

Between religion and history: afterlives of Buddhist relics

In 1892 Alexander Rea unearthed a small piece of bone in an inscribed stone reliquary at Bhattiprolu (in southern India). The translation of the ancient inscriptions identified the bone as the corporeal remains of the historical Buddha. In 1916 the Government of India proposed to present the Bhattiprolu relic to the Maha Bodhi Society, a prominent neo-Buddhist association. However, during the actual act of relic presentation in 1921, the reliquary itself was retained by the Madras Museum as an object of artistic and antiquarian value. The old bone was put in a new casket and presented to the Society for ritual enshrinement in the new Buddhist temple of Calcutta, the Dharmarajika Vihara.

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THIS WAS NEITHER THE FIRST NOR THE LAST instance where ancient Buddhist corporeal relics discovered in the course of archaeological excavations in colonial South Asia travelled to practicing Buddhist shrines. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, archaeologists identified and excavated a number of Buddhist funerary mounds (*stupas*), which led to the unearthing of Buddhist corporeal remains in reliquaries. The inscriptions on the reliquaries were decoded by scholars, identifying the relics as corporeal remains of either the historical Buddha or of prominent ancient Buddhist monks. The British Indian state distributed these relics to various Buddhist countries, communities and associations across South and mainland Southeast Asia. In every instance, the old reliquaries housing the corporeal remains at the moments of their discovery were retained in museums as objects of art, history, and antiquity. The bare bones were classified as purely sacred objects, having no historic value, and were given away for ritual enshrinements in new relic caskets.

This study explores why and how this classification of bones as essentially sacred, and the ancient reliquaries housing them as objects of art and history, was produced. It does not ascribe the British colonial state or its political and cultural apparatuses – institutions of archaeology and museums – with the sole agency of producing meanings around ancient corporeal remains. Circulation of Buddhist relics predated both European colonialism and the rise of modern nation states in South and Southeast Asia. The study, however, seeks to bring out the centrality of modern regimes of scholarship and religious practice in producing a new visibility and multiple identities of Buddhist relics. Both colonial and postcolonial nation states produced new networks and protocols of exchange and circulation that lent to the production of different and competing values and meanings around Buddhist relics.

Buddhist relics at the crossroads of history, politics, and religion

In 1898 Buddhist relics unearthed at Piprawah Kot (in eastern India) were presented by the British Indian state to the King of Siam (Thailand) as the only reigning Buddhist sovereign, which he, in turn, distributed between the Buddhists of Siam, Burma (Myanmar), Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Japan. In 1910 Buddhist relics discovered at Shah-ji-ki Dheri near Peshawar (in Pakistan) were presented by the state to the Buddhists of Burma to be enshrined in a new relic temple at Mandalay (Burma). Such presentations of relics represented acts of frontier and foreign diplomacy of the colonial government. The presentation of relics to King Rama V of Siam reflected British anxieties to increase their political influence over Siam, which had emerged as an important geopolitical buffer between the British and French colonial interests in mainland

Fig. 1: Copy of a Photograph of the Relic Casket discovered from Shahji-ki Dheri in the Peshawar Museum, 1909. Courtesy, Buddha's Collarbone Relic Temple, Mandalay, Myanmar.

Fig. 2: The Peshawar Relics Enshrined in a new ruby encrusted reliquary at the Buddha's Collarbone Relic Temple, Mandalay, Myanmar. (Photograph author)

Fig. 3: Buddha's Collarbone Relic Temple, Mandalay Hill, Myanmar. (Photograph author)

Fig. 4: New Reliquary with English Inscriptions designed by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1910 for the Peshawar Relic now in Mandalay, Myanmar. (Photograph author)

Southeast Asia. The presentation of relics to Burmese Buddhists was intended as a symbolic gesture to consolidate the new found British political hold over Burma after its political and economic subjugation in the late nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, as competition for colonial control among the European powers and an emergent Japan intensified over South and Southeast Asia, the presentation of these relics to practicing Buddhist territories and countries provided the colonial state in India an opportunity to fashion themselves in the image of pre-modern imperial benefactors of the Buddhists. The context of the Wars and particular turns in nationalist politics in colonial India, Ceylon, and Burma, which moved beyond associational politics of urban middleclass to anti-colonial mass movements, provided the backdrop in which relics excavated from Bhattiprolu and Taxila (in Pakistan) were presented to the Maha Bodhi Society in 1921 and 1932. The new regimes of relic circulations mediated by the colonial state were designed as responses to contain politically contingent situations and secure the loyalty of colonial subjects at moments of crisis of the Empire.

The separation of corporeal remains from the caskets that these presentations ensued stood in sharp contrast to the early colonial archaeological encounters with Buddhist relics. Till the mid nineteenth century Buddhist corporeal relics along with their relic caskets, like those unearthed from Sanchi, Sonari, and Satdhara (in central India) during the 1850s, travelled out of South Asia to major museum collections in London. There was no established code that could prevent Buddhist relics – both the bones and reliquaries – from being treated as unsuitable objects of specialized scholarly analysis, scientific preservation and public display. The religious sacrality of the bones and historicist sanctity of the reliquaries did not remain fixed and permanently coded over time. The new visibility and classifications produced around Buddhist corporeal relics were forged by the colonial state's politics of relic diplomacy and a concurrent refashioning of Theravada Buddhism at the intersection of worlds of scholarship and devotion.

Nineteenth century Orientalist textual and text aided archaeological scholarship on Buddhism led to the discursive emergence of an ancient 'pure' Buddhism as a humanist creed. Transnational Buddhist reform and revivalist associations drew on this image of 'authentic' Buddhism in fashioning a new reformed practicing Buddhist subject. At the turn of the twentieth century the Maha Bodhi Society emerged as the most prominent transnational Theravada Buddhist voice whose emphasis shifted from a quest for scriptural purity of recovered, translated, and critically edited canonical Buddhist texts to the physical site and space of Buddhist pilgrimage

in Ceylon, India and Burma. The Society's demands for recovery of ancient Buddhist sites in India brought the world of practicing Buddhism into intimate encounters with the historicist vision of archaeological conservation of ancient monuments. The potential sacrality of Buddhist relics to a large extent thus prevented their complete archaeological/ museological appropriations. Antiquity preservation laws enacted in British colonies across India, Ceylon, and Burma in the early twentieth century were designed to consolidate the authority of the colonial state over movable and structural antiquities. However, keeping in mind the colonial state's commitment to religious non-intervention, the laws shied away from granting protected status to antiquities in active ritual use or even potentially sacred like archaeologically unearthed Buddhist corporeal relics. As objects overlaid with historical, artifactual, and religious connotations, bones and reliquaries now travelled to different destinations, to temples and museums.

Old bones, new caskets: dual lives of Buddhist relics

To end this study it might be worthwhile to explore how ancient Buddhist relics and reliquaries emerged as sites of competing claims and custodies inhabiting multiple spaces of history, heritage, and religion. In a different context of the repatriation of the Sanchi relics from the Victoria and Albert Museum during the 1950s, Torkel Brekke (2007) has argued that the idea of making copies of the reliquaries by the museum authorities reveal that they did not believe in the sacrality of these objects – not primarily because the objects belonged to an alien religion, but because of their modern secular worldview. Keeping in mind Brekke's point about different epistemologies of knowledge and belief, I argue that the commitment to the making of duplicate reliquaries can also be explained by the material particularity of the objects in question – the relics and their relation to their reliquaries.

At the most fundamental level, corporeal 'relic' usually denotes the body or fragment of the body of a deceased person revered as holy. Unlike other material objects a corporeal relic requires a physical frame that explicitly signals its status as sacred object. The symbolic potentials of such relics are constructed in the ways they are physically and ritually framed. In sharp contrast to icons and images, the relic's absence of representational features and its recognition as a moment of unmitigated corporeality is construed by the denotative work done by its frame, its reliquary. A relic without its reliquary/ casket loses its identity of a hallowed object.

In the context of colonial South Asia, the heightened importance of the reliquaries relates to the ways in which Buddhist corporeal relics came to the identified and authenticated. In pre and early modern polities across South and Southeast Asia the test of authenticity of Buddhist relics lay in their magical ritual powers woven around narratives of their durability, indestructibility, and mobility. In sharp contrast to these attributes, the primary identification of Buddhist corporeal relics, especially those unearthed during archaeological excavations across colonial South Asia, lay in the decoding of ancient inscriptions on the reliquaries. This was a world of specialist scholarly expertise, a new domain of archaeological and epigraphic research that was introduced in South Asia under the aegis of the colonial state.

For all concerned parties the separation of the bones from reliquaries threatened to turn Buddhist corporeal relics into meaningless scraps. To prevent this, the colonial state, despite its official commitment to remain unconnected to objects of religious worship, took upon itself the task of designing new relic caskets. The new caskets, now inscribed with a brief statement of the discovery of the relics and a translation of the original inscription, sought to attest to the enshrined bones' identity as authentically Buddhist. This divorcing of the reliquaries from the corporeal remains led the production of a new order of Buddhist relics centred only on the symbolic sacrality of the bones. It would require more than the demands of religion to gain custody over relics and reliquaries from the preserves of museums and archaeology. In the context of South and mainland Southeast Asia, it would be the demands of postcolonial nationalist repatriations that would drag bones and ancient reliquaries from museums in Europe to the sanctums of new Buddhist temples.

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