

Icons: Standing out from the Narrative in Theravādin Art

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Setting the Scene

“The term *icon* is loaded with implications,” writes art historian Robert Brown towards the end of a thought-provoking essay examining the iconic function of *jātaka*, narratives of the Buddha’s achievement of perfections over his past lives, painted and sculpted on and in South and Southeast Asian monuments (Brown 1997: 98). In Brown’s simple sentence I read discreet acknowledgement of the Christian heritage borne both by the term “icon” and by the many academic fields in which it operates, and glimpse a particular nod to the ever-extending body of work in the field of Art History grappling with the term’s pertinence in interpretation of theory and practice in Buddhist worlds. To gaze intently at the “icon” in this field would be to open oneself and one’s readers to the infinite, where, strictly speaking nothing is seen, to reference Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of the “icon” in opposition to the “idol” as cited in Jacob Kinnard’s detailed discussion of a selection of the many extant discussions in primary and secondary sources on the “question of the presence of the Buddha in physical objects” (Kinnard 1999: 25-44). I can afford no more than a glimpse into Brown’s glimpse here, as readers can by now I hope imagine, and will follow Brown’s lead in circumscribing discussions as he closes the essay in looping back around to his opening critique of what has proven to be, for scholars of Buddhist art of South and Southeast Asia, an impactful reading of early artistic representations of Buddhist narratives by art historian Vidya Dehejia (Dehejia 1990).¹

Dehejia’s reading is faulted by Brown precisely for its *reading*, that is to say for its presumption of a sort of equivalence between written text and pictorial representation, where the one (pictorial) effectively translates the original other (written) representation. In

¹ See also the 1997 monograph where Dehejia develops on this 1990 article, along with Brown’s 2001 review of the book in *Artibus Asiae* in which he reiterates both praise for Dehejia’s work and a critique of that dimension of her approach which “treats the art as if it were on the walls of a museum or on the screen in a classroom” (Brown 2001: 357).

Dehejia's work the different forms are seen to share semantic content and to engender a like process of accessing that meaning: reading. This vision of linear development, from the written to the pictorial, nonetheless posits a certain hierarchy of value in which the written serves as point of origin and reference for the therefore derivative other. If the typology proposed by Dehejia for deciphering, describing and organizing dominant early artistic modes of rendering Buddhist narratives makes, in Brown's words, "an important contribution" to art historical analysis, Brown challenges Dehejia's qualification of the discerning subject as a "viewer." In Brown's reading, Dehejia's "viewer" shares more with the art historian-cum-museum-goer than it does with the early Buddhist worshiper as apprehended by many modern scholars attempting to traverse time and space to see from within local eyes.² While noting that on one level Dehejia masterfully discerns the logics of composition, Brown calls for further attention to *jātaka* pictorial function in its inseparability from the processes by which meaning is had within ancient Buddhist milieu.

"I intend it [i.e. the term "icon"]," Brown continues, "in a specifically Indic religious sense, simply as a form of the deity that is the focus of reverence and worship" (Brown 1997: 98). Replacing the "viewer" with the "worshiper" triggers a gestalt shift whereby what scholars are first made to see as narrative becomes instead iconic. The *jātaka* representations which Brown studies are integral to monumental architecture. They are stories of the Buddha's past lives but, Brown demonstrates, their very physical emplacement within the monumental space precludes "reading" by a "viewer." Instead, they are parts of whole schema by which the Buddha is made present (*re-presented*) in the here and now to worshipers. Brown's analyses make evident that it is this sort of active re-presentation of the Buddha which is at work in the "specifically Indic" reverence for a form of the deity and which makes that form an "icon." Likewise, it is this relatively simple formulation of "icon," which deconstructs the opposition, and so the hierarchy, between copy and original, such that a representation of X is a *re-presentation* of X which is at the core of my own usage throughout this essay.

² In addition to the synthetic critical work of Kinnard cited above, see Huntington 1990, 1992 and 2015, whose critique is also directed at Dehejia on bases shared with Brown to the degree that both seek a more distinctly emic perspective; Schopen 1987 and 1991; de Caroli 2015; and, for the now classical studies of the very closely related question of Hindu vision: Eck 1981 and Babb 1981. I will examine in further detail below Peter Skilling's insightful consideration of this question with specific reference to interpretation of *jātaka* tales but set within a broader critique of art historical practice (Skilling 2008, esp. p. 80).

The “icon” in this sense maintains an existential relation with its original manifestation – in our case the Buddha. This relation can be on the order of the Veronica, the quintessential Christian relic where the image of Christ’s face derives its potency from its supposed material contact with his actual face, and where the existential relation between original and copy is manifest in their shared physical form. In many ways, with the help of relics and ritual, and as a type of relic itself, the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha can be likened to the Veronica. The relation can also be considered along the lines of the Peircean index, where the one physical form – take for example a footprint – depends upon another - in this example, a foot – for its very existence. The Buddha’s footprint contains in the here and now his past presence. From an art historical point of view, the one (the present footprint) wills the other (the past-present Buddha) into existence. From a worshiper’s point of view, the active willing agent is the walking Buddha making his presence manifest in the footprint. This particular form of the Buddha’s presence is variously manifest today across South and Southeast Asian landscapes, repeatedly attesting at once to a singular historical event of object consecration itself attesting to a singular legendary event, when the Buddha is understood to have been then and there. Among the region’s most famous footprints today are that of Sri Lanka’s Śrī Pāda (Adam’s Peak), Cambodia’s Phnom Bakheng, Thailand’s Phu Phra Bat, Luang Prabang’s Phu Si and Burma’s Shweseṭṭaw. These forms range from the amorphous (natural stone formations in the land) to the metonymically anthropomorphic (detailed sculptures in the round variously “impressed” into the land); each has been framed by architectural, legendary ritual and often iconographic structures to appear as the enduring mark the Buddha has left on the land. The worshiper’s perspective turns the art historical analysis on its head of course, without however transforming the fundamental function of the index. But let me reiterate that the existential relation I am describing cannot be reduced to an impoverished understanding of representation as a conventional, pragmatic mode of rendering which underestimates the complexity of both “original” and “copy,” as well as their relation in the contexts that concern us. The existential relation between the “original” manifestation (which is to say the “original” is itself always already a manifestation) can be had in both the more or less mimetic anthropomorphic form of the Buddha mentioned above and in the abstract form of the *stūpa*. Just as relics can be embedded in both statue and *stūpa*, so can stories of the Buddha’s past lives be narrated around them to make or animate the relation. My doubling of representation and *re*-presentation is meant to emphasize what Kinnard identifies as a

productive tension between the realm of representation per se and the realm of ontology at the heart of Buddhist art.³

On Image-Text Relations

That the interpretive processes at work here, in ancient Buddhist contexts as in the modern day, are anything but simple is illustrated in Brown's closing analogy between the "iconized dharma" and the *jātaka* as "iconized word texts." The "iconized dharma" is the crystallisation of a foundational Buddhist tenet, the *pratītyasamutpāda* (in Pāli, *paṭiccasamupāda*) or "dependent origination," into a four-line verse, the *pratītyasamutpādagāthā*, which becomes objectified in medieval India (ca. 600-1200 CE) – literally made into an object on the order of the funerary *stūpa*, or of the relic within the *stūpa*, or of the image which is like the relic assimilated with the funerary monument.⁴ Just like Brown's *jātaka*-as-icon, the "iconized dharma" does not reference a pictorial translation of a text, a secondary derivative of an original, a mere illustration; instead it names apprehension of the verse-tenet as icon, that is as an image whose veneration makes the dharma present in the here and now. In Pāli traditions, the *paṭiccasamupāda* can be identified with the dharma as a whole (Boucher 1991: 2 and 17, n. 4), the Buddha's teachings which stand in for the Buddha, notably during his absence from this or that place and, irrevocably, after his entry into nirvana. [Fig. 1] When inscribed on a statue of the Buddha, a practice well established in first millennium Southeast Asia as seen in a corpus of statues from what is now Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, the verse cannot be reduced to a text to be read but functions rather like the *jātaka* on a *stūpa*, endowing the larger image with its very life.⁵ As Peter Skilling notes, the *paṭiccasamupāda*

³ Kinnard 1999: 25-44. For the specific reference here to the Buddha made present "'indexically'" in 'texts, images and relics and other icons and indices,' see Tambiah 1984, ch. 14, p. 202, also cited in Kinnard. I have also grappled with these questions in other contexts: Thompson 2011, 2013 and 2020.

⁴ Brown 1997: 99, reading Boucher 1991. A common rendering of the verse:

ye dhammā hetuppabhabvā tesāṃ hetuṃ tathāgato

āha tesāñ ca yo nirodho evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo 'ti

Those *dhammas* which arise from a cause

The Tathāgata has declared their cause

And that which is the cessation of them.

Thus the great renunciant has taught.

(Translation from Boucher *ibid.*, p. 6, cited by Brown 1997: p. 108, n. 89.)

⁵ On the image pictured here, held by Wat Mahathat, Ratchaburi, Thailand, see Skilling 2003: 274-5,. A well studied contemporaneous image is from Tuol Preah Theat in Cambodia's Kompong Speu province, and is now held by the Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet, Paris, inventory no. MG 18891. See Baptiste 2008: 20-21 and 27-28. The copious bibliography provided in this catalogue entry highlights the piece for its inscription,

verse is the “dharma-relic” par excellence (Skilling 2003: abstract). The apparent distillation of a fundamental teaching, which takes diverse, more or less elaborate discursive form across all Buddhist traditions, into the four-line verse is analogous with the apparent distillation of a scene or an episode or a sequence of episodes or even an entire *jātaka* tale to its bare essence. Hierarchised values implied in art historical analyses which presume images to have been derived from texts, meet a powerful challenge in this interpretive context which sees images and iconized word texts, rather, as embryonic, containing and maintaining the vital potentiality of Buddhahood.⁶ There is a manifest equivalence between text and image at work here, but it is radically different from the model of translation with which we began in following Brown’s critique of Dehejia’s readerly viewer.

Skilling effectively extends Brown’s reflections anchored in select sites in South and Southeast Asia to make a more general point about the *jātaka* function in relation to the Buddha image broadly defined – including the “aniconic” form of the *stūpa* as it will be discussed below. Skilling insists on the importance of understanding the *jātaka* as not just tales of the Buddha’s past lives but, more precisely, as tales of the future Buddha’s attainment of ethical “perfections” (*pāramitā*) over these many lives leading to his Awakening as the Gotama Buddha, or as he is often called in scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism, the “Historical Buddha.” The *stūpa*, Skilling writes, is “the repository of the Buddha’s power and virtues, from his career as a *bodhisattva* [a being on the path to Awakening] over many lives, to his teaching career as an awakened Buddha in his final life, up to his death, embodied in the relics installed within the *stupa*” (Skilling 2008: 61-63). The anthropomorphic image of

effectively making it “iconic” also in the more popular sense of the word. See also Skilling 2019, who likewise notes that the “usual function” of the *ye dhammā* verse is “to be installed in a *stūpa*, the foundation of a building, or a Buddha image” (Skilling 2019: 44). In his veritable corpus of studies on the verse, Skilling brings to light the remarkable corpus of first millennium Buddha statues bearing *ye dhammā* inscriptions in Pāli, Sanskrit and Prakrit to which I refer above. While this research demonstrates the participation of the verse in creating a common Buddhist culture across mainland Southeast Asia in the first millennium, the use of diverse languages likewise points up a diversity in monastic affiliations at this time.

⁶ For examination of dimensions of these questions in linguistic realms, see Gethin 1992, where the truly interminable lists in Buddhist literature are considered for their matricial function: “Translators of Buddhist texts have often taken the word (*mātikā/māṭṛkā*) to mean something like ‘summary’ or ‘condensed content.’ Although one would hesitate to say that this is incorrect, it is, strictly speaking, to put things the wrong way round, for it is the underlying meaning of ‘mother’ that seems to inform the use of the term here. A *mātikā* is seen not so much as a condensed summary, as the seed from which something grows. A *mātikā* is something creative—something out of which something further evolves. It is, as it were, pregnant with the Dhamma and able to generate it in all its fullness” (Gethin 1992: 161); and Crosby 2020, esp. ch. 4, who considers how Theravādin meditation practices treat language as a veritably bodily creative principle.

the Buddha is no different from the *stūpa* in this regard as Skilling explicates it; nor, I would add, is it different from the Buddha himself: the “physical form of the Buddha is the product of ethics, the product of merit. Since the image of the Buddha is meant to represent the idealized form of the Buddha, there is an intimate relation between *jātakas* and Buddha image. The *jātakas* have, in a sense, culminated in the image” (Skilling 2008: 68). To see the image strictly as something to be seen is, in Skilling’s Buddhologist eyes, nothing less than to manifest ignorance in the “history and function of Buddhist art” (Skilling 2008: 80). That the narrative imagery can be made to be unseen must be itself seen in light of its function as integral to the body of the Buddha as such, which is to say to its iconicity as an object of veneration.

The manifest relation between image and text in Theravāda manuscript traditions points up another dimension of this critical paradigm. Images in manuscripts frequently do not serve to illustrate the texts which they nonetheless accompany; nor are they simply abstract décor. Figure 2 <Figure 2> exemplifies one telling mode of visual-cum-textual composition. This accordion-style or leporello manuscript is from Wat Khao Yi San, Samut Songkhram province, western central Thailand. Its use of a particular Khom script, a type of decorative writing derived from Old Khmer script and used in central and southern Thai sacred contexts, allows for dating the manuscript to the late 18th-early 19th century. The Pāli text is from the abbreviated *mātikā* of the seven books of the *Abhidhamma*, with the spread pictured here displaying the *Dhātukathā mātikā*. The flanking images are of the *Suvaṇṇasāma Jātaka*.⁷ Skilling’s comments on this type of 18th-19th century Thai leporello with *jātaka* imagery is illustrated in the 2008 volume cited above with a manuscript now held in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; they apply equally to the more modest manuscript of Figure 2, still held in a monastery setting. The *jātaka* paintings appear “in two vertical bands that flank the text... The accompanying text is not however that of the *jātakas*” (Skilling 2008: 72; see also image p. 73). For Skilling, this presentation of the *jātaka* demonstrates that the paintings “exist in their own right, as amplifications of the power and perfections of the Buddha” (Skilling 2008). This is a somewhat strange formulation: they exist in their own right, yet they do so as amplifications of something else. The first clause distinguishes the painted

⁷ Thanks to Trent Walker for initially sharing this image and the details noted above with me. On the Khom script, in an excellent introduction to the Khmer-Tai Buddhist manuscript culture of which this leporello is a part, see Walker 218: 1-46, esp. pp 20-21.

jātaka scenes from mere illustrations of a text; the second affirms that they are nonetheless integral to something greater than themselves. In this description the manuscript is thoroughly analogous to the monumental *stūpa* and the anthropomorphic Buddha statue where the *jātaka* participate in the iconisation of the dharma.

I would amplify Skilling’s analysis in noting the gestalt effect produced by the composition. The two painted panels on either side of the text on a given page (the spread comprised of two pages, unfolded) are framed by decorative borders, with the framing enhancing the iconicity of each scene. The inner decorative border of each painted panel separates the flanking *jātaka* paintings from the central text, serving thus as borders *also* to the text. The two inner decorative borders are identical to each other but differ from the two outer borders which are in turn identical with each other. When seen together, that is as belonging to the text rather than to their respective paintings, these “inner” borders of the paintings become outer borders of the text. That is, they frame the central text, enhancing *its* iconicity. Gazing at an unfolded page, we can see at once a singular framed image and a triptych. Variations on this particular compositional and framing practice in which image and text become interchangeable via a logic radically different to that of illustration, by which I mean translation, can be readily observed in the British Library *Discovering Sacred Texts* online resource. See, for example, the 18th-century leporello from central Thailand which contains a collection of Pāli extracts from the *Vinaya* and the *Abhidhamma* along with a Pāli composition on the Buddha’s virtues derived from a famous fifth-century Pāli commentary on the *Abhidhamma* by Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka, the *Visuddhimagga* (British Library Oriental Manuscript Or 14068: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/animal-tales-mahabuddhaguna-birds-buddhist-texts>). The paintings flanking the manuscript are of the last ten *jātaka*. The framing technique used in this manuscript, where the inner borders are most prominent, singles out the *text* as image over the images themselves, while also presenting the whole of an unfolded page as a triptych.

I note, finally, that the view of “reading” shared by both Dehejia and Brown is itself circumscribed within an academic discourse which risks stripping the practice of 1) its metaphysical – or shall I say meditative - dimensions to leave us readers as it were with a rather impoverished understanding of what it is that we do when our eyes move across the

traces on a surface; and 2) any contextual dimensions inflecting what a given reader at a given time in a given context is doing when they or she or he “read(s).” In short, I am not sure that I know what reading is – no more, or less than I know what it means to worship a Buddha image. To pursue reflections on what it is to read would bring us to further nuance distinctions Brown is evoking in this essay and to highlight also relations, for example between the secular and the sacred; it would also however bring me further from my present circumscribed task to examine the icon in Theravādin art, even as this task presumes that, in giving body to transcendence of the material world, “art” itself – not unlike the Buddha - challenges such distinctions.

The Aniconic and the Anthropomorphic: Ongoing Issues in Buddhist Art History

The term “aniconic” gained currency in early 20th-century art historical studies of the earliest instances of Buddhist art.⁸ It is a misnomer insofar as what it names is not *an*-iconic, i.e. a negation of the iconic, but rather an investment in it. Early “aniconic” Buddhist art includes a range of forms which index the Buddha without representing him anthropomorphically. These forms range from relatively simple signs such as the footprint or the *stūpa*, to complex narrative scenes interpreted as presenting events in the Buddha’s life story where the Buddha is distinctly not represented in human form, and where this anthropomorphic absence is made evident by a variety of means, from symbolic stand-ins to empty spaces staged as such. This “aniconic” art is generally associated with monumental *stūpa*. If, to requote Brown, an icon, “in a specifically Indic religious sense” is “a form of the deity that is the focus of reverence and worship,” “aniconic” Buddhist art is truly *iconic*, whether it comprises a singular emblem, a setting of that emblem within a narrative construct, or a narrative sequence in which the anthropomorphic figure of the Buddha is made conspicuously absent. The “aniconic” can be a distinct focus of worship and/or participate in the iconisation of the monument of which it is a part. The “aniconic” in this early scholarly context was set in opposition to anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. Interpretive focus has been twofold. On the one hand, we see a predominantly historical investment, with scholars intent on identifying the earliest of early Buddhist art and establishing a chronological sequence from the aniconic to the anthropomorphic; on the other, we see a more interpretive investment in uncovering

⁸ A number of the key texts reconsidering the early scholarship on early Buddhist art I summarise here are those by Dehejia, Huntington and DeCaroli cited above. See also Karlsson 2000 and 2006.

the causes behind both “aniconic” representation of the Buddha and the emergence of its perceived opposite in human form, be these causes geo-historical, socio-cultural, ritual, or doctrinal. A more apt term for the “aniconic” in this context might simply be the non-anthropomorphic. Note, however, that insofar as it is only the “Historical” Buddha, who is not represented in human form in early “aniconic” Buddhist art, the term “non-anthropomorphic” does not adequately describe this category of art as a whole which is fully figurative and often teaming with anthropomorphic figures, a context which in fact enhances the conspicuousness of the absence of the anthropomorphic figure of the Buddha. For this reason, also, the term “aniconic” as it can be used in art historical writing more generally to designate non-figurative art, must be considered a misnomer for our specific topic here.

More than a century of debate on the topic has led to robust understandings of the geo-historical development of early Buddhist art, and to a widespread acceptance of the absence of any formal prohibition on anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha underpinning early practice. It has produced sophisticated understandings of the historical and conceptual dimensions of the evolution of early Buddhist art production, notably with work on funerary portraiture (DeCaroli 2015?) and detailed accounts of the role of Buddhist narrative in integrating a pool of Indic auspicious signs, with the representation of the auspicious figure of the anthropomorphic Buddha as one outcome of this process (Karlsson 2000; 2006). The aniconic-anthropomorphic paradigm has in many ways been superseded with more complex, historically-grounded frameworks for understanding early Buddhist art. Yet, the paradigm haunts Buddhist art history still, and not only in writing on early India. Brown, for example, is compelled to distance his usage with reference to first and early second millennia South and Southeast Asian *jātaka* representation from that embedded in the debates summarised above, adding a footnote to his simple definition of “icon.” “My use of *icon*,” he writes, “is not intended to relate to this dialectic” (between “iconic” and aniconic” in writing about the early Buddhist art of India) (Brown 1997: 107, n. 86). The reasons for this haunting are no doubt multiple. In the following I will probe a few of these, in pointing up how Brown’s usage might relate after all to this dialectic at the foundation of Buddhist art history insofar as his South and much later Southeast Asian materials render the dialectic in themselves, and in doing so challenge established narratives of the simplicity of Theravāda and its art in its supposed singular focus on the “Historical” Buddha.

The *stūpa* and the anthropomorphic figure of the Gotama Buddha can be said to stand out as the principal mainstays of Theravāda artistic production over time and space. As the above discussion on *jātaka* tales, sculpted or painted as well as written, has, I trust, demonstrated, the *stūpa* and the Buddha image do not stand alone, but they are made to stand out. The *stūpa* is aniconic in the established usage of the term in Buddhist art history, that is it renders the Sakyamuni Buddha in non-anthropomorphic form. In my view, all of Brown's case studies provide fine examples of the dialectic maintaining between the two forms, including in Theravāda settings. I will draw out a few salient points in this regard at one of Brown's chosen sites, Wat Si Chum of Sukhothai, to then consider Cambodia's Angkor Wat temple as transformed in the 16th century in light of these discussions. With these specific historical examples, I aim also to give some sense of how what might appear to be an abstruse theoretical construct of the icon – involving lofty ideas of presence and absence apparently far from the minds and experiences of average worshipers – actually takes mundane material form. In making the connection between debates on early Buddhist art and second millennia Southeast Asian constructs, I do not mean to suggest that Theravāda maintains a privileged relationship to early Buddhist art in any straightforward historical sense. The relations are thoroughly ideological insofar as the *stūpa* and the image of the Historical Buddha can be said to evoke in embodying existential relations with the Buddha himself. It strikes me in fact that the work of these icons is more in tune with the complexities frequently attributed to Mahāyāna developments on visualisations and embodiments of the divine in *contrast* with the thus-perceived simple Theravāda. Kinnard's "quite tentative" contrasting characterisation of the two is indicative in this regard, as it recognises the reductive nature of the vision of Theravāda on which it nonetheless relies. Short of adequate interpretive frames, this is what Kinnard says: "The Theravādin position, on its face at any rate, is relatively straightforward: the Buddha was an extraordinary man who lived in the sixth century BCE; he was endowed with certain extra-human powers, but was nonetheless a mortal who was born, lived and died [...] Therefore, to look for the presence of the Buddha in stones, relics, sculptures, etc., is to look in vain. These are merely reminders of the Buddha, and they thus serve to signify the Buddha who is himself no longer present, but whose life and teachings serve as both, to use Geertz' well known terms, a *model of* and a *model for* the ideal life. The Mahāyāna position is more difficult to summarize briefly "(Kinnard 1999: 26).

The “face” of Theravāda is of real import in this affair. It appeals to a certain historicity, an investment in an understanding of linear time by which a man lived and died, and whose life and death is commemorated by adherents centuries on. Theravāda in this sense embodies an investment in history as a linear, teleological narrative: as Siddhattha Gotama progressed to Awakening so do adherents progress in their lives commemorating his. The face of Theravāda is more than a façade covering up something else, something more complicated or illicit even, something heterodox akin to Mahāyāna as this sort of hesitant characterisation of Theravāda tends to suggest. With a nod to Kinnard’s own theorisation of Mahāyāna constructs in this same chapter, I suggest rather that the tensions maintained in that very face are what *make* Theravāda and its icons. The “Historical Buddha” is as much a supernatural as a natural phenomenon. The perfections he legendarily achieved over many past lives led to the life of Siddhattha Gotama and his Awakening. Each of the characteristic marks the Buddha bears – *uṣṇīṣa* (cranial protuberance) on the head, *cakra* (wheels) on the palms, etc., is linked to a “perfection” (Skilling 2008: 67-8). The latest in a line of Buddhas, he becomes an idealised figure, an exemplar, which is to say at once bearing and bereft of singular identity – an “icon” in and of himself, to be venerated. The *stūpa* embodies another iteration of this tension between the historical and the ahistorical. The monument represents the end of the narrative, the Buddha’s death, the disappearance of the natural figure. At the same time, however, it gives body and supernatural, ahistorical life to that figure. Relative to the spectacular artistic developments of Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna the figure of the Buddha and *stūpa* are simple indeed. Yet, as the following historical examples should demonstrate, they are, like Mahāyāna, not easy to summarise briefly. They too are “metapractical” objects on the order of the Mahāyāna materials described by Kinnard, “involving and invoking a range of strategies with which Buddhists could work through the incongruities and complexities” at hand (Kinnard 1999: 43-4).

The broader Theravāda narrative I will sketch out, linking Sukhothai’s Wat Si Chum and Cambodia’s Angkor Wat, aims to point up how ensembles of imagery – aniconic, iconic and narrative in the conventional sense each of these terms has carried in Buddhist art history but also in their relations I have attempted to outline above -- embody remarkably coherent strategies. In turn, these strategies lend a certain physical and conceptual coherence to a vast region otherwise characterised by heterogeneous language use and topographies as well as political and cultural histories. I am not speaking directly to exchange networks by which

people, objects and ideas circulated, though these underpin to a degree my concerns which linger rather on aesthetic questions concerning the *work* that art does. On the surface the image ensembles, at Wat Si Chum and Angkor Wat, are quite dissimilar. They differ markedly in architectural and artistic form, style and manifest content. Each ensemble is thoroughly historically contingent, produced as a result of specific local historical events and contributing to the commemoration of these. They stand at a great distance from each other in time and space, north central Thailand in the 14th century and northern Cambodia in the 16th. To my mind, they point to two major inflections of premodern Theravāda on the mainland. The one, Wat Si Chum, can be said to be largely shaped through an orchestrated orientation to Sri Lankan Buddhism, building on Angkorian constructs while nonetheless distancing itself from them; this comes with a pronounced investment in the Buddha's life stories. The other, Angkor Wat, is predominantly shaped by the Angkorian heritage of which the temple is an exemplary part; the 16th-century transformation of the temple evinces a pronounced investment in the Hindu god Vishnu's life stories, now serving to endow the temple-as-Buddhist-icon with new life. Still their different modes of expression share in a visual projection of Buddhist icons made to stand out as such by epic narratives in which the Buddha and Vishnu are, in varying ways, assimilated, a shared projection which makes each ensemble also stand out from local historical narratives to participate in what might be termed a Theravāda civilisation transgressing contingencies of time and space.

Readers are encouraged to read the following in conjunction with Anne Blackburn's essay in the present volume examining how Sukhothai came to participate in the Pāli world of the second millennium. In a forthcoming monograph on Theravādin Buddhist kingdoms, Blackburn expands on this work tracking a shift from the discrete state-building focus of King Ramkhamhaeng's Buddhist expression in early Sukhothai to subsequent Sukhothai reigns characterised by sustained campaigns to emplot traces of the Buddha in Tai territories and a noted immersion in Pāli texts composed in Sri Lanka, to a subsequent predominant concern for monastic lineage in developments in Lanna (northern Thailand) and Bago (Burma). While Blackburn sounds the fine distinctions between these polities and their Buddhisms as they develop in time and space, she tracks a singular arc of development. In the following I seek to add another piece to the larger premodern Pāli world in which Cambodia is also integral, though otherwise. Sukhothai might be seen as a sort of pivot linking and foreshadowing what will become, in one inflection, the Sri Lanka-Bago-Lanna

arc traced by Anne Blackburn, and in another, the Cambodia-central Thailand arc which we might be tempted to name Ramayanic Buddhism in ways that should become evident below.

Re-presenting the Buddha: Two Historical Examples

Wat Si Chum (Fig. 3)

Wat Si Chum is a 14th-century Theravāda monastery outside the city walls of Sukhothai, one of three urban centres comprising the backbone of an eponymous premodern polity in what is now north central Thailand. Sukhothai emerged in the 13th century as a Tai Buddhist power with a developing cosmopolitan outlook and regional prominence; this rise came in the wake of Angkor, the Khmer polity centred on the Angkor plain in what is now northern Cambodia from the 9th to 13th centuries. Angkor had expanded its reach into the area which would become the independent realm of Sukhothai by the late 12th-early 13th century, and ultimately contributed to its foundation, such that Sukhothai can be considered one of multiple inheritors of Angkor. Angkor had thrived on a largely Hindu political structure in which the gods Shiva and Vishnu figured prominently in royal cults and associated administrative structures. Buddhism was present over much of this period but came to prominence at court only in the late Angkorian reign of Jayavarman VII, which saw a flourishing of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna expression underpinning political consolidation and expansion into what is now Thailand and Laos. Theravāda Buddhism became dominant at Angkor and elsewhere in Cambodia from the 13th- 14th centuries, developing at this time also in exchange with Sukhothai, Pagan and other regional polities in ways which remain relatively obscure today.⁹

Wat Si Chum has been the subject of extensive research. This is in part for the unique configuration of the site's dominant architectural feature, what is referred to in the scholarly literature as a *mondop* according to Thai pronunciation of the Pāli *maṇḍapa*. The *mondop* is thought to have been built in the late 14th century around a pre-existing colossal Buddha image. A narrow tunnel-like passageway was built into the *mondop*'s monumental walls,

⁹ For more on the spread of Theravāda in Cambodia after Angkor, see Thompson forthcoming; and Walker forthcoming.

spiralling through a system of staircases from the floor level around the building up to its top. Stone etchings of one hundred *jātaka* tales, numbered and with legends, are fit into the ceilings and other select components of this passageway effectively encircling the Buddha image. Scholars were long misled in interpretation of these *jātaka* plaques, and so of the site as a whole, by a conviction perfectly articulated by epigraphist-art historian team Griswold and Prasert na Nagara in their seminal work on the historical complex at hand:

“Representations of Jātakas, more than any other category of Buddhist art, are intended for the edification of the general public; so it is certain that these were not made to be installed in a dark stairway where they could only be seen with the aid of a candle” (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 77). This widely-held conviction led to interpretive acrobatics on the part of multiple scholars positing that the *jātaka* etchings were originally mounted on the exterior of Sukhothai’s Mahādhātu, the majestic city centre *stūpa*, only to be moved later to the eccentric *mondop* of Wat Si Chum. This interpretation has been discredited, both for the way in which the stone slabs have been shown to have been custom-made during the original construction of Wat Si Chum and for its premise that the very *raison d’être* of *jātakas* lies in being read – a premise convincingly challenged by Brown and Skilling as discussed above. A massive, lengthy stone inscription in Thai language and script was found in Wat Si Chum’s inner-wall passageway entrance; once thought, in conjunction with the *jātaka* hypothesis, to have belonged to Sukhothai’s Wat Mahādhātu, it is now generally understood that the epigraph was found just where it belonged, at Wat Si Chum.

The *mondop* and *jātaka* of Wat Si Chum comprised one of the case studies presented by Robert Brown in his 1997 essay. Brown is most interested in the placement of the *jātaka* at Wat Si Chum, encircling the Buddha/monument yet out of easy sight in ways he shows to be comparable to the placement of *jātaka* at other Buddhist sites including the early 12th-century Ananda temple at Pagan. The 2008 collective volume edited by Peter Skilling presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary review of the extant research on Wat Si Chum, while also contributing new findings and interpretations of multiple dimensions of the site. I will draw primarily from the work of Skilling, architectural historian Pierre Pichard and art historian Pattaratorn Chirapravati in this 2008 volume to make a few further points (Skilling: 2008: 59-109; Pichard 2008: 41-57; Chirapravati 2008: 13-39); I also reference Anne Blackburn’s essay in the present volume and Chapter Two, “Crossroads Sovereignty: Sukhothai Enters the Pali World,” of Blackburn’s forthcoming monograph on Theravāda kingdoms, in which the

author distils research on Inscription 2, from Wat Si Chum, in view of understanding the evolving modes of engagement with cosmopolitan Buddhist circulations in and out of Tai territories.

The photograph in Figure 3 shows a view of the *mondop* today following multiple restoration campaigns in the 20th century. It is a large stuccoed square brick structure on a massive stepped base aligned to the west of a brick terrace. The terrace is understood to be the remains of a *vihāra* (pronounced *wihan* in Thai) or worship hall, containing at its western end a pedestal for a Buddha image facing east, like the Buddha inside the *mondop* behind it. The alignment of a *vihāra* and *mondop* is common at Sukhothai, with variations including the addition of a *stūpa* behind the *mondop*, or a *stūpa* in the place of the *mondop*. The Wat Si Chum configuration is unusual in the Sukhothai context for the fact that the *vihāra* appears to have been closed at its western end, such that the colossal figure of the Buddha visible through the peaked doorway of the *mondop* today would not have been readily visible as the configuration was originally conceived. A narrow space between the *vihāra* and the *mondop* nonetheless allowed access into the latter. The Wat Si Chum *mondop* is unusual in the context of other *mondop* structures at Sukhothai for a number of other reasons including its massive size and relatively unadorned exterior.

Pierre Pichard's detailed study of the structure makes a tentative but strong argument that Wat Si Chum's *mondop* was conceived as a sort of *stūpa*. Pichard reminds readers that it is unlikely that the term *maṇḍapa* was used during the Sukhothai period to refer to this structure or to like structures today called *mondop* in other period temple sites. The interchangeability between *stūpa* and *mondop* evidenced in the period site configurations described above itself comprises a first suggestion that this structure could have been a *stūpa* or at least associated with, if not veritably assimilated with, the *stūpa* concept.¹⁰ The upper part of the inner walls of the *mondop* are tapered inwards. To Pichard this indicates that the structure was originally conceived as a tall tower with a high corbelled inner structure, but was left incomplete.

¹⁰ Early Theravadin architectural configurations at Angkor are strikingly similar in this regard, evincing the interchangeability of ancient sanctuary towers or *prāsād* with *stupa* and, in limited cases, what has been referred to as a 'treasury' which most resembles the Sukhothai *mondop* in physical terms. . More extensive comparative work than that accomplished to date would no doubt be productive. See in particular Marchal 1918; Gosling 1996; Thompson 1998.

Pichard cites possible local architectural models in the late 12th- early 13th-century Khmer sanctuary towers of Sukhothai's nearby Wat Phra Phai Luang and the square, tower-shaped Lanna stupas some 300 kilometres to the north such as the famed Chedi Ku Kut at Wat Chamathewi in Lamphun first constructed in the mid-12th century. He additionally evokes the Satmahal Prāsāda in Sri Lanka's 12th-century capital of Polonnaruva as a possible inspiration to monks returning to Sukhothai from the island. Whatever the specific inspiration might have been, assuming there was one, for this architectural historian the overriding image of Wat Si Chum's *mondop* is that of a *stupa*: "If, as generally believed, the large ... Buddha image was there before the *mondop*'s construction, a solid *stupa* would have been out of question since an interior space was necessary around the image, but the general profile could be adopted nonetheless" (Pichard 2008: 53) The especially tight fit between the colossal Buddha and monument enveloping it, along with the placement of the ensemble directly behind the enclosed *vihāra*, certainly renders the *stūpa* effect, where the Buddha relic inside is more or less inaccessible. There is scant space for worship inside the *mondop*. The spatial relation between image and monument creates a dazzling effect for the worshiper on the ground who, once inside can behold the image little better than from the outside, that is to say they cannot behold the image per se, as a whole, but can only be impressed in a nearly literal manner, by the monumentality of the Buddha's presence.

Inscription 2, from Wat Si Chum and datable to the latter half of the 14th century, is a remarkable text recounting the exploits of prince-become-monk, Śrī Śraddhā.¹¹ The text opens and closes with a sort of précis of Śrī Śraddhā's good Buddhist works including focused reference to his construction and veneration of a *stūpa* housing a tooth relic, and another housing a famous hair and neckbone relic in a forest monastery. Alternating between the first and third person, the text then tells us of the heroic acts of ancestors, whose sovereign titles were originally bestowed on them by Angkor at the foundation of Sukhothai, and then of Śrī Śraddhā's own military prowess before leaving the princely world behind for the monastic order. The ebullient prose then records one pious work after the next, including multiple temple, bodhi tree, *stūpa*, and statue foundation and restoration campaigns, and culminating in an extraordinary, long account of relics performing miracles like fireworks in the sky, evidencing Śrī Śraddhā's extraordinary devout power. Throughout the text, Śrī

¹¹ For a critical review of the extant scholarly work on dating the text and a reasoned hypothesis that the text dates no earlier than the late 1350s, see Blackburn forthcoming.

Śraddhā's acts are associated with “acts of truth” (Pāli: *saccakiriyā*) by which the good works done, including that done in the recording of the vow, are explicitly formulated as building the meritorious path by which Śrī Śraddhā will become a Buddha. Chirapravati judiciously summarises convincing historical arguments for positing Wat Si Chum as the forest monastery named in the inscription and built by Śrī Śraddhā on a pre-existent Theravādin site to house a newly introduced Forest-dwelling Sinhalese monastic lineage (Chirapravati 2008: 19). The *mondop* with its *jātaka* engravings is assumed to have been among his many good works.

The text weaves in and out of Sukhothai and the neighbouring Si Sajjanalai, Mottama (Martaban, a Mon polity on the Andaman coast), India and Sri Lanka, where Śrī Śraddhā appears to have been re-ordained, in ways that make it often impossible for the reader to discern exactly where this or that event is said to have occurred, and whether it occurred in fact or fiction. Griswold and Prasert's comments in this regard are informative on multiple levels: “the author of inscription 2 is gushing, hyperbolic, at times long-winded and repetitive, at times hurried and elliptical to the point of obscurity. He jumps from one subject to another in a very confusing way, so that painstaking study is sometimes required to decide whether we are in Siam or in Ceylon or in India. [...] Despite the oddities of the composition... when we take the trouble to disentangle the succession of events and straighten out the topography it is one of the most informative we possess” (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 84-85). The authors skilfully do just this by reading Inscription 2 up against another epigraph in which the same Śrī Śraddhā recounts his travels with a slightly greater degree of chronological and topographical clarity. Other scholars have continued the quest to trace Śrī Śraddhā's exact trajectory, pinning down times and places to build a picture of monastic practices and regional exchange networks operating at the time.¹²

These are vital historical points, to which I would like to add reflections on the historical vision had by the text and its author as evinced in the text's very form. The interpretive acrobatics required to set Śrī Śraddhā's record straight is strikingly reminiscent of those long undertaken to explain the “hidden” *jātakas* of Wat Si Chum: they belie a process by which

¹² In addition to Skilling's 2008 edited volume, see chapter 2 of Anne Blackburn's forthcoming monograph on Theravāda kingdoms.

the logic of the interpreter prevails over the logic of the text. What if, then, the form of the text, with its tangled temporalities and twisted topographies, were to be taken on its own terms? The question pulsates throughout Griswold and Prasert's meticulous critical translation, but remains unarticulated as such and so unanswered. Instead, following on from their authoritative depiction of the oddities cited above, we hear them go further to characterize the author as irrational (Ibid: 89); we hear them ask, in repeating and expanding upon their initial depiction, "What of the author's hyperbolic style of writing, his repetitions and ellipses, his jumping about from one subject to another, his dream-like chronology and topography and his general absent-mindedness?..." (Ibid: 90) As they attempt to pin down a series of acts recounted in the text to specific times and places we hear them pre-empt anticipated readerly objections with the argument that "order and continuity are not [the author's] strong points" (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 127-8, n. 149). Yet, the shadow of a doubt in their own convictions of the author's illogic emerges as they qualify their recurrent argument in this regard: "We believe this to be true; but the train of thought may be more complex" (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 128, n. 49).

Here in this tiny footnote to a footnote, and as I will show, in like supplementary commentary, Griswold and Prasert are onto something essential to the understanding of Theravāda icons, somethings which adds another dimension to the historical interpretation which has thus far dominated critical work on the Wat Si Chum text. These are linguistic turns which themselves embody the condensation of time and space by which an icon embodies the powerful presence of the Buddha. The indiscrimination between times, present or past, and places, here or there, which has challenged translators for nearly a century is not only a result of an irrational author. It is rather structurally embedded in the Buddhist practices recorded as in the Buddhist practice of recording. Griswold and Prasert note for example the ambivalence embedded in the usage of Tai and Sanskrit verbs which can mean at once "to construct" and "to reconstruct;"¹³ in the usage of a Tai demonstrative meaning "that" or "there" (*dī nann*) to also or instead mean "this" or "here," an ambivalence which contributes to that of the positioning of the text's enunciating subject vis-à-vis the objects and events he describes in

¹³ Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 119, n. 109 (Part II, line 9 of inscription): Tai *phlūk*, where the term is actually used twice in a single passage associating the construction of a stupa with the planting of flowering trees; and p. 127, n. 149 (Part II, line 27 or inscription): Sanskrit *pratiṣṭhā*.

time and space;¹⁴ and in the spectacular capacity for relics to self-reproduce such that duplicates, found, seen, deposited or venerated here and now, are indistinguishable from their “originals.” Such questions of linguistic ambivalence bring the translators to concede to footnote a particularly thorny passage as “most likely”... “a kind of religious double-talk” in which a single phrase would reference at once *stūpas* in Sukhothai and Sri Lanka, as if the one were “magically identified” with the other (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1972: 128, n. 149). Call it what you like - condensation, dream-like or double-talk -, the formal dimensions of the text, like those of the *jātaka*-Buddha- *stūpa* ensemble of Wat Si Chum, allow us to think how Buddhist art writ large, i.e. text, image and monument, itself thinks history, in conjunction with how modern scholars might seek to understand history with reference to it.

What is crystal clear from the inscription is that Śrī Śraddhā’s life story is that of a *bodhisattva*, a being destined to become a Buddha who accomplishes good works enabling the fulfilment of that destiny; and that “Sri Lankan” Buddhism comprises the model by which Buddhahood is to be achieved. In the life recorded in stone, Śrī Śraddhā effectively reincarnates the past Buddha in his past lives. As Blackburn has noted in the wake of the text’s translators, the account of the transition from domestic to ascetic life mimics first that of Siddhattha leaving the princely fold for the ascetic life at the sight of pains and sorrows of the mundane life, and then the *Vessantara Jātaka*, a tale of the past life of the Buddha as Prince Vessantara who gives away fortune, kingdom and family in accomplishing the perfection of generosity (Blackburn: forthcoming). Here it is the technique of literary allusion which accomplishes the condensation of time and space, such that the tales of the accomplishment of perfection give Śrī Śraddhā’s own present person the power of the Buddha-to-be.

This vision of Śrī Śraddhā as a *bodhisattva* is reiterated in a multitude of spectacular ways throughout the text. Early on we learn that his good works are explicitly channelled to promote the Sri Lankan model and intended to forge his predestined path to Buddhahood. The relic miracles are both caused by his devotion to Sri Lankan Buddhism and proof of his future Buddhahood. The two core elements of his formal name, Śrīśraddhārājacūlamuni

¹⁴ The issues arise repeatedly throughout the text. See especially comments in Griswold and Prasert 1972: 26, n.146.

Śrīratanaḷaṅkadīpa, encapsulate his Buddhist person as it appears at the end of the text. The first can be literally rendered August (Śrī) Faith (śraddhā) Royal (rāja) Lock of hair left on crest of the head after shaving, mark of royal distinction (cūḷa) Ascetic (muni, also spelled *muni* in the text); as Griswold and Prasert note, the end compound *cūḷamuṇi* recalls *cūḷamaṇi*, the legendary “Hair-crest Jewel” of the Buddha encased in an eponymous heavenly *stūpa*.¹⁵ The royal monk literally appears to merit this name when in the finale of the spectacular relic miracle performance, after Śrī Śraddhā has thrown himself “on the ground and offered [his] life as an irrevocable gift, vowing to uphold the religion of Laṅkādīpa [Sri Lanka],” two relics are physically embedded in him (Griswold and Prasert 1972: 131). The first, a golden relic, circles his head in a propitious manner before landing on it to then install itself in his forehead; the second, a hair plucked from the Buddha’s own head when living, lands and stays atop Śrī Śraddhā’s own head. At this sight, the Sri Lankan onlookers, artisans Śrī Śraddhā had brought back to Sukhotai with him for the express purpose of building the Sri Lankan model on Tai land, exclaim him to be a *buddhāṅga*, a Buddha element or seed or essence, which is to say embodying the remains and the potential of Buddhahood (Griswold and Prasert 1972: 104 (Thai text Part II, 1. 73)). “The reason they [the relics] performed such miracles,” the text tells us, “was to show themselves to all the people, to cause them to help uplift the Dharma of Laṅkā[dīpā] as a great source of merit, and to make the Buddhist religion manifest.”¹⁶ The second core element of the epigraphic hero’s formal name emphasizes this dimension of his person: he is the August (Śrī) Jewel (*ratana*) [of the] Island (*dīpa*) of Lanka.

The Khmer figure periodically in the text, in a sort of apposition, in contrast to the recurrent figuring of Sri Lanka in the position of inspiration and source. Ancestral political relations to the Khmer recorded in the opening of the biographical account are complemented by ancestral cultural relations evidenced throughout the text in its use of Khmer terminology.¹⁷

¹⁵ The titles appear with a range of small variations on a Pāli-Sanskrit mix of component terms in both Pāli and Sanskrit. I have given the Sanskrit spellings as regularised by Griswold and Prasert 1972, p. 75 and note 2.

¹⁶ Ibid: 133. This passage is somewhat ambiguous. Coedès gives: “The reason for these miracles was to inspire all the people to go to Laṅkādvīpa to contribute to making the religion prosper, which is a great and manifest source of merit in the religion of the Buddha” (my translation of Coedès 1924: 74).

¹⁷ One example of the textual positioning of the Khmer in contrast with the Sinhalese comes in a passage which Coedes translates as “He [Śrī Śraddhā] enjoys observing the prohibitions and meditating in the middle of forests and woods, losing himself there and without food (reduced to content himself with) fruits and roots, behaving in all manners according to model of the Siṅhala (monks). The people of Kameradesa [the Khmer country] come (to Sukhothai) in search of higher learning” (Coedes 1924: 64); and which Griswold and Prasert

When recording Śrī Śraddhā's efforts to "save the August Great Royal Reliquary" (*loek hai ka tāṃ braḥ mahādhātu hlvaṅ*) in a phrase combining Khmer, Thai, and Pāli terms, the text adds that "The Khmer call it "Great Buddha" (Khmer: *braḥ dham*)" (Griswold and Prasert, Tai text, Part I, ll.20-23). To my mind, it is not entirely clear to which monument this passage refers; and it is of note that the Khmer appellation *braḥ dham* is common (in modern usage and in Middle Khmer as we understand it) for Buddha images but not for *stūpas* themselves. Chirapravati and Skilling aim to close the long debates on this question in identifying the *braḥ mahādhātu hlvaṅ* / *braḥ dham* with the Dhanyakataka in Amaravati (in Andhra Pradesh, India) subsequently named in the text. Chirapravati makes a convincing argument in this regard, notably pointing to ongoing activity in the 14th century at this majestic stupa first built in the 3rd century BCE, and to the concomitant reference in the Wat Si Chum text to the monument in question having once boasted "stone carvings of the five hundred...jātakas." (Chirapravati 2008: 19-20). The Dhanyakataka did indeed once boast hundreds of scenes of the life of the Buddha and *jātaka* tales sculpted on stone slabs on the inner face of its surrounding railing. Reviewing the epigraphic and art historical evidence, Chirapravati argues that Śrī Śraddhā could well have visited the site (Chirapravati 2008: 19-20). I argue simply that this convincing historical identification might further serve to inform understandings of the overarching logic of the text and of the practices it records, including the practice of recording it performs, whereby what happens in the South Asian sites reputed for their ancient association with the Buddha is virtually inseparable from what happens in Sukhothai through Śrī Śraddhā's person. Indeed, though Wat Si Chum boasted stone carvings of only one hundred *jātakas*, Pichard calculates that the apparent conception of a tall tower could have well included an intended installation of another four hundred *jātaka* plaques in a passageway continuing to spiral up the monument.

An ancillary point to my point here is that while the text is overwhelmingly concerned with the Sukhothai-Sri Lankan/Indian relation, the Khmer somehow mattered. Why does Śrī Śraddhā take the time to tell us how the Khmer called the site "saved" from ruin by Śrī Śraddhā?

translate as "He [Śrī Śraddhā] likes to observe the precepts and meditate in the depths of woods and forests, absorbed in thought, forgetting to eat. [His usual food is only?] fruits and the roots of plants. His daily routine is [that of] Siṅhala in every way. He likes to wander about the country in search of wisdom" (Griswold and Prasert 1972 : 113, and note 58). The divergent interpretations hinge on the reading of one consonant as either "k" (in "the Khmer country", *kameradesa*) or "th" (in "wander about the country," *tameradesa*). The latter, while not naming the Khmer as coming to Sukhothai, nonetheless names Śrī Śraddhā's Sinhalese-like quest for wisdom in Sukhothai with the ancient Khmer term *tmer*, from *ter*, to walk, travel.

Were Khmer-speaking pilgrims working alongside Śrī Śraddhā in Amaravati, restoring the stone carvings of *jātaka* tales before Śrī Śraddhā would return to Sukhothai to recreate his experiences there – including naming the Khmer name for an early Indian site there in the Wat Si Chum inscription? The possibility is intriguing. In any case it is of note that this late 14th-century Tai text discreetly tells us that the Khmer (name) mattered even as the people and the name were statedly, textually pulled into Sukhothai’s Sri Lankan orbit.

A last note on Śrī Śraddhā’s own dynamic identity will introduce us to our closing consideration of royal Cambodian Theravāda expression. The overarching identification of Śrī Śraddhā as a future Buddha is underpinned by periodic mention of his past Vaishnava lives. As a princely youth he makes a vow to become Rāma, an avatar of Viṣṇu.¹⁸ Later, as a royal monk-*bodhisattva* he is called “Lord Kṛṣṇa,” the very “person of Rāma and the god Nārāya(ṇa) who descended from heaven to be reborn and travel through the round of last transmigrations, wandering back and forth from birth to birth” (Ibid: 124). This identification of the *bodhisattva* Śrī Śraddhā as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, avatars of the God Vishnu also known as Nārāya(ṇa), is followed immediately by an enigmatic and fragmentary quotation: ‘Mettaiyo...Gotamo’”, an appeal to Maitreya the future Buddha and Gotama the present Buddha in the singular Theravāda line. In other words, Rāma lingers in, and is in fact reborn in the person of this (once princely now future) Buddha. It was not unusual for Buddhist kings to be seen in such a Vaishnava light, and the figure endures in the titlature and pageantry of Southeast Asia’s remaining Cambodian and Thai monarchies. What interests me here are Śrī Śraddhā’s parallel evocations, at Wat Si Chum, of his own (re)incarnation of the many lives of Viṣṇu and the Buddha as he works his way along the path to Awakening. Whether or not his relics are deposited in the *jātaka*-Buddha-*stūpa* ensemble of Wat Si Chum, we cannot be sure. The inscription does however ensure his ongoing life.

Angkor Wat (fig.4)

Angkor Wat temple was built on the Angkor plain in what is now northern Cambodia in the 12th century under the reign of King Sūryavarman II. The *prāsād* (Hindu temple) was

¹⁸ The passage in question is slightly effaced, giving Harīḥr..., which is very likely Harīḥrakṣa – Harirakṣa, an epithet of Rama used in the Siamese *Ramayana*. See Griswold and Prasert 1972: 166 and n. 89.

dedicated to the god Viṣṇu in association with the founder king for whom it would serve as a posthumous abode. No foundation stele has been found for Angkor Wat; nor do we know what statue originally served as the temple's central icon. The information just conveyed has instead come to us through the temple's 12th-century sculpted reliefs which are predominantly Vaishnava, and short legends inscribed amongst these identifying representations of the founder king by his posthumous name, "Paramaviṣṇulok," "He who has gone to Viṣṇu's realm."

Significant transformations were made to Angkor Wat in the 16th century. The major components of this transformation were, first, the completion of Vaishnava bas-reliefs in the northeastern wings of the temple's third enclosure galleries. Associated short inscriptions tell us that these reliefs were sculpted between 1546-1564 under the commission of *braḥ pād stac braḥ rāja oṅkār parama rājādhirāja rāmādhīpatī parama cakravartirāja* to complete the "narrative panels" "left unfinished" by *braḥ pād mahāviṣṇulok*. The former title is notable in the present context for its Vaishnava orientation naming Rāma and his attribute as a wheel-turning monarch, the *cakra* disc; the latter serves to prove that the temple's founder king was remembered by his posthumous Vaishnava name some four centuries after the fact (Cœdès 1962). The dates correspond to the reign of a king more often known as Aṅg Cand, notably celebrated in the broader contemporary historical record and later local historiography for leading a Buddhist renewal of the Cambodian kingdom at the time (Groslier 1958; Vickery 1977: esp. 226-228). The 12th-century reliefs of Angkor Wat's third enclosure include multiple stories of Vishnu and his avatars, as well as a historical depiction of King Sūryavarman II and his entourage in procession, and a depiction of beings transmigrating through heavens and hells, their destinies made to be seen as depending on actions committed in past lives. Representing narrative sequences highlighting the heroic actions of Viṣṇu and his avatar Kṛṣṇa, the 16th-century reliefs do indeed complete the 12th-century narrative schema. Art historians have hypothesised in fact that at least portions of these later narrative compositions were sketched into the stone in the 12th century such that Ang Chan's artisans had only to follow their lead. (Boisselier 1962: 244; Giteau 1975: 93-111; Roveda 2002: 57).

The second major 16th-century transformation of Angkor Wat consisted in the closing off of the originally open central sanctuary: each of the four doorways was filled in with large

sandstone blocks sculpted into a colossal standing Buddha. Seen in conjunction with two Khmer language inscriptions at the temple, this modification appears to have comprised the conversion of the central sanctuary into a *stūpa* in the late 1570s to contain the relics of King Ang Chan’s son under the commission of the latter’s spouse and their son, now king in his father’s stead, whose lengthy title also included Rāma; in the process, the four Buddhas of the central sanctuary-*stūpa* were assimilated with royal ancestors (Lewitz 1970; Thompson 1998). The works accomplished at the temple summit, along with the vows recording them, were explicitly designed to participate in the renewal of ancient Cambodian political power, now under the Buddhist banner. Written respectively in the first-person voice of the queen mother and in a third-person narration of her son the king, these inscriptions declare themselves to be “vows of truth” (Sanskrit: *satyapraṇidhān*), in the same genre repeatedly cited by Śrī Śraddhā at Wat Si Chum. The operative vocabulary of “saving” (*loek*) an ancient temple in restoring it and in doing so “saving” the Buddhist religion, along with the interchangeability of “constructing” and “reconstructing” (here with the Khmer verb *sāñ*) seen at Wat Si Chum (with the terms *phlūk* and *pratiṣṭhā*), likewise situate these 16th-century Cambodian works in a broad Theravadin politico-cultural complex. The good works in 16th-century Cambodia are conceived as enabling Maitreya’s coming, but the emphasis is nonetheless on channelling them and the salvation of Buddhism to save the Cambodian kingdom as a whole. In contrast with the 14th-century Sukhothai materials discussed above, there is no overarching reference to Sri Lanka and no harping insistence on the *bodhisattva* nature of the royal actors.

For their apparently distinct religious orientations, the one Vaishnava and the other Buddhist, as for their asynchronous commissions, these two transformations to Angkor Wat have been consistently interpreted in more or less discrete terms – to begin with by myself in a number of publications. The third enclosure’s northeastern Vaishnava reliefs are understood to be the demonstration of a post-Angkorian Cambodian Buddhist king’s respect for tradition. The later transformation of the central sanctuary into a *stūpa* with four Buddhas, on the other hand, is understood to comprise an expression of the transformed state of the kingdom in the name of Theravāda Buddhism. The two are presented as discrete if harmonious in the Cambodian context as an example of syncretism by which religious heritage is valued and incorporated into a specifically historically conditioned cultural complex. Art historian Madeleine Giteau’s comments in the one monograph to date on post-Angkorian art are telling in this regard: “It is Braḥ Bīṣṇulok or Vishnu and the Brahmanic gods who reign on [Angkor Wat’s] lower level,

while the higher levels are dedicated to the Buddha (Giteau 1975: 89)". This is a perfect picture of syncretism as it has often been conceived in Cambodia, where one discrete religion is layered atop another. This is not entirely false; nor however is it the whole truth.

What I wish to suggest here, in closing, is that Wat Si Chum, along with its many avatars studied by Robert Brown et al, allows us to see late 16th-century Angkor Wat in more holistic terms. The Vaishnava narratives encircling the temple are, I believe, analogous, in 16th-century Cambodian terms, with the *jātaka* encircling other sites, working to endow the temple's central icon with its own life and effectively *iconise* the temple as a whole. As they tell the story of Viṣṇu's accomplishments over many lives, they endow the Viṣṇu-Buddha-King(s) in the body of the *stūpa-prāsād* that is Angkor Wat with its own powerful presence. This is akin to what George Cœdès said nearly a century ago with reference to the Angkorian-period mythological and historical narrative reliefs at Angkor Wat as well as at the Mahāyāna Buddhist Bayon temple: the "presence of [narrative reliefs] on the walls of the temple animate him [the god understood to reside in the temple]... Just as a statue made according to the fixed rules and duly consecrated according to established rites, *is* the god himself, a bas-relief representing him in this or that episode of his legend contributes greatly to animating the temple with his real presence" (Cœdès 1992 [1936]: 267 (my translation)).¹⁹ In the late 16th-century at Angkor Wat there is no distinction between "Buddhism" and "Vaishnavism," let alone between "Theravāda" and its others; these are modern terms on which the paradigm of syncretism is built. On one critical register, the four-Buddha-*stūpa* ensemble at the summit of Angkor Wat is unmistakably Theravādin, set as it is within a Pāli context anchored with reference to the Gotama Buddha and the future Maitreya and integral to a broader Theravāda world. But the Theravāda which emerges at Angkor Wat encompasses, amongst many other things, the so-called "Historical Buddha" *as* Rāma, and this Buddha-Rāma *is* also the Cambodian king and his avatars – past and future. This is to say that Cœdès' reading of relations between narrative, central statue and temple at Angkor Wat

¹⁹ Cœdès' comments are explicitly meant to counter European aestheticization of Angkorian art as "art for art's sake," and in such they might be construed as foreshadowing Robert Brown's critique of Dehejia's interpretive paradigm discussed in the opening of the present essay. We are not however reinventing the wheel already perfected by Cœdès. First, Dehejia's reading does in many ways take into account local Buddhist modes of pictorial composition. And, crucially, the contemporary commentators I have elected to work with throughout this essay advocate significant reconsideration of relations between text and image as perceived in much colonial scholarship. While Cœdès laments the supposed loss of master manuscripts thought to have dictated Angkorian sculpture to a T, from Brown to Skilling, as we have seen, Buddhist art can call for examination in its own right in the absence of any appeal to art for art's sake.

must be extended in terms of both theory and content, to debunk once and for all any lingering notions that Theravāda is “relatively straightforward” (Kinnard 1999: 26). That the classical Cambodian version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, whose composition dates to around this time, consistently refers to Rāma as a *bodhisattva*, proves my point. Without skipping a beat, Rāma is, like Śrī Śraddhā in his own account of others’ exclamations before his miraculous relic-animating feats at Wat Si Chum, called the *buddhaṅkur*, a Buddha element or seed or essence, which is to say embodying the remains and the potential of Buddhahood. The Khmer Rāma is explicitly described in the Khmer *Rāmāyaṇa* as being “in the lineage of the Buddha” (*aṃpūr tathāgat / baṅs bodhisambhār*), or, further telescoping temporalities, he is at times called the Buddha himself (Pou 1997: 87). In Angkor Wat, I mean to say, we have another iteration of the *jātaka*-Buddha-*stūpa* ensemble, where the life stories make the Buddha-*stūpa* anthropomorphic-aniconic ensemble the icon that it is.

Recent research by art historian Eric Bourdonneau and historian Grégory Mikaelian has highlighted another key element of 16th-century developments at Angkor Wat which link the temple at once to the ancient Angkorian *devarāja* cult, to Śrī Śraddhā’s 14th-century Sukhothai and to the modern Phnom Penh and Bangkok courts, while also demonstrating relations between the temple’s 16th-century Vaishnava lower-level gallery reliefs and its summit. In short: the Brahmanic royal tutelary divinities of Angkor had found new embodiment in the *devālayamahākset*, “residence of the gods of the great sacrificial field,” a temple set outside of Sukhothai’s city walls within a monastery built on royal commission to host a leading visiting monk and his entourage from Mottama who had himself resided in Sri Lanka – a monastery minutes away from Wat Si Chum. The 16th-century epigraphic record at Angkor Wat noted above tells us that the *stūpa-prāsād*’s upper terrace served as the assembly site of these same Brahmanic divinities who effectively oversaw royal initiation ritual; they also appear in the 16th-century lower gallery bas-reliefs. And they have an enduring place in Cambodian and Thai court ritual today (Bourdonneau and Mikaelian 2020).

What we see at Angkor Wat is not a corruption of Theravāda, or a syncretic outcome which can only be understood as “Cambodian Theravāda,” where the qualifier implies both the existence of a non-qualified, pure original thing which this one is not and a unique nationally-bound thing known nowhere else. Even if what we see at Angkor Wat may be called Ramayanic Theravāda it is important to remember that this *is* Theravāda just as much as what

we see at Wat Si Chum is Theravāda – if Theravāda is anything at all. That is to say: Theravāda is only ever localised, even as it makes its place in broader worlds.

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