

Janice Stargardt & Michael Willis (eds), *Relics and Relic Worship in Early Buddhism: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma*. 2018, 123 pp., £35, The British Museum, London.

Reviewed by Wannaporn Rienjang

This handsome volume takes a holistic approach to the study of Buddhist relics. It brings together seven experts from different fields -- literature and epigraphy, numismatics, art history, material culture studies and archaeology -- to explore how Buddhist relics were perceived and venerated during the period between the turn of the Common Era and about the seventh century AD. As Janice Stargardt says in her introduction, Peter Skilling sets out the theme of the book by highlighting the centrality of relics in Buddhist rituals and ideology. In so doing, he presents textual, epigraphic, architectural and sculptural examples from early to later periods to show how Buddha relics have been treated as the Buddha himself and how they travelled with his teachings. Skilling also emphasizes the role of relics in the historiography of Buddhism in South Asia. He warns that relics should not be studied as mere 'material culture', a contention which resonates with the contents of this volume as well as the study of relics in recent decades.

The literary context of relics is specially explored by Lance Cousins, who passed away before the book saw its publication. Cousins uses his expertise in Pali literature to discuss the etymology of the words *cetiya* and *thūpa* as recorded in canonical and paracanonical Pali texts. While advocating the antiquity of Buddhist Pali texts, Cousins suggests that only in later Pali texts do the meanings of *cetiya* and *thūpa* conform to the Buddhist use: they then do not simply mean mound or heap, as they did earlier, but also the places where the worship of relics took place. Such worship involves fragrant items such as flowers, incense, and sumptuous objects associated with royalty, such as parasols and banners, so that Cousins draws a parallel between the treatment of the Buddha relics and the bodily remains of the *cakkavattin*.

The significance of relics in literary sources is further explored by Michael Willis, who discusses statements from inscriptions and passages from the *Milindapañho*, *Niddesa* and *Petavatthu*. In citing these texts, Willis explores how offerings to the Buddha, dharma and sangha are perceived. He draws attention to the term *deyyadhamma*, which refers to items that ‘should be given’ and argues that there is an equivalence in offering *deyyadhamma* to relics of the Buddha, to monks and to Buddha images.

While epigraphic and literary contexts are still retained, the next four chapters of the book also embrace art history and archaeology. Karel van Kooij relates relics to the Indic term *darśana*, and translates the latter as revealing or manifesting itself. In connection to this, van Kooij considers the practice of displaying relics in antiquity and argues that relics, as opposed to foundation or consecration deposits, were meant to be seen and became entwined with Buddha images. Sculptural panels depicting relics in procession and architectural remains in Sri Lanka are brought in to support this argument.

Numismatic evidence is added into the holistic study of Buddhist relics by Elizabeth Errington and Joe Cribb. Using one of the richest remaining collections of Buddhist relic materials in the world, the Masson Collection at the British Museum, Errington takes us to see how coins found with relic deposits can inform the chronology of the relic cult in eastern Afghanistan. She presents a picture of relic practice during the first and second centuries AD, in relation to funerary practices whose contemporaneity with the relics is uncertain largely due to the lack of associated coins. She also draws attention to similarities between objects found in these relic deposits and those found in the first century necropolis of Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan. One of the objects discussed is the famous Bimaran gold reliquary. Errington argues that, with the depiction of the Buddha that it bears, the reliquary could have served as an *uddesika dhātu* (representational relic), and was originally made to be seen, probably on a display, thus posing the question of its previous life prior to being interred in the stupa.

The context of the Bimaran gold casket is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter by Joe Cribb. Cribb’s long and detailed study of coins found in greater Gandhara enables him to establish that the four copper coins found with the Bimaran deposit belong to issues of the late first century satrap who ruled in the Jalalabad area. His holistic and thorough discussion of the Bimaran reliquary in archaeological, art historical, epigraphic and numismatic contexts convincingly suggests that the Bimaran reliquary was probably made before,

at the same time, or soon after the issuing of Buddha coins by Kanishka I, thus dating its production round AD150. This proposition, as argued by Cribb, implies that by the mid second century AD, the prototype of the standing Buddha depicted on the Bimaran reliquary already existed.

Janice Stargardt closes the volume with her chapter illustrating one of the earliest examples of Buddhist relic worship in Burma. She examines the rich relic deposit of the fifth to sixth centuries AD at the ancient Pyu city of Sri Ksetra. Two objects from this deposit are presented: a golden manuscript of 20 leaves of canonical Pali and a large silver reliquary bearing a depiction of seated Buddhas. Stargardt's thorough examination of these objects using art-historical, epigraphic and archaeological methods illustrates the process of reception of Buddhism in Burma, thereby suggesting the Pyus' selective borrowing of iconography and texts from Andhra in India.

The volume overall succeeds in presenting a wide range of evidence to show how Buddhist relics were perceived and used in South Asia and adjacent lands in early times. While materials from the literary and epigraphic world discussed in this volume belong largely to the Pali tradition, this constraint is complemented by a wide range of art-historical and archaeological materials. Although the volume does not address important areas such as the Swat valley in Pakistan, where relic worship in early Buddhism is attested by their rich archaeological remains, the chapters included in the volume address key issues and present methodologies that can be taken forwards in the study of Buddhist relics in countries beyond South Asia, such as China, Tibet, Japan and Thailand, where relic worship has played an important part in Buddhist rituals until the present time.