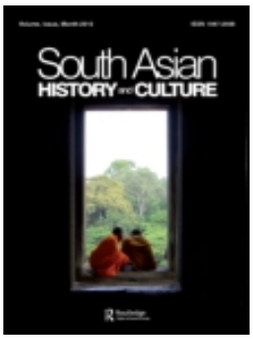

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Buddhist st#pas in South Asia: recent archaeological, art-historical, and historical perspectives, edited by Jason Hawkes and Akira Shimada

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REVIEW ESSAY

Buddhist stūpas in South Asia: recent archaeological, art-historical, and historical perspectives, edited by Jason Hawkes and Akira Shimada, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, 346 pp., Rs. 895, ISBN 0-19-569886-X

From roughly first century BC, through to the second century AD, evidence strongly suggests that the religiosity of the Buddhists in early India substantially focused on the huge funerary mounds called *stūpa* – enclosed with brick or stone – in most cases containing the relics of the Buddha. But with virtual disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian peninsula from around twelfth century AD onwards *stūpas* as ritual monuments steadily went into oblivion. However, since the discovery and subsequent uncovering of the Buddhist *stūpas* in colonial India – in the past almost two centuries – a great deal of scholarship has met the need to study this unique religious architecture, where varied forms of Buddhist ritual presentation took place. Since its inception, *stūpa* studies have been interspersed with some monumental works from Cunningham[1] to Barua,[2] and more recently Snodgrass[3] et al., have pushed the trajectory from descriptive, architectural, stylistic, art-historical, symbolism to newer and unchartered terrains. This has not merely deepened our understanding of such monuments but also equipped us better to understand early Buddhism – to which these monuments essentially belong – in its wider cultural and historical milieu. This volume brings together a motley collection of recent scholarship on *stūpas* in early India – presents new paradigms, concepts and approaches to study this sacred monument and culls and combines data from archaeology, art history and epigraphy that hugely augments our understanding of these monuments in their broader architectural, archaeological, cultural and historical framework.

This volume with a compilation of essays that purportedly breaks new grounds in *stūpa* studies makes the task of reviewing a hazard, as one occasionally runs the risk of over-emphasizing a certain piece of scholarship. It is difficult to achieve uniformity in such multiple-author work as compared to a monograph. Thematically divided into five sections, its 15 essays are neatly positioned in each of the sections.

The volume editors present an 'Introduction' that succinctly charts the course of the emergence, development, evolution, crystallization and recent divergences that have marked the study of the academic discipline of ancient South Asia in general and of Buddhist Studies in particular, with the study of *stūpa* as a category of religious architecture inscribed within it. While the exercise is faultless in terms of charting the historiography, the approach, wherein the evolution of *stūpa* studies appears to be hemmed by the developments in the former fields, tends to marginalize the focus of this volume, effectively pushing the historiography of *stūpa* away from the centrality it deserved in such a work.

The two essays in the first section adopt the critical-historiographical approach for studying India's ancient past, which benefited both the study of early Buddhism and its archaeology. H.P. Ray's essay on the archaeological study of the *stūpas* explores the construction and negotiation of the Buddhist identity in the colonial period. She tries to argue

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that such a negotiation of Buddhist identities was as much achieved through the British discovery of Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as due to the uncovering and dexterous examination of the Buddhist *stūpas* by Alexander Cunningham – whose role and scholarship on Buddhist *stūpas* was singularly pioneering. However, in Ray's essay there is an axiomatic assumption that Buddhist identity either had dissipated or had lain dormant over the last several centuries of the pre-colonial period and that textual studies and archaeological uncovering of ritual buildings turned things around for the Buddhist community; secondly there is a tenuous linkage between Cunningham's archaeological explorations-excavations and a demonstratable consolidation of Buddhist identity in the colonial period. Identities are neither created nor reinforced/consolidated in vacuum – relative crisis and contingencies often force their negotiation. Ray fails to factor this while explaining the process of consolidation of Buddhist identity in colonial India.

In the next essay, Jennifer Howes explores the treatment of the remains of a *stūpa* as legitimate source of study. Taking the second-century AD *stūpa* from Amaravati, she investigates the antiquarian exploration of this Buddhist site and the extrication and movement of Amaravati sculptures to beyond its confines and into external environment. She argues that the manner in which these sculptures were preserved, used by people and institutions – who subsequently owned them – came to have a heavy and unfortunate bearing on the manner in which they shaped our study and understanding of these monuments – an obvious fallout and not an entirely radical postulation.

The second section ('*Stūpa* and its Meaning') contextualizes the *stūpas* in a religious frame and opens with Michael Willis' paper on Buddha's relics that presents an overview of the diverse meaning and types of relics and the manner in which the Buddhists understood and associated with these. Those familiar with the recent fascinating scholarships of Strong,[4] Trainor[5] and Schopen[6] on Buddhist relics would find Willis' essay plebeian and holding out nothing radically new. Many of the assumptions that Willis continues with – initial symbolic representation of the Buddha, figural/iconic representation following the aniconism, etc. – have been severely tested, criticized and found not well-founded.[7] His understanding and inclusion of the 'Hymn of Dependent Origination' into the category of a valid *uddesika-dhātu* ('relics of indication') is both problematic and trifle far-fetched. In terms of freshness of ideas and insight Willis offers precious little.

In Chapter 4, Andy Rotman examines the strategy through which early Buddhist sacred geography was carved, invented and expanded. He ascribes the geographical spread of Buddhism largely to the proliferation of relic shrines and uses textual data to demonstrate what determined and defined a Buddhist site as sacred. But sadly, Rotman is short on innovative ideas with relation to the above process. However, towards the end of the essay he does holds out interesting insight into the manner in which Buddhist–Brahmanical antagonism and conflict spilled over to the contest of sacralizing a place abutting a Brahmanical neighbourhood and co-opting of the Brahmanical site. One wishes Rotman could have devoted much more space to it.

Moving away from import of relics and relic shrines, Robert Brown in the next chapter examines the nature and rationale of the non-religious motifs as found in the carved sculptures at relic sites. His spotlight is on the natural forms – relief carvings of plants and animals – that adorn the *stūpas* of Sanchi (Stūpa I) and Bharhut. He argues that natural patterns at these sites neither merely served decorative purpose nor are arbitrarily placed. Instead the presence of such structured and patterned representations had intent creation of a new kind of religious space which concurrently carved an ideal, secure and separate social space that showcased a microcosm of social ordering and working. Though abstracted and formalized, these representation of natural forms were deemed by the

viewer pilgrims as imbued with a living quality. While the marshalling of sculptural representations of natural motifs and the juxtaposition of symbolism and realism is impressive, yet in the absence of the 'intention' – of the sculptors or of those who commissioned these; intention being lost or unavailable – behind the ordering of such 'utopian' social spaces, Brown's analysis lacks solid backing of historical evidence.

The third section ('The *Stūpa* in Context') brings together four essays that utilize an array of material – archaeological, epigraphic and art-sculptural – from *stūpa* sites to shift focus from the religious contexts of *stūpas* to wider social contexts. In the first essay, Kurt Behrendt examines the narrative sculptural reliefs – the Buddha's life-cycle scenes – from Gandhara. While piecing together the scattered (across museums of South Asia and Europe) sculptural narratives, he abandons the use of traditional textual sources to read and decode these truncated narratives. Instead he gives a shot at reconstructing the original sequence of narratives – that was most certainly viewed, decoded and absorbed by the viewer-pilgrims while circumambulating the *stūpa* shrine – through examining similar narratives that were inscribed on single-stone slabs that were created for small *stūpas*. Besides the novelty of the methodology, his research holds out promise of fresh insight into the study of Gandhara narrative tradition and styles.

'Shedding Skins' by Robert DeCaroli explores complex layers of meaning and imagery associated with *nāga*s. Besides underlining the meaning and understanding of *nāga*s as envisaged in traditional literature, DeCaroli sifts through the inscriptions and sculptural representations from Amaravati – also painstakingly compares them with those at Sanchi and Bharhut – to provide a measured reinterpretation of the category of *nāga*s. Although there is incontrovertible evidence to concur with him that the *nāga*s were integral to the socio-religious life of ancient India, his conclusion that their association with Buddhism, its institutions and rites provided legitimacy to the latter is on shaky ground. Buddhism as an established and popular religion had little call for gaining legitimacy through such association. On the contrary, Buddhism rather provided the *nāga*s – through association with it – to transcend their social status and move up the ladder.

The two succeeding essays showcase the potential of landscape archaeology in the examination of Buddhist *stūpas*. Julia Shaw and Jason Hawkes push the limits of such an approach in the context of the Buddhist sites of Sanchi and Bharhut, respectively. Shaw's core concern is the Sanchi archaeological landscape – ritual and social; monastic and *stūpa* – and studying these by placing them against a wider archaeological context to refine our understanding of early Buddhism and its practitioners' motivations behind the ordering of ritual/religious and social spaces within the wider landscape engineering. Her bold suggestions and insights challenge some of the hitherto received and accepted wisdom concerning early Buddhism. Hawkes' focus is in on Bharhut's landscape archaeology, where he attempts to study these to identify the socio-political and economic dynamics of Bharhut region and employs the same approach to delineate shifts these spheres witnessed in subsequent periods.

The four chapters – 10 to 13 – in the penultimate section contextualize the Buddhist *stūpas* in their wider political, social and material milieu. Concerned with the Kushana period Xinru Liu underscores the transformative role of long-distance trade in effecting changes in Buddhist theology and ideology and infusing it with commercial ethos. While the symbiotic and energetic relationship between trade-commerce and the early Buddhist *Sangha* has been well stressed and recorded,[8] Liu shifts gears to apprise how it actually put a strain on Buddhist ideology and theology to change and transform. While economic forces do seem to have played a role in the ideological transformation of early Buddhism in the period under review, Liu conveniently ignores the role of socio-religious forces and

factors in unleashing such transformations. James Heitzman's complex essay explores the urban context of *stūpas* and the manner in which they formed an important feature of the urban landscape in early India and forged linkages with other features of the urban centres.

Akira Shimada chooses the Amaravati *stūpa* to explore the socio-spatial relationship between Buddhist monasteries and cities of early historic period. While studying the spatial location of Amaravati *stūpa* and its remains in conjunction with those of other similar edifice, he discovers a pattern – Buddhist religious edifices are located on the fringes of the city. For Shimada, the significance of such spatial location is not lost, for he proclaims that the kind of activities that these edifices carried and indulged in – funerary and commercial – were proscribed to be undertaken within city spaces. Even if we accept that *stūpas* and monasteries indulged in activities that were decreed 'impure' by traditional Brahmanical literature, one fails to understand why the Buddhists – who contested Brahmanical ideology of purity – would have agreed to place their religious edifice on the margins of the city and allow these to fall in the 'outside space', unless they were forced to, by social and political forces or had other reasons to do so. Shimada ought to have given a convincing explanation to such supposed acceptance of Buddhists to a Brahmanical ideology.

Jonathan Walters in his essay, 'Stupa, Story, and Empire' explores the linkage between the new biographical tradition of the Buddha that was developed in the *avadāna* literature of the early post-Aśokan period and the proliferation of *stūpas* in this phase. The promise that *avadāna* literature held out for achieving the soteriological goal of *nirvāna* meant that, in the physical absence of the Buddha, *stūpas* as his embodiment became legitimate objects through which the goal of being a part of the Buddha's biography could be accomplished. In Walters' assessment this explains the proliferation of *stūpas* in the early post-Aśokan period and his paradigm appears reasonably cogent. Yet surely motivations behind joining the enterprise of constructing or embellishing a *stūpa* must have been varied as were the agents involved in it. To be certain of the motivations of those involved in their construction, etc., a close reading of epigraphic records left at these sites would be handier rather than pegging it to certain development in the biographical-textual tradition.

In the final section ('The Revival of a Tradition'), Catherine Becker and Jinah Kim in two separate essays demonstrate the appropriation, utilization and manoeuvring of the historical past to meet modern religious and political agenda. Becker devotes attention to the Amaravati *stūpa* and its story in the wake of performance of the *Kālacakra* initiation by Dalai Lama in January 2006. She recalls how the remains of the *stūpa* were re-employed, manipulated and invested with new meanings to provide the site with a new sense of sacrality. Kim's essay is more an attempt to map the revival of *stūpa* construction in modern India and its ramification for hemming and assembling of Buddhist identity in contemporary India.

The volume editors purport that the essays included adopt novel methodologies and break new ground in understanding the ritual architecture of the *stūpas*. This is a claim that is not fully realized. While some essays indeed are outstanding in terms of the employment of methodology and the vast reach of sources and bold suggestions and challenges these pose to received opinions and views, others come up with old, oft-cited sources to which new interpretations are sought to be provided, without being propped by supporting evidence, still others are downright pedestrian, providing precious little by way of innovative ideas.

However, the most serious failing of this assortment of essays is the absolute paucity of essay(s) on some vital religious dimensions of *stūpa* – which is after all an essentially religious edifice. Not a single chapter included explores how ritual space was organized

within *stūpa* complexes nor is there any discussion on the forms of presentation within the ritual space of *stūpas* or on pilgrimage. *Stūpa*s were primarily *tīrtha*s or centres of religious devotion and pilgrimage for accruing merit. The total exclusion of rock-cut *stūpa* complexes and devotion to open-air *stūpa* complexes is something that editors ought to have explained.

Notes

1. Cunningham, *Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments*.
2. Barua, *Barhut*.
3. Snodgrass, *Symbolism of the Stūpa*.
4. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*.
5. Trainor, *Relics, Ritual and Representation*.
6. Schopen, 'On the Buddha and His Bones', 527–37.
7. See Huntington, 'Early Buddhist Art', 401–8.
8. See Ray, *Monastery and Guild*.

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