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Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India. By Gregory Schopen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. Pp. xvii + 298.

Reviewed by **Dan Arnold** University of Chicago

For over twenty years now, Gregory Schopen has prolifically been producing articles on the archaeology, epigraphy, and texts that pertain to Indian Buddhist monasticism. Schopen's treatment of this material has been extremely insightful and original, and his work has been instrumental in overturning many of the cherished convictions that had long constituted the "received wisdom" of Buddhist studies. In particular, his articles have prompted significant revision in thought regarding the development of Mahāyāna and regarding the role of the monastic religious in Buddhist cultic life.

With the publication of this collection of Schopen's essays, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (the first of two such volumes, according to the Preface by Donald Lopez), Schopen's work stands to receive a wider hearing, and so to extend its already significant influence in the field of Buddhist studies. This is as it should be; for all scholars in the field are very much in Schopen's debt for the illuminating interpretations and conclusions that he has distilled from monumental amounts of epigraphical data. While Schopen has devoted care to the edition, translation, and interpretation of manuscript remains from Gilgit (chiefly, the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins), his most characteristic and original interpretations have been of the kind of "donative inscriptions" attached to the material remains of Indian Buddhist cultic life—a task that requires, among other things, a rare expertise across the range of Middle Indic dialects. In deploying such expertise, Schopen has presented compelling evidence, for example, that it was in fact monks and nuns who sponsored the kinds of practices typically associated with the rise of Mahāyāna—a conclusion that counters the long-unchallenged view that it was Buddhist laypeople who initiated this movement. It would be good indeed if such conclusions, as well as the exemplary scholarship that warrants them, were to have influence in proportion to their originality and importance.

Still, it must be said that the presentation of the essays collected in this volume also reveals one important problem, and it is to be hoped that this feature does not become entrenched as part of Schopen's influence. For particularly when reading these essays all at once, one is struck by the recurrent statement of a specious dichotomy between what religious people "actually did," and what canonical texts say they should have done. Overcorrecting the biases of his philological predecessors, Schopen insists on this dichotomy in a way, it seems to me, that reflects a problematic view of how canonical texts must have been used—a view according to

which, if attested behavior contradicts such texts, they must simply *not* have been used.

The influential essay “Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit” (reprinted as chapter 2 of this volume) clearly exemplifies the pattern of Schopen’s work. He starts by arguing (contra the presupposition of many of his predecessors) that there is little basis for taking the Pāli canon as reflecting anything like the state of practice at an early point in history. He then goes on to show (on the basis of donative inscriptions that are much more reliably datable indicators of what was happening on the ground) that, contrary to what the “canon” would lead us to expect, it was in fact chiefly monks and nuns who sponsored the production of cultic images. This evidence calls for the recognition that “from its first appearance in inscriptions, the Mahāyāna was a monk-dominated movement” (p. 32); that “not only was the image cult overwhelmingly a monastic concern, it was also, on the basis of the available information, a monastically initiated cult” (p. 32); and that, “All of . . . [the] monks [involved] were doctrinal specialists, and they were all actively engaged in and concerned with popular cult practice” (p. 33).

In this way, Schopen persuasively argues against the time-honored conviction that such cultic practices must surely have been instigated by the laity. But note that Schopen himself emphasizes that the monks and nuns involved in such activities were “doctrinal specialists.” He wants to emphasize this since he wishes (appropriately) to discourage us from supposing that only the non-literate or non-scholastic among the professional religious could have been active in, say, image cults. And he is surely right thus to discourage us. However, he seems to want both to call these participants “doctrinal specialists” and to insist that they knew nothing of “official” doctrine. This is particularly clear in Schopen’s programmatic essay, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism” (reprinted as chapter 1). The “Protestant presupposition” in question is that the study of Buddhism involves only the study of Buddhist *texts*. According to Schopen, though, it is important to remember that the textual material favored by traditional scholars “records what a small, atypical part of the Buddhist community wanted that community to believe or practice” (p. 1). Such scholastic texts as have taken center stage in Buddhist studies “may not even have been known to the vast majority of practicing Buddhists—both monks and laity. It is axiomatically assumed that the texts not only were known but were also important, not only were read but were also fully implemented in actual practice” (p. 2).

If Schopen’s predecessors have taken it as “axiomatic” that Buddhist texts unproblematically reflect Buddhist practice (and too often, no doubt, they have), Schopen almost seems to take it as axiomatic that, where texts and practice seem to disagree, there must simply have been no knowledge of the textual tradition. It seems to me that the more interesting possibility (and the one we are more entitled to entertain) is that both practices *and* texts coexisted, but that despite *our* sense of frequent contradiction between these, no cognitive dissonance was involved for Indian Buddhists. Perhaps, that is, it is only modern Buddhologists who have made

the mistake of taking canonical texts as straightforwardly descriptive, with Indian Buddhist “doctrinal specialists” having recognized all along that that is not how such texts are used. And in fact, as Steven Collins has richly shown in his works, the canonical texts themselves frequently reflect something very much like such an awareness.¹ Surely, then, it would have come as no surprise to such doctrinal specialists that, with respect to the doctrine of *karma*, “where the doctrine is known at all, it is generally invoked in very limited and specific contexts, and people’s behavior and their motivations are largely governed by other ideas or forms of a doctrine of *karma* that differ, sometimes very markedly, from the classical, textual doctrine.” I do not wish to deny that there were probably far more participants in the cult of images than there were scholastic polymaths versed in the intricacies of *karma* doctrine; I only wish to emphasize that it is a problem for Schopen thus to speak of “the *only* actually attestable form of the actual—as opposed to the ideal—Buddhist doctrine of *karma*” (pp. 6–7; my emphasis).²

It might be supposed that Schopen’s rhetoric in regard to this is simply guided by his delight in upsetting sacred cows, and that it does not reflect a principled commitment. And, to be sure, such boldness of rhetoric is part of what makes Schopen’s work a pleasure to read. Nevertheless, this problematic dichotomy is recurrent enough that it threatens to become part of a new scholarly orthodoxy. Thus, for example, Schopen chastises textual scholars for failing to attend to sources that reflect “the nature of the *actual*, as opposed to the *ideal* goals of religious activity among practicing Indian Buddhists . . . [and that can tell] us what a fairly large number of Indian Buddhists *actually* did, as opposed to what—according to our literary sources—they might or should have done” (p. 56; all emphasis mine). The sharpness of this distinction obscures the fact that at least some Buddhist scholastics *actually did*, for example, compose and study doctrinal digests; and it presupposes that, where “actual” behavior is at odds with such, it must be because the actors simply had no knowledge of them.

Again, Schopen begins his excellent article “Burial *Ad Sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions” (chapter 7) by suggesting that, if Buddhist studies had gone as Schopen thinks they ought to have gone, “texts would have been judged significant only if they could be shown to be related to *what religious people actually did*” (p. 114; my emphasis). Schopen goes on to argue, quite persuasively, that there was clearly a Buddhist conception of relics as “living entities” (pp. 125 ff.); that *stūpas* were often regarded as “legal persons” (pp. 128 ff.); that there was a “functional equivalence of the relic and the living Buddha” (pp. 131 ff.); and that these facts explain why, as archaeological inquiry attests, it was considered important to bury funerary remains near *stūpas*. But the dichotomy that frames the essay asks us to overlook the fact that among the other things that *religious people actually did* was compose and study doctrinal texts. Indeed, isn’t this *precisely* what is shown by the fact (repeatedly emphasized by Schopen) that it was most often learned monks who initiated such cultic practices as burial *ad sanctos*? It seems to me that what is called for in light of Schopen’s cogent and erudite work is not so much the conclusion that there is a sharp distinction between “what religious people actually did” and the texts favored

by traditional philological scholars, but rather that being religious is a sufficiently complex affair that *the same people* who write (and use) scholastic texts might in fact be involved (and without experiencing any conflict) in practices that might *seem* to us to contradict such texts. What is called for, that is, is a richer theorization of the phenomena of “real religious people” and what they “actually did.”

I suggest that this conclusion represents a more nuanced statement of what Schopen is ultimately after; but it is, I think, important that the conclusion be moderated in this way, and that is why I have developed this criticism. I also think, however, that this is about the *only* important criticism to be made with respect to this otherwise outstanding and important collection of essays. Thus, I would like to return to the commendatory spirit that began this review and emphasize that Schopen’s work has already greatly advanced the cause of a richer understanding of the religious lives of Indian Buddhists.

Notes

- 1 – See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 2 – Particularly in regard to these passages a comparison of Schopen’s work with that of Collins is highly instructive: it shows, among other things, that Schopen’s conclusions are not simply a function of his doing *history* (instead of, say, philosophy)—for Collins has also studied Buddhist materials with an eminently historical sensibility; and yet, Collins’ different historiographical concerns have led him to conclude not that there is a sharp distinction between the “actual” and the “ideal” accounts of *karma*, but precisely that “the ultimately explanatory notion of karma is implicit in the statement of any efficient explanation, which is the practically useful identification of some particular means by which the force of karma has operated” (Collins, *Nirvana*, p. 110). This should remind us that when Schopen says that the purpose of canonical texts “is almost never ‘historical’ in our sense of the term” (p. 3), he clearly has in mind a particular conception of what it would mean for something to be “historical”; and Collins, with his interest in the *longue durée* level of change considered by historians of the *Annales* school, clearly has a different sense of what the “historical” significance of such texts might be. Given these different historiographical commitments, it is not surprising that Collins has noted that Schopen is someone whose “rhetoric at times comes close” to the view that canonical texts are “of no historical or ethnographic value” (Collins, *Nirvana*, p. 76 n). But see also Collins’ laudatory review of Schopen’s book in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67 (3) (1999): 706–708.

Of Body and Brush: The Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth Century China. By Angela Zito. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Pp. xix + 311. Hardcover \$45.00. Paper \$17.95.

Reviewed by **R. Kent Guy** University of Washington

It may be best to think of the argument of Angela Zito’s enormously stimulating book *Of Body and Brush: The Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth Century*