

ing scenes of Vessantara's own journey from the forest. As Lefferts and Cate demonstrate, through the procession of the cloth scrolls the Buddhist villagers intentionally parallel Vessantara's triumphant return from the forest to rule his city. After the procession reaches the temple, the scrolls are hung in the meeting hall of the temple, which is decked out with props to recreate the setting of the VJ, and monks recite the text as a form of theater. Christoph Emmrich details similar performative homologies in Nepal. In this case, the VJ is read as part of a liturgy venerating the bodhisattva (Lokanātha) Avalokiteśvara. Emmrich explains how the participants of the liturgy identify with characters within the text, who are not part of the VJ itself but the story framing it. The characters in the frame story actually worship Avalokiteśvara, providing a model for the liturgy occurring outside of the text. And as the worship of Avalokiteśvara in the frame story is said to produce merit resulting in the birth of Vessantara, so the performance of the external liturgy is thought to be able to bring a male child to sponsoring participants. Here too, then, we see that the VJ is a rich, living text amenable to constant re-creation and reinterpretation (pp. 183–209). The VJ today is clearly not the sole domain of royal patrons or male literati, and we can safely assume, I think, that this has always been the case.

But the cliché that a great strength can also be a great weakness duly applies here. There are so many tellings of the VJ, and there is so much ground covered in these essays—historical periods, geographical areas, various cultures, textual media, performative contexts, and so on—that there is little holding this volume together. I am of the mind that what is published as a book—even an edited volume of essays like this one—should *read like a book*, with a logical sequence from beginning to end. As it stands, this volume is really a collection of disparate works, and it appears that there was little effort made to harmonize them. If the VJ, as Collins suggests, is so complex—he likens it to *Hamlet* (p. viii)—that we could never plumb its depths, then rather than publishing a seemingly random selection of essays, it might behoove us to interrogate the text from a certain perspective, or at least to limit discussion to particular themes. In his introduction, Collins teases the reader with fruitful avenues of interpretation that might guide a more organized volume. One relates to the concept of *atidāna*, which can either mean 'great generosity' or 'excessive generosity'. The question is how Buddhists have interpreted and continue to interpret Vessantara's gift of his family members. Collins refers to the *Milindapañha*'s hedging its answer to this problem by allowing for both definitions of *atidāna* (pp. 7–11). Unfortunately, though, this important issue is almost completely absent throughout the rest of the volume, only being addressed sporadically by Ladwig (pp. 61, 64, 69–70, 73). Collins also broaches the critical topic of gender, both with respect to the VJ itself and also its external use and interpretation (pp. 16–19). But the only sustained treatment gender receives in this volume is by Justin McDaniel, who quite cogently argues for reading the VJ as a love story involving Vessantara and Maddī, his wife (pp. 81–99; but also see pp. 43–45, 190–91, 199–201).

I do not believe the kind of volume I am suggesting is something that the editor, or this whole series on Buddhist texts for that matter, aimed to produce. So I suppose my criticism is directed less at this particular volume on the VJ than at a species of academic publication. Indeed, volumes made up of a haphazard collection of essays are legion in the humanities. But since the VJ certainly has enough fodder for much future scholarship, perhaps others will organize essay collections that read well in book form, from cover to cover. In the meantime, *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka* provides a solid starting point for future work on the VJ, and several of its essays will be treasured for years to come.

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Reading the Mahāvamsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravāda Buddhist History. By KRISTIN SCHEIBLE. South Asia across the Disciplines. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. viii + 223. \$60 (cloth).

In *Reading the Mahāvamsa*, Kristin Scheible discusses two Buddhist texts that have occupied the attention of scholars for generations. The *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* were seized upon by Orientalist

scholars in the nineteenth century as texts that related more or less reliable historical information about the origins of Buddhism and the ancient history of Sri Lanka. In the twentieth century, Sri Lankan and Western scholars examined these texts—the *Mahāvamsa*, in particular—for possible antecedents for nationalist political ideologies and ethnic chauvinism in the post-Independence history of the modern Sri Lankan state. Scheible seeks to make an intervention into the scholarship on the early Pāli *vamsas* by applying twenty-first-century scholarly interests on the literary features of Theravada Buddhist texts to the early “chronicles” or “histories.” Her work makes ample use of what Steven Collins, Jonathan Walters, and I have brought to the study of Theravāda *vamsa* literature, although Scheible makes the strongest argument for reading Pāli histories as literary works that functioned to make its “reader-hearers” into a textual community of “good people” (*sujana*). Scheible distinguishes her work from earlier studies by seeking to re-mythologize and, to some degree, de-historicize the way we read *vamsas*. Her manner of reading focuses attention on features that most other scholars have downplayed or ignored—the mythical *nāgas* (changeable, subterranean snake-like creatures) and the metaphors employed in narrative descriptions.

Unlike earlier scholars of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa*, Scheible seeks to understand these texts on their own terms, relatively free of the traditions of interpretation that influenced how they were read and used by later generations of Buddhists and Western scholars. This move entails trying to bracket out the more political and sectarian readings of the *Mahāvamsa* that appear in its later commentary *Vamsatthappakāsinī* and that privileged the interests of the Mahāvihāra monastic order. We learn that careful readings of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* reveal expectations that ideal readers and hearers of these texts would be ethically transformed by the texts’ well-crafted literary devices and placed in proximity to the enduring presence of the Buddha, who had otherwise lived in India and passed out of this existence centuries ago (p. 6). She places a great deal of analytical importance on the proems of these two works, as she points out how their opening lines emphasize the generation of religiously valued emotions in those persons that encounter their narratives.

The first chapter of this book examines the instructions, admonitions, and aspirations that are found in the proems of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa*. These two texts, written no more than about a century apart, share an expectation that their readers-hearers will be transformed by their narratives. The *Dīpavamsa* speaks of producing what Scheible terms “religious satisfaction” (*pasāda*), while the *Mahāvamsa* claims to be able to engender “anxious thrill” (*saṃvega*) and “serene satisfaction” (*pasāda*) in its own audience (pp. 13, 33). The authors or compilers of these two ancient texts speak directly to their readers-hearers, telling them to “listen up” and priming them to be transformed in specific ways by their narratives.

Accordingly, we are encouraged to view the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* as literary texts written to produce particular effects in ways much like poetic *kāvya* literature (p. 19). This argument requires a degree of nuance since, as she freely admits, much of the theorizing about poetry in South Asian literature comes after the period in which the early Pāli *vamsa* were composed (p. 28). But the “use of metaphor, puns riveting narrative, superhuman characters, and dramatic imagery” all suggest an intention to produce literary effects on those who read or hear these texts (p. 19). To this end, Scheible employs the historian Dominick LaCapra’s oft-used distinction between “worklike” and “documentary” dimensions of historical texts. By pointing out that the Pāli *vamsa* possess elements that go beyond the simple narration of events to incorporate features of imagination and commitment, she lays out a persuasive case for reading these texts as offering much more than historical information. Instead these works make appeals for people to participate in their narratives, and they serve to produce a textual community of “good people” that are transformed by doing so.

The following two chapters offer extended analyses of light metaphors and the literary figures of *nāgas* in the early Pāli *vamsas*. Therein, Scheible presents her case for reading these texts as works of literature that are designed to transform people and affect their views and emotional states. Images of light receive special attention at first. The light that is connected with the Buddha, his relics, and Sri Lanka itself as the “lamp of the Dhamma” (*dharmadīpa*) is in turn related to the serene satisfaction and clarity of *pasāda*, which is said to be one of the chief effects of these texts. Importantly, for Scheible,

the episodes where the Buddha visits Sri Lanka in order to prime it for the eventual establishment of his religion (*sāsana*) illustrate how awesome darkness cast by the Buddha is followed by blinding light to tame the native *yakkhas* who inhabit the island (p. 60). Such phenomena mirror what Scheible takes to be the experience of the readers-hearers—feelings of awe (*saṃvega*) followed by comforting joy and clarity (*pasāda*). Further, according to Scheible, the apparently mythological accounts of how the Buddha converts the *yakkhas* and *nāgas* on the island serve as models for the transformations of those persons who encounter the text. They are likewise transformed by the Buddha's presence, albeit one that appears in texts and relics deposited throughout the island.

The greater part of the author's analysis deals with *nāgas*, as she takes these snakelike beings to be central rather than peripheral to the *vaṃsas*. In one of the more intriguing and original arguments of the book, Scheible asserts that *nāgas* function as moral exemplars that are "good to think" and that help to legitimate the authenticity of the relics that convey the Buddha's presence in Sri Lanka. *Nāgas* possess an important but ambivalent status in the *Mahāvamsa*, as they represent model devotees that seek out Buddha relics to venerate but are still held to be soteriological inferior to humans. Their conspicuous yearning for proximity to the Buddha and his relics serves, we are told, to incite in readers and hearers both a sense of gratitude for being born in a higher, human state and a sense of urgency to strive for moral perfection leading to better rebirths (p. 90).

Scheible effectively makes a case for the integral relationship between *nāgas* and relics of the Buddha in chapter four. Herein we learn that these snakelike beings are not only useful as "ruminative triggers" that make people think in morally productive ways, but they have crucial roles as intermediaries that convey and legitimate relics for human use. In the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* (as well as other Theravāda *vaṃsas*), *nāgas* "serve to ground, locate, and guard various kinds of relics" (p. 100). We are shown how they are involved with all three kinds of relics—(1) *sarīrika*, those of the body, (2) *pāribhogika*, those of association or use, and (3) *uddesika*, those "prescribed" or representing an image of the Buddha (p. 103). Scheible mines the texts for episodes that demonstrate how *nāgas* are closely associated with how relics were conveyed and established in various locations in the island. These episodes, in turn, are said to reveal an enduring concern among Theravāda Buddhists to maintain a sense of continuity with the Buddha and his Sangha. It is here Scheible attempts to make a complicated argument for the dual significance of the *vaṃsas*—they function as transformative literary texts, yet still also serve to authenticate the Theravāda tradition.

The final chapter, aside from a short conclusion, examines questions surrounding the historicity of the early *vaṃsas*. The author uses this chapter to distinguish further her approach to the *Mahāvamsa* from other scholars who are prone to using it as a document for reconstructing history. She rejects the approach of using these texts as mere "chronicles" of events and similarly questions (despite the subtitle of her book) the appropriateness of the label "histories" for *vaṃsas* (pp. 135–37). Whatever history appears in the Pāli *vaṃsas* is considered to be a temporal framework for a series of literary devices geared to transform the reader-hearers of the texts. Scheible proposes that we pay less attention to the texts' historical features in order to fully appreciate its literary effects.

Reading the Mahāvamsa succeeds in demonstrating that the early *vaṃsas* were composed as literary works empowered by metaphors, extraordinary figures, and dramatic accounts to affect those who encounter the text. In this way Scheible has injected new interest and relevance to re-mythologized Pāli texts that have long been studied in other ways. At the same time, there are some aspects to the book that are not wholly convincing. *Nāgas* are interesting figures, but there are other such human and non-human characters that seem equally important in these texts. In places Scheible risks overstating the importance of *nāgas*, implying that readers and hearers would naturally feel gratitude to these creatures, when there is little in the tradition to support this interpretation. In addition, the historical significance of the *Mahāvamsa* is somewhat taken for granted, assuming that numerous people actually did read or listen to this text, although evidence for these activities is more circumstantial. Her related attempts to explain the significance of using Pāli for these early *vaṃsas* are fairly speculative when she suggests that there was an emotionally powerful effect in reading or hearing the narrative in the Buddha's language, and that the difficulty in understanding spoken Pāli would have resulted in

a “sweeter” attainment for those who attempted it (p. 140). Nevertheless, Scheible has contributed an interesting and innovative study of early *vamsas* that helps to advance efforts by scholars to read Buddhist literature as *literature*, with all the dimensions and effects that this label entails.

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The Unfinished: Stone Carvers at Work on the Indian Subcontinent. BY VIDYA DEHEJIA AND PETER ROCKWELL. New Delhi: ROLI BOOKS, 2016. Pp. 280, illus.

This book is the result of a fruitful collaboration between the renowned art historian, Vidya Dehejia, and a specialist on stone carving, Peter Rockwell. It examines many of India’s most famous rock-cut and structural temples at the sites of Ajanta, Ellora, Mamallapuram, Khajuraho, Bhubaneshvar, Halebidu, and Thanjavur. However, unlike most scholars who have examined the iconographical programs and architectural design of temples at these sites, the authors of this book focus on *unfinished* stonework. It is surprising—even to those of us who feel that we know these monuments intimately—that a significant percentage of their architectural and sculptural elements remain today in an incomplete state. In many cases, these elements appear to have been abandoned in mid-creation. Why is this the case and what can we learn from studying these unfinished expressions? Throughout the book, the authors chisel away at these questions and provide new and valuable information regarding the processes and techniques of stone carving employed at these sites. At the same time, they challenge our understanding of what it means to identify monuments as either “complete” or “unfinished,” especially when we consider their ritual usability.

The book is organized in two parts. Part one contains five chapters that provide the interpretative lens for examining the “why” of unfinished monuments. Important contributions include an innovative classification system for identifying India’s unfinished stonework (chap. 2) and its application to monuments at Mamallapuram and the western caves (chapters 2 and 3). In chapter 4 the authors examine dedicatory inscriptions associated with these sites in order to develop more nuanced perspectives regarding the impact of donative activity in the excavation process. Chapter 5 continues with an analysis of epigraphical material, though here it shifts to the many sculptors’ names found on the structural temples at Khajuraho. Rather than serving as a visual statement of pride for the artists, the authors surmise that the inclusion of names may have functioned as a way to keep track of work performed and payments due.

Although chapter 5 concludes part one of the book, its emphasis on the agency of artists serves as a nice transition to part two, which highlights the tools, teams, and processes of stone carving. Three chapters (7, 8, and 9) address carving in the rock-cut tradition while the remaining chapters (10, 11, 12, and 13) examine built temples and their imagery. In their discussions of structural temples, the authors carefully reconstruct what they call the “rhythm of construction” in order to understand the many strategies at play in simultaneously building and sculpting elements. The book concludes with an epilogue that identifies the hands of artists working at Mamallapuram and an appendix by Randall Law, an archaeogeologist, who analyzes the geological characteristics of stone found across the subcontinent.

Overall, the book is exceptional in scope and fills a significant void in the scholarship on Indian stone temple architecture. The close observations made by the authors, their collection of art historical and epigraphical data, and the beautiful photographs that accompany the descriptive text, all contribute to the importance of this book in advancing our knowledge of temples and their construction. Of primary importance are the authors’ analyses of the types of stone found in India, a stone’s workability, the tools used for stone carving, the methods of quarrying or extracting stone, and the labor force required for building and carving stone temples. This last point of discussion is fascinating, as the authors remind us that in addition to the stone carvers themselves, teams of workers who could build scaffolding and blacksmiths who could sharpen iron chisels were an equally important presence at the