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The Development and Representation of Ritual in Early Indian Buddhist Donative Epigraphy¹

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Some of the largest, most valuable resources available for the study of the earliest phase of Indian Buddhism to which we have access² come from large, open-air *stūpa* pilgrimage sites, such as Sanchi³ and Bharhut in ancient central India. At these sites, during the Early Historic period from 300 BCE to 300 CE, there are more than one thousand donative epigraphs chronicling the patronage of monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, and others from different walks of life. The records are relatively short and contain varying amounts of sociological information pertaining to persons who gifted towards the construction or enlargement of the reliquary site. A few read:

Isirakhitasa dānaṃ //
The gift of Isirakhita.⁴

Dhamarakhitāya madhuvanikāye dānaṃ //
The gift of Dhamarakhitā, [a woman] from Madhuvana.⁵

Pusasa cahaṭiyasa bhuchuno dānaṃ //
The gift of the monk Pusa [from] Cahata.⁶

Although frequently referenced, these inscriptions are not very well understood. Traditionally, scholars searching for historical facts about monastic Buddhists, women in early Buddhism, or references to geographic locations, cite and then forget them.⁷ Despite the value of the sociological information, it is uncommon to find an in-depth study of these little understood written records by specialists who are able to read beyond their relatively simple Prakrit language in a somewhat straightforward Brāhmī script as pioneered during the reign of Aśoka Maurya in the third century BCE. I seek to read between the lines and study these records in some new ways, to illustrate not only their utility as historical records that must be repeatedly revisited but also as

markers of broader historical processes, such as the expression of donation rituals in a completely new way, namely in writing, and in a totally new medium.⁸

In this paper I flesh out the chronological development of marking donation rituals, known in Buddhism as *dāna*, on permanent materials, namely stone, in the earliest phases of Indian Buddhism. First, I introduce the concept of *dāna* as a ritual, and then I present *dāna* as an important if not necessary phenomenon for the survival of institutionalized and domesticated monastic Buddhism. Next, I explore the permanent epigraphical records found throughout ancient India during the Early Historic period (300 BCE to 300 CE) and attempt to trace how, when, and possibly where *dāna* came to be an important aspect of Indian Buddhism. Over time linguistic markers gradually became more complex as the sophistication of donation rituals increased in meaning. I conclude that Buddhist worship centers functioned as financial nodes within larger patronage networks, and that early, pithy statements recording donations over time became highly ritualized with words that carried much soteriological significance. Early Indian Buddhist ritual is a difficult subject to study historically because of questions over dating either the Pāli canon or the problems of preservation and translation in the various fragmented texts surviving in Sanskrit, Gāndhārī, or Chinese. Nevertheless, in the following I hope to add to chronological discourses regarding early Indian Buddhist rituals.

The geography I refer to includes Madhya Pradesh, where the *stūpa* site of Sanchi is located, and Uttar Pradesh, where Bharhut was discovered. Besides these two large sites, other locations, such as Pauni in Maharashtra, Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh, and Bodh Gaya in Bihar also display the exact same epigraphic features. Additionally, I survey several widely ignored early Brāhmī cave inscriptions from Sri Lanka that may indicate a southern origin to written markers of donation rituals that completely contrast the thousands of inscriptions from Sanchi and Bharhut. Therefore, in this paper, I argue that the systemization of donative formulae was a complex phenomenon and may partially come from a very unexpected stimulus.

DĀNA

The Sanskrit noun *dāna* (also used in Prakrit) derives from the verb √dā, “to give,” and can refer to giving as an action or a physical gift. *Dāna* as both a gift and the act of giving begins from the earliest times in

India with the *Ṛg Veda*. The close link between rituals and gift exchange need not be discussed here,⁹ but it is safe to say that *Dānastuti* hymns in the *Ṛg Veda* glorified patrons who gave gifts (here called *dakṣiṇā*), who will obtain renown.¹⁰ Other non-*śramaṇa* texts, such as the *Mahābhārata* or the *Dānakhaṇḍa*, discuss *dāna* in much of the same way. In this literature, *dāna* is always a ritual with six *aṅgas*, or constituents, i.e., the donor (*dātṛ*), donee (*pratigrahitṛ*), charitable attitude (*śraddhā*), gift subject (*deyaṃ*), and a proper time and place (*deśakālo*). The literal gift to priests, *dakṣiṇa*, functions as a payment for a ritual or sacrifice. Romila Thapar has studied how this changed with urbanization and the expansion of kingdoms, which in turn changed societal customs.¹¹

The advent of Buddhism, according to Buddhist religious literature, added new layers to this rite. Some scholars suggest that new sources of wealth and the emergence of influential householders (*gahapatis*)¹² helped Buddhism take advantage of access to new financial networks. The innovation saw the rise of reciprocity whereby monastic Buddhists provided opportunities to the laity for merit-making.¹³ The ritual now involved two parties who gave equally to each other. Material donations to the sangha led to spiritual merit (*puṇya*) bestowed upon the donor. In some cases, it could be distributed to family members, monastic teachers, or even, eventually, “all beings.”¹⁴

According to the corpus of Pāli literature, there is a clear connection between the gifts and monastic property. Giving lodgings or property to the sangha is the highest, most auspicious gift of all, probably because it required a tremendous amount of resources for the donor.¹⁵ Similarly, gifting land to a religious organization for the construction of buildings for religious use is also the most meritorious out of all Vedic *dāna* gifts.¹⁶ Monks are allowed to construct their own dwellings with or without a donor if what they build is with “found things.”¹⁷ In the *Pātimokkha*, if furniture and fabrics (meaning possessions within the monastery) are not cared for properly it constitutes a *pācittiya* offense requiring expiation.¹⁸

The gift of a monastery from a story in the early Mahāvagga section of the Pāli *Vinaya* illustrates how such a dedication ritual of a physical place may have occurred. In the story, lay king Bimbisāra ritually presents a monastery located in the perfect place to the Buddha for sangha’s use. My slightly truncated version reads as follows:

Atha kho bhagavā yena rañño māgadhassa seniyassa bibbisārassa nivesanaṃ, tenupasaṅkami upasaṅkamtivā paññatte āsane

nisīdi saddhiṃ bhikkhusaṅghena [...] Ekamantaṃ nisinnassa khā rañño māgadhasa seniyassa bimbisārassa etadahosi: “kattha nu kho bhagavā vihareyya, yaṃ assa gāmato neva atidure na accāsanna gamanāgamanasampannaṃ aṭṭhikānaṃ aṭṭhikānaṃ manussānaṃ abhikkamanīyaṃ divā appakiṇṇaṃ rattim appasaddaṃ appanigghosaṃ vijanavātaṃ manussarāhaseyyakaṃ paṭisallānasārappaṇ’ti”?

Then the Lord went to the abode of King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha. Once there, together, with his monastic order, the Buddha sat in the appropriate seat.... When King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha was sitting at a respectful distance, he thought: “Where might the Lord dwell that is neither too far or too near a village, that is easy for coming and going, that allows all kinds of people to approach [for the sake of dhamma], that is not crowded during the day, not too noisy or lonely at night, and is suitable for seclusion?”

Atha kho rañño māgadhasa seniyassa bimbisārassa etadahosi: idaṃ kho amhākaṃ veḷuvanaṃ uyyānaṃ [...] Yannūnāhaṃ veḷuvanaṃ uyyānaṃ buddhapamukhasa bhikkhusaṅghassa dadeyya”nti. Atha kho rājā māgadho seniyo bimbisāro sovaṇṇamayaṃ bhīnkāraṃ gahetvā bhagavato onojesi: “etāhaṃ bhante, veḷuvanaṃ uyyānaṃ buddhapamukhasa saṅghassa dammi”ti. Paṭiggahesi bhagavā ārāmaṃ. Atha kho bhagavā rājānaṃ māgadhaṃ seniyaṃ bimbisāraṃ dhammiyā kathāya sandassetvā samādapetvā samuttejetvā sampahaṃsetvā uṭṭhāyāsanaṃ pakkāmi. Atha kho bhagavā etasmim nidāne dhammiṃ kathaṃ katvā bhikkhu āmantesi: “anujānāmi bhikkhave ārāmaṇ’ti.

King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha had a thought: “[My] Veluvana pleasure park is [suitable for all of these needs].... I will give Veluvana to the community of monks with the Buddha at its head.” At that time, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha grabbed ahold of a golden vessel filled with water and offered it to the Lord, saying: “May I bestow this pleasure garden known as Veluvana to the sangha led by the Buddha?” The Lord accepted the pleasure garden as an *ārāma* [a monastery suitable for dwelling]. Having given King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha a dhamma talk, the Buddha rose up and departed. It was from this [event] that the Lord told the monks: “*Bhikkhus*, I permit the use of *ārāmas* for dwelling.”¹⁹

Pouring water from a ceremonial golden vessel over the hand of the gift’s receiver eventually becomes one standard method of donation to the monastic community in Theravādin texts.²⁰ However, what happens next? In this short story, the Buddha accepts the donation,

gives a dhamma talk, and then gives permission for monks to stay in *ārāmas*. Within the context of the historical development of the monastic Buddhist institution in India, in actual practice—at least according to our epigraphic evidence examined below—sometimes the early Buddhist community ended smaller donation and dedication rituals with acts of writing, whether the writing was considered to be a by-product or a magic ritual in itself.

In his study of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*, Schopen discusses the origination of pious religious donations and their accompanying votive formulae written on physical objects.²¹ He tells the story of how King Bimbisāra, who we know rather well, donates his deceased father's furnishings to the sangha. In order to not mislead others into thinking that the sangha stole the furnishings, the Buddha orders a specific formula to be written on the religious gifts: "This thing is the religious gift of King Bimbisāra." The gift should be displayed publicly. The formula correlates nearly perfectly with what is inscribed on monuments like those at Sanchi.

DONATIVE EPIGRAPHY

Common wisdom regarding donative inscriptions suggests that the inscriptions were meant to transfer merit²² to the donor through the gift to the monastic community and/or also via the donor's proximity²³ to the Buddha, meaning the *stūpa*, probably via their names.²⁴ Although I do not disagree with these conclusions, the common assumption is that they were always, from the beginning, very powerful end products of ritualistic donation. I disagree. As I will show, the donative inscription formula grew in ritualistic power over time and in the beginning was likely not much more than a record of posterity recording only the very act of donation rather than an elaborate attempt to transfer merit. With time engravers—and indeed the community itself—began to realize the power associated with the written word and then utilized the written word as an efficacious ritualistic marker of *dāna*. Intentionality changed over the centuries, and it would be a disservice (not to mention anachronistic) to the study of the history of Indian Buddhism to propel a ritual complexity on to the earliest extant body of known Buddhist epigraphy.

We may historically trace the developments leading up the fully ritualized donative epigraphy beginning with the very first written records in India: the edicts of King Aśoka from the third century BCE.

Rock Edicts 8, 9, and 12, written in Brāhmī script using epigraphic Prakrit language, tell how Aśoka still practiced the old Vedic mode of *dāna* with gifts to religious orders as payment for ritual services.²⁵ In other edicts, such as Rock Edicts 5 and 11 and the Queen's Edict, Aśoka describes how generosity should be promoted by his ministers. Aśoka promotes one-sided gifting from patron to priest for services rendered and not two-way reciprocity as advocated later by the Buddhists. Despite this, the word Aśoka uses is simply *dānam*—a term the Buddhists who erected monumental stone construction projects for the next millennium eventually claimed as their own. I argue that during the time of Aśoka, the material record suggests that there was no connected dedication ritual associated with gifting just yet, as the Barabar and Nagarjuni cave inscriptions confirm.²⁶

The earliest strata of Buddhist inscriptions found at cult worship and pilgrimage sites reveal some precursors to expressing the donation ritual in writing. These inscriptions seem to be very similar to Aśoka's administrative edicts in contributed content, albeit with much less overall information. They tend to mark the construction of physical objects at these worship and pilgrimage sites, like pieces of *stūpas*, architectural fragments, cave *vihāras*, or *caityas*.

At Kesanapalli, a *stūpa* site in Andhra from around the second century BCE, are fifteen inscriptions which label various architectural fragments, mostly stone slabs called *paṭas*. These inscriptions are short and to the point. For example, one reads only “*oṇipino paṭam*” (The [stone] slab of [a man named] Onipi) in Prakrit.²⁷ These records remind us of the simple administrative seals used for marking commodities as studied below. Two of these simple inscriptions from Kesanapalli include the word *dānam* at the end of the written formula in the space normally reserved for the word *paṭam*. For instance, one record might be translated as “A gift (*dānam*) of the Noble Badhaka, pupil of the Noble Elder Deva.” Missing is the simple label of the established architectural fragment. In its place is this little word that becomes increasingly important with time.

At Bodh Gaya, the seat of enlightenment, also from around the second century BCE, are about a dozen inscriptions which utilize this same word, *dānam*, to describe the physical gifts of actual people to the Buddhist community. Unlike at Kesanapalli, these records display unique conformity with their usage of the word *dānam* indicating that at least at Bodh Gaya in the second century these religious gifts and

their subsequent display and written record were standardized while at Kesanapalli the end result of ritualistic donation, namely the written record, was not uniform in its formula. However, the Bodh Gaya corpus is not without its archaic features either, as the grammar switches between dative and genitive cases rendering it sometimes unclear if the gift was *of* or *for* the named person.

A single reliquary inscription from Kolhapur²⁸ in Maharashtra seems to indicate the next step in recording ritualistic donation. The record is again very brief and simple and is written on a reliquary. Its inscription reads “1²⁹ bamhasa dānaṃ / 2 dhamagutena kāritaṃ” in two lines. The first translates to “Gift of a brāhmaṇa.” The curious second line translates to “caused to be created by [a man named] Dhamaguta.” It is very likely that Dhamaguta is not the same person as the anonymous brāhmaṇa who gifted the vessel because the names are separated onto separate lines and are in different grammatical cases. Rather, Dhamaguta was probably some sort of stonemason who personally constructed the stone reliquary. This tiny inscription marks a kind of official departure from labeling property, like at Kesanapalli, to a somewhat detailed account of the history of the reliquary, a very important religious gift with great significance because of its propensity for worship.

A century or more later, by the time the famous sites of Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, and others were enlarged to their present forms, nearly every inscription becomes “gift [*dānaṃ*] of such and such” along with an increasingly frequent appearance of their occupations, lineages, and villages. By the end of the first century BCE, the total epigraphic corpus utilizing *dānaṃ* and many of these sociological features to mark the end of a ritualistic donation numbers around a thousand or more, showing not only the popularity and remarkable uniformity of the practice but the importance for the expansion of Buddhism into new regions and continued enlargement of known worship centers like the *stūpa* at Sanchi. In contrast, the most logical place for Aśoka in the third century BCE to use the word *dānaṃ* in the same sense as the Buddhist donative inscriptions is in the Barabar Cave inscriptions where he “gives” caves to religious ascetics for religious practice. But he does not record these gifts in the same way as the later Buddhists, thus indicating an early stage in the development of *dānaṃ* in written records versus a mature phase in the first century BCE at Sanchi and Bharhut.

Schopen astutely observed in these very same inscriptions that “The vast majority of donors at [Sanchi and Bharhut] do not record their intentions.”³⁰ He links this problem with the “textual doctrine” of karma in that the epigraphic data suggests an alternative understanding of that doctrine. While this may be the case, I would like to present the very same epigraphic material—and also the very same exception—as evidence of a different process. Looking closely at the single exception Schopen cites from Sanchi and Bharhut, it becomes clear that there is a different phenomenon happening altogether. The single exceptional inscription from Bharhut reads:

Sagharakhitasa m[ā]tāpituna aṭhāyā dānaṃ /³¹

The gift of Sagharakhita, for the sake of [his] mother and father.

Indeed the formula is different in this case, although only slightly. The usage of *aṭhāyā* (“for the sake of”) is a very literal, almost forced way to convey this meaning as the engraver could have just simply put *m[ā]tāpituna* in the ablative plural instead of the genitive plural. In the ablative plural the meaning would essentially remain the same whereas putting the *m[ā]tāpituna* into genitive plural seems superfluous, especially with the *aṭhāyā*. In other words, we might see here an early and perhaps sloppy attempt to convey intention (with the added layer of merit transfer). Later inscriptions do the same thing but with more efficient linguistic constructions.

Although numerous, the fate of the Buddhist donative inscription during the Early Historic period was not to remain in the same form as it appears at Sanchi and Bharhut. Rather, inscriptions become gradually more complex in similar ways to how Sagharakhita’s inscription reveals more than meets the eye. One such innovation appears at Pauni, a *stūpa* site in Maharashtra roughly contemporaneous to Sanchi and Bharhut. A partially fragmented donative inscription says,

...ya+ visamitāya dāna sukhāya hotu savasātānaṃ //^{*32}

A gift [of the lay-woman] Visamitā for the happiness of all beings.³³

The Pauni inscription shows something new. Gifts “for the happiness of all beings” expand the idea of intentionality. Now donors are knowingly transferring merit with words inscribed permanently onto sandstone. The Bharhut donation “for the sake of his mother and father” and the Pauni inscription “for the happiness of all beings” are clear exceptions to general rule from *stūpa* sites in central India. Where these offer intention, almost all of the thousands of other inscriptions do not,

indicating not only an outlying style but an overwhelming uniformity of the style as seen in the records saying only “The gift of Isirakhita,” or “The gift of Dhamarakhitā, [a woman] from Madhuvana,” or even just “The gift of the monk Pusa [from] Cahata.” When looking at later records, it becomes obvious that the written style and physical presentation changes. But why and from where would such an incentive to change come? As the drive to represent significant gifts in a ritualistic manner increased, so too did the impulse to record them for others to read because of their religious rather than administrative importance. In the following section, inscriptions from Sri Lanka show that the ritualistic function of donative inscriptions could have been an older preoccupation of Buddhists living in the south.

SRI LANKAN CAVE INSCRIPTIONS

Some donative inscriptions from caves in Sri Lanka display a very early, possibly third or even second century BCE, usage of a ritualistic formula similar to the exceptions found at Bharhut and Pauni. For instance,

Gamaṇi-uti-maharajhaha(jhita abi-ti)śaya leṇe daśa-diśaśa sagaye
dine mata-pitaśa aṭaya

The cave of the princess (Abi) Tissa, daughter of the great King Gāmaṇī-Uttiya, is given to the sangha of the ten directions, for the benefit of (her) mother and father.³⁴

At least four other inscriptions from Sri Lanka describe gifts given “for the welfare and happiness of beings in the boundless universe” (*aparimita-lokadatuya śatana śita-śukaye*).³⁵ There are many questions surrounding these early donative inscriptions from Sri Lanka. First, are the dates for the Sri Lankan inscriptions completely certain? It would seem yes, at least for the Abi Tissa cave inscription since we are confident in the historicity of her father, the king. However, the others warrant further study.³⁶ If these inscriptions found in Sri Lanka do indeed potentially date to a century or more earlier than those at Sanchi and Bharhut then we may be looking at a very clear starting location for the use of ritualistic record-keeping in early Buddhist material culture, although it would have a non-Indian mainland origin. If ritualistic donative formulae etched into stone were the southern schools’ innovation then it only gradually worked its way up into central India and then eventually to the northwest and northeast. Such a process may

have taken several decades at its quickest or several centuries at its slowest. As its popularity increased, the old style of inscribed administrative records for posterity was discontinued.

Two first century BCE inscriptions from central India demonstrate a different kind of donative expression that closely mimics the records from Sri Lanka and obviously contrasts the well-known contemporaneous donative formulae from Sanchi and Bharhut. One comes from a stone slab at Kaushambi and is a testament to the development of intentionality in epigraphy on architectural pieces that were not surrounding *stūpas*. A brown sandstone piece now found in the Allahabad University Museum reads:

1 bhayaṃtasa dharasa āntevāsisa bhikhusa phagulasa...
2 budhāvase ghoṣitārāme sava budhānām pujāye śilā kā(rito) //

Bhikhu Phagula, the disciple of the honorable Dhara, caused this stone (slab) to be made at Ghoṣitārāma, a place where the Buddha stayed, for the sake of honoring all the buddhas.³⁷

Interesting in many ways, the intention here, to honor all the buddhas, is not only a very early case from the South Asian mainland but reveals an early awareness of the importance in worshipping divine figures, like buddhas, and, presumably, earning merit for oneself by honoring the buddhas in such a ritualistic manner with the written word.

The Manibhadra inscription found at Masharfa near Kosam shows something similar:

Namo bhagavate sathavāhasa mānibhadasa gahapatikasa
ejāvatiputasa varisa puto gahapatiko seliyāputo kusapālo nāma tasa
putena gahapatikena gotiputena aśikāyaṃ kārītā vedikā piyataṃ
[bhagavā]³⁸

Adoration to the Holy One! A [rail] was caused to be made at Aśikā by Gotiputa, a householder, who was the son of one named Kusapāla, a householder who was the son of Seliyā and the householder Vāri, the son of Ejāvati, a follower of Manibhadra and the leader of a caravan. May (the Holy One) be pleased.³⁹

While neither is exceeding complex, both inscriptions are mid-first BCE century parallels to the Sri Lankan cave inscriptions and contemporaneous to the short, pithy donative inscriptions from Sanchi, Bharhut, and Pauni. One describes the donation of a stone slab and the other the installation of a *vedika* railing—two common architectural features found in abundance at Sanchi, Bharhut, Pauni, etc.—and both contain

the intentions of the donors (“for the sake of honoring all buddhas” and “adoration to the Lord!”).

Eventually the concept of recording intentions—for the sake of accumulating intangible aims such as merit—explodes, and ritualistic writing becomes an integral part of Buddhist material culture. For instance, an early, Common Era potsherd inscription from Tor Dherai exemplifies how the words may be just as important if not more important than the item itself since, after all, a potsherd is only a potsherd. The inscription reads:

Shahi-yola-mirasya viharasvamisya deyadharmo yaṃ prapa
svakiya-yola-mira-shahi-vihare saṅghe caturdiśe acaryanaṃ
sarvastivadinaṃ pratigrahe.

This hall for providing water is the religious gift of the Shahi Yola-Mira, the Owner of the Monastery, to the Community from the Four Directions, for the acceptance of the Teachers of the Sarvāstivādin Order, in his own—Yola-Mira, the Shahi’s—monastery.⁴⁰

The expansion of donative formulae into long, multifaceted explanations containing numerous references to self, community, family, and king becomes the standard nearly everywhere, including Sanchi, and on all types of material culture imaginable ranging from potsherds to spoon ladles to sacred sculptures. In the Kuśāna period, donated images and their accompanying records adopted the formula. For example, on an image of Śākyamuni from Sanchi there is the inscription,

1 raño vaskuṣāṇasya sa 20 2 va 2 di 10 bhagavato śakkyam[un]eḥ
pratimā pratiṣṭāpitā vidyamatiye pu...+
2 ...mātāpitṛṇa sarvvasatvanā ca hitasu...+

In the (reign) of King Vasukushana, the year 22, the second month of the rain season, on the tenth day, (this) image of the Bhagavat Śākyamuni was installed by Vidyāmatī for...and for the welfare and happiness of (her) parents and all creatures.⁴¹

Another on a Mathura sandstone bodhisatva image records “...(sa)tāna+ hi[ta]sukha’rtha[r̥m] bhavatu /”⁴² or “May it be for the welfare and happiness of (all) beings.” Sanchi, previously the home of the largest number of short administrative donative records now becomes the home to lengthy written markers of ritual and abandons the old model.

CONCLUSION

Why are these longer types of inscriptions so dissimilar to inscriptions like “the gift of Isirakhita” from the first century BCE? I believe the answer lies in the intentionality of the site record-keepers. The early BCE administrators at Sanchi seem to have a different agenda altogether than those at Kaushambi or in Sri Lanka. Into the Common Era, at Sanchi and similar sites such as Amaravati we gradually see fewer and fewer short, pithy administrative donative inscriptions that record merely the “gift of so and so” and more complex donative epigraphs that echo those found in the Sri Lankan caves and those found elsewhere in north, east, and west India.

One theory for such a shift centers on what Vidya Dehejia calls “collective patronage,”⁴³ where donors from all rungs of society contributed to construction projects, such as the enlargement or erection of a *stūpa*, as a unified egalitarian group. She argues that the pattern of patronage eventually changed in favor of a more heavy-handed approach that allowed elites and royals to carry the bulk weight of the donations. However, it is very clear from even this small sampling that persons of considerable power contributed large gifts to the monastic community from a very early time period shadowing the kind of patronage established in the Aśokan inscriptions.

I would like to suggest that the Sanchi donative epigraphs and those like them from the first century BCE or thereabouts represent an attempt at something different altogether. Is it possible that the Sanchi inscriptions were intended to function primarily as simple records of posterity and not as markers of rituals? If so, do they bear a resemblance to any other known forms of record keeping in ancient South Asia? The answer may lie in a future study of Indian mercantile seals that record the exact same types of information we find in the Sanchi inscriptions and in the same style.⁴⁴ For now, it may be sufficient to hypothesize that recordkeeping at Buddhist worship centers acting as financial nodes within regional patronage networks slowly evolved linguistically from pithy documents for posterity into deeply ritualized words with much soteriological significance.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the many people who have contributed towards this article in one way or another, including Oliver Freiberger, Courtney Bruntz, Amanda Boundy, and several of my students. Sections of this article also appear in

my dissertation: Matthew Milligan, "Of Rags and Riches: Indian Buddhist Patronage Networks in the Early Historic Period" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, forthcoming).

2. I refer specifically to material culture whereby there is little, if any, actual properly excavated extant evidence. Although some Mauryan remains exist, aside from the limited epigraphic evidence, they are sparse and not securely dateable let alone Buddhist. For a survey of Aśokan materials see Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source-Book with Bibliography*, Monographien Zur Indischen Archäologie, Kunst Und Philologie 18 (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 2006). For a reimagining of Aśoka and the Mauryas see Patrick Olivelle, *Aśoka: In History and Historical Memory*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009); and Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko, and Himanshu Prabha Ray, eds., *Reimagining Asoka: Memory and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012). Recently the *Arthaśāstra* has been re-translated and re-examined in Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Mark McClish, "Political Brahmanism and the State: A Compositional History of the Arthaśāstra" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2009).

3. Throughout this paper I will be using place-names without diacritics. For example, in some scholarly literature, the archaeological site known as Sanchi may be rendered with diacritical marks as Sāñcī.

4. Sanchi inscription no. 648 from Keisho Tsukamoto, *Indo Bukkyō Himei no Kenkyū* (A Comprehensive Study of Indian Buddhist Inscriptions), vols. 1–3 (Kyoto-shi: Heirakuji Shoten, 1996). Henceforth, all numbered inscriptions refer to their corresponding site as organized in Tsukamoto. All translations are my own unless specified otherwise.

5. Sanchi no. 657.

6. Sanchi no. 636.

7. Although one could cite numerous examples, I will reference several of the most valuable studies: Vidya Dehejia, "The Collective and Popular Bases of Early Buddhist Patronage: Sacred Monuments, 100 BC–AD 250," in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Upinder Singh, "Sanchi: The History of the Patronage of an Ancient Buddhist Establishment," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 1 (1996); Kumkum Roy, "Women and Men Donors at Sanchi: A Study of Inscriptional Evidence," *Position and Status of Women in Ancient India* 1 (1988); and Ranabir Chakravarti, "Merchants and Other Donors at Ancient Bandhogarh," *South Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (1995). For a creative approach in applying these inscriptions to broader historical phenomenon within the history of Buddhism see, for example, Jonathan Walters, "Stupa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-

Asokan India,” in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). More recently, see Meera Visvanathan, “Before Genealogy? Marking Descent in the Inscriptions of Early Historic India,” *Religions of South Asia* 5, no. 1 (2012).

8. Subject to much debate over the past few decades, the use of material culture to study ancient Indian religion has led to the identification of several problems with exclusively relying on religious literature. Gregory Schopen, although not an archaeologist himself, has been at the forefront of this movement away from written sources and towards a more hybrid approach, which is the research style I adopt here. Some of the problems of relying exclusively on written textual sources are: (1) they are mostly undated; (2) they derive from a very late manuscript tradition; (3) they are heavily edited by monastic elites (in the case of Buddhism); and, lastly, (4) they intend to inculcate an ideal. See Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 3. Moreover, Norman and others are of the opinion that all of our textual canonical sources, including the Pāli, are translations, at the very least, from an earlier source. See K.R. Norman, “The Value of the Pali Tradition,” in *Jagajjyoti Buddha Jayanti Annual* (Calcutta: 1984). Inscriptions, generally, do not have this problem, except for the rare case of royal edicts being copied in multiple places and changed slightly throughout, like the case of several Aśokan edicts.

9. Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, vol. 9 (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 198–228; Jan C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kinship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

10. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 2.2 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1974), 838–839.

11. Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (New York and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 521–522.

12. Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

13. Ellison Banks Findly, *Dāna: Giving and Getting in Pali Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003).

14. Schopen, *Bones Stones and Buddhist Monks*, 36.

15. Vin 2.147.

16. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 2.2:858.

17. Vin 3.148–157. Traditionally, the Pāli tradition claims that at the beginning of the monastic tradition only *nissayas*, or “resources,” were permitted for use: (1) scraps (of food) (*piṇḍiyālopabhōjana*); (2) rags for robes (*paṃsukūlacīvara*); (3) lodgings at the foot of a tree (*rukkhamūlasenāsana*); and (4) medicine of foul

urine from cattle (*pūtimuttābhesajja*). See Vin 1.58.

18. Vin 4.41–42.

19. Vin 4.38–39.

20. Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravada Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 30.

21. Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 24.

22. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 6–7. The same was definitely true for Gandharan inscriptions, as “the aim of the votive inscriptions was not, perhaps, that they should be read and understood, but to ensure religious merit through the mystic power of the *akṣara*-s” (Sten Konow, *Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions with the Exception of Those of Aśoka*, 2 vols. [New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1929; repr., 1991], 2:93).

23. Schopen, “Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions,” in *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*; and I.B. Horner, trans., *The Book of the Discipline*, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), vol. 2, translation.

24. Schopen, “What’s in a Name: The Religious Function of the Early Donative Inscriptions,” in *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*.

25. For easily accessible translations of the edicts, it may be simplest to refer to those printed in Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961; repr., 1997). Editions and better translations are scattered throughout the secondary literature.

26. For some recent editions and discussions of Aśokan inscriptions, including the Barabar and Nagarjuni caves, see Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*.

27. Kesanapalli no. 12.

28. Kolhapur no. 1.

29. The roman numerals presented within inscriptions cited here refer to the separate etched lines on the surface of the inscribed object.

30. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 6.

31. Bharhut no. 163.

32. A single dot indicates a partially lost *akṣara* on the original record while three dots indicates three missing *akṣaras*. A + replaces a completely missing *akṣara*. Lastly, an asterisk indicates an editorial restoration.

33. Pauni no. 2, but the first part of the fragmented inscription likely reads *upāsikāya*, “lay-woman,” since the same donor, the woman Visamitā, made a donation from Pauni no. 1.

34. Inscription no. 34 from S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon Vol 1: Containing Cave Inscriptions from 3rd Century B.C. to 1st Century A.C. and Other Inscriptions in the Early Brahmi Script* (Colombo: Dept. of Archaeology, 1970).
35. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 7. However, see nos. 338–341 from Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon Vol 1*.
36. Another question pertains to the nature of the relationship of the “others” to the donors themselves. Were the parents, for instance, still alive at the time of the donation or were they deceased?
37. Edition and translation found in S.R. Quintanilla, *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura, Ca. 150 BCE–100 CE* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 270–271.
38. The edition comes from Harry Falk, “The Tidal Waves of Indian History: Between the Empires and Beyond,” in *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, ed. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150.
39. Translation from Quintanilla, *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura*, 257.
40. Translation and edition is from Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, 220.
41. No. 829 in John Marshall and Alfred Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, 3 vols. (Delhi: Swati Publications, 1982), 1:386. My translation adapted from N.G. Majumdar’s in the Marshall volume.
42. No. 909 in Marshall and Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi*.
43. Dehejia, “The Collective and Popular Bases of Early Buddhist Patronage.”
44. Such a discussion is one subject of my dissertation and a focus of a working paper.