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The Advent of Theravāda Buddhism to Mainland South-east Asia

In the present paper I examine evidence for the school-affiliation of the early Buddhism of mainland South-east Asia, in the first millenium of the Common Era.¹ Is the evidence sufficient to establish that this school was the Theravāda, and, if so, when and from where did it arrive in the region?

For the Theravāda of Ceylon—or more precisely, for the Mahāvihāra school of the Theravāda—we have the history as presented in the two famous chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*. Information may also be gleaned from references to historical events embedded in the commentaries of Buddhaghosa and others, from inscriptions in Old Sinhala and Sanskrit, from archæological and iconographical evidence, and from Chinese sources—in some cases first hand, such as that supplied by the redoubtable pilgrim Fa-hien. Altogether, we have at least in broad outline a continuous history of Theravāda in Ceylon from its inception up to the present day.

Outside of Ceylon, the history of Theravāda is obscure. For mainland India we have almost no information at all. There are some—but not many—references to Theravādin doctrines in the works of other schools,² but the historical information—such as that provided by inscriptions or by the Chinese pilgrims Hsüan-tsang and I-ching—is at best sketchy.

For the South-east Asia of the early period we do not have any historical records comparable to those of Ceylon: no indigenous chronicles,

This is a revised version of a paper given at the École française d'Extrême-Orient, Phnom Penh, 6 July 1996. The title was inspired by Luce 1974.

1. That is, I do not discuss the Buddhism of peninsular and insular South-east Asia, or that of Campā (the coastal regions of present-day central and southern Vietnam). In none of these areas is there any early evidence for Theravāda Buddhism.

2. See Skilling 1987, 1993a and b, and 1994 for some examples from Tibetan sources.

whether in Pāli, Sanskrit, or in vernaculars survive. The few extant historical inscriptions do not give us any continuous history, and Chinese reports tell us little about the type of Buddhism practised on the mainland.

Pāli Inscriptions from Burma and Siam

The main evidence for the school-affiliation of early Buddhism in South-east Asia comes from Pāli inscriptions. These are known from two main areas: the Pyu kingdom of Śrīkṣetra in the vicinity of Prome in the lower Irrawaddy valley of Burma, and the Mon kingdom of Dvāravatī in the Chao Phraya basin of Siam.³ The inscriptions from Burma are engraved on gold plates (fashioned in imitation of palm-leaf manuscripts), a silver reliquary (*stūpa*), terracotta tablets, and stone slabs. The inscriptions from Siam are engraved on stone *dharmacakkas*, octagonal pillars, stone slabs, and clay tablets and reliquaries. The script used in both cases is similar, and may be described as a variety of the South Indian Pallava script.⁴ The Śrīkṣetra inscriptions are dated to the 5th to 7th centuries CE, the Siamese inscriptions to the 6th to 8th centuries: that is, they are broadly contemporary.⁵

(1) Inscriptions from the region of Śrīkṣetra:⁶

- the *ye dhammā hetuppabhavā* verse (*Vinaya Mahāvagga*, I 40.28–29);
- the *iti pi so bhagavā* formula (cf. *Dhajagga-sutta*, SN I 219.31–33);
- the *svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo* formula (cf. *Dhajagga-sutta*, SN I 220.1–2);

3. In this paper I set aside the historical questions (of, for example, chronology and geographical extent) attached to the names of these two kingdoms, and (with not a little reluctance) use the names as a conventional shorthand.

4. The script of the Pyu inscriptions has in the past been variously described as Kadamba, Telegu-Canara, or Grantha: for a welcome reappraisal see Stargardt 1995, 204.

5. For the dating of the former see Stargardt 1995, for the latter e. g. Bauer 1991 and Skilling forthcoming (a). It should be stressed that the inscriptions do not bear any dates, and that those assigned to them are tentative and approximate. A comprehensive comparative palaeographical analysis of the Śrīkṣetra with the Dvāravatī corpus remains a desideratum.

6. For details see Ray 1939, 41–52; Luce 1974, 125–27; and Stargardt 1995. Most of the texts are brought together in U Tha Myat 1963. Note that several of the passages are known from more than one inscription.

- the formula of dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*: cf. *Vinaya Mahāvagga*, I 1.10–2.1);⁷
- stanzas sung by Sakka, Lord of the Gods, in praise of the Buddha entering Rājagaha (*Vinaya Mahāvagga*, I 38.15–23, 29–30);
- the *maggān' atthāṅgiko seṭṭho* verse (*Dhammapada* 273);
- verses from three popular *paritta*-s: the *Maṅgala*-, *Ratana*-, and *Mora-sutta*-s;⁸
- the four confidences (*vesāraja*) of a Buddha (MN I 71.32; AN II 8, penult);
- the 37 factors conducive to awakening (*bodhipakkhiya-dhammā*);
- a list of miscellaneous numerically grouped items, in ascending order;
- a list of the 14 Buddha *nāṇa*-s (cf. *Paṭisambhidāmagga* I 133.19–30);
- a fragment of a commentary on *paṭiccasamuppāda* (cf. *Vibhaṅga* 144–45);
- the opening of the *mātikā*: *kusalā [dhammā aku]salā dhammā abyāka[tā] dhammā* (cf. *Dhammasaṅgani* 1.4);
- a fragment giving two of the 24 conditions: [*adhi*]patipaccayo *anan-tarapaccayo*;

7. In addition to the *paṭiccasamuppāda* inscribed on gold plates from Śrīkṣetra, the *Vinaya Mahāvagga* version is known from a stone slab from Kunzeik, Shwegyin township, Pegu: see Aung Thaw 1978, 111. As far as I know this handsome and well-preserved inscription has not been published, but fortunately most of it can be described from the photograph at Aung Thaw p. 110. It opens (the readings here are preliminary) with the introductory [1] *t(e)na samayena buddho bhaga(vā) uruvelāyaṃ viharati na(jj)(ā) (neraṅja-rāya? unclear)* [2] *tīre (or tire?) bodhirukkhamaḷe pathamābhisambuddho atha kho bhagavā . . .*, followed by the full *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula, both *anuloma* (lines 5–9) and *paṭiloma* (lines 9–14). The latter opens with the phrase *avijjāya tv eva asesavirāganīrodhā*, characteristic of the Theravādin (Pāli) version only, and not known in versions of other schools, such as the (Mūla)Sārvāstivādins or Lokottaravādins, or from the Prakrit inscriptions from Devnīmori and Ratnagiri, all of which open with equivalents of *avijjā-nirodhā*. The *paṭiloma* is followed by the *yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā* verse (lines 15–18), known also from inscriptions from Siam. The last two lines continue with the prose text of the *Mahāvagga*—*atha kho (bhaga)vā r(attiya) maj(jh) imam (yā)maṃ paṭicca*—suggesting that the slab is part of a longer inscription. For the Devnīmori and Ratnagiri inscriptions see von Hinüber 1985; for a suggestion that the former might be Vātsīputrīya or Sāmmaṭīya, see Skilling forthcoming (c).

8. For these see Skilling forthcoming (b).

—a list of seven of the eight *vipassanā ñāṇa*-s (cf. *Visuddhimagga* XXI.1).

(2) Inscriptions from the Chao Phraya basin:⁹

- the *ye dhammā hetuppabhavā* verse;
- the formula of dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*);
- an enumeration of the four truths of the noble (*ariya-sacca*), the twelve links of dependent arising (*paṭticcasamuppāda*), and the 37 factors conducive to awakening (*bodhipakkhiya-dhamma*), inscribed together on a rectangular stone bar from Nakhon Pathom;¹⁰
- extracts from the prose *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, the “first sermon” spoken by the Buddha in the Deer Park at Sarnath, found on stone *dhammacakkas*;¹¹
- the three *yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā* verses (*Vinaya Mahāvagga*, I 2.3–26);
- the *anekajātisaṃsāraṃ* verses (*Dhammapada* 153–54);
- the *dukkhaṃ dukkhasamuppādaṃ* verse (*Dhammapada* 191);¹²
- the *abhiññeyyaṃ abhiññātaṃ* verse (*Suttanipāta* 558);
- fragments of the 16 senses (*aṭṭha*) of the four truths (cf. *Paṭisambhidāmagga* 19.31–20.6);¹³
- nābādhakaṃ yato dukkhaṃ . . .*, non-canonical verses on the four truths (cited at *Visuddhimagga* XVI.25);
- sacca-kicca-kata-ñāṇaṃ . . .*, a non-canonical verse on the twelve aspects (*dvādasākāra*) of the four truths (cited in the *Paṭhama-sambodhi* and *Sāratthasamuccaya*);
- three verses from the *Telakaṭāha-gāthā*.¹⁴

The evidence of the inscriptions may be examined from two aspects: language and contents. The language of both the Śrīkṣetra and Dvāravati palæographs is Pāli. Is the use of Pāli sufficient to establish the presence of the Theravāda? Or could another Buddhist school have also transmitted

9. Most of the inscriptions may be found in Supaphan na Bangchang 2529 (1986), 15–40. As in the case of the Śrīkṣetra inscriptions, several of the passages are known from more than one inscription.

10. See Skilling 1992.

11. See Skilling forthcoming (a) for references.

12. See Skilling 1991 and 1992.

13. See Skilling forthcoming (a) for this and the two following passages.

14. See references below. The inscription is from Prachin Buri, and thus outside of the Chao Phraya valley proper.

its sacred writ in Pāli, and have been responsible for the inscriptions? From an early date, Buddhist tradition recognized dialect as one of the key distinguishing features of the different schools (*nikāya*). In the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era, tradition spoke of four main schools, each transmitting its canon in a different Indic dialect: (Mūla)Sarvāstivādins, who used Sanskrit; Mahāsāṃghikas, who used an intermediate language; Sāmmatiyas, who used Apabhramśa; and Sthaviras (that is, Theras), who used Paśācī.¹⁵ The tradition is confirmed by the distinctive and consistent linguistic features of available texts of the schools. On this evidence I conclude that it is unlikely that another school would have used Pāli, and that the use of that language in the inscriptions is a strong indication of Theravādin activity in the region.

What about the contents of the inscriptions? It is true that the canonical extracts—such as the various formulas, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, and the verses—belong to the common heritage of Buddhism: but our epigraphs give them in their Theravādin recensions, and they agree very closely indeed with the received transmission that we know today.¹⁶ The “extracts” from the *Abhidhamma* and *Paṭisambhidāmagga* are rather more indicative. As far as is known, the seven books of the Theravādin *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* are unique to that school, and employ a unique system and technical vocabulary. The Śrīkṣetra inscriptions preserve fragments with counterparts in the *Mātikā*, the *Vibhaṅga*, and the list of 24 conditions (*paccaya*), all of which may be described as specifically Theravādin. Inscriptions from both Śrīkṣetra and Siam employ technical categories known from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (whether or not they are actual extracts is not clear), an ancient commentary transmitted in the *Khuddaka-nikāya* of the Pāli Canon, and unique to the Theravādin school.

The non-canonical inscriptions provide further convincing evidence for a Theravādin presence. The Śrīkṣetra list of seven *vipassanā nāṇa*-s has a parallel in the *Visuddhimagga*, and an inscribed octagonal pillar from U Tapao gives a set of verses on the four truths that are cited in that work and in other works of the school.¹⁷ The *Visuddhimagga* is, of course, one of the most representative and most authoritative texts of the Mahāvihāra

15. See Skilling forthcoming (c) for references. The Theravādins traditionally describe the language of their texts as Māgadhī, “the language of Magadha”: see von Hinüber 1994.

16. There are a very few orthographic variants, for which see e. g. Skilling 1992, 84—with reference to the work of von Hinüber—and forthcoming (a).

17. See Skilling forthcoming (a) for references.

Theravāda. An inscription found in association with a giant pair of *Buddhapāda* at Amphoe Si Maha Phot in Prachin Buri province gives three Pāli stanzas in homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. The stanzas, in the *vasantailaka* metre, are from the *Telakaṭāha-gāthā*, a work of unknown authorship believed to have been composed in Ceylon. According to the opening Khmer portion, the epigraph was set up by one Buddhasiri in CE 761.¹⁸ The *sacca-kicca-kata-ñānam* verse is known only from late Theravādin texts: it is noteworthy that the Siamese inscriptions (the verse occurs several times) are much earlier than the known texts that give the verse.¹⁹

From the point of view of both language and contents, I conclude that the Pāli inscriptions of Burma and Siam give firm evidence for a Theravādin presence in the Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya basins, from about the 5th century CE onwards.²⁰ From the extent and richness of the evidence it seems that the Theravāda was the predominant school, and that it enjoyed the patronage of ruling and economic elites.²¹ But I do not mean to suggest that religious society was monolithic: other schools may well have been present, or have come and gone, and there is ample evidence for the practice of Mahāyāna and Brahmanism in the region.²²

18. See *Charuk nai prathet thai* 2529, I: 179–86 and Rohanadeera 1988. The *Telakaṭāha-gāthā* was edited by Edmund R. Goonaratne (1884).

19. See Skilling forthcoming (a) for references.

20. We must wait for a comprehensive study of Indic loan-words in early Mon inscriptions from Siam before we can determine the degree to which they use Sanskrit or Pāli. An example of the former is the word *puṇya*, ubiquitous in the epigraphs. A possible example of the latter is the term *upājhāy*, derived more probably from Pāli *upajjhāya* (also *upajjha* and *upajjhā*) than Sanskrit *upādhyāya*, in an inscription from Lopburi: see Coëdès 1961, 8, II (1). Another form, from two ca. 9th century “votive tablets” is *pajhāy*: *Charuk nai prathet thai* 2529, II: 85–89, 90–94 (note that the word occurs side-by-side with *ācāryya*).

21. Stargardt (p. 200) remarks of the relic chamber of the “Khin Ba mound,” the source of a 20-leaf golden Pāli text: “although many other relic chambers were discovered at Śrī Kṣetra, this was the only one to survive intact, and its contents exceeded—in number, quality of workmanship, and concentration of precious metals and stones—even the relic chamber of the Bhaṭṭiprolu stūpa in Andhra.”

22. The practice of Mahāyāna is compatible with any of the Vinaya schools, including the Theravāda, and brahmins played (and continue to play) an active role in South-east Asian “Buddhist” societies, both court and common. The schools or religious groups should be regarded as interactive and complemen-

The Question of Origins

The Theravādin *saṃgha* of Ceylon was divided into two main rival branches, the Mahāvihāravāsins and Abhayagirivāsins. After more than a thousand years of contention for legitimacy and patronage, the former won out, and absorbed the monks and monasteries of the latter. Most regrettably for our purposes, the literature of the Abhayagiri, which included a chronicle of the school, was allowed (or perhaps encouraged) to disappear, with the result that no undisputed Pāli text of the school survives.²³ The Theravāda that we know today is the Mahāvihāra tradition, as settled by the time of the prolific commentator Buddhaghosa in the 5th century. The later Pāli literature of the sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*s) and manuals, although subject to further development and a variety of influences, also belongs to the Mahāvihāravāsin lineage.

Both schools maintained contacts with India: with Kāñcīpuram, Andhradeśa, and Magadha. Is there any evidence for the presence of either school in early South-east Asia? The canonical inscriptions—including the *Abhidhamma* “extracts”—could belong to either the Abhayagirivāsins or the Mahāvihāravāsins, since both are believed to have transmitted a similar canon in Pāli, and both held broadly similar tenets and used a similar technical vocabulary.²⁴ It seems that the Abhayagiri also transmitted the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, or at least a similar text, since passages cited in the *Vimuttimaggā* (for which see below) have parallels in that work. The *nābādhakaṃ yato dukkhaṃ* verses, known at present only from Mahāvihāra texts such as the *Visuddhimaggā*, are given in citation, and are not original to the works in question: that is, they originate from an earlier text that may have been accepted by both schools.

The *Vimuttimaggā*, a treatise associated with the Abhayagiri, was well-known outside of Ceylon (whether it was composed in that country or in India remains under debate). A comprehensive manual of practice and

tary rather than mutually exclusive. For Avalokiteśvara in South-east Asia see Chutiwongs 1984 (especially ch. 3 on Burma and ch. 4 on Central Thailand) and Chutiwongs and Leidy 1994; for brahmanism in the region see Dawee 1982.

23. See Skilling 1993a.

24. The canons of the two schools were not identical (and is it not historically and humanly improbable, rather impossible, that two canons transmitted for centuries from an early date—the Abhayagiri was founded in the 1st century BCE—at separate monastic centres should be so?): see the important references in von Hinüber 1995, 36–38.

theory, composed by Upatissa (Skt. Upaṭiṣya) perhaps by the 2nd century CE, it was translated into Chinese in 515. Interestingly, the translator, *Saṃghabhara, was a *bhikṣu* of Funan (an early South-east Asian polity known from Chinese sources, and located by the *savants* in the deltaic regions of Cambodia).²⁵ The manuscript of the *Vimuttimaggā*, along with the other texts translated by *Saṃghabhara, was brought to China in 503 by another monk of Funan, *Mandrasena.²⁶ Since none of the other texts brought from Funan are Theravādin, and some belong to the Mahāyāna,²⁷ the fact that the *Vimuttimaggā* was among them attests only to the availability of that text in Funan: it cannot be interpreted as evidence for a (non-Mahāvihāra) Theravādin presence.²⁸ Since *Saṃghabhara did some of his translation work in the “Funanese Pavilion,”²⁹ and enjoyed the patronage of the Emperor, it seems that Funanese Buddhism was accorded some esteem.

(For insular South-east Asia, we have one clear piece of evidence: the inscription from Ratu Baka in central Java, dated CE 792, which refers to an “Abhayagiri-*vihāra* built for the Sinhalese *saṃgha*.” On the mainland, but outside of our period, there is mention of an Abhayagiri in the concluding Khmer portion of a Vajrayānist Sanskrit palæograph, dated CE 1066, from the vicinity of Nakhon Ratchasima [Korat] in Central Siam.³⁰ The precise location of this Abhayagiri is unknown, and it is by no means certain that the toponym should be related to the Abhayagiri school: the inscription names only an “Abhaya Mountain” [*giri*: without the word *vihāra*], where images of “Buddhalokeśvara” and others were installed and later renovated.)

25. For the school-affiliation (and name of the translator and date of translation, about which there has been some confusion) see Skilling 1994.

26. *Li-tai san-pao chi*, T. no. 2034, 49.98c.6–7; *K'ai-yüan shih-chiao lu*, T. no. 2154, 55.537c.18–19. The *Annals of the Liang Dynasty* confirm that Funan was one of the countries that sent tribute in 503. I am grateful to Bhikṣuṇī Vinītā Tseng for checking the Chinese sources.

27. The works are listed in Nanjio 1975, II §§ 101, 102; Bagchi 1927, 414–18; *Répertoire du canon bouddhique sino-japonais*, Fascicule annexe du Hōbōgirin (1978) 267 (s. v. “Mandarasen”), 281 (s. v. “Sōgyabara”).

28. The *Vimuttimaggā* was also known in North India: the chapter on the *dhutaṅga*-s was translated into Tibetan under the title *Dhutagaṇanirdeśa* around CE 800, and long sections were cited by Daśabalaśrīmitra, a North Indian scholar, probably in the 12th century, in a work preserved only in Tibetan translation: see Skilling 1987, 1993b, and 1994 for references.

29. Bagchi 1927, 416.

30. See Chirapat 1990, 12 (text line 32), 13 (tr.).

All told, there is no conclusive local evidence that the early Theravāda of South-east Asia was affiliated with either the Mahāvihāra or the Abhayagiri. We may also note the absence of references to South-east Asia of the period in the chronicles of Ceylon,³¹ and reflect that in the great period of reform that swept the region in the 14th and 15th centuries the new ordination lineage was distinguished by the name *Sihala-sāsana*. Might this not suggest that the old tradition did not associate itself with Ceylon?

It is therefore probably futile to try to trace the Theravāda of the period to either of the Ceylon schools. It is likely that Buddhism arrived in the area at an early date—perhaps even from the time of Soṇa and Uttara's mission to Suvannabhūmi during the reign of King Aśoka, as traditionally held. Whether this Buddhism belonged to the Theravādin lineage from the start, or whether that lineage asserted itself later, cannot be said (and what did the term Theravādin mean in the pre-Buddhaghosa period, and outside of Ceylon?)—but there is no doubt that it evolved independently of the Ceylon schools. Over the centuries it would have undergone multiple influences, as monks (and perhaps nuns) from different regions of India criss-crossed the region, and as local monks travelled throughout the region and to different parts of India.³² There is evidence for connections with Andhradeśa and the South, for example in the layout of early Pyu *stūpas* and *vihāras*, such as those from Beikthano.³³ There is also evi-

31. See here Ray 1939, 52. Sirisena (1978, 58) remarks that "Sri Lanka's close religious contacts with Burma started only from the eleventh century." His work offers a wealth of information—from chronicles, inscriptions—on the relations between Ceylon and South-east Asia but, as the title indicates, all from the later period.

32. If anything is clear from the time of our earliest records—the *Tripitaka* itself (e. g. the *Puṇṇovāda-sutta*, MN 145)—up to the present, it is that monks travelled, even in the face of adversity or danger. The subject is addressed by Vasubandhu, who in his *Vyākhyāyukti* gives in verse seven reasons why the Buddha travelled (note the technical term, known from the canon, *cārikāṃ carati*) and fifteen reasons why auditors (*śrāvaka*) did so (Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripitaka, vol. 113, cat. no. 5562, *sems tsam si*, 44b6 foll.). The verses are available in Sanskrit citation in Haribhadra 1960, 271.30 and 274.19.

33. See e. g. Stargardt 1995, 200, 205. It is intriguing that the *dukkhaṃ dukkhasamuppādam* verse, inscribed at least twice in Siam, is also known (but in a lightly Sanskrit form) from an inscription from Andhra: see Skilling 1991 and 1992 for details. The use of the Pallava script cannot in itself be cited as evidence, since that script was employed from an early date throughout insu-

dence for contacts with North India: the influence of Gupta idioms on Dvāravatī Buddha images, and the practice of enshrining the *ye dhammā* verse or the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula in *stūpas*, which was widespread throughout the North, but rare in the South³⁴ and Ceylon.³⁵ The *Telakātāha* verses suggest contacts with the latter country, as does, perhaps, a short and enigmatic Old Mon inscription from the Narai or Khao Wong cave in Saraburi, dated to *circa* 12th century BE (CE 550–650), which refers to an Anurādhapura.³⁶ Whether the reference is to the ancient capital of Ceylon or to a local site cannot be said, although the latter seems more likely: the important point is that the toponym is otherwise known only from Ceylon.³⁷

lar, peninsular, and mainland South-east Asia, for secular and religious (both Brahmanical and Buddhist) records.

34. For some Southern examples in the Pallava script see Rea 1990, 149–80 and pls. 51–64 (and also Mitra 1980, 218–20). The inscriptions that I am able to decipher from the Stygian reproduction of the plates give the *ye dharmā* verse in Sanskrit. Rea describes the site as “one of the most remarkable groups of Buddhist remains in the Presidency” (then in Madras, the site is now in District Visakhapatnam of Andhra Pradesh). Further south, at Gummadidurru (District Krishna) were found “127 clay tablets of the size of an eight-anna piece and bearing the Buddhist creed in Nagari characters of the late mediæval period” (*Archæological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1926–27*. Rpr. Delhi: 1990, 155–56: see also Mitra 1980, 212).

35. That the practice was not unknown to the late Ceylon Theravāda may be seen from the *Sāratthadīpanī* (a text some centuries younger than our examples from the field), which defines a *dhamma-cetiya* as “[a *cetiya*] built after depositing a book inscribed with conditioned arising, etc.”: Mahāmakūṭa ed., vol. 1 (Bangkok), 2511 [1968], p. 263, ult *paṭiccasamuppādādilikhitapothakam nidadhitvā katam paṇa dhammacetiyaṃ nāma*. (I am grateful to the late U Bo Kay of Pagan for the reference.) We may compare the definition with Candragomin (6th–7th century CE?) as cited by Haribhadra (late 8th century) in his *Āloka* (BST 4, 361.15) *yatra hi nāma pudgalanairātmya-dyotikayā ye dharmā hetuprabhavā ity ādigāthayā adhiṣṭhito bhūbhāgaḥ stūpo mataḥ*. For some of the few *ye dharmā* inscriptions known from Ceylon, see Mudiyanse 1967, 29–30 (in Nāgarī, on images that Mudiyanse, with good reason, deems imported), 92–95 (in Sinhalese characters, possibly in Pāli), and 97. Ceylon is rich in deposited texts, but mostly in Sanskrit, and of *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, or *Prajñāpāramitā*, rather than extracts from the Pāli canon: see Mudiyanse 1967, Schopen 1982, and von Hinüber 1984.

36. *Charuk nai prathet thai* 2529, II:42–47.

37. That is, no other references are given in Monier-Williams 1976, 37c, or in Malalasekera 1983, 83–85.

We should not regard the establishment and development of Buddhism in the region as a mere mechanical process: it was rather a human, and hence unpredictable, progress in which decisions were made and acted upon by individuals and communities. A single charismatic monk could attract followers and sponsors of status to his school; a single ruler could, whether for political, economic, or purely religious reasons, decide to favour a particular *samgha*.³⁸ Changing trade routes or political alliances could bring new patterns of patronage.

Perhaps because of the absence of indigenous information—of contemporary chronicles or histories—the Buddhism of early South-east Asia is all too often portrayed as an inanimate cultural package that was passively received from abroad. All the evidence, however, is against this. The Buddhism of the Chao Phraya plain was not a simple copy from Ceylon or India: from the time of the very first evidence, it already has a unique face, implying an earlier evolution for which no records remain. The surviving artifacts are expressions of a mature and refined culture, with special features like the large and ornate stone *dharmacakkas*; the plan of the *stūpas* or *caityas*, and the style of their stucco art; the style of the Buddha images; the rich terracotta art (the so-called votive tablets); and motifs that remain to be explained, such as the so-called Banaspati image. From this evidence we can only deduce that the Buddhism of the Chao Phraya valley is the flowering of a “local genius.” The same may be said of the Buddhism of the Pyu, which had its own architecture and terracotta art, and local practices such as the urn-burial of people of status. The two realms were flourishing centres of Buddhist culture in their own right, on an equal footing with contemporary centres like Anurādhapura.³⁹

To conclude, we may turn to Laos and Cambodia. Is there any evidence of early Theravādin activity in these countries? Very little information is available for Laos. In 1968 a standing stone Buddha in Dvāravatī style,

38. That a single monastic could make enormous and enduring contributions to a culture—in manifold aspects—may be seen from countries for which we have records. Atiśa and Bu ston spring to mind for Tibet, Kukai for Japan.

39. The situation was perhaps not much different from that of today, when the *Buddhisms* of the Mon, Burmese, Central Thai, Shan, Lanna Tai, Lao, and Khmer are each quite distinctive. We might also bear in mind that—from the point of view of Madhyadeśa—Ceylon, Andhra, and South-east Asia were equally foreign cultures, and that there is no valid reason to relegate the last-named to a lower rank. In a sense “local” and “foreign” are modern constructs: the South-east Asian cultures that adopted Indian cosmology did not hesitate to place themselves within Jambudīpa.

190 cm. in height, was found at Ban Thalât in Vientiane province. The image and the accompanying Mon inscription have been dated to the 7th–8th centuries.⁴⁰ The finds suggest that the Mon Buddhism of the right bank of the Mekhong River (the Mun and Chi valleys) also spread to the left bank, but much more research needs to be done into the nature of the Buddhism of the middle Mekhong valley before anything more can be said.

In Cambodia—which is rich in structural remains and lithographs—no ancient Pāli inscriptions have been found, and scriptural extracts of the type discussed above are unknown, with one exception. This is an epigraph of two lines, engraved in small “pre-Angkorian” letters on the back of a standing Buddha image (90 cm. in height) from Tuol Preah Theat in Kompong Speu province (now in the Musée Guimet).⁴¹ The text reads:⁴²

*ye dhammā hetuprabhavā tesam hetum tathāgato avaca
tesañ ca yo nirodho evaṃvādī mahāsamano.*

The verse differs from the Pāli of the *Mahāvagga* (*Vinaya* I 40) in giving *hetuprabhavā* for *hetuppabhavā* and *avaca* for *āha*, and cannot be cited as evidence for a Theravādin presence.⁴³ Otherwise, the earliest Pāli inscription dates from CE 1308—and thus belongs to the heyday of the “Theravādin renaissance” in Rāmaññadesa, Burma, Central Siam, the Lanna Kingdom, and other northern principalities.⁴⁴

40. Boun Souk 1971, 14 (with photograph); Vothu Tinh 1983, 42–43.

41. It is not without interest that the *ye dhammā* verse is also inscribed (in Pāli) on the back of a standing Dvāravatī-style Buddha image (196 cm. in height) from Ratchaburi, dated to ca. 12th century BE (CE 550–650): see *Charuk nai prathet thai* 2529, I:72–74. Another Dvāravatī Buddha image with a (fragmentary) Pāli *ye dhammā* inscription “en caractères préangkoriens peu soignés” is in the Korat Museum: “Inscription sur une statue de Buddha du Musée de Korat,” in Cœdès 1964, 162.

42. Cœdès 1964, 108. The image is illustrated in Dupont 1955, Pls. 45 B and 46 C.

43. Note that there are many examples of the *ye dharmā* verse in a mixed or Sanskritic Pāli from India, and that they have yet to be subjected to sustained linguistic and palæographic analysis.

44. Cœdès 1989, 282–89. The inscription is a royal record of a religious foundation, and not a scriptural extract.

There is certainly evidence of the presence of Buddhism in the early period: stone, metal, and wooden images of the Buddha,⁴⁵ of Maitreya,⁴⁶ and of Avalokiteśvara,⁴⁷ and occasional mention in Sanskrit or Khmer dedicatory inscriptions. Chinese sources record that monks travelled back and forth between Funan and the Middle Kingdom, but say nothing about their school-affiliation. The *Vimuttimaggā* and other Buddhist texts, including some of the Mahāyāna, were sent to China from Funan in the early 6th century. The opening verses of the *Telakaṭāha-gāthā* are known from an 8th century inscription from Prachin Buri, which may be said to belong to the Khmer cultural sphere. Furthermore, some of the early Buddha images of Cambodia are stylistically affiliated to those of Dvāravatī. On the other hand, it is remarkable that in Cambodia there are no ruins of monumental brick *stūpas*, so common in Pyu and Mon areas, or even of smaller complexes of votive *stūpas*. Boisselier has noted that none of the ancient epigraphs refer to *stūpas*, and that none of the known *stūpa* remains are earlier than the 12th century.⁴⁸ Nor is there any evidence of a practice shared by Pyu and Mon Buddhists: the mass-production from moulds of clay “votive tablets.” Here too Boisselier remarks that these *praḥ patima* are not well-attested until the 12th century.⁴⁹ In sum, while Buddhists were certainly active in Cambodia during the early period, it seems that the dominant ideology remained that of the brahmins, and that Buddhism or Buddhist culture did not flourish among the Khmer to the degree that it did among the Pyu and the Mon.

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45. See Dupont 1955, 189–210.

46. See the examples in Chutiwongs and Leidy 1994, and Dupont 1955, pls. 29 A and 30 A.

47. For examples see Chutiwongs 1984 (chap. 5), Chutiwongs and Leidy 1994, and Dupont 1955, pls. 12 B, 22 AB, 28 A, 29 B, 30 B, and 31 A.

48. Boisselier 1966, 97.

49. Boisselier 1966, 300. For “Saintes Empreintes” in Cambodia, see Boisselier’s §§ 219, 256–57, 303, and Fig. 70.

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