of the characteristic terms of the later (Ikhshvāku) inscriptions at that site do not appear in Āpadāna: this gives us some indication of both the place (Andhra Pradesh) and time (post-Maurya, pre-Ikhshvāku) in which the Āpadāna was current.

Similarly, it should be possible to locate the subtle developments of the cosmic Buddha biography from Cariyāpitaka to Āpadāna within a nuanced understanding of the art historical stages discernible in the hodge-podge of carvings. For example, at Bhārhat many of the rail carvings, dated to about the middle of the second century B.C., contain identified scenes of jātakas that line up, in part, with Cariyāpitaka, but which seem to be, given their inclusion with different sorts of labelled scenes, incorporated within a this-life biography of Buddha as well as an explicit chart of previous Buddha-time. Buddhavamsa, then, may be roughly coeval with the Bhārhat railings. But there is still much to be done before any definite conclusions can be reached, since art historians will have to reevaluate their identifications of certain scenes in order to assess the degree to which they correspond to the texts that actually belong to the periods in question. Simple questions, like do we see the Buddhavamsa version of the Buddha’s cosmic miracle illustrated in any of the carvings, have not even been asked. Again, my point is a general one: the texts and the carvings participate in the same story-telling tradition, the history of which will become clear only when they are examined together.

There is a third problem about the epigraphs that must be reckoned with, and that overlaps with the two points I have just made. Unlike the later Brahmī epigraphs that have been so masterfully analyzed by Schopen, the early Brahmī donative inscriptions that I have been discussing do not indicate a specific recipient. This goes deeper than an absence of that sectarian specification which began to characterize donative inscriptions only in about the first century A.D., under the Kushans and their Śārvāstivādin favorites. In the early Brahmī inscriptions we do not even have an indication of what it meant to give a gift, nor who was supposed to accrue the merit, nor how they were supposed to do so. The inscriptions are bare: generally just “the gift (dānam) of (donor’s)” How then do we go about reconstructing the epistemology according to which agents of various complexity considered it a good thing to join together in order to perform stūpa worship and other pious Buddhist acts known from the inscriptions of the day? What Buddhist ideology of gift-giving made giving Buddhist gifts rational? Considering the complex mobilization of resources and people that was required in order to effect any specific stage in the development of the great stūpas, it is reasonable to assume that there was such a shared understanding of the value of Buddhist piety, a shared understanding that united all these different agents (whatever their ulterior personal motivations) together in specific collective projects: giving Buddhist gifts.

My short answer to the problem of intent is that the Āpadāna and related texts provide the ideological component or “inside” of human actions that left as their “outsides” wreaths of withering flowers, remnants of oil and incense and food, and of course the actual pillars, cross-bars, etc., that still survive today. Among the many ways in which the language of the Āpadāna parallels the epigraphs, it uses “dānam” (gift) as a category unto itself, with all its subvarieties described and catalogued according to method and result in a self-referential discourse. In his or her apadāna each monk or nun states, parallelly the inscriptional remains, “I gave such-and-such gift (dānam) during the time of such-and-such Buddha; I experienced no unpleasant states in subsequent transmigration; in the present I achieved arhatship: this is the fruit of that gift (fruit of ānāmasa idam phalam).” A donative inscription that simply states “the such-and-such dānam of so-and-so” is not at all ambiguous if we remember that the ABCs were coeval with the giving and inscribing of the gifts. The Āpadāna tells in full detail what a dānam means, and why and how it is done. The only questions left open in its karmically black-and-white world concern the variety of gift and the identity of donor (which is precisely the information recorded in the inscriptions). The very nature of the Āpadāna rendered further elaboration on stone redundant. Such elaboration of purpose appeared in epigraphic records only later, after the Āpadāna had been displaced by subsequent revisions of its “Great Story,” starting with Divyāvadāna, that had different epistemological orientations.
So it is to the ABCs that we must look if we want to reconstruct the "insides" of the actions in question. I have already attempted to sketch out the general framework of meaning in which the ABCs set Buddhist action, the ideology of gift-giving reflected in and constituted by those Buddhist texts (i.e., the ABCs) that were being composed at the same time that the stūpa were being constructed and inscriptions inscribed. Positing this framework of meaning implies neither that the texts describe the actual practices nor that the actual practices were mere enactments of the stories in the texts. Instead, it implies that both overlapped at an "epistemic" or "archaeological" level of thought, to borrow Michel Foucault's useful terminology. The ABCs, unlike their inscrptional counterparts, provide insight into the philosophical sophistication of this thought,\(^\text{48}\) which attempted to increase the value of the Buddha's legacy to humanity in light of new questions that emerged after Aśoka's imperial unification of the subcontinent constituted, for the first time, a totality of which the various Indian kingdoms and other social groupings became parts.\(^\text{59}\) This universalization of the Path consisted of a series of biographical analyses of the religious act, first with reference only to the Buddha but finally with reference to other people who represent an enormous cross section of cosmic time and space, of cosmic society. Buddhas and arhats share a virtue that ordinary people do not: they know their previous lives. This well-established canonical detail had immense ramifications for post-Aśokan Buddhist practice, after it had been realized that these previous lives encode a program for action here-and-now. It is within this epistemology that we should imagine the acts that produced the stūpas.

In the next section I want to elaborate upon a few of the many ways in which the Apadāna narratives inform the nature of the actions represented by the surviving ruins. I will focus on three topics: the relationship between stūpa and biography, the symbolism of the stūpa, and the nature of the complex agency that produced the great stūpas of early post-Aśokan India.

### Biography as Empire

The connection between biography and stūpa is more direct than I have yet allowed. As Paul Mus has shown us,\(^\text{60}\) the stūpa is more than a representation of the cosmic Buddha biography: it is the cosmic Buddha biography. The stūpa of the Buddha is precisely what the Buddha biography has become in the time between the Paniniṇīya and today. The relic it contains is the material body (rāpakāya) of the Buddha-in-nirvāṇa or some Buddhist saint-in-nirvāṇa.\(^\text{61}\) The "stories" it illustrates are the teachings of Buddha, his body of Dharma (dharmakāya). According to Mus, at the Paniniṇīya Buddha did not die in the way modern Westerners think of death; he was merely transformed. His legacy in the present, that is his ongoing biography within saṃsāra, is the combination of bodily and linguistic relics that the stūpa literally constitutes. The participants in the stūpa cult thus participate in an unbroken continuation of the pious activities that Buddhists did before Gotama was transformed in Paniniṇīya: give food, garlands, flowers, scents, fences, stairways, walkways, houses, umbrellas, seats, clothes, flags, service, worship, praise, and memory to the Buddha himself, conceived as a participant in the present.

The ABCs confirm Mus' thesis entirely. Their language is rich with plays on the metaphors of Buddhism as the "inheritance" from the Buddha by his "children," of Buddha as the sacrificial altar and fires, and of other perspectives that Mus labored to suggest. Most important for our purposes, the Apadāna texts about stūpa (and Bodhi tree) worship echo unmistakably Mus' view that the worshiper regards the stūpa as though it were the Buddha\(^\text{62}\) or as the Buddha himself,\(^\text{63}\) who never died but was transformed into a saṃsāra collection of bones and books and an (unknowable) nirvāṇic state (all the ABC biographies, like those Mus actually studied, "end" with the Buddha alive and establishing his "estate").

Remarkably, Mus apparently came up with his analysis largely on the basis of intuition; it is notoriously difficult to develop (or even understand) his work because he seldom had actual textual passages to support his conclusions. Following Foucher, Mus discussed certain canonical suttas and then the usual range of later Pāli and Buddhist Sanskrit texts, but he did not discuss the ABCs. He was, as a result, forced (unnecessarily) into intellectual gymnastics in order to make the Buddhist texts reveal the ideology (that he had discerned through his creative reading of the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads). For, it is only in the ABCs that this ideology is actually stated, described, and constituted. That is because the ABCs were composed in the critical period of transition between the canonical suttas and the Buddhist Sanskrit texts, and so they alone spell out in detail the process by which an ideology (of the cosmic Buddha/universal soteriology) that is absent (though perhaps foreshadowed) in the earlier suttas came to be simply presumed (and reworked) by the Buddhist Sanskrit authors. At the same time that the ABC authors were thus changing, embellishing, and praising the Buddha's dharmakāya, the participants in the stūpa cult were changing, embellishing, and praising his rāpakāya. These two groups overlapped; they participated in a single episteme: the stūpa is the union of the texts and the donative inscriptions, the union of ideology and practice.

Just as the stūpa does not symbolize the Buddha and his biography but actually is the Buddha and his biography, so too the stūpa is not the symbol of a universal society but the product and project of a universal society. Apadāna is the story of one enormous biographical web, in which Buddha

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and the saints in his dispensation knew each other and the same previous Buddhas, lived in the same ancient cities under the same ancient kings, and attended the same festivals or funerals or dharma-talks. Sometimes this is explicit: the Buddha's aunt reached nivāsa with 500 nuns who were her kinsfolk and companions, en masse, throughout her previous lives.44 Rāhula transmigrated with his sister;45 many groups of monks transmigrated together;46 the seven ancient daughters of Kīkī King of Kāsi ended up sisters in the same convent;47 marriages (including that between Buddha and Yasodharā) are bonds for eternity.48 The trope of the cotransmigration of social units (homologous to the complex agents in the inscriptions) is always implied, due to the basic epistemological position that the biographical web is still being spun by those who are part of it but have not yet escaped it. The Apadāna describes a series of Buddha eras in which large numbers of people, participating in the then-ongoing Buddha biography together, move on together through cosmic time until they are born together in the time of Gotama Buddha and achieve together the goal of his dispensation. The biography of the Buddha himself is indistinguishable from the biographies of all those who were involved in the complex agencies that provided the context for his (and their) actions throughout time. As the biography is ongoing, so too is the series of complex agencies that continues in this Buddha era to create a Buddha's legacy by caring for his earthly "bodies." His biography is their biography; Apadāna is part of the biography of a cosmic society still moving on together toward nivāsa: a universal society whose members are the participants, past and present, in the stūpa cult.

There are other ways, too, in which the ABCs drive home this point that the stūpa cult is the ongoing cosmic Buddha biography qua universal soteriology. In the Apadāna the participants in the stūpa cult are superhuman in addition to human: devas, yaṁkhas, nāgas, and other mythical beings are described as present at and active in the construction and festivals of worship of stūpas. This does more than provide insight into the presence of these beings at the stūpas, which was constituted by the stūpa sculptures and carvings (usually understood as "influences" on Buddhism of the fertility goddesses and animistic spirits that haunt the timelessly dreamy Indian mind). It allows us, more importantly, to understand that the universality represented in the stūpa cult is more than theoretical or symbolic: the entire universe really was centered around the stūpa, around the Buddha. The universally attended and extremely joyous festival in which the Buddha reveals the Buddhavamsa (a common trope in the self-understanding of later Mahāyāna sutras) is, in the Apadāna and the stūpa cult, homologous to the actual, then-present-day, world. The actual festivals that effected the various stages in the development of the stūpas (and even the ideology of competitive one-upmanship is spelled out in Apadāna)49 constituted the continuation of a Buddha biography that was simultaneously the continuation of a universal society, namely the congregation of all those donors (and the supernatural beings) under one complex agency that organizes and sponsors the festival.

Likewise, as I have already indicated in part, this extension of the Buddha biography across time (pre-Siddhattha lives and post-Gotama lives) was complemented by an extension of the Buddha biography across space. Buddhavamsa treats the "spreading out of the relics" (dhātvatīthiṇhāroma)50 of a Buddha as one among its many categories for telling Buddha biographies: just as it asks of each Buddha "how long did he remain an ascetic?" or "what was the name of his father?" so it asks, "were his relics spread out?". It turns out that the answer is "no" for sixteen Buddhas, "yes" for the remaining nine (including Gotama). The "spreading out" of Gotama's relics — i.e., the distribution over space of his ongoing biography — is well known in Buddhological circles. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta contains a famous account of the distribution of relics after Gotama's funeral, which constitutes a geopolitical map of Magadha (northeastern India). Buddhavamsa not only categorically defines this "distribution" as part of the ongoing Buddha biography; it appropriates the actual verses out of Mahāparinibbāna Sutta and incorporates them within its own greatly expanded enumeration of the relics and their subsequent journeys.51 In Buddhavamsa this is not just a map of Magadha; it is a geopolitical map of an India conceived on a scale that was possible only after the imperial unification of the subcontinent (under Aśoka).52

Again, this is not "popular legend" but extremely sophisticated thought about the then-real world. For the "cosmic" and "universal" society that I have been describing is, as I have already suggested, constituted by the people who actually participated in the stūpa cult (whether in the second century B.C. or one hundred thousand eons ago). The Buddha biography, extended in both time and space by the ABCs and the diffusion of stūpas, is the biography of a then-real, complex sociopolitical organization, namely the post-Aśokan Indian imperial formations of the Sungs and the Sātavāhanas. The inscriptions alone make it clear that the stūpa cult developed within the post-Aśokan imperial process.53 And in light of the fact that the earliest "hard" evidence for the existence of any litic record or the construction of any stūpas is Aśokan, that is imperial; in light of the improbability that anyone other than an emperor would have had the power to hold a festival and build a stūpa on the scale that we are talking about, and at major intersections of major land and water routes throughout the empire(s); in light of the certainty that subsequent additions to these stūpas by the later Sātavāhanas and Ikshvākus were decidedly imperial acts, it does
not seem remarkable that the inscriptions should bear the names of emperors. It is the world-conquering Buddhist monarch, the cakkavattin, who is the agent organizing the pious work/festival that gathers together people from all those places (the extension of the Buddha biography in space) and all those walks of life (the extension of the Buddha biography in time) in order to constitute the continuing biography of the Buddha, cosmic society, and the empire: the stūpas are the constitutions of polities, the inscriptions the signatures of representative citizens, and the texts political philosophy.

As I have already mentioned, each Āpādāna actor experiences in his or her cosmic biography a period of transition between the first performance of a Buddhist action—often a trivial gesture or fleeting recollection—and the final attainment of nirvāṇa in the time of a Buddha (Gotama). This period of transition lasts for countless eons, but it is entirely pleasant: only birth in heaven or on earth, and always in a state of luxury that vastly magnifies the original piety. These descriptions contain as a matter of course enumerations of the times that each monk or nun was a Wheel-Turning Monarch or his homolog the King of Gods (or their analogs, those kings’ queens); the number of times that they attained “local kingship” within a larger empire is, when stated at all, sloughed off as “beyond reckoning.”

The point is that the political and religious ideologies, which we tend to treat as distinct, are utterly entwined and presuppose each other: the cakkavattin is cakkavattin because he was once a pious Buddhist; cakkavattins, in order to demonstrate that they are cakkavattins (and because it is the very nature of cakkavattins) are pious Buddhists today. The citizens of the empire, from “local kings” on down, participate in the ongoing biography (that the cakkavattin constitutes: the empire itself) because they are where they are today—human, after all—only having already participated in this biography during previous lives, and because the texts tell them how participation in it during the present life will assure future, greater blessings and eventual nirvāṇa.

Everyone benefits from the cakkavattin’s festival, with the exception of those who do not, at least with an approving glance, participate. From the lowliest village to the headman whose name goes on the pillar, from the offerer of a flower that he found on the highway to the wealthy sethi or sāniṣṭha who singularly makes a contribution equal to what others can give only if they rally together, all participants are assured a part in the Buddha biography, the cosmic story of their own salvation. All these people—even the workmen who clean the stūpa and the grounds, the dyers, the plasterers, the musicians, the onlookers, and the people there who speak words that praise the Āpādāna—can be certain that they will one day be local kings and world emperors themselves, will one day possess minds so enlightened that they will remember the moral acts of previous lives (including participation together in these very festivals) and will one day sing apadaṇas of their own beatitude in order to encourage others to perform these same actions.

Conclusion

The festivals for constructing, improving, and worshiping a stūpa (or a Bodhi tree, or a place sacralized by a Buddha’s presence) or the sangha were the historical situations in which text, inscription, and carving came together. Festivals were the actions constitutive of the Buddha’s then-present biography. Early post-Asokan Indian Buddhist emperors, equating that biography with their empire(s), constituted those empires by organizing such festivals: mobilizing people and resources in common projects that left as their effects the architecture and carvings, that claimed as their major (already complex) agents the donors, and that proceeded according to the ideological framework of the texts. I want to suggest that the texts were actually recited or performed during the festivals. There is plenty of reason to assume that they were composed for performance; there is also every reason to think that they would be “festive additions” to such an occasion. The ABCs are all written in light and delightful Pāli verse, full of alliteration and rhyme, suspense and drama, pathos and humor.

The purely entertainment value, however, is overshadowed by the relevance that these texts had for the festival as its ideological basis: it is the story that justifies the donor’s participation in these particular forms of piety, that provides directions and specifications for that piety, that assures him or her of future bliss. It is the story that makes these present at the festival feel good about their participation.

In the end, feeling good—about one’s actions, about the Buddha, about the empire—is what the texts, inscriptions, and carvings are all about. The texts and carvings produce aesthetic and religious pleasure at the same time that they narrate certain ideas about the nature of the world, the empire, and the Buddha; the happy willingness with which the donors participate is reflected in the act of carving their names in stone, for all to see at the festival. The Buddhavamsa account of the prototypical biography festival, in which the text itself is proclaimed amid throngs of human and supernatural beings, develops an almost untranslatable language of mental pleasure—laughing a huge laughter (hasati mahaḥāsāt), heretipulating with delight (uttahatthaḥ), pleased with mental pleasure (ciitapādaṇa panna), having a mind of delight (tutthānūnāsana), satisfied (santuṣita), overjoyed (pamodita), thrilled (udgāpaita), good-minded (sumana)—repeated over and over again. That is the state of all the people who participate in the paradigmatic biog-
racy festival, who listen to the Buddhavamsa. And they respond with song and dance and reflection and devotion. The happiness that makes the festival happen is excelled only by the happiness that it generates.

And it is precisely this mental act—being happy in a Buddhist context—that in the Apadāna defines the efficacy of ritual. It was "because of that deed well done with intention and resolve" (tena kammaṃ sukatena cetanāt pahādhi ca), or simply "because of that mental pleasure" (tena citta-puṇādēna) that monk after monk, nun after nun, and even the Buddha himself experienced lifetimes of pleasant existence, universal rulership, and material wealth, until finally they realized the ultimate happiness, the true perfection of mind, nirvāṇa. The festival, with its melodic chanting and pretty pictures, its crowds of people in the presence of big shots, the flowers and dancing, the lamps and the incense, constituted that happiness and was in turn constituted by it. That mental act was performed by the participants in the festival, who simultaneously acted as citizens in the empire and as characters in the ongoing Buddha biography.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 42.
3. Ibid., p. 39.
6. Schopen occasionally treats the textual evidence as though it were largely irrelevant (e.g., Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism," pp. 9-23, esp. pp. 14, 22-23; cf. the treatment of textually based reconstructions of the "origin" of the Mahāyāna in "Mahāyāna and Indian Inscriptions"), although his work generally is directed at textualists, that is, at evaluating the nature of texts on the basis of the inscriptions. Underrepresented in his work is the potential value texts have in confirming the points he makes about the epigraphic record (but cf. in this regard Schopen's use of vamsa texts for confirming epigraphic readings in "On the Buddha and His Bones: The Conceptual of a Relic in the

Inscriptions from Nāgārjunikūṭa," Journal of the American Oriental Society 108, no. 4 (October–December 1988), pp. 527-537). More important, Schopen has done little work from the other side: that is, allowing textual data to challenge and nuance the epigraphic conclusions just as the epigraphic conclusions challenge the texts.
7. My own perspective owes much of its substance to the combined work of my colleagues and teachers, especially Ronald Inden, in the ongoing Seminar on Text and Knowledge in South Asia at the University of Chicago. We have been developing and laying a "constitutivist" method, which in this context is a view that text and epigraph are mutually constituting discourses in time, constitutive of each other and also of the historical situation(s) in which they were produced. For examples of the new knowledge that such a reading of text-and-epigraph makes possible for all periods, see Inden's "Imperial Formation, Imperial Purāṇa," forthcoming in Post-Orientalist Approaches to the Study of South Asian Texts, ed. Inden, and my own contribution to that volume, "Buddhist History: The Sri Lankan Pali Vamsa"; cf. Inden's Imagining India (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), especially chap. 6, "Reconstructions." The "constitutive" method builds on the work of modern critical thinkers including Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Edward Said, upon the basis of the late R. G. Collingwood's systematic philosophy; for an introduction to Collingwood's philosophy, see his An Autobiography (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939) and An Essay on Philosophical Method (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935).
9. Underlying this anachronistic scholarship is an assumption that the authors of the later texts merely repeated ancient oral traditions in which the stories already preexisted, full blown. But the evidence for that assumption is limited, in the early post-Aśokan period anyway, to the conclusions of scholars about what is represented in the carvings at Bhārhat and Sānchi. This gets very slippery because most of the carvings from this period do not actually have labels at all, and reconstructing the stories they tell has largely been a matter for guesswork.
10. The fact may be that the carvings gave shape to the later texts that seem to correspond to them, rather than the other way around.
11. Mary E. Lilley, ed., The Apadāna of the Khuddaka Nikāya (London: Pāli Text Society, 1925, 1927), 2 vols. My citations are to Lilley's edition throughout, but there are much better editions available in Sinhala (I find the Hewawithana Bequest edition reliable), Devanāgari, and Thai scripts. I cite Lilley's edition because I assume that despite its difficulties, it is more accessible to readers of English than (superior) editions in Asian scripts.
12. Definitive work on the dating of these texts remains to be done (my own work herein on the epigraphic evidence is meant as a contribution to this
project, but no scholar to my knowledge has suggested that they were composed before the time of Aśoka; the question is how long after Aśoka they were composed. A. K. Warder argues on the basis of meter that the texts belong to the second and first centuries B.C. (Pāli Text Society, 1967), pp. 303, 346; compare his statements in Indian Buddhism [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1970], p. 298), and I believe that this can be demonstrated on other grounds as well. In addition to my arguments in this essay about the overlap of these texts with the early Brahmi inscriptions that are dated to the same two centuries, the study of intertext further clarifies the point. *Apadāna* quotes Carīyāpitaka and *Buddhavamsa* in addition to many earlier texts (as discussed below); this gives some indication of how late it is. But *Apadāna* was known by the authors of early (Sāvātivādin) Buddhist Sanskrit works, including Divyāvīddhāna (compare Lilley, The *Apadāna*, vol. 1, p. 6 v. 77 [Buddhāpadāna] with E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, eds., The *Divyāvīddhāna: A Collection of Early Buddhist Legends* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886], p. 460 [note the loss of the syntactical integrity of the Pāli when it is translated into Sanskrit]; ibid., p. 533 [jayātāni eva satyaṁ kriyāṁ Buddhaya āśaṁ] is apparently a [poor] translation of the typical concluding statement of virtually every *apadāna* [chādahāthīkā sacchikā keśam Buddhassa āśaṁ]; ibid., p. 195–196 [mahāyā mānavīkā kārayā duryāy kārayā upasate] is similarly a Sanskritization of a very familiar *apadāna* refrain and *Anuvāatāgāthā* [see K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983], p. 92]; this gives some indication of how early it is. For an extended review of the evidence that the ABCs postdate the Buddha by “several centuries,” see Oliver Abney-Jayak, A Textual and Historical Analysis of the Khuddaka Nīkāya (Colombo: Tissera, 1984), pp. 164–182, 214–215. Heinz Bechert has tried to date the text considerably later than most scholars (as late as the third century A.D.), even though he allows the possibility of second or first century B.C.—see his “Buddha-Feld und Verdenstibertragung: Mahāyāna-Ideen im Theravāda-Buddhismus Ceylons,” Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques 5e. série, vol. 62 [Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1976], p. 48), but his argument is based on an understanding of both “Theravādin orthodoxy” and “Mahāyāna ideas” that is extremely problematic; see, for an initial critique, Schopen, “Two Problems,” esp. pp. 46–47.


14. Compare V. Fauboll, ed., The *Sutta-Nipāta* (SN) (London: Pāli Text Society, n.d. [1885]), pt. 1, pp. 6–12 (Khaggavīrāsāsana); with Lilley, The *Apadāna*, vol. 1, pp. 8–13 v. 8–49 (Pacekkabhuddāpadāna); the commenatary tradition on SN also attributes these verses to Pacekkabuddhas.


16. The connection of these early saints’ verses to the *Apadāna* is most intimate: many of the *apadānas* take up and incorporate the same monk’s or nun’s verses in *Thera-Therigāthā*, continuing the process, evident even in the latter texts, of adding biographical “rubrics” to the core verses. See Norman, *Pāli Literature*, pp. 89–90, who goes as far as saying that *Apadāna* is “almost an appendix to the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā” (p. 89). It might be better to think of *Apadāna* as “almost a commentary” on those texts. It, like another *Khuddaka-nikāya* text that is a “commentary” on *Sutta-nipāta* (*Nīlāsena*), represents a crucial stage in the development of commenatary thought within Theravādin history. In terms of *Apadāna*, the process is continued by Dhammapāla, who comments on the *Thera-Therigāthā* by quoting the *apadāna* of each monk or nun after providing a prose account of it. It is thus the case that the biographical details in C. Rhys-Davids’ famous translation of the *Thera-Therigāthā* (*Psalms of the Sisters and Psalms of the Brethren*) owe their origin to the *Apadāna* stage in the commenatary process.


19. Compare Morris, ibid., p. 3 v. 23 with Lilley, The *Apadāna*, vol. 1, pp. 20 v. 79 (Sāriputra Thera), vol. 2, pp. 156 v. 38 (Udana Thera), and p. 422 v. 9 (Nāsatvakha Thera); vol. 2, p. 429 vv. 1–6 (Dhammapālī Thera) presupposes *Buddhavamsa*, employing its typical prediction (rather than the alternate form typical of other *apadānas*) and making obvious reference to the *Buddhavamsa* account of Sumeñha (compare Morris, The *Buddhavamsa* and the Carīyā-Pitaka, p. 10 vv. 66f); for examples of other *Buddhavamsa* verses quoted in *Apadāna* see Lilley, *The Apadāna*, vol. 3, p. 479 vv. 2–6 (Mahākatthikha Thera) = p. 481 vv. 2–6; p. 484 vv. 2–6; p. 486 vv. 2–6 [etc.]. A listing of *Buddhavamsa* pādas that appear in *Apadāna* would be even more extensive than a similar list of Carīyāpitaka pādas in *Buddhavamsa*.


21. They are giving (dāna), moral discipline (śīla), turning away from the world (nekkhaṃma), wisdom (paññā), exertion (viriya), patience (lekotā), truthfulness (sacca), resolution (adhiṭṭhāna), love (mettā), and even-mindedness (upekkhā).

22. Even the one suṣṭha that would seem to contradict this statement, *Mahāpadāna Sutta* of the *Dighāñikāya*, supports the contention I am making. It is true that it details the lives of previous Buddhas and indicates that the Buddha made good kamma then, which at least hints at the full-blown cosmic biography. And there is no doubt that the details of this sutta are a major basis for the *Buddhavamsa* (and consequently for the *Apadāna*) account, including the name, *Apadāna*, that defines the genre to
which all three ABCs self-consciously belong. But in Mahāpadaṇa the problematic frame is not universal soteriology; the question of the sutta is about whether Buddhas remember their own previous lives or learn about them from gods, not about the universality of Buddha's messages. Thus Mahāpadaṇa Sutta lacks the essential revelation that each Buddhan laid the foundation for all people, even those who did not achieve the goal thereand-then, to achieve it sometime. The stark contrast between Mahāpadaṇa Sutta and Buddhavamsa is best seen in a comparison of their respective tellings of the "Brahma begs Buddha to preach" myths. In the former text this characterizes other Buddhas' lives too (showing a stage in the development of the Buddhavamsa) but otherwise stays close to the original myth, in sharp distinction to Buddhavamsa itself, as described below.


27. Ibid., p. 67 v. 20: Etesam bharmarajānaṃ aṃśam nukatānaṃ/ācakktāvāsā tam maggam nibbute te sasāvokā ti.

28. Specifically, the Buddha magically creates (vimittā) with his mind a gem-studded palace and then imagines all the Buddhas and disciples of cosmic time together, in that palace. The palace itself bears a striking similarity to the stūpa, for in it the Buddha "provides" to the previous Buddhas precisely what people in this period provided to the Buddha (in his present "palace," the stūpa itself): wreaths, precious substances, incense, lamp-stands, banners, lion-thrones, musical instruments, celestial songs, ratt with torana, etc. The situation created in the Buddha's mind is also homologous with the cosmic festival of the Buddhavamsa, and thus with the cosmic festivals recorded in Apadāna as well as the then-modern festivals of the Śrāvakas and Sāvāvataṃs, as the I argue below, the texts were performed and the stūpas were built.


31. E.g., ibid., vol. 1, p. 153 v. 4: anippadāma Buddhe saṃsaṃsā bhūvaṇapādā ("the fulfillment/growth of seeds [of karma] is assured by the Buddha for everyone").


34. Schopen, "Two Problems."


36. Collingwood's most extensive description of "complex agency," situated historically and defined philosophically, is his The New Leviathan or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarity (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1971 [1942]). Collingwood begins with action motivated by the human passions, "personal motivations," but demonstrates that human agency always extends beyond the passions because people act simultaneously as members of social units from families right up to civilizations. All human action thus has collective, societal dimensions characterized by rational activity aimed at constructing, defining, maintaining, improving, and/or regulating the social formations of which individuals are constitutive. The passions may still play a role in action, but collective action—"complex agency"—implies and necessitates overlapping "collective motivations" in the form of an epistemology that is shared and thereby constituted as the arena in which consensus is produced. Because epistemology is, for Collingwood, created in time and space by the human thought that also produced the texts (or inscriptions or monuments) that survive today as evidence of it, rather than some essence (e.g., collective consciousness, cultural productivity, sociopolitical "context") that exists outside of and is merely expressed by actual texts, its recovery is a strictly historical problem that requires an imaginative reconstruction, based upon a learned reading of the evidence itself, of the relationships between human thoughts and sociopolitical formations in any given historical period. "Collective motivations" (e.g., ideologies, stereologies, Buddhologies) and collective agencies (kingdoms, caste groups, religious sects) are recovered in the single act of interpreting the primary evidence that was constituted by and constitutive of both theory and practice. Inde has made brilliant use of Collingwood's ideas about "complex agency" in his Imagining India, especially the idea of "caste as citizenship." Compare here Lamotte (History, p. 414), who recognizes (as have other scholars) the fact of complex agency (although not in those terms) but does not then explore the ramifications of such a view.

41, 44, 124, and 126 (friends, family, and relatives); cf. H. Lüders, A List of Brahmi Inscriptions (Epigraphia Indica 16, pp. 1-179), nos. 1214, 1278.

38. E.g., Lüders, List, no. 1186 (guild of corn dealers: donābhaṇa).

39. The best example is the famous set of inscriptions on the Bhatiprolu stūpa’s relic caskets: see G. Bühler, “The Bhatiprolu Inscriptions” (EI 1, pp. 323-329). Here, the richness of “complex agency” in the construction of stūpas is apparent. A king called Kubera[ka] organized at least two committees (gothi) and a mercantile town (nigamā), the members of which are listed at length on the actual caskets and which themselves already represent complex agencies, into a single complex agency that effected the enthroneing of the three caskets together in a single stūpa. Compare in this regard Lüders, List, no. 234 (Sāhichi; “Buddhist Committee” [bodhaṅghān] from Dhammavardhāna: ibid., no. 351), no. 273 (Sāhichi, a gothi from Vidisi). Cf. further no. 783 (Dhārāṇa, a group of dāyakas from Purikā); no. 214 (Sāhichi; upākara from Navagiri) and others.

40. Lüders, List, no. 195 (Sāhichi; the village of Vcaja); no. 401 (Sāhichi; village of Avatāravati); no. 625 (Sāhichi; village of Chetavamoragiri (?) ); cf. Sivaramamurti, Amaravati Sculptures, no. 22 (“of the Paśupatī community”).

41. Sivaramamurti, Amaravati Sculptures, nos. 12, 16 (?), 58 (dhāmakatākasa nigama); cf. Lüders, List, no. 1261 (Amaravati, bhādānigama, no. 705 (Bhārāhut, Karahakata nigama).

42. E.g., ibid., no. 69 (a nun, herself a pupil of the monk who is overseeing the repairs at Amaṣāga, acting as the representative of her daughters), no. 80 (nun acting for her siblings); Lüders, List, no. 163 (Sāhichi, groups of nuns); at Bhatiprolu (Bühler, “Bhatiprolu Inscriptions” p. 228 no. 5) it would appear that Kubka’s technical title was “Monk of/for the Committee” (gothiṣanamana).

43. A beautiful example of complex agency in the Apanāṇī understanding of stūpa construction is Lilley, The Apadāna, vol. 1, pp. 70-74 (Upavama Thera). Compare ibid., vol. 1, p. 33 v. 2 (Mahākassapa Thera; “calling together my relatives and friends [tātārītive]); and vol. 2, p. 425 (Dhāmānājaka Thera; “calling together my relatives”); v. 89 p. 2 (Ayāgadaya Thera; “having addressed the people in charge of repairs I gave the capital”).

44. E.g., Lilley, The Apadāna, vol. 1, p. 59 (Pilindavaccha Thera; organizes an alms-giving to the sangha in conjunction with śīvastaṭṭha; ibid., p. 171 (Vedikāraka Thera; holds a rail-festival [v. 2: vedikāya mahaṃ kavel]); ibid., p. 172 (Saparvāryga Thera; participates in a group pūjā); ibid., p. 172 (Ummāppamhiya Thera; participates in a “great stūpa festival” [v. 1: mahāsthāpanihāna]); ibid., p. 249 (Dhammāsānaka Thera; participates in a great Bodhi tree festival [mahābodhīhāna]); vol. 2, p. 397 (Ekasā校友ya Thera; participates in a mahābodhimahā); ibid., pp. 513-514 (Mekkaladojakā Thera; gives a ‘gridle’ at the festival to finance a stūpa then another [at for the festival] when it is finished).

45. Art historians have been very conscious of the fact that the ancient carvings that contain pictures of stūpas illustrate them as they appeared at the time of the illustration, and thus encode a history of the development of the form of the stūpa. It is thus remarkable that scenes portraying kings and queens have always been identified with scenes from some sort of collective historical memory (the texts that are supposed to embody these tales are, remember, considerably later than the actual carvings), rather than with the actual practices of the then-present monarchy; likewise festival scenes illustrate archetypal stories rather than the stūpa worship, kōṣṭhī pūjā, singing and dancing and above all happy times that probably built the rails or pathways on which the illustrations are actually displayed. Sometimes the same historical scene is said to appear several times in a single set of carvings! Moreover, even if these are historical scenes, it is important to ask why they should have been represented at all, hundreds of years after their purported occurrence. In the texts, different tellings of the tales often reflect the different historical circumstances in which they were composed, because the authors of those texts thought about their own past in light of a homology to the present. Thus even if it could be demonstrated that all the illustrations are of famous kings such as Asoka over and over, they may simultaneously illustrate the less-famous kings who, being Asoka’s imperial successors, coordinated the construction of these edifices.

46. A splendid illustration of the ideology behind ever-improving upon the predecessor’s stūpa construction, a characteristic example of Indian imperial-upanishadism, is Lilley, The Apadāna, vol. 1, pp. 70-74 (Upavama Thera). Subsequent emperors would appropriate (in various ways) their predecessor’s monuments, religious practices, etc., just as they appropriated their empires.

47. Compare ibid., vol. 1, p. 4 v. 40 (dipanikkhā—et passim: “Rev. Lamp Giver” is a very popular name in the Apadāna); Lüders, List, no. 929u (Sārnāṭh: pradīpā); Sivaramamurti, Amaravati Sculptures, no. 118 (divokakabha—a late inscription?)

48. The pillar-gift (thaṃbhā jhadānā) is easily the most common and certainly one of the oldest technical terms in this litthic discourse. Cf. Lilley, The Apadāna, vol. 1, p. 172 (Thabhāraka Thera; erects a pillar [thaṃbhā] at the Buddha’s cetiya [here, as elsewhere in Apadāna and extremely common in the inscriptions, “cetiya” is clearly synonymous with “stūpa”]).

49. Cf. ibid., vol. 1, p. 213 (Alambanadāiya Thera; gives a balustrade [ālaṃbana] for a Buddha’s cetiya(?)), with Lüders, List, no. 231a (Sārnāṭh).

50. E.g., Lilley, The Apadāna, vol. 1, p. 55 (Sāhāsanadāiya Thera; gives a lion-throne with ‘foot stool’ after the Buddha had reached mahāmāna [i.e., for him as a relic, in a stūpa (?)]) ibid., pp. 188-189 (Sāhāsanadāiya Thera [3]; gave a śāsanē after the Buddha had died). It is of course very common to see people worshiping an empty lion’s throne, and/or a ‘footstool’ containing footprint of the Buddha, in the carvings of early post-Asokan Buddhist India. Such carvings (also carvings of people
worshiping Bodhi trees (= Enlightenment), of people worshiping dhammacakkī pillars (= First Sermon), and of people worshiping stūpas (= Patimokkha) are considered "aniconic" representations of the various stages in the Buddha biography. This view is not sufficiently nuanced in the scholarly literature. All of these objects are known to have been just that—actual objects of worship at the stūpas where the illustrations were displayed—on the basis of archaeological, epigraphic, and textual (i.e., Aśāra) evidence. The carvings thus contain straightforward illustrations of the actual practices that constituted and were constitutive of the stūpa cult. For epigraphic confirmation of this point, see, e.g., Lüders, List, no. 1223 (Amarāvati, sitāhāna; nos. 1217, 1219, 1235, 1236 (Amarāvati, footprint slab/foot stool). However, there is truth in the aniconic theory to the extent that people did worship these objects as symbols or representations of the Buddha and/or the important events in his life. So we need not go as far as Susan and John Huntington (The Art of Ancient India [New York: Weatherhill, 1985]) in denying aniconism altogether. My own view, however, has an advantage over "symbolist" studies of ancient Buddhist aniconism in so far as it puts aniconic thought at the level of actual practice rather than leaving it an abstraction redundantly represented by the artists and the patrons of the stūpas. I am grateful to Michael Rabe and Robert Brown for clarifying to me the complexity of the issues surrounding the aniconic theory.

51. Compare Lüders, The Aśāra, vol. 1, p. 179 (Adhikāvattha Thera: had an umbrella with covering [chatphathattham] made for a Buddha's stūpa and ibid., pp. 244-245 (Chattāvārya Thera: put a white umbrella on a stupa) with Sivaramamurti, Amaravati Sculptures, no. 92 (vedyāsaka chata, "an umbrella for the ceta\(ya\)). Actual remnants of stone stūpa-umbrellas have been discovered (e.g., M. M. Hamid, et al. Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology at Sanchi, Bhopal State [Archaeological Survey of India] [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1982 (1920)], nos. 72, 77, 78, 79, 80, etc.) and it is of course very common to see umbrellas (even umbrellas that are themselves covered, as in Aśāra) adorning the stūpas that are illustrated in the carvings. The presence of umbrellas, given their significance in Indian royal practice and ideology, provides a constant reminder that these stūpas were constructed within a political world.

52. Compare Lüders, The Aśāra, vol. 1, p. 90 (Dhammacakkī Thera; placed a well-constructed dhammacakkī in front of a Buddha's lion-throne) with any number of contemporary carvings that illustrate the worship of such objects at stūpas and other Buddhist sites (and cf. note 50, above, about the problems of seeing these carvings as "aniconic representations" of a Buddha from the past rather than as illustrations of Buddhist practice in the then-present). Cf. also Sivaramamurti, Amaravati Sculptures, no. 51 (dhammacakkī); Lüders List, no. 866 (bodhicakra).

53. The importance of rākas (sī, vedika, veiaka, veiaka) around the stūpas of this period hardly needs to be documented; the illustrations as well as the ruins abound in them, and the term is an old and common one in the litic discourse. The idea of putting up rākas is also common in Aśāra (e.g., Lüders, The Aśāra, vol. 1, p. 171 [Vedākā Thera], and p. 172 (Saravīvī Thera)). The equally common litic term for cross-bar gift (sīcā dānam), however, appears to retain only its original meaning ("needle-gift") in Aśāra; that text uses the term "legs" (janghal) to refer to the parts of a rākā. This may further indicate the specific situation in which Aśāra had meaning, although I would have expected, given the antiquity of sīcā as a litic term for cross-bar, to find it so used in Aśāra. Perhaps we can detect here the interest of the Aśāra authors in clearly distinguishing the various subvarieties of dāna: it does not allow for a confusion of "cross-bar" and "needle," as does the litic record.


56. There is of course the embarrassing possibility, given the structure of the epigraphic Pakrits (i.e., the indistinguishability of the dative and genitive cases, sometimes even the ablative), that we should translate all these inscriptions "the (dānas) for (recipient of the merit)." It is long-established practice not to view the inscriptions this way, but it makes a degree of sense for certain ones among them.

57. In other work I have been exploring the legacy of Aśāra's karmic absolutism. My article "The Buddha's Bad Karma: A Problem in the History of Theravāda Buddhism" (Numen, June 1990) explores the long debate in later Theravāda history over the Aśāra position that even Buddhas must suffer the effects of previous bad karmas; "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story" (History of Religions Journal, May 1994) explores the "feminist" response to the Aśāra certainty that in the long process of transmigration men remain male and women remain female.

58. On the basis of purely epigraphic records, Schopen too has insisted that the development of the stūpa cult in this period involved the finest minds of the day, scholar-monks who, we cannot doubt, were of the same status as (or actually were) the composers of the Pāli Abhidhamma and the preservers of the texts of "early Buddhism" (see "Two Problems," esp. pp. 24-26).

59. For standard historical accounts of Aśoka—of which there are many—see e.g., V. A. Smith, Aśoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India...
Schopen has confirmed this point in a creative reading of the Nāgārjunikonda inscriptions, which, grammatically at least, equate the terms “relic” and “Buddha” (“On the Buddha and His Bones”). But Schopen, who does not seem to be aware of Mus’ theory, reads into this fact a foreign dualistic incarnationalism: the Buddha is somehow a “living presence” in the relic (p. 537). As Mus has demonstrated, the “indigenous Indian logic” at work in the stūpa cult is more complex than this, and decidedly nondualistic. The relic is the material face of a Buddha whose teachings on nirvāṇa make the (gnostic) description of his “livingness” highly problematic (even though this sort of positive “gnosticism” does eventually emerge in Sanskritic Buddhist thought). Instead, Mus says, it is precisely the message, constantly driven home, that the Buddha’s graspable (sāṃsārīc) biography is today only the biography of bones (and texts = dharmakāyā), which “projects” the devotee into the extradiscursive realm of the Buddha as he really is today, that is nirvāṇa. Still, Schopen’s point is an important one, and the *Apādana* confirms his reading, as do many other texts that Schopen talks about in this context (add to his [single] *Apādana* reference the texts cited below, n. 62 and n. 63).

62. *Lilley, The Apādana*, vol. 1, p. 108 v. 2 (Dhajādāyaka Thera; “As though face to face with the Buddha I worshipped the unexcelled Bodhi Tree” [sambuddha viṣṇu sambuddham avadim bodhibh uccam] = p. 149 v. 3 [Ekānīthiyā Thera] = p. 290 v. 3 [Boddhivandaka Thera]); ibid., p. 111 v. 2, vol. 2, p. 189 v. 5, p. 149 v. 27 (worshipping stūpas “as though face to face with the Buddha”).

63. Schopen’s argument about the meaning of “relic” in the Nāgārjunikonda inscriptions is that the word for relic (“dhāraṇ”) stands in grammatical opposition to words for Buddha, hence relic = Buddha. By this logic, all except the last text among those cited in n. 62 shares the same epistemology: the Buddha is the Bodhi tree or stūpa that is being worshiped (sambuddham ... dhūpan). This connection is explicit in Lilley.


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It is a common trope in *Apadana* that children “tagging on with father” participate in some pious activity (to which father is going), which becomes the guarantee of their own salvation.

It is of course possible that the emperors who organized the stūpa cult conceived of this Buddhist biography only as part of their empires, and that their practices constituted other “Great Stories” (like the epics) as other “parts” of those empires, simultaneously. However, in the early Brahmi period, as far as I am aware, there is no direct inscriptive evidence to confirm such a view; there is only proof that the emperors were, in various ways, involved with Buddhist cultic activity. By the time of the later Sātavāhanas (first-second centuries A.D.; e.g., Gauthamiputra Satakarni et al. at Nasik and Amarāvatī) and especially under the imperial Ikshvakus of Anurāha, (second-third centuries A.D.), on the other hand, it had become standard practice for non-Buddhist emperors to command the development of Buddhist history by empowering queens/vasals/ministers to act as the (organizing) agents of change.

I have already mentioned that the texts are addressed to a plural you,” an audience, that is enjoined to “listen.” There are also internal reasons for making his supposition: unmarked changes of voice that would be unintelligible without separate performers, indeed the very style in which the texts are written (colloquialism, additions of entertainment value, and the like.) This is not the place for an extended discussion of the performative dimensions of the ABCs, which I plan to address in a later work. For initial reflections on performative context and its centrality to the historical interpretation of *apadāna* texts, see my “A Voice from the Silence.”

Given the dating, we see here the prototype for the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahābhārata*, which are written in Sanskrit verse exactly paralleling the style of the ABCs, which tell “Great Stories” that bear obvious similarity to those in the ABCs (cosmicized “maps” of both time and space; India as a single web of interconnection, frame, and *karma*; the centrality of kingship), and which, during the Gupta period, emerged as the kind of imperial discourse that the ABCs had been shortly after the time of Asoka. If I am right about the “festive” context of the ABCs, a great deal of light is also shed upon the performance history of the epics.

Among more than five hundred stories of the Buddha’s former lives, known as the *jātaka* tales, several identify the future Buddha as a king. The history of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia, where such stories are widely known, provides ample examples of royal rulers who self-consciously sought to emulate in their own lives the ideal of future Buddhahood. Cultural representations of the future Buddha as king and of the king as a future Buddha are therefore common themes in the sacred biography of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

McGill’s essay presents a discussion of a set of paintings depicting the Buddha in his penultimate life as King Vessantara. Through stylistic and epigraphic analysis, McGill links these visual narratives painted on canvas to the production of a particular Thai artistic genre in the service of popular ritual performances and recitations of the same narrative, the *Vessantara Jātaka*, as a royal occasion for making merit in order to encounter the future Buddha, Maitreya. His exploration of “Painting the ‘Great Life’” uniquely links the production of a particular art genre to ritual performances centered on a common biographical theme, namely the story of King Vessantara.

Hudak describes the development from prose to poetry of a classical example of Thai literature. The narrative structure of this *jātaka* story underwent changes by multiple authors and conflates in its intentionality