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Buddhist Nuns

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NUNS, LAYWOMEN, DONORS, GODDESSES: FEMALE ROLES IN EARLY INDIAN BUDDHISM*

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I. *Gender pairing*

In this paper, I will examine several aspects of the role of the female in “early Buddhism”, defined here as from the time of the Buddha up to the early centuries of the Christian Era¹. Since a study of female roles should not neglect the broader context of gender relations within the Buddhist community, I will begin by examining a structural feature of Buddhist social organization and literature (the one reflecting the other), which I describe as “gender pairing”. For this we will start in the middle of the 3rd century BCE, with the reign of King Aśoka, whose edicts are both the earliest lithic records of India and the earliest extant information on Buddhism.

Aśoka’s famous edict on *saṃghabheda*, which was set up at three important centres of Buddhist activity — Kauśāmbī, Sāñcī, and Sārnāth — refers to both monks and nuns (*bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*)². The Sārnāth inscription was to be communicated to both the order of monks (*bhikkhu-saṃgha*) and the order of nuns (*bhikkhuni-saṃgha*). In the “Calcutta-Bairāt” edict, the King conveys his wish that both monks and nuns, both laymen and laywomen, frequently listen to and reflect upon selected teachings of the Buddha — the famous *dhammapaliyāya*³.

* I am grateful to Ulrike Roesler (Marburg) and Justin Meiland (Oxford) for their careful reading, comments, and corrections.

¹ The classic study of the subject remains Horner 1930. Her work makes thorough use of Pāli sources, but does not take into account inscriptions or the literature of other Buddhist schools. See also Paul 1979. For a variety of views on the date of the Buddha, see Bechert 1991, 1992, 1995: for this article, I assume that the *parinirvāṇa* took place between 400 and 350 BCE.

² Bloch 1950, pp. 152-153.

³ Bloch, pp. 154-155; Schneider 1984, pp. 491-498. The edict is from a hill 52 miles north of Jaipur in Rajasthan; the “Calcutta” of the title signifies that the inscription was removed to Calcutta, then capital of British India.

For our purposes, the edicts tell us two things. Firstly, they show Aśoka's concern for the welfare of both *saṃghas*, and his regard for the order of nuns as an important social body, on a par with the order of monks⁴. Secondly, the language of the inscriptions reflects the fact that the monastic ordination lineage, established by the Buddha himself, was dual in nature: men became *bhikkhu-s*, and women became *bhikkunī-s*. Lay disciples were also classed by gender: laymen (*upāsaka*) and laywomen (*upāsikā*).

From Aśoka's edicts we may thus deduce that the leading participants in the early Buddhist movement were two gendered pairs: monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen⁵. A similar picture may be drawn from the scriptures, where the two pairs make up the "four assemblies"⁶. At the beginning of his career, the Buddha expressed his intention that the four groups become independent of him in their ability to absorb, teach, and explain his teachings. This is recounted in the Theravādin *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, where the Buddha relates how, not long after his enlightenment, Māra came and requested him to enter final *nibbāna* immediately (that is, fearing loss of influence, Māra did not want the Blessed One to teach the *dhamma*). The Buddha replied: "I will not enter *parinibbāna*, Evil One, until my monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen have become auditors who are intelligent, trained, confident, learned, bearers of *dhamma* who practise in accordance with *dhamma*, who practise correctly, who follow *dhamma*; who, taking up what they have learned

⁴ Let us remember that according to Sri Lankan tradition Aśoka's daughter Saṃghamittā became a nun, and took a sapling of the bodhi-tree to the isle of Laṅkā, where she established the order of nuns.

⁵ A shorthand for the orders of monks and nuns was *ubhato-* or *ubhaya-saṃgha*, "both orders", "the two orders". In *pācattika* 84 of the Mahāsaṃghika and Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya-s*, Viśākhā invites "the two orders" to a meal together: see Hirakawa 1982, p. 273; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, § 198. In the *Dakkhiṇā-vibhaṅga-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* III 255.28) the first two of seven classes of offerings made to the order (*saṃgha-gatā dakkhiṇā*) are to "both orders" (*ubhatosaṃghe dānaṃ deti*); these are followed by offerings to the order of monks, the order of nuns, an appointed number of monks and nuns, an appointed number of monks, and an appointed number of nuns.

⁶ See *PTSD* 437a, s.v. *parisā*, and Takasaki 1987, pp. 250-252. It is remarkable that the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, a Sarvāstivādin text which according to its title deals with the [origins of] the "four assemblies", entirely omits the tale of the foundation of the order of nuns. The Jains also have a "fourfold community" (*caturvidha-saṃgha*): Dundas 1992, p. 129.

from their teacher, will announce, teach, proclaim, establish, reveal, explain, and clarify it; who, when a dispute arises, will admonish correctly, following the *dhamma*, and, having admonished, will teach the marvellous *dhamma*. I will not enter *parinibbāna*, Evil One, until under me the holy life is successful, flourishing, widespread, popular, and far-famed: until it is well-proclaimed among humans”⁷. The phrasing of (Mūla)-Sarvāstivādin parallels — the *Divyāvadāna* and the Central Asian *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* — differs, but also stresses the wisdom and capability of all four groups equally⁸.

In this passage, the Buddha defines the conditions for the success of his teaching, of the “holy life” (*brahmacariyā*). When the Buddha is eighty years old Māra reminds him of the statement, and asserts that the conditions have now been fulfilled. The Buddha offers no direct comment, but tells Māra that he will enter *nibbāna* in three months’ time, thereby implicitly accepting the truth of Māra’s verdict. Similarly, in the *Pāsādika-sutta*, in the latter years of his career, the Buddha tells Cunda that he now has “senior monk disciples who are intelligent, trained, confident, who have attained release from bondage; who are able to proclaim properly the holy *dhamma*; who, when a dispute arises, are able to admonish correctly, following the *dhamma*, and, having admonished, to teach the marvellous *dhamma*”. He goes on to list the other members of his flock: middle-ranking monks, and newly-ordained monks; senior,

⁷ *Dīgha-nikāya* II 112-113, *na tāvāhaṃ pāpima parinibbāyissāmi yāva me bhikkhū ... bhikkhuniyo ... upāsakā ... upāsikā na sāvikā bhavissanti viyattā vinītā visāradā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammānudhamma-ṭṭipannā sāmīcīpaṭṭipannā anudhammacāriṇiyo, sakaṃ ācariyakaṃ uggahetvā ācikkhissanti desessanti paññāpessanti paṭṭhapessanti vivarissanti vibhajissanti uttānikarissanti, uppannaṃ parappavādaṃ sahadhammena suniggahitaṃ niggaḥetvā sappāṭihāriyaṃ dhammaṃ desessanti. na tāvāhaṃ pāpima parinibbāyissāmi yāva me idaṃ brahmacariyaṃ na iddhañ c’eva bhavissati phūtañ ca vitthārikaṃ bāhujāññaṃ puthu-bhūtaṃ, yāva devamanussehi suppakāsitaṃ.*

⁸ *Māndhātāvadāna, Divyāvadāna* § XVII, Cowell & Neil 1987, p. 202.11, *na tāvat pāpīyaṃ parinirvāsyāmi yāvaṃ na me śrāvakāḥ paṇḍitā bhaviṣyanti vyaktā vinītā visāradāḥ, alaṃ utpannotpannānāṃ parapravādināṃ saha dharmena nigrāhītāraḥ, alaṃ svasya vādasya paryavadāpayitāro bhikṣavo bhikṣuṇya upāsakā upāsikā vaistārikaṃ ca me brahmacariyaṃ carīṣyanti bāhujanyaṃ pṛthubhūtaṃ yāvad devamanuṣeybhyaḥ samyaksamprakāśitaṃ. The Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra has a different string of words at the beginning, but is otherwise the same (except for some orthographical variation) (Waldschmidt 1986, § 16.8) *paṇḍitā ... vyaktā medhāvinaḥ* (= Tib. *mkhas pa gsal ba śes rab tu ldan pa*), *alaṃ ...*. Cf. also *Buddhacarita* XXIII 63-68.*

middle-ranking, and newly-ordained nuns; laymen and laywomen householders, both celibate and non-celibate, and concludes with the assertion that: “Now, Cunda, under me the holy life is successful, flourishing, widespread, popular, and far-famed, well-proclaimed among humans”⁹.

The four assemblies are also put on an equal footing in the *Sobhana-sutta*. Here the Buddha states: “These four [individuals], O monks, intelligent, trained, confident, learned, bearers of *dhamma* who practise in accordance with *dhamma* adorn the order (*saṅgha*): a monk who is intelligent ...; a nun ...; a layman ...; a laywoman ...”¹⁰. By way of contrast, according to the Theravādin *Saṅgīti-sutta* and an *Ekottarāgama* cited in the *Sūtrasamuccaya*, one of the characteristics of barbarous frontier regions is that they are not visited by monks or nuns, laymen or laywomen¹¹. That is, the presence of the four assemblies in an area was the defining mark of “civilization”, since only then was there a chance to hear and practise the *dhamma*.

Other members of the movement were also classed in gendered pairs. Disciples of the Buddha in general were known as male-auditors (*sāvaka*) and female-auditors (*sāvika*); lower ordination consisted of *sāmaṇera*-s and *sāmaneri*-s. For further examples, see Table 1.

⁹ *Dīgha-nikāya* III 125.17, *santi kho pana me cunda etarahi therā bhikkhū sāvakā viyattā vinītā visārādā patta-yogakkhemā, alaṇi samakkhātuṃ saddhammassa, alaṇi uppannaṃ parappavādaṃ sahadhammena suniggahitaṃ niggahetvā sappāṭihāriyaṃ dhammaṃ desetum...* *etarahi kho pana me cunda brahmacariyaṃ iddhañ ca phītañ ca vitthārikaṃ bāhujāññaṃ puthu-bhūtaṃ, yāvad eva manussehi suppakāsitaṃ.*

¹⁰ *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, *Catukka-nipāta*: PTS II 8; *Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti* [I] 314; *Syāmratṭha* Vol. 21, pp. 9-10; *Nālandā* II 9-10, *cattāro 'me bhikkhave viyattā vinītā visārādā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammānudhamma-paṭipannā saṅghaṃ sobhenti*. Only *Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti* and *Nālandā* give the text in full. (Note that the omission of *dhammadharā* in the description of the *bhikkhunī* at PTS 8.13 must be a typographical error, since the epithets are applied equally to all four in the opening and closing statements.) The commentary (*Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti* ed., *Āṅguttaraṭṭhakathā* II 252.4) has little to say: *vīyattā ti paññā-veyyattiyena samannāgatā, vinītā ti vinayaṃ upetā suvinītā, visārādā ti vesārajjena somanassa-sahagatena nāṇena samannāgatā, dhammadharā ti sutadhammānaṃ ādhārahūtā*. For a parallel in the *Ekottarāgama*, see Przyłuski 1923, pp. 207-208.

¹¹ *Dīgha-nikāya* III 264.12, *paccantimesu janapadesu paccājato hoti milakkhusu aviññātāresu yatha n' atthi gati bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ upāsakānaṃ upāsikānaṃ ...*; *Pāsādika* 1989, p. 6.15, *mtha' 'khob kyi mi dañ, rku 'phrog byed pa dañ, kla klo dañ, brnab sems can dañ, gnod sems can gañ du, dge sloñ dañ, dge sloñ ma dañ, dge bsñen dañ, dge bsñen ma mi 'oñ ba'i nañ du skyes pa yin no*.

Table 1. Gender pairing in terminology¹*a. General*

sāvaka: śrāvaka	sāvikā: śrāvikā
kulaputta: kulaputra	(kuladhītā) ² : kuladuhitr

b. Renunciants

samaṇa: śramaṇa	samaṇī: śramaṇī, śramaṇā, śramaṇikā
bhikkhu: bhikṣu	bhikkhunī: bhikṣuṇī
sāmaṇera: śrāmaṇera	sāmaṇerī: śrāmaṇerī, śrāmaṇerikā
thera: sthavira	therī: sthavirī, stherī, thavirī
upajjhāya: upādhyāya	upajjhāyā, upajjhāyini: upādhyāyini, upādhyāyikā
—: karmakāraka	—: karmakārikā ³
ācariya: ācārya	ācariṇī ⁴ : ācāryāyini, ācāryikā
saddhivihārī: sārdhāṃvihārī	saddhivihārini ⁵ : sārdhāṃvihārini
antevāsi: antevāsi	antevāsi ⁶ : antevāsinī
—	sahajivinī ⁷ : —
—	sikkhamānā: śikṣamāṇā
—	—: upasthāyikā ⁸
—	pavattinī ⁹ : —

c. Lay persons

upāsaka: upāsaka	upāsikā: upāsikā
gahapati: gṛhapati	gahapatānī: gṛhapatinī
gihī: gṛhī	gihinī: gṛhīnī

¹ This is a preliminary list, and does not include all possible terms or forms. For each term I give first Pāli then (Buddhist) Sanskrit (largely Lokottaravādin), as available. References are given for only a few rarer terms. For further equivalents in Prakrit and Sanskrit from inscriptions and literature, see Skilling 1993-4, pp. 29–30. Nolot 1991, pp. 30, n. 80, and pp. 533–534, discusses several of the terms (not all of which are uniquely Buddhist).

² See remarks in text, n. 67.

³ See Nolot 1996, p. 89.

⁴ For Pāli *ācariṇī* see *Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga)* IV 227.4, 317.26 and 29, 320.3, 322.11.

⁵ For Pāli *saddhivihārini* see *Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga)* IV 291.27, 325.11, 326.penult.

⁶ For Pāli *antevāsi* see *Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga)* IV 291.31.

⁷ *Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga)* IV, *pācittiya* XXXIV, LXVIII, LXX.

⁸ See Nolot 1991, p. 533.

⁹ See Nolot 1991, p. 534.

Since the monastic lineages were dual in nature, the related monastic literature was made up of paired texts: *Vinaya*, *Pāṭimokkha*, *Kammavācā* for both monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhunī*). These texts pertain to the regulation of the monastic life. Other paired texts are found in the *Khuddhaka-nikāya* of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, as may be seen in Table 2. The “feminine” pairs consist of three collections of verse that include, I believe, some of the oldest examples of (ascribed) female composition in Indian literature¹². The *Therī-gāthā* contains verses spoken by over seventy senior or elder nuns (*therīs*), expressing their enlightenment or relating their spiritual careers. A few of the nuns’ verses are incorporated into the Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya*¹³. That the Mūlasarvāstivādins transmitted a counterpart of the *Therī-gāthā* is seen from references in lists of titles corresponding roughly to the *Kṣudraka* or miscellaneous collection: the *Carma-vastu* and *Adhikaraṇa-vastu* of their *Vinaya* refer to a *Sthavirī-gāthā*¹⁴, and the *Samyuktāgama* in Chinese translation mentions a *Bhikṣuṇī-gāthā*¹⁵. The collection has not been preserved either in the original Sanskrit or in translation¹⁶.

In the *Therī-apadāna*, forty *therīs* relate in verse the deeds of their past existences and the joy of their present freedom¹⁷. The *Therī-gāthā* and *Therī-apadāna* give the verses of the *therī*-s only, with no narrative elements. The *Itthivimāna* has a different structure: in answer to verse questions put by others (for example, Mahāmoggallāna), goddesses explain in verse the meritorious deeds that have led to their rebirth in fabulously beautiful conditions¹⁸. It is noteworthy that the stories present, without comment or condemnation, female continuities across rebirths: in their past lives the goddesses were also female¹⁹.

¹² “Ascribed” because monks were certainly involved in at least the later stages of editing, and because the *Itthivimāna* belongs rather to narrative literature. Female authorship was not uniquely Buddhist: for example, some hymns of the *R̥g Veda* are attributed to women. Women act as astute philosophical interlocutors in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: Olivelle 1996, §§ 3.6, 8 (Gārgī Vācakanvī) and 2.4, 4.5 (Maitreyī).

¹³ Nolot 1991, pp. 96-98.

¹⁴ Dutt 1984, Vol. III, pt. 4, p. 188.9; Gnoli 1978, p. 64.17.

¹⁵ Lamotte 1976, p. 178 (reference to Taishō 99, p. 362c10).

¹⁶ For the *Sthavira-gāthā* from Central Asia see Bechert 1974.

¹⁷ For the *Apadāna* see Cutler 1994.

¹⁸ For the *Vimānavatthu* see Horner 1974, Masfield 1989, and Falk 1990, pp. 139-142.

¹⁹ Cf. Harvey 1995, pp. 68-69, on gender continuity and change across rebirths.

Table 2. Paired Texts in the Theravādin tradition¹*a. Texts related to monastic discipline (Vinaya)*

Male	Female
<i>Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga</i>	<i>Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga</i>
<i>Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha</i>	<i>Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha</i>
<i>Bhikkhu Kammavācā</i>	<i>Bhikkhunī Kammavācā</i>

b. Texts included in the “Miscellaneous Collection” (Khuddaka-nikāya) of the Sutta-piṭaka

Male	Female
<i>Verses of Elder Monks (Thera-gāthā)</i>	<i>Verses of Elder Nuns (Therī-gāthā)</i>
<i>Exploits of Elder Monks (Therāpadāna)</i>	<i>Exploits of Elder Nuns (Therī-apadāna)</i>
<i>Purisa-vimāna</i>	<i>Itthi-vimāna</i>

¹ As different schools or lineages evolved, each codified and transmitted texts in its own recensions. In this table I list only the Theravādin versions.

While the *Thera-gāthā* and *Thera-apadāna* are much longer than the *Therī-gāthā* and *Therī-apadāna*, the *Itthivimāna* is longer than the *Purisavimāna*. The closest non-Theravādin parallels to the *Vimānavatthu* that I know of are Parables 51 to 57 of the *Tsa-pao-tsang-ching*, all of which concern goddesses²⁰.

Gender pairing also occurs within the texts of the *Nikāya-s/Āgama-s*, particularly (by nature of its structure) the *Āṅguttara-nikāya/Ekottarāgama*. The most famous example is the *Etadagga-vagga* of the *Ekaka-nipāta*, in which the Buddha praises outstanding monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen according to their individual talents²¹. A parallel text is included in the Chinese translation of an *Ekottarāgama* of unknown school²². In the Theravādin version, the Blessed One lists thirteen

²⁰ See Willemen 1994, pp. 121-129.

²¹ *Āṅguttara-nikāya* I 23-26.

²² “Ekottarāgama (Traduit de la version chinoise par Thich Huyen-Vi)”, in *BSR* 3.2 (1986), pp. 132-142; 4.1 (1987), pp. 47-58. This text, the *Tseng-i-a-han-ching*, is preserved only in Chinese translation; for its school affiliation, see Skilling 1994a, n. 21.

outstanding nuns; in the *Ekottarāgama* he extols fifty-one nuns²³. The Sanskrit *Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* (of unknown school) refers to a similar collection as the *Bhikṣuṇīnām-agratā-sūtra*²⁴. References to nuns using the *etad-agra* formula are scattered here and there in Mūlasarvāstivādin literature: in the *Avadānaśataka*, for example, Supriyā is praised as “foremost of those who have made merit” (*ḷṛtapuṇyānām*)²⁵. Some other examples will be given below.

(It is worthy of note that the *Uppātasanti*, a Pāli protective verse text believed to have been composed in Northern Thailand [Lān Nā] during the Ayutthaya period, lists the thirteen *therīs* of the Pāli version along with their attainments, and invokes their protection — along with that of past Buddhas, the great male disciples, deities, and so on)²⁶.

From a verse of the *Apadāna* of Paṭācārā we learn that past Buddhas (in this case Padumuttara) also made *etad-aggā* declarations²⁷. Indeed, each Buddha of the past, present, and future has two “chief male-auditors” (*aggasāvaka*) and two “chief female-auditors” (*aggasāvikā*). The *Buddhavaṃsa* names the pairs of monks and nuns who held this position for each past Buddha; in the case of Gotama, the chief female-auditors were Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā²⁸. The *Anāgatavaṃsa* gives the same information for the future Buddha Metteyya²⁹.

In another paired text — found in the *Āyācana-vagga* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, a Sanskrit *Ekottarāgama* from Gilgit, and the Chinese *Ekottarāgama* — the Buddha names model pairs of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, whom their peers should emulate³⁰. In the Pāli and Chinese versions, Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā are the model nuns, while Khujjuttarā and

²³ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 25.17 foll.; *BSR* 4.1 (1987), pp. 47-51 (see p. 58, n. 11, for the total number).

²⁴ Lévi 1932, p. 161.19; Vaidya 1961, p. 216.6.

²⁵ Speyer 1970, p. 11.2; Feer 1891, p. 267.

²⁶ See Phra Dhammānanda Mahāthera (ed.), *Uppātasanti*, verses 172-186, in *Agrama-hāpaṇḍitānusaraṇa*, Lampang, BE 2535 [CE 1992].

²⁷ *Therī-apadāna*, Nālandā ed., verse 471, *tato vinayadhārīnaṃ aggamaṃ vaṇṇesi nāyako, bhikkhuniṃ lajjiniṃ tādiṃ kappākappavisāraḍaṃ*.

²⁸ *Buddhavaṃsa* XXVI, 19 *khemā uppalavaṇṇā ca bhikkhuniṃ aggasāvikā*; see also *Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII, 9.

²⁹ Chit Tin & Pruitt 1988, verses 97-98.

³⁰ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 88-89; Okubo 1982, pp. (21)-(22); *BSR* 5.1 (1988), pp. 47-48.

Veḷukaṅṭakī Nandamātā are the model laywomen³¹. The Gilgit version has Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Utpalavarṇā in the first instance, and Viśākhā Mṛgāramātā of Śrāvastī and Kubjottarā of Kauśāmbhī in the second.

Laymen and laywomen are not neglected. The Buddha praises the qualities of ten laywomen in the Theravādin *Etadagga-vagga*, and thirty-one in the Chinese *Ekottarāgama*³². The Sanskrit *Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* refers to a similar collection as the *Upāsikānām-agratā-sūtra*³³. The *Buddhavaṃsa* names the two chief female lay-supporters (*agg' upatthik' upāsikā*) for each past Buddha, as does the *Anāgatavaṃsa* for the future Buddha Metteyya³⁴.

There is also a *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* in the *Sagātha-vagga*. Here there is no matching **Bhikkhu-saṃyutta* (but several *saṃyutta*-s of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* are devoted to individual monks). A Sanskrit counterpart of the *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* is known from Central Asia, and a similar section is found in the Chinese *Saṃyuktāgama*; both belong to the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin school³⁵. Verses from this *saṃyukta* are cited in Sanskrit works such as the *Abhidharmakośa*. The Dharmaguptakas and Mahīśāsakas also included a *Bhikṣuṇī-saṃyukta* in their *Saṃyuktāgama*-s³⁶.

These examples show an even-handed treatment of gendered pairs in Aśoka's edicts and in texts of several schools: monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, are recognized and valued social roles or bodies³⁷. This gendered pairing — which goes beyond a simple acknowledgement of the natural fact of sexual polarity (classed in Buddhist texts as the male and female faculties, *purisa* and *itthi indriya*-s) — pervades early Buddhist literature. I do not think that gender pairing was accorded the same degree

³¹ That is, if in the Chinese *Ekottara*, Kiu tch'eu to lo = Khujjuttarā.

³² *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 26.16 foll.; *BSR* 4.1 (1987), pp. 54-57 (and p. 58, n. 19 for the total number).

³³ Lévi 1932, p. 161.20; Vaidya 1961, p. 216.7.

³⁴ Chit Tin & Pruitt 1988, verse 99.

³⁵ See Waldschmidt 1980, pp. 144-148, and Akanuma 1990, p. 183.

³⁶ Lévi & Chavannes 1916, p. 35; Przyluski 1926, p. 194.

³⁷ There are, of course, hierarchical disparities: monks are mentioned first, followed by nuns, laymen, laywomen, and it is well-known that the order of nuns was subordinate to the order of monks. Furthermore, the lists of outstanding nuns and the verse-collections of nuns are shorter than those of the monks.

of significance in early brahmanical or Jaina literary traditions³⁸. Although these traditions also had paired terms (as is only natural) — especially the Jainas, whose terminology was similar to that of the Buddhists — they did not transmit paired texts, or anthologies devoted exclusively to women³⁹.

II. Nuns and the transmission of the scriptures

What role did nuns — or women — play in the transmission of scriptures? For practical purposes, the *Bhikkunī Pāṭimokkha* and *Bhikkunī Kammavācā* must have been transmitted by the nuns themselves, since these texts had to be memorized and recited. What about other texts? Traditional accounts of the Buddhist councils (*saṃgīti*) (available for a number of schools) record that the oral traditions and (later) written scriptures were rehearsed, redacted, and handed down by monks: or at least they do not mention nuns.

That nuns did participate in the transmission and explication of the sacred texts is, however, proven by both literary and epigraphic records. Several nuns are known to have been outstanding preachers⁴⁰. An important discourse, the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta*, is spoken by the nun Dhammadinnā to her former husband Visākha. The Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin counterparts, included in the *Madhyamāgama*, were known as the *Bhikṣuṇīdharmadinnā-sūtra*⁴¹. It was a well-known and authoritative text,

³⁸ For the position of women in Jainism, see Deo 1956, Jaini 1991, and Dundas 1992, pp. 48-52. Deo (p. 578) remarks that “the nuns always remained subordinate to the monks not only regarding seniority but also in the execution of monastic jurisprudence. With all that, they have played a very important role in the organisation of the female Jaina laity” See *ibid.* pp. 507-508 for some (not entirely satisfactory) remarks on “Nuns and Brāhmanism”. For the status of women in Indian society in general, see Basham 1971, pp. 179-190.

³⁹ The Jainas also use the terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*, *sāvaka* and *sāvikā*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*, as well as *nigantha* and *nigganthī*. They did not have a separate set of rules for the nuns: as noted by Deo (1956, p. 473), “right from the time of the composition of the *Ācārāṅga*, different texts give a rule starting with the formula: ‘*Je bhikkhū bhikkhuṇī vā*’, or ‘*Niggantho nigganthī vā*’, which shows that the rule was common both to the monks as well as to the nuns”.

⁴⁰ For “the influence of the teaching and preaching nuns” in China see Tsai 1994, p. 8. For early Jainism cf. Deo 1956, p. 491, who says that “women preachers are often mentioned”. See also Jain 1991, pp. 352-353.

⁴¹ *Majjhima-nikāya* no. 44. For the Sarvāstivādin version see Bhikṣu Thich Minh Chau 1991, pp. 269-278; for the Mūlasarvāstivādin version see Śamathadeva, *Abhidharmakośa-upāyikāṭīkā* (Q 5595, Vol. 118, *mñon pa'i bstan bcos tu*, 7a8-12b3).

cited in the *Abhidharmakośa* and other works. In the *Khemātherī-sutta* of the *Avyākata-saṃyutta*, Khemā Therī delivers a profound discourse to King Pasenadi⁴². The nun Thullanandā — whose behaviour was less than ideal — is described as “learned, eloquent, confident, outstanding in the ability to preach sermons”⁴³. Many people came to hear her preach, including, on at least two occasions, King Pasenadi of Kosala⁴⁴. The same epithets are applied to Bhaddā Kāpilānī⁴⁵.

According to *pācattika* 93 of the Mahāsāṃghika and Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇī Vinayas*, the ten qualifications of a nun who can induct other women into the order include being learned (*bahuśruta*) in *abhidharma* and *abhivinaya*⁴⁶. According to *pācattika* 104, a nun who acts as preceptor (*upasthāyikā ti upādhyāyini*) must train her charge (*upasthāpitān ti sārđhaṃ vihāriṇī*) for two years in *abhidharma* and *abhivinaya*⁴⁷. In the *Sobhana-sutta* cited above, a nun who is, among other things, “learned, a bearer of *dhamma*” (*bhikkhunī ... bahussutā dhammadharā*) is said to adorn the

⁴² *Saṃyutta-nikāya* IV 374-380. According to Akanuma (1990, p. 235) there is no Chinese parallel.

⁴³ *Vinaya* IV 254.4, 255.4, 256.23, 285.18, 290.4, *bahussutā hoti bhāṇikā visāradā paṭṭhā dhammiṃ kathaṃ kātuṃ*. I interpret *bhāṇikā* as “eloquent”, rather than as the feminine of *bhāṇaka* in the technical sense of a trained reciter of a section of the scriptures (*dīgha-bhāṇaka*, etc.), since in this sense *bhāṇaka/bhāṇikā* does not appear in the *Tipiṭaka*, but only in later literature such as paracanonical texts and *Aṭṭhakathā* (and also early inscriptions). The occurrences of *bhāṇikā* listed above seem to be the only ones in the *Tipiṭaka*, except for *mañju-bhāṇikā*, “sweet-voiced, uttering sweet words”, *Jātaka* VI 422: see *PTSD* 501b, s.v. *bhāṇaka*. The term *paṭṭha* is also rare (*PTSD* 402b). The word *bhāṇikā* is not listed in the indexes to the Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* (Roth 1970; Nolot 1991). I reluctantly render *bahussuta/bahuśruta* as “learned”, for want of a better equivalent: we should remember that the term belongs to the realm of aurality/orality, and means literally “having heard many [teachings]”.

⁴⁴ *Vinaya* IV 254-256.

⁴⁵ *Vinaya* IV 290.7.

⁴⁶ Hirakawa 1982, p. 290; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, §207. There is no Pāli parallel to this rule.

⁴⁷ Hirakawa 1982, pp. 313-314; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, §218. The text defines *abhidharma* as *nava-vidhaḥ sūtrāntaḥ* and *abhivinaya* as *prātimokṣaḥ vistara-prabhedena*. Here, and in other epithets, terms such as (*abhi*)*dharma* or (*abhi*)*vinaya* do not refer to the written texts that we know today, but to earlier oral transmissions and explications of the Buddha’s teachings and the monastic guidelines. The Pāli parallel (*pācittiya* 68) does not give the ten qualifications, or mention *abhidharma* and *abhivinaya* (but the ability to train in *abhidhamma* and *abhivinaya* are among the five qualities that a monk should possess in order to ordain another: *Vinaya* I 64.penult.) For the two terms see Watanabe 1996, pp. 25-36.

order. The *Cūḍāpakṣāvādāna* of the *Divyāvādāna* mentions nuns who are “versed in Tripiṭaka, preachers of *dharma*, coherent and fluent speakers” (*bhikṣuṇyas tripiṭā dhārmakathikā yuktamuktapratibhāṇā*)⁴⁸.

The accomplishments of nuns related to the transmission or preaching of *dhamma* are singled out in statements phrased in the *etad-agga* formula. It is important to observe that these exemplary nuns are described as “foremost among my female auditors, among the nuns” (*etad aggaṃ ... mama sāvikānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ*) in a certain ability: that is, other nuns had the same accomplishments, but to a lesser degree. In the *Etadagga-vagga*, the above-mentioned Dhammadinnā is extolled as “foremost among preachers of *dhamma*”⁴⁹. Paṭācārā is singled out as “foremost among bearers of *vinaya*”⁵⁰. According to the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya* and the *Avadānaśataka*, Kacaṃgalā is “foremost among those who explain the *sūtras*”⁵¹. According to the *Avadānaśataka*, Somā is “foremost among those who are learned and who preserve the oral tradition” (*bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadharīnāṃ*), and Kṣemā is “foremost among those who are very wise and very eloquent” (*mahāprājñānāṃ mahāpratibhānāṃ*)⁵². In the *Etadagga-vagga*, the latter is described as “foremost among those who are very wise”⁵³.

⁴⁸ Cowell & Neil 1987, p. 493.8, 15. The same passage occurs in the *Vinaya-vibhaṅga* and *Vinaya-samuccaya* with the variant **dvīpiṭā vā tripiṭā vā: Vinaya-vibhaṅga*, Q1032, Vol 43, ‘*dul ba ñe*, 65b1, 7 and *Vinaya-samuccaya*, Q5607, Vol. 121, ‘*dul ’grel mu*, 104a7, b6, *dge sloṅ ma rnam s ni sde snod gñis pa dañ*, *sde snod gsum pa chos sgrog pa, rigs pa dañ*, *grol ba’i spobs pa can dag*. (The few minor variants in the Tibetan need not trouble us here.) For *yuktamuktapratibhāṇa* cf. Braarvig 1985, pp. 18 and 25, nn. 3, 4.

⁴⁹ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 25.22, *etad aggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvikānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ dhammakathikānaṃ yad idaṃ dhammadinnā*. Cf. *BSR* 4.1 (1987), p. 48.

⁵⁰ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 25.21, *etad aggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvikānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ vinayadharānaṃ yad idaṃ paṭācārā*. Cf. *BSR* 4.1 (1987), p. 47. Paṭācārā’s initial aspiration in a previous life is related in her *apadāna: Therī-apadāna*, Nālandā ed., verses 468-511, especially verses 471 (for which see n. 27 above) and 506. For a summary of the *apadāna* see Cutler 1994, pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, in Dutt 1984, Vol. III, pt. 1, p. 22.13, *eṣāgrā me bhikṣavo bhikṣuṇīnaṃ mama śrāvīkānāṃ sūtrāntavibhāgakarīṇāṃ yad uta kacaṃgalā bhikṣuṇī*; Tibetan translation Q1030, Vol. 41, ‘*dul ba ge*, 121b8; *Avadānaśataka* in Speyer 1970, p. 43.8 = Feer 1891, p. 291. See also the *Tsa-pao-tsang-ching* (Taisho 203), in Willemen 1994, p. 21, “Among *bhikṣuṇī*-s [Kacaṃgalā] had the best understanding of the sutras”.

⁵² Speyer 1970, pp. 22.4, 50.9, respectively; Feer 1891, pp. 277, 295, respectively. For the skills implied by *bahussuta* and *sutadhara* see *Majjhima-nikāya* I 213.1.

⁵³ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 25.19, *etad aggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvikānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ mahāpaññānaṃ yad idaṃ khemā*. Cf. *BSR* 4.1 (1987), p. 47.

An early Pāli chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, gives a long list of nuns, starting with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and other nuns in India, who are described as “learned in *vinaya*” (*vinayaññū*) and “adept in the path” (*maggakovidā*)⁵⁴. It then gives long lists of nuns: Therī Saṃghamittā and nuns who came with her from Jambudīpa to Sri Lanka, followed by other nuns both from India and Ceylon. A refrain states that the nuns “recited the *Vinaya-piṭaka* in Anurādhapura, recited the *Five Nikāyas* [of the *Sutta-piṭaka*], and the *Seven Treatises* [of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*]”⁵⁵. The account goes up to at least the time of Abhaya, son of Kuṭivaṇṇa, that is to the first half of the first century of the Christian Era⁵⁶, and concludes with the statement: “At present there are others — senior, middle, or newly-ordained — ... bearers of *vinaya*, guardians of the transmission of the teaching: learned and virtuous, they illuminate this earth”⁵⁷. The nuns were honoured by Kings Abhaya and Devānaṃpiya Tissa. King Lajjitissa listened to the well-spoken words (*subhāsita*) of the nuns and offered them whatever they desired⁵⁸.

Epigraphic evidence for the accomplishments of nuns in the field of learning is scant. At Sāñcī Avisinā from Maḍalāchikaṭa is described as “versed in the *sūtras*” (*sutātikinī*)⁵⁹. No title is supplied to indicate her status, so we do not know whether she was a nun or a laywoman. A *bhikṣuṇī* named Buddhāmitrā, who set up images of the Buddha, is described as “versed in the Tripiṭaka” (*trepīṭikā*)⁶⁰. Buddhāmitrā is associated with her teacher the *bhikṣu* Bala, also “versed in the Tripiṭaka”. It is likely that both Buddhāmitrā and Bala belonged to the Sarvāstivādin school.

Although early literary and epigraphic evidence thus shows that nuns contributed to the transmission of the texts — as is only to be expected —

⁵⁴ *Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII, 7-10.

⁵⁵ *Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII, 11-43: the refrain runs (with variants) *vinayaṃ tāva vācesuṃ piṭakaṃ anurādhavasahaye, nikāye pañca vācesuṃ satta c’ eva pakaraṇe*.

⁵⁶ Geiger 1953 II, p. x, gives regnal dates CE 16-38 for Kuṭakaṇṇatissa, 38-66 for Bhātikābhaya.

⁵⁷ *Dīpavaṃsa* XVIII, 44 *idāni atthi aññāyo therikā majjhimā navā, vibhajjavādī vinayadharā sāsane pavenipālakā, bahussutā silasampannā obhāsenti mahiṃ imaṃ*.

⁵⁸ *Dīpavaṃsa* XIX, 12.

⁵⁹ Marshall & Foucher 1983, Vol. I, §§304, 305.

⁶⁰ Sharma 1984, p. 184, notes 46 and 49. For *trepīṭikā* (masc. *trepīṭaka*) see Damsteeg 1978, pp. 179 and 248 (where he notes that the feminine *trepīṭikā* is not in any of the dictionaries that he consulted).

their role seems to have eventually been forgotten or ignored. Furthermore, no commentaries or independent treatises composed by nuns are known to have survived. It may be that they were never written down, or, if they were, they were not preserved in later ages, when the influence and status of the order of nuns waned. This may have been a decision made by the monks, who controlled the redaction of the scriptures.

If the scriptures were transmitted by males, by monks, there is one intriguing exception: the *Itivuttaka*. According to the commentary (attributed to Dhammapāla), the *Itivuttaka* was transmitted by the laywoman (*upāsikā*) Khujjuttarā, first of all to the ladies of the royal harem of King Udena at Kosambī, who learnt it by heart. Later the monks learned the collection, which was recited by Ānanda at the First Council. This is a unique case of an entire collection being transmitted by a woman⁶¹. Khujjuttarā is praised for her “wide learning” (*bahussutatā*) in both the Pāli *Etadagga-vagga* and the Chinese *Ekottarāgama*⁶². As seen above, she is presented as a model laywoman in the Pāli, Gilgit, and Chinese *Aṅguttara-nikāya/Ekottarāgama*.

*Nuns and laywomen in Mahāyāna sūtras*⁶³

In Mahāyāna sūtras, we meet another gendered pair: *kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā*, “son of good family or daughter of good family”. The pair occurs frequently, for example in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*⁶⁴ — where it often refers to the exemplary audience or potential practitioners of the “Perfection of Wisdom” — and in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Woodward 1948, p. viii.

⁶² *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 26.19; *BSR* 4.1 (1987), p. 55. Note that the *Sobhana-sutta* (see n. 10 above) includes “laywoman” among those who adorn the order: *upāsikā bhikkhave viyattā vinitā visāradā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammānudhamma-paṭipannā saṅghaṃ sobhenti*.

⁶³ For some aspects of the feminine in Mahāyāna literature, see Dayal 1932, pp. 223-224 and Paul 1979.

⁶⁴ See e.g. the *Vajracchedikā* in Conze 1974, §§ 8, 14h, 19, 28, 30a, 32a, and Conze’s remarks on *kulaputra*, pp. 103-104. It is interesting that several of the similes of the *Vajracchedikā* begin with “whatever woman or man” (*yaś ca khalu punaḥ subhūte strī vā puruṣo vā*): see §§ 13e, 15a, and also 11.

⁶⁵ See Ejima et al. 1985, pp. 280-281, s.v. *kula-duhitṛ, kula-putra, kula-duhitṛ* is “always accompanied with (*sic*) *kulaputra*”; the latter occurs alone, and more frequently.

The pair also occurs in (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin literature, for example in the **Gautamī-sūtra* of the Chinese *Madhyamāgama*, in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, and in a *sūtra* cited in the *Abhidharmakośa*⁶⁶, but the extent of its use remains to be determined. It does not seem to be known in Pāli⁶⁷.

The openings (*nidāna*) of some Mahāyāna sūtras mention the presence of nuns in the audience. Some, such as the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, the *Suṣthitamati-devaputra-paripṛcchā*, the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*, and the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcaya-gāthā* simply record the presence of the four assemblies, or what I have described above as the two “gendered pairs” (monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen). The qualities, names, and size of the attendant *śrāvaka* assemblies are often mentioned, more often for monks but sometimes for nuns as well. The *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* and *Daśasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-s* state that 500 nuns, laymen, and laywomen were in the audience, “all of them stream-enterers”⁶⁸. The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka Sūtras* give the most detailed *nidāna* that I have found: “6000 nuns headed by Mahāprajāpatī, Bhikṣuṇī Yaśodharā Rāhulamātā and her following”. Similarly, some sūtras mention (e.g. the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*) or list (e.g. the *Vajracchedikā*) the four assemblies in the closing formula. Many other Mahāyāna sūtras do not mention nuns at all. Although these *nidāna*-s are formulaic and ahistorical, they tell us something about the attitude of the compilers or editors of the texts towards nuns, and deserve further study⁶⁹.

⁶⁶ Tsukamoto 1985, Vol. II, pp. 1094-1095; Waldschmidt 1986, §41.5, 10; *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* IV 4ab (Pradhan 1975, p. 196.15); IV 117ab (Pradhan 270.11); for a fuller citation see *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* ad IV 4ab (Dwarikadas 1971, pp. 580-582).

⁶⁷ For *kula-putta* see PTC 63b, which gives only 3 references for *kula-dhītā* (63a), to *Vinaya* II 10 and *Mahāniddeśa* 229, 392. In none of these references is *kula-dhītā* paired with *kula-putta*. Where the Sarvāstivādin **Gautamī-sūtra* has “believing son or daughter of good family”, the Pāli counterpart (*Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga*, *Majjhima-nikāya* III 254-255) has no equivalent. Where the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* has both *kula-putra* and *kula-duhitṛ*, the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* has only *kula-putta*. In both Pāli and Sanskrit, *kula-putta/kula-putra* (and, in the latter, *kula-duhitṛ*) is regularly prefixed by “faithful, believing” (*saddha*, *śrāddha*), and is frequently used in connection with the creation of merit (*puṇya*). A comprehensive study of the usage and contexts of *kula-putra/kuladuhitṛ* in Theravādin, (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin, and Mahāyāna literature is a desideratum.

⁶⁸ Since the passages referred to may easily be found at the beginning of any edition or translation of the texts in question, I do not give any references.

⁶⁹ I would not be surprised if in some cases different recensions or translations of the same sūtra give different *nidāna*-s.

One Mahāyāna sūtra which allots to females an outstanding role as teachers of the profound bodhisattva practices is the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Out of the 52 *kalyāṇamitra*-s consulted by the pilgrim bodhisattva Sudhana, one is a *bhikṣuṇī* named *Siṃhavijrmbhitā*⁷⁰. Another *kalyāṇamitra*, the “night goddess” (*rātrī-devatā*) Sarvanagararakṣāsambhavatejaśrī, relates her deeds in a former life as a nun named Dharmacakranirmānaprabhā, who had a retinue of 100,000 nuns (*bhikṣuṇī-śatasahasra-parivārā*)⁷¹. Out of the 52 *kalyāṇamitra*-s, four are described as laywomen (*upāsikā*)⁷², and four others are female⁷³. Others are goddesses: these will be discussed below.

The Mahāyāna was not a monolithic entity, and different texts present different views of women. An example is the discrepancy in attitude between the *Sukhāvātī* and *Akṣobhya Vyūha*-s⁷⁴. In Amitābha’s “pure land” there are no women — devotees are reborn as men, albeit within beautiful lotus-flowers — while both genders are present in the pure land of Akṣobhya. Neither *sūtra* mentions the presence of nuns or laywomen in the audience. In contrast, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* includes a large group of nuns in the audience, as seen above, and predicts the future Buddhahood of Mahāprajāpatī and Yaśodharā⁷⁵. After they have heard their predictions, the nuns offer to teach the *Lotus Sūtra*. These differences may reflect the influence of time and place, of social milieu, upon the composition of the *sūtras*, as well as the attitudes of the compilers towards women.

⁷⁰ Vaidya 1960, pp. 148-153, translated in Paul 1979, pp. 94-105 (from Sanskrit: abbr.), and Cleary 1987, pp. 141-146 (from Chinese).

⁷¹ Vaidya 1960, pp. 236.10 foll.

⁷² Nos. 8, 14, 20, 46: see table in Vaidya, pp. xxiv-xxix. For translations from Sanskrit of Nos. 8 and 14 see Pauly 1979, pp. 137-144, 144-155; for translations from Chinese see Cleary 1987, pp. 84-90 (No. 8), 107-111 (No. 14), 127-132 (No. 20), 318-319 (No. 46).

⁷³ Nos. 11, 26, 41, and 42 in Vaidya’s table. For a translation of No. 26 from Sanskrit see Pauly 1979, pp. 155-162. For translations of Nos. 11, 26, 41, and 42 from Chinese see Cleary 1987, pp. 98-102, 146-149, 273-305, 305-315. No. 51 (Cleary pp. 320-328) has a gendered pair: a young man (*dāraka*) and a young woman (*dārikā*).

⁷⁴ Gómez 1996, vow 35, pp. 74 (from Sanskrit) and 170 (from Chinese) for the former; Dantinne 1983, pp. 97-98 (vow 21), 141-142 (note x), 194-197, 223-224 (note w) for the latter.

⁷⁵ Watson 1993, pp. 191-192. Needless to say, as Buddhas the former nuns will be males.

III. Nuns and laywomen as donors

During his lifetime, the Buddha and the community of monks and nuns attracted the support of female donors. One of the best-known, and most liberal, was Visākhā, “Migāra’s mother”, lauded by the Buddha as “foremost among female donors”⁷⁶. She endowed a monastery at Sāvattihī, at which the Blessed One spent several rains-retreats. One of the classical *sutta* opening formulas (*nidāna*) begins with: “At one time the Blessed One was staying in Sāvattihī, in the Eastern Pleasance, at Migāra’s mother’s residence ...”⁷⁷. As noted above, on at least one occasion Visākhā invited both orders to a meal.

In the period beginning about a century after Aśoka, women participated in the sponsorship of the construction of the earliest surviving monuments of Buddhism, the great *caityas* at Bhārhut and Sāñcī. These edifices — the earliest large-scale stone monuments of India — were not erected and adorned by a single donor, but rather through collective sponsorship of men and women from various walks of life: royals, merchants, artisans, and their wives and relatives⁷⁸. Donative inscriptions from these monuments and from other early sites record the names, and sometimes other details, of individuals who sponsored component parts of the structures, such as coping stones or pillars.

(A study of the family and social relationships recorded in the dedications is much needed, since it would tell us a great deal about individual and collective acts and dedications of merit⁷⁹. Many donations were joint [family or corporate, rather than individual] acts; even when they were individual, the ensuing merit was dedicated to family members and teachers. The inscriptions show that family relationships retained their importance for renunciant monks and nuns. This is borne out by the monks’ rules, the *Pātimokkha*, in which certain practices that are normally

⁷⁶ *dāyikānaṃ aggā*, *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 26.18. For Visākhā see Horner 1930, pp. 345-361; *DPPN* II 900-904; Falk 1990.

⁷⁷ e.g. *Majjhima-nikāya* III 104.2, *ekam samayaṃ bhagavā sāvattihyaṃ viharati pubbārāme migāramātu pāsāde*.

⁷⁸ For patronage during the period in question, see Thapar 1992, Dehejia 1992, Willis 1992. For the vocabulary of donation in early inscriptions, see Bhattacharya 1987.

⁷⁹ See, for a start, Gokhale 1991, pp. 13-15 and Gregory Schopen, “Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism: A Question of ‘Sinicization’ Viewed from the Other Side”, in Schopen 1997, Chap. III.

prohibited are allowed if the person involved is a relative. For example, *nissaggiya pācittiya* no. 4 states: “Should any *bhikkhu* get an old robe washed or dyed or washed by beating by a nun not related to him [*aññātikāya bhikkhuniyā*], this entails expiation with forfeiture”. Similar exceptions involving nuns are found in *nissaggiya pācittiya*-s nos. 5 and 17; exceptions involving male or female householders [*aññātako gahapati vā gahapatānī vā*] are given in nos. 6 to 9 and 27. Biographies of the Buddha relate that he returned to Kapilavastu to convert his father [and other clan-relations], and ascended to the Trāyaśtrimśa heaven to convert his mother. In the [Mūla]Sarvāstivādin tradition these two acts are among the necessary deeds performed by all Buddhas [*avaśyakaraṇiya*]. The first convert after the Group of Five monks was the householder Yaśa, who became an arhat and a monk. Immediately afterward, Yaśa’s father, mother, and former wife all became stream-winners and lay-followers. Thus, from the beginning of the order, family relationships were important.)

Inscriptions from Sāñcī, Bhārhut, Kaṇheri, Kārle, Kuḍā, Nāsik, Pauni, Amarāvātī, and Mathurā show that nuns were major sponsors of the early monuments. Gregory Schopen has calculated that at Sāñcī there were 129 monk donors, and 125 nuns. He notes that “at Pauni there were three monk donors and five nuns; at Bhārhut 16 nuns and 25 monks; at Amarāvātī there were 12 monk donors and 12 nun donors”⁸⁰. The inscriptions, which date from roughly the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, show not only that nuns played an active role in the erection of *caitya*-s and *vihāra*-s, but also that they had the social and economic status that enabled them to do so. Inscriptions from Nepal, belonging to the Licchavi period (5th to 9th centuries) record a number of donations made by nuns⁸¹.

Other inscriptions commemorate donations made by women: some described as laywomen, others not. A thorough study of the role of laywomen as revealed in inscriptions remains to be undertaken, and I can give here only a few examples. At Sāñcī the term *upāsikā* occurs in fifteen dedications, *upāsaka* in four⁸². At Sannati a beam was sponsored by *upāsikā*

⁸⁰ Schopen 1988-89, p. 164.

⁸¹ See Skilling 1993-94, pp. 34-35.

⁸² Marshall & Foucher 1983, Vol. I, p. 297. For women as patrons, see Thapar 1992, pp. 28-29, Gokhale 1991, pp. 14-15, and Willis 1992.

Samā⁸³. Queens, or other female members of the court, played a role. Mahādevī Gautamī Balaśrī, mother of Gautamīputra Siri-Sātakaṇi, donated a cave (*leṇa*) at Nasik (LL 1123). Also at Nasik, *upāsikā* Viṣṇudattā gave an endowment to the order (LL 1137), a cave (*layana*) was offered by *upāsikā* Mammā (LL 1145), and cells (*ovaraka*) were donated by Dakṣamitrā, wife of Rṣabhadatta (himself an active donor in the region) (LL 1132, 1134). At Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh, female members of the royal elites were prominent donors⁸⁴. In Sri Lanka, ten of the early (3rd century BCE to 1st CE) Brāhmī inscriptions edited by Paranavitana record the donation of caves to the *saṃgha* by nuns (*śamaṇi*) — as against nearly 300 by monks⁸⁵.

Nuns and laywomen also participated in the sponsorship of some of the earliest Buddha images, such as those produced at Mathurā⁸⁶. At Mathurā a seated bodhisattva was set up by *upāsikā* Nāgapriyā, housewife of the goldsmith Dharmaka⁸⁷. At Sāñcī, in the Kuṣāṇa period, an image of the *jambu-chāyā* episode was installed by Madhurikā, an image of Śākyamuni by Vidyāmatī, and an image of Bodhisattva Maitreya by a woman whose name has been lost⁸⁸. At a later date, a fine bronze standing Buddha was donated by “Lady Buddhakaya” in Uttar Pradesh⁸⁹.

The pedestals of early stone images frequently bear scenes in relief representing worshippers or donors (in addition to geometric, floral, animal, or architectural motifs). I have not seen any studies of these reliefs in their own right. They are rich in detail and variety, and might be described as relief miniatures (especially in most reproductions, in which the scenes are so small that they are difficult to read). Examples from Mathurā show a variety of devotees: couples, or men and women, including children, paying respect to *dharma-cakras*, trees, or auspicious

⁸³ Sarma & Rao 1993, p. 90.

⁸⁴ For references see Chaudhury 1982, pp. 229-232.

⁸⁵ Paranavitana 1970, pp. cv-cvi, cxvii. Paranavitana describes *śamaṇi* as “the recognized form of referring to a nun”, and notes that “the equivalents of the terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* have not been applied to Buddhist monks and nuns” in the early inscriptions.

⁸⁶ For examples of participation of nuns, see Schopen 1988-89, pp. 159-163; Skilling 1993-94, pp. 31-32.

⁸⁷ Lüders 1961, §150.

⁸⁸ Marshall & Foucher 1983, Vol. I, §§828-830.

⁸⁹ Czuma & Morris 1985, §117.

symbols (the *nandyāvarta*)⁹⁰. In several cases what appear to be whole families are lined up in homage⁹¹. Pedestals from Gandhāra show couples, monks, or groups of men and women, standing or kneeling beside images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or “fire altars”. Examples from Zwalf’s handsome study of Gandhāran sculpture in the British Museum include:

2 monks and a couple	worshipping	a bodhisattva	(§ 1)
male figures	worshipping	a Buddha	(§ 6)
kneeling monks	worshipping	a Buddha	(§ 9)
men and women	worshipping	a bodhisattva	(§ 24)
pair of gods (?) or bodhisattvas (?) with a pair of monks	worshipping	a Buddha	(§ 26)
pair of monks	worshipping	3 Buddhas and 2 bodhisattvas	(§ 31)
pair of men and pair of women	worshipping	a bodhisattva	(§ 47)
men and women	worshipping	a “fire altar”	(§ 48)
man, woman, and girl	worshipping	a bodhisattva	(§ 52) ⁹² .

The exact relations between the devotional figures and the donative inscriptions (when such exist), or between the miniature Buddhas or bodhisattvas on the base and the main image, are not clear⁹³. A comprehensive study of the components of these reliefs would be instructive. It is interesting that, while Gandhāran reliefs show monks at worship, the Mathurā pedestals do not seem to do so, even though Mathurā inscriptions record the donations of monks and nuns⁹⁴. One such image, a *kapardin* Buddha in the National Museum, New Delhi, was dedicated by a

⁹⁰ See e.g. Sharma 1984, figs. 83-86, 89-91. A small child is present in fig. 90.

⁹¹ See e.g. Rosenfield 1967, figs. 33, 104. Similar scenes are depicted on the bases of Jaina images: see e.g. Huntington & Huntington 1985, fig. 8.44.

⁹² Monks are also shown, in homage to a seated bodhisattva, on the base of a standing Gandhāran bodhisattva in Czuma & Morris 1985, § 115

⁹³ See Zwalf 1996, Vol. I, p. 41, “Seats and bases”. Zwalf remarks that “although an iconographic programme often seems present, systematic relationships between an image and the carving on its base remain to be established in detail”.

⁹⁴ As far as I have noticed, monastics are not depicted in the earliest reliefs of Bhārhut and Sāñcī, whether in narrative or homage scenes. For two monks worshipping a *dharmacakra* on a tympanum described as from the 1st century CE see Czuma & Morris 1985, § 7.

monk named Virāṇa; the base depicts four lay figures, of which at least two are female, paying homage to a bodhi-tree⁹⁵.

The examples given here make it abundantly clear that early Buddhist building, monumental art, and iconography were joint projects, sponsored by monastics and lay-followers, male and female. Nuns, laywomen, queens, wives, and mothers played a significant role, and without their participation the monuments would have been poorer places⁹⁶. Records — inscriptions, or reliefs on *caitya* pillars or the bases of images — show that couples and whole families participated joyously in the cult, paying homage and making offerings at the shrines⁹⁷.

IV. Goddesses in text and stone

I have spoken above of the “paired texts” of the Pāli canon. One pair that is missing concerns deities: there is a *Devatā-saṃyutta*, but no **Devī-saṃyutta*; a *Devaputta-saṃyutta*, but no **Devadhītā-saṃyutta*; a *Yakkha-saṃyutta*, but no **Yakkhinī-saṃyutta*⁹⁸. And generally speaking, goddesses figure rarely in the canonical Pāli texts.

I can think of two exceptions: the *Itthi-vimāna* of the Pāli *Vimānavatthu*, and the Sanskrit *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*⁹⁹. The former (referred to

⁹⁵ Czuma & Morris 1985, §15.

⁹⁶ The role of women as donors remains strong today (except that the order of nuns is no more): an observer at a temple ceremony in Siam will be struck by the fact that the assembly consists largely of women, who present offerings of food and requisites to the monks. On special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, or funerals, the whole (extended) family usually participates in merit-making. Just as the components of the ancient *caitya*-s were labelled by the donors, so the components and furniture — a *kuṭi*, a gate, a bench, an electric fan — of the modern monastery bear the names of the donor(s) and of those to whom the merit is dedicated.

⁹⁷ Male-female couples flanking *caitya*-s are a frequent theme in Sāñcī reliefs, and men and women are shown worshipping at tree or footprint shrines. See also the worshipping couples on the door-jambes in Czuma & Morris 1985, § 11, and the giant couples at Kārle (Huntington & Huntington 1985, figs. 9.3, 9.4) and Kaṇheri (ibid, fig. 9.20).

⁹⁸ *Devatā*-s can be male or female, but in the *Devatā-saṃyutta* they are all male. *devadhītā* is rare in Pāli: see *PTSD* 330a (not in *PTC*).

⁹⁹ For a Sanskrit Sarvāstivādin version from Central Asia see Waldschmidt 1932; for a Mūlasarvāstivādin version in Tibetan translation see Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 8. Both Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin versions bear the title *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*. For the Theravādin version, the Pāli *Mahāsamaya-sutta*, see *Dīgha-nikāya* 20; in this version there are fewer female deities.

earlier in Part I) gives verse descriptions of the delightful floating palaces or “mansions” (*vimāna*) enjoyed by goddesses (*devī*) as a result of meritorious deeds performed in their previous lives as humans. According to the commentary, and the occasional context, these goddesses belong to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three (*tāvatiṃsa*).

In the *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*, hosts of female deities are among the divine assembly that gathers to pay homage to the Blessed One and 500 arhats in the Kapilavastu Forest. The goddesses figure mainly among the “60 groups of deities” who illuminate the forest¹⁰⁰. Included in their ranks are some whose names are known elsewhere, some whose nature is straightforward (such as goddesses of the four elements), and many who are otherwise unknown, whose sole claim to immortality rests in the *Mahāsamāja* verses. Also present in the assembly is “Hāritī, most exquisite in complexion and shape, surrounded by her children”¹⁰¹. Hāritī, with her children, is mentioned in the *Mahāmāyūrī* and other *Pañcarakṣā* texts, and in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* and *Lalitavistara*¹⁰².

Another early text, the *Ātānāṭīya-sūtra*, is available in Pāli, Tibetan, Chinese, and in Sanskrit fragments from Central Asia¹⁰³. The *Ātānāṭīya-sūtra* does not catalogue female divinities by name, but does list supernatural beings in gendered pairs: male *gandharva*-s and female *gandharva*-s; senior male *gandharva*-s and senior female *gandharva*-s; boy *gandharva*-s and girl *gandharva*-s; male *gandharva* attendants and female *gandharva* attendants; male *gandharva* messengers and female *gandharva* messengers: and so for *piśāca*, *kumbhāṇḍa*, *preta*, *nāga*, etc¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰⁰ These are listed in six sets of verses, each of which names ten groups of deities: Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 8, §§ 20-26. The deities catalogued in §§ 20, 22, 23, and 24 are all female. Fa-t'ien's Chinese translation of the *Mahāsamāja* describes the deities of § 22 as “Göttermädchen”, of §§ 23 and 24 as “Yakṣamädchen”: see Waldschmidt 1932, pp. 184-188.

¹⁰¹ Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 8, § 28.

¹⁰² One version of her story is related in the *Tsa-pao-tsang-ching*: see Willemsen 1994, §106. For further remarks and references see Zwalf 1996, Vol. I, pp. 44 and 48, n. 125.

¹⁰³ I use here the title as given in the Mūlasarvāstivādin version. In the Central Asian Sanskrit version the title is *Ātānāṭika*, in Pāli (*Dīgha-nikāya* 32) it is *Ātānāṭīya*.

¹⁰⁴ Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 9, § 3.7: for other beings see §§ 4.2, 5.7, 6.2, 7.7, 8.2, 9.7, 10.2. Pāli § III.2 is less scrupulous. I do not know if it would be safe to conclude that the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin editors were especially gender-sensitive, since the context — protective invocation — requires comprehensiveness.

Other apotropaic (*rakṣā*) passages — such as those in the *Mahāmāyūrī*, *Laṅkāvatāra*, and *Mahābala*, also list powerful beings in gendered pairs¹⁰⁵.

Goddesses play a significant role in other early texts. The *Lalitavistara* lists in verse the goddesses who watched over the bodhisattva at birth, and female deities play prominent parts in other chapters of that text. The *Āśīrvādagāthā* — a verse blessing bestowed by the Buddha upon the merchants Trapuṣa and Bhallika, just after his enlightenment, transmitted both independently and in the *Lalitavistara*, the *Mahāvastu*, and other texts — invokes 32 *devakumārī*-s, in addition to 28 constellations, the four Great Kings, and a shrine for each quarter¹⁰⁶. In a story related in the commentary to Mātṛceṭa's *Śatapañcāśatka*, 700 Brahmakāyika goddesses (*tshaṅs ris kyi lha mo*) pay homage in verse to the low-born Ārya Nīla¹⁰⁷. A number of *rākṣasī*-s are named and summoned with *mantras* in the annex to the *Nagaropama-sūtra*¹⁰⁸. Local goddesses are listed (alongside male deities) in the *Candraagarbha-sūtra* of the *Mahāsannipāta*¹⁰⁹.

Elements common to the *mantras* of a wide range of texts — of Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna — invoke the names of female deities. Usually found in association, they include *gaurī*, *gandhārī*, *caṇḍālī*, and *mātāṅgī*, which feature in the *mantras* of the *Ātānāṭīya-sūtra*, the *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra*, the *Mahāmāyūrī*, the *Mahādaṇḍadhāraṇī*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, the *Mahābala-sūtra*, the *Ārya-avalokiteśvara-mātānāma-dhāraṇī*, and the Central Asian *Nagaropama-vyākaraṇa*¹¹⁰. For these phrases the editors drew on a common pool of *mantra* elements that seem to have been connected with the cult of female deities.

Examples have been given above of the outstanding position of women as teachers of the Mahāyāna in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. Out of the 52 spiritual guides consulted by Sudhana, a total of twenty are

¹⁰⁵ See Skilling 1992, p. 147.

¹⁰⁶ See Skilling 1992, pp. 133-134. For an edition, translation, and study of a related Uighur text, see Radloff & von Staël-Holstein 1910; for the Sanskrit version, the *Diśāsauvāstika-sūtra*, see *SHT* (I) 660, (IV) (Erg.) 660, and Wille 1996, pp. 387-388.

¹⁰⁷ Shackleton Bailey 1951, pp. 119, 205.

¹⁰⁸ See Bongard-Levin et al. 1996, pp. 82-87 (text), 96-101 (translation).

¹⁰⁹ See Lévi 1905, pp. 264-268.

¹¹⁰ For references see Skilling 1992, p. 155.

women¹¹¹. Out of these twenty, eleven are goddesses, who relate their attainments and give instruction¹¹². Some recount their past lives, in which they were also female: that is, as in the *Itthi-vimāna* (see above), female continuities across rebirths are presented in a positive light. Goddesses take the stage elsewhere, such as in Chapter 44, in which a city goddess (*nagaradevatā*) named Ratnanetrā, surrounded by a host of sky goddesses (*gaganadevatāgaṇaparivṛtā*) gives Sudhana a sermon on guarding and adorning the “city of mind” (*cittanagara*)¹¹³.

On the testimony of literature, we may conclude that reference to goddesses — some local, some mainstream — was widespread in early Buddhism. This is corroborated by archaeological evidence. The earliest surviving Buddhist records — the great *caityas* of Bhārhut and Sāñcī, the Bodh Gayā railings, the stone monuments of the Deccan, and the *caitya* of Sanghol in the Punjab — swarm with female forms. Although they in part reflect the perennial Indian fascination with the feminine form, with the exuberance of existence, their function is not merely decorative¹¹⁴. They are there to celebrate, to pay homage, and to protect, along with their male counterparts. That many are divine is shown by the fact that they perch upon lotus blossoms, or on a variety of “vehicles” (*vāhana*), animal, mythological, and human. Divine mounts — including elephants, horses, camels, bulls, buffaloes, rams, sheep, serpents, birds, men, women, boys, and girls — are mentioned in the *Āṭānāṭīya-sūtra*¹¹⁵, as well as in the *Vimāna-vatthu*¹¹⁶.

Are these female figures anonymous, are they stereotypes, or are they individuals, with their own names? Could some of them be the goddesses enumerated in the *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*? They participate in a sacred complex that represents the protective circle, the *maṇḍala*, that is invoked in

¹¹¹ Or 21, counting the “young maiden” (*dārikā*: see above, n. 73). A paper on this subject was announced at the 35th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (Budapest, 7-12 July, 1997): Yuko Ijiri (Leiden), “The Role of Female Kalyāṇa-Mītras in the Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra”.

¹¹² Vaidya 1960, table, nos. 31-40, 43.

¹¹³ Vaidya 1960, p. 339.14 foll.; Cleary 1987, pp. 306-307.

¹¹⁴ See Roth 1986 for a study of the motif of a woman bending down the branch of a tree, the *śālabhañjikā* pose.

¹¹⁵ Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 9, § 2.33-36.

¹¹⁶ E.g. stories no. 5, 41, 60-62.

the *Mahāsamāja* and *Āṭānāṭīya Sūtras*, with the Four Kings standing guard at the cardinal points. Unfortunately, few of the images seem to have borne inscriptions, and in their present condition the monuments — with fragments and sculptures scattered in dozens of museums — are difficult to read and interpret. A narrative scene from Bhārhuṭ includes the *apsaras* (*acharā*) Subhadā, Padumāvati, Misakosi, and Alaṃbusā¹¹⁷ — none of whom are mentioned in the *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*, although they are known in other texts such as the *Vimānavatthu* and the *Āśīrvāda-gāthā*. Also represented at the great *caitya* were the *yakṣiṇī*-s Cadā and Sudasanā, and the goddesses (*devatā*) Culaḥkōkā, Mahakōkā, and Sirimā¹¹⁸. At Sāñcī (and elsewhere) Śrī is ubiquitous¹¹⁹, while Hārītī is popular in Gandhāran sculpture¹²⁰. Other images, both free-standing and relief, represent unnamed *nāgī*-s and *yakṣiṇī*-s.

The role of goddesses in early Buddhism has yet to be adequately studied, whether from the point of view of archæology or of literature — perhaps because it fits uneasily into the “original Buddhism” constructed over the last century¹²¹. This Buddhism is ethical, philosophical,

¹¹⁷ Barua & Sinha 1926, pp. 48-52. Padumāvati is placed in the northern quarter in the *Āśīrvāda* texts (see e.g. Radloff & von Staël-Holstein, table, pp. 100-101). In the *Āṭānāṭīya* (Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 9, § 2.43) she is a consort of Kuvera, guardian of the north (so the Sanskrit and the Tibetan: the Pāli is different).

¹¹⁸ Barua & Sinha 1926, pp.72-78.

¹¹⁹ For an inscribed Gandhāran Śrī see Zwalf 1996, § 95.

¹²⁰ See Zwalf 1996, Vol. II, fig. 92; Czuma & Morris 1985, §§74, 75, 80; Huntington & Huntington 1985, pl. 5 and figs. 8.26, 8.27. For a later image from Ratnagiri see Snellgrove 1987, pl. 21a.

¹²¹ It strikes me that many modern works attempt to rationalize the role of deities, and to limit the discussion to cosmology (treated as a carry-over from earlier beliefs) — the levels of rebirth as determined by karma and meditation — with a grudging recognition of the role of gods (Śakra, certain Brahmā-s) as interlocutors (treated as symbolic). On gods in (early Theravādin) Buddhism see Marasinghe 1974, *EB* IV 412-418, s.v. *deva*, and Wagle 1985; (in general) Lamotte 1976, pp. 759-765. For deities in Gandhāra see Zwalf 1996, Vol. I, pp. 43-44. For goddesses in Jainism see Dundas 1992, pp. 181-183. For female deities from Hindu contexts, see Daniélou 1964 (especially part 4) and Kinsley 1988. (On the Hindu/Buddhist distinction, Sylvain Lévi's remarks with reference to Nepal at the beginning of this century may be fairly applied to the India of the centuries after the Buddha: “A rigid classification which simplistically divided divinities up under the headings, Buddhism, Śaivism, and Vaiṣṇavism, would be a pure nonsense; under different names, and at different levels, the same gods are for the most part common to different confessions [*églises*]” [*Le Népal, Étude historique d'un royaume hindou*, Vol. I, Paris, 1905, repr. New Delhi, 1991, p. 319, as rendered in Gellner 1992, p. 76]).

intellectual; it is austere and male, and it has no room for cults, no place for gods, let alone goddesses¹²². Beyond this, the reaction of early European scholarship to texts like the *Mahāsamāja* and *Āṭānāṭīya Sūtras* — not to speak of the *Pañcarakṣā* and other *mantra* texts — was generally unfavourable: the genre was regarded as peripheral, even beyond the pale of “true” Buddhism. No connection seems to have been drawn between the deities and the early monuments.

V. Conclusions

The testimony of inscriptions and other historical materials establishes that the order of nuns was a socially active and influential institution during the early centuries of Buddhism, into the Christian Era¹²³. We have seen above that new female members of the order were instructed by their preceptors, from the start of their careers. As they themselves advanced in accomplishment and seniority, they would in turn train other nuns. Nuns were taught by nuns, by monks, by the Buddha; nuns taught other nuns, taught lay-followers and the public, taught kings. Nuns travelled: this is known from inscriptions, from the monks’ and nuns’ rules¹²⁴, and other records¹²⁵. Thus the order of nuns flourished not only in India, but also abroad, for example in Sri Lanka, and in Khotan and Kucha in Central Asia.

With the passage of time, the order declined and died out. Since Indian society has never been monolithic — and the status of women would never have been consistent throughout the vast and diverse continent — the process must have been gradual and piecemeal, occurring at a different pace, to a different degree, in different regions. The order may have flourished in one place, and withered in another, or even have waned and then waxed anew: surviving records are insufficient to determine what

¹²² For examples of colonial conceptions of Buddhism, see Scott 1994 and Almond 1988.

¹²³ For further details see Skilling 1993-94.

¹²⁴ See e.g. Hirakawa 1982, p. 337, or Theravādin *bhikkhu pācittiya* no. 27.

¹²⁵ See above, references to *Dīpavaṃsa*. As a boy Kumārajīva travelled from Kucha to India and back with his mother, who had become a nun: Watson 1993, p. xxv. In 429 and 433, nuns from Sri Lanka travelled by sea to China, where they assisted in the establishment of the nun’s ordination lineage: see Tsai 1994, pp. 53-54.

happened. The factors that contributed to the decline, whether social (a parallel decline seems to have happened in “Indian” society) or internal (assertion or usurpation by the male order or male elites) remain to be defined.

In the early period, both nuns and laywomen were prominent sponsors of *caitya*-s, caves, and images. With the Gupta period the nature of Buddhist monument building changes: no longer do we meet with enduring edifices like the early *caitya*-s and caves, with their wealth of donative records carved in stone. Later monuments, constructed largely from brick and stucco, succumbed to the ravages of impermanence and war, and survive (if at all) as ruined foundations. If the practice of cooperative sponsorship continued, there is little evidence for it: either the donations were recorded on perishable materials, or the nature of sponsorship and record-keeping had changed. Whatever the case, the body of available evidence shrinks from the Gupta period onwards, and the role of female donors becomes difficult to determine. We do know that women (laywomen more often than nuns) continued to dedicate images and manuscripts into the Pāla and Sena periods, but our records — scattered inscriptions and colophons — are fragmentary.

Gods and goddesses may enjoy fabulously long lives in their heavens, but on earth their cults rise and fall according to the whims of fickle humankind. Many of the early female deities, such as those listed in the *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*, disappeared without trace, with a few exceptions, such as Hārītī and Śrī. But in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna new goddesses and female bodhisattvas — such as Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā, or the five Pañcarakṣā deities — took their place, to play a vital role in day-to-day cult and practice¹²⁶.

The present paper has only scratched the surface of a vast and complex topic. There is scope for much more research, investigation, and analysis, which should amplify, improve, and correct these preliminary findings. Dundas has noted that “female religiosity in south Asian religions is a subject which up to comparatively recently has been inadequately treated ... as further ethnographic data about the role of women, both lay and ascetic, starts to appear, there should be a partial readjustment away from

¹²⁶ Cf. Snellgrove 1987, pp. 150-152.

the standard exclusively male-oriented perception of Jain society”¹²⁷. The same holds for Buddhist society, history, religiosity. Texts — inscriptions and monuments, and the vast and largely unindexed Buddhist literature — wait to be read and interpreted. We should not expect the resultant data on the status of women to be consistent, especially in literature, since our texts belong to different periods and schools, and were composed, revised, and edited in different social milieux. I hope the present modest contribution to the social history of early India and early Buddhism, to some aspects of gender studies, is a step towards the sort of readjustment envisaged by Dundas for Jainism, and that it will inspire others to investigate the roles of women in Buddhism more thoroughly.

References

Unless otherwise noted, references to Pāli texts are to the roman-script editions of the Pali Text Society (PTS), England, by page and line. References to Tibetan texts are to D.T. Suzuki (ed.), *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition*, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1955-61 (Q), by folio and line.

Abbreviations and titles

BCE	Before Christian Era
BSR	<i>Buddhist Studies Review</i> (London)
CE	Christian Era
<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>	Hermann Oldenberg (ed., tr.), <i>The Dīpavaṃsa, An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record</i> , [London, 1879] New Delhi, 1982.
DPPN	G.P. Malalasekera, <i>Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names</i> , 2 vols., [London, 1937-38] New Delhi, 1983
EB	<i>Encyclopædia of Buddhism</i> (Colombo)
JPTS	<i>Journal of the Pali Text Society</i> (Oxford)
LL	H. Lüders, “A List of Brāhmī Inscriptions from the Earliest Times to about A.D. 400 with the Exception of those of Aśoka”, Appendix to <i>Epigraphia Indica</i> , Vol. X, Calcutta, 1912 (reference by list number)
PTC	Pāli Tipiṭakam Concordance
PTSD	The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary
Q	see above

¹²⁷ Dundas 1992, p. 49.

SHT Ernst Waldschmidt et al., *Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfan-Funden*, Wiesbaden, 1965-

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¹²⁸ The article was originally published (with numbers of misprints) in Pathompong Bodhiprasiddhinand (ed.), *Pāli and Sanskrit Studies: Mahāmakut Centenary Commemorative Volume and Felicitation Volume presented to H.H. The Supreme Patriarch on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, Mahāmakuta Rājavidyalaya Foundation, Bangkok, BE 2536 (1993), pp. 208-251.

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