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The Historical Authenticity of Early Buddhist Literature A Critical Evaluation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The academic study of Indian Buddhism began in earnest during the Victorian period.[1] In this early phase of Buddhist studies in the West, little was known about the age and historicity of the small amount of Buddhist literature then available. Because of this lack of knowledge, it is not surprising that some scholars tended to be sceptical of the historical worth of their sources. Thus in his *Essai sur la legende du Buddha* (1873-75), Sénart claimed that mythological accounts of the Buddha's life were transformations of pre-Buddhist myths of a solar god.[2] Sénart did not deny the possibility that reliable historical information about the Buddha had been preserved, but his approach effectively minimised such concerns. This paved the way for Kern, writing soon after Sénart, to completely deny the existence of the historical Buddha.[3] Against this scepticism, T.W. Rhys Davids, in his *Buddhism, being a sketch of the life and teachings of Gautama the Buddha* (1877), defended the historicity of the Buddha as presented in the (hitherto unpublished) Pāli texts.[4]

Rhys Davids argued that the internal evidence of the Pāli canon proved its antiquity and historical authenticity,[5] but he also cited

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[1] As de Jong notes (1974: 76-77), the year 1877 marked a turning point in the publishing of Pali texts, although the Pali Text Society was not founded until 1881. An increasing number of Buddhist Sanskrit texts began to be published after 1881, as well as many more critical studies.

[2] De Jong 1974: 78-79.

[3] De Jong 1974: 79-81.

[4] Rhys Davids 1877: 15-17. Rhys Davids (1877: 190-193) summarised Senart's solar theory and stated that Senart did not deny the existence of the historical Buddha (p.193). Senart's solar theory was also rejected by Oldenberg (De Jong 1974: 81).

[5] In many publications after 1877, Rhys Davids defended the historical authenticity of the Pāli canon, e.g. Rhys Davids 1899: ix-xvi, and 1903: 163-175.

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epigraphical evidence that assumed the existence of a vast Buddhist literature from about the third century B.C. onwards.[6] This position is weakened by the fact that the internal evidence of the Pāli canon cannot be verified by any external evidence, inscriptional or otherwise.[7] Nevertheless, the line of argument taken by Rhys Davids appears to be strong. He could point out the following:

> The books make no mention of Asoka. Had they undergone any serious re-editing after the reign of the great Buddhist Emperor (of whom the Buddhist writers, whether rightly or wrongly, were so proud), is it probable that he would have been so completely ignored?[8]

The simple argument that only pre-Aśokan, northern India is depicted in the early portions of the Pāli canon[9] can be supplemented by the fact, pointed out by Norman, that the Pāli canon shows "no certain evidence for any substantial Sinhalese additions… after its arrival in Ceylon."[10] If the Pāli canon is redacted in a language which is without substantial Sinhalese additions, it must have been compiled somewhere in north India before it was introduced to Sri Lanka. And on this point, previous scholars generally accepted the

[6] Rhys Davids 1899: xii-xiii, and 1903: 167-169. He also attached great importance to correspondences between the Pāli and Buddhist Sanskrit literature (1887: 13).

[7] The sceptical view must be revised somewhat because of the recent discovery of early Gandhāran manuscripts. In general, however, these manuscripts do not predate the first or second century A.D. (Salomon 1999: 154-55; 2003: 74-78), and so the sceptic is quite right to point out that no manuscripts have survived from roughly the first four hundred years of Buddhism (I accept that the Buddha died around 404 B.C.; see n.45). The earliest external evidence concerning the contents of the early Buddhist literature is found in Aśoka's Bairāṭ edict, which names a number of early compositions. For the edict itself, see Hultzsch (1925: 173). Older views about it are found in Oldenberg (1879: xl), Rhys Davids (1899: xiii-xiv; 1903: 169-170). More recent comments are found in Jayawickrama (1948: 230-32), Schmithausen (1992: 115-117) and Norman (2001: xxxiii).

[8] Rhys Davids 1903: 174.

[9] For the present purposes, we can take the early portion of the Pāli canon to consist of the Suttapiṭaka and the Vinayapiṭaka minus the *Parivāra*. It is undeniable that there are further chronological strata in this collection of texts, but this issue is complex and beyond the limits of the present article. See n.19 for studies which have attempted to stratify parts of the *Suttapiṭaka* on doctrinal grounds.

[10] Norman 1978: 36.

Sinhalese commentaries, which state that the Pāli canon was written down in the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmiṇī (29-17 B.C.),[11] and that before this, it was brought to Sri Lanka by Mahinda during the reign of Aśoka.[12] According to this view the earlier portions of the Pāli canon were composed before the middle of the third century B.C., and a similar antiquity was more or less assumed for the various collections of early Buddhist literature extant in other languages.

2. MODERN SCEPTICISM

In more recent times the views of scholars such as Rhys Davids have been replaced by a form of extreme scepticism similar to that of Sénart and Kern. Gregory Schopen sums up the modern sceptical position as follows: [13]

> Scholars of Indian Buddhism have taken canonical monastic rules and formal literary descriptions of the monastic ideal preserved in very late manuscripts and treated them as if they were accurate reflections of the religious life and career of actual practising Buddhist monks in early India.[14]

There are two aspects to this view. On the one hand, Schopen stresses that normative religious literature is not an accurate record of historical events:

> Even the most artless formal narrative text has a purpose, and… in "scriptural" texts, especially in India, that purpose is almost never "historical" in our sense of the term.

On the other hand, Schopen doubts that texts preserved in "very late manuscripts" contain ancient historical evidence; he wishes us to believe that the canonical texts cannot be taken as evidence for the period before the fifth century A.D.:[15]

> We know, and have known for some time, that the Pāli canon as we have it – and it is generally conceded to be our oldest source – cannot be taken back further than the last quarter of the first century B.C.E, the date of the Alu-vihāra redaction, the earliest redaction that we can have

[11] Dīp XX.20-21, Mhv XXXIII.100-01; Collins 1997: 97.
[12] For a detailed study of this evidence, see sections 5.1-5.2.
[13] Schopen 1997: 3.
[14] Schopen 1997: 3.
[15] Schopen 1997: 23-24.

> some knowledge of, and that – for a critical history – it can serve, at the very most, only as a source for the Buddhism of this period. But we also know that even this is problematic since, as Malalasekera has pointed out: "…how far the *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries reduced to writing at Alu-vihāra resembled them as they have come down to us now, no one can say." In fact, it is not until the time of the commentaries of Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, and others – that is to say, the fifth to sixth centuries C.E. – that we can know anything definite about the actual contents of this canon.

Schopen believes that the discipline of Buddhist studies should be transformed into a branch of the archaeology of religions. This is more satisfactory not only because archaeological and epigraphical sources can usually be dated with some confidence, but also, according to Schopen, because they tell us what actually happened as opposed to the fictions invented by the composers of the texts.

This, then, sums up what we can call the modern sceptical approach to the study of Indian Buddhism. This approach seems to have become the mainstream view, if the *Encyclopedia of Religion* is anything to go by. Under the heading "Buddhism in India," the following entry is found:[16]

> Unfortunately, we do not possess reliable sources for most of the history of Buddhism in its homeland; in particular, we have precious little to rely on for its early history. Textual sources are late, dating at the very least five hundred years after the death of the Buddha.

There are certainly advantages to this approach. In particular, archaeological and epigraphical evidence is nowadays studied in greater detail, whereas in the past it tended to be neglected. But it is unfortunate that most of its presuppositions have not been critically examined. The most important presuppositions are that early Buddhist literature is normative and undatable, and that the archaeological and epigraphical sources are descriptive and datable. To some extent these presuppositions are common-sensical: religious literature is quite often normative and based on manuscript (or oral) lineages which disappear into the distant past. There is less room for doubt with archaeological and epigraphical evidence, on the other hand, for it is quite literally written in stone. But the truth of the matter is far more complex than it first appears.

[16] ER II/351b.

In this article I will examine some of the presuppositions of the modern sceptical approach to Buddhist studies, in the hope that an increased methodological clarity will further academic progress. As the title shows, I am particularly concerned with the historical authenticity of early Buddhist literature, and most of what follows will explore this issue in various ways. First of all, however, I will examine the sceptical presuppositions underlying the use of archaeological and epigraphical evidence. Not only will this reveal the true worth of archaeological and epigraphical sources, but it will also give a preliminary indication of the value of literary evidence.

3. THE HISTORICAL WORTH OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND EPIGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

As we have seen, Schopen thinks that the epigraphical and archaeological sources tell us what Buddhists "actually did":

> [The epigraphical evidence] tells 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.[17]
> [The Archaeology of Religions] would have been preoccupied *not* with what small, literate, almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups wrote, but rather, with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived.[18]

There are at least two problems with these statements. Firstly, although the archaeological evidence may give some indication of "what a fairly large number of Indian Buddhists actually did," the epigraphical evidence does not. And secondly, Schopen's method is suspect: he assumes a dichotomy between normative literary evidence and descriptive epigraphical and archaeological evidence, and then uses the dichotomy to show that only the latter is historically valuable.

The first point is relatively straightforward. The archaeological sources may indeed be evidence for a large proportion of the ancient

[17] Schopen 1997: 56. Schopen also comments (1997 p.71 n.50): "We do know, however, that from the very beginning of our actual epigraphical evidence (Bhārhut, Sāñcī, etc.), a large number of monks were doing exactly what the data indicate they were doing at Ajaṇṭā."

[18] Schopen 1997: 114.

Buddhist *saṅgha*, but the inscriptions number just over two thousand, which is evidence, surely, for a small minority of the *saṅgha*. If we also consider the fact that the archaeological sources tell us very little about Buddhist thought and practice without the inscriptions, it seems that archaeology and epigraphy do not get us very far. The canonical literature, on the other hand, is rich in its diversity and represents the beliefs and practices of rather more than a few thousand Buddhists.[19] The texts, it seems, are the more informative source. For example, Schopen notes that two inscriptions at Mathurā record the donations of monks who are called *prāhaṇīka-s*, 'practisers of meditation'.[20] But without consulting the evidence of the Pāli canon for the word *padhāna* or the Buddhist Sanskrit evidence for the word *pradhāna/prahāṇa*, we would have no idea what the term signified for the two monks, and why they used it. The texts, then, are our most important source, even if their historical worth is not known. They are indispensable not only for the understanding of Buddhist thought and practice in India, but also for the correct understanding of archaeological and epigraphical sources.[21]

My second objection to Schopen's estimation of the epigraphical and archaeological sources is more complex. In section six I will show that the texts contain descriptive evidence which is historically authentic.[22] This means that the dichotomy Schopen draws between normative literary evidence and descriptive epigraphical and archaeological evidence cannot be entirely true. Nevertheless, there is at least some truth in the claim that the literary evidence is normative. But how should we treat this fact? Schopen's method is peculiar: he claims that in cases where epigraphical evidence is cont-

[19] Some of the diverse beliefs and even disputes contained in the early Buddhist literature have been studied in La Vallée Poussin 1937, Bronkhorst 1985 and 1993, Gombrich 1996 (in particular, chapter 4: 'Retracing an Ancient Debate: How Insight Worsted Concentration in the Pali Canon'), Schmithausen 1981 and Wynne 2002.

[20] Schopen 1997: 31.

[21] The use of literary evidence alongside archaeological evidence has been argued for by Hallisey (1990: 208): "It will only be after we have learned to combine our interest in 'what really happened' with a sensitivity to the changing thought-worlds of the Theravāda that we will begin to discern the historical reality behind the literary and archaeological traces of ancient Buddhist monasticism."

[22] I have elsewhere tried to show that historical facts can be drawn even from normative religious literature (Wynne 2004: 116-118).

radicted by the literary evidence, it is the latter, being normative and unverifiable, which is historically suspect. But this is not entirely obvious. Such contradictions in the evidence certainly require an explanation, but it is simplistic to fall back on the contention that the literary sources are normative and therefore historically suspect. Another explanation for such contradictions, probably the most obvious of all, is that the texts are older than the archaeological and epigraphical sources. For example, if a belief or practice which appears in a canonical text is contradicted by an inscription from the first century A.D., this is probably because the texts have recorded the beliefs and practices from an earlier period. Schopen would not admit this argument, for it assumes the antiquity of early Buddhist literature. Nevertheless, I will argue in section 4.2 that this explains the apparent difference between textual and epigraphical evidence for the doctrine of merit transference.

There are other ways of explaining apparent conflicts between textual and epigraphical evidence. Arnold has pointed out that what appear to us to be contradictions between text and inscription may not necessarily be so: [23]

> 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.

In other words, the epigraphical and archaeological evidence shows us what some Indian Buddhists thought and did in certain contexts. But in other contexts, such as didactics or doctrinal debate, or even meditative practice, the same Buddhists may well have accepted views different from those which can be traced in the epigraphical and archaeological remains. It seems that the dichotomy between normative text and descriptive inscription is not as clear as Schopen claims; it is not a reliable criterion through which the historical authenticity of early Buddhist literature can be judged.

The texts, then, are indispensable to the study of Indian Buddhism, regardless of their historical authenticity. But what is their historical

[23] Arnold 2000: 621-22. See section 4.2 for my arguments that this is so in the case of epigraphical and textual references to the doctrine of merit transference.

worth? To assess this requires that we first of all assess the various sceptical arguments against the historical authenticity of early Buddhist literature.

4. THE SCEPTICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE HISTORICAL WORTH OF EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Various sceptical arguments have been used to show that early Buddhist literature is not historically authentic. Schopen has articulated two of the most important of these. First of all, he has used epigraphical evidence to cast doubt on the doctrinal history recorded in the texts. Secondly, and more importantly, he has claimed that the general method of higher criticism – the method which is often used to prove the antiquity of canonical texts – is inapplicable in the case of early Buddhist literature.

4.1. Argument Against One of the Methods of Higher Criticism

Schopen sums up this method of higher criticism as follows:[24]

> [I]f all known sectarian versions of a text or passage agree, that text or passage must be very old; that is, it must come from a presectarian stage of the tradition.

The alternative explanation of the agreement of "all known sectarian versions of a text or passage" is that the agreement was produced by the sharing of literature between different sects at a later date. It is this hypothesis which Schopen has attempted to prove by showing that versions of the story of the *stūpa* of Kāśyapa at Toyikā found in Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka and Theravādin texts are later than similar versions of the same story found in the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and in the Divyāvadāna.[25] The former group of texts claim that the Buddha manifested a *stūpa* momentarily, after which a *stūpa* was built (by monks) or appeared. The version of the story in the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and in the Divyāvadāna, however, is described by Schopen as follows: [26]

[24] Schopen 1997: 25-26.

[25] Schopen 1997: 28-29.

[26] Schopen 1997: 29. This comment shows that Schopen accepts at least some methods of higher criticism, although it is not clear what the significance of various sources lacking "subplots" could be, if he is right in assuming that the

> Firstly, it has none of the various subplots found in the other versions – a fairly sure sign of priority – and, second, it knows absolutely nothing about a *stūpa* at Toyikā or its construction.

Schopen's main argument is that the story in the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and the Divyāvadāna is earlier because it does not mention a *stūpa*:[27]

> This version, in short, reflects a tradition – apparently later revised – that only knew a form of the relic cult in which the *stūpa* did not yet have a part.

The claim that there was a form of the relic cult that did not include the *stūpa*, based on the evidence of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and Divyāvadāna, is peculiar. The narratives in these texts mention *caitya-s*, and although Schopen states that this term has nothing to do with *stūpa-s*, this is not at all clear. In his article 'The *Stūpa* Cult and the Extant Pāli *Vinaya*,'[28] he has in fact argued that in the Pāli literature the word *cetiya* is equivalent to *stūpa*.[29] It could easily be the case that the word has the same meaning in the relevant parts of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and the Divyāvadāna. But even if not, are we to imagine a form of relic worship without a *stūpa*?

If we take the literary and epigraphical sources seriously it is hard to imagine that this could ever have been the case. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, for example, states that the Buddha's relics were to be contained in a *stūpa*,[30] and this suggests that the *stūpa* go-

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Buddhist literature went through various phases of levelling in the sectarian period.

[27] Schopen 1997: 29.

[28] Schopen 1989.

[29] Schopen 1997: 89-91.

[30] D II.142.5ff: *…cātummahāpathe rañño cakkavattissa thūpaṃ karonti. evaṃ kho Ānanda rañño cakkavattissa sarīre paṭipajjanti. yathā kho Ānanda rañño cakkavattissa sarīre paṭipajjanti evaṃ tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjitabbaṃ. cātummahāpathe tathāgatassa thūpo kātabbo*. "…At the junction of four roads they make a *stūpa* for a Cakravartin. Just so, O Ānanda, do they conduct themselves with regard to the body of the Cakravartin. And as they conduct themselves with regard to the body of a Cakravartin, so should they conduct themselves with regard to the body of a *tathāgata*: a *stūpa* should be built for the *thathāgata* at the junction of four roads." – D II.164.28: *aham pi arahāmi bhagavato sarīrānaṃ bhāgaṃ, aham pi bhagavato sarīrānaṃ thūpañ ca mahañ ca karissāmi*. The Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* mentions *śarīrastūpa-s* in portions of text which correspond to these Pāli references: 36.7 and 50.5 correspond to D II.142.5. The compound *śarīrastūpa* also appears at 46.7, 50.16, 50.20, 51.9, 51.22.

es back to the very beginning of Buddhism. The *stūpa* was certainly a feature of Buddhism by the time of Aśoka, who records in his Nigālī Sāgar Pillar Edict that twenty years into his rule, he had the *thuba* of Konākamana doubled in size.[31] Moreover, Aśoka seems to have known a portion of a passage found in the canonical texts – in his Rummindei inscription he records that he visited Lumbini and worshipped there saying "Here the Blessed One was born" (*hida budhe jāte*);[32] this corresponds to the Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*[33] and the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D II.140.20: *idha tathāgato jāto*). This part of the Sanskrit and Pāli versions of the text, in which the Buddha outlines the four places which excite religious emotion in the "faithful son of a good family,"[34] is close to the parts which mention *stūpa-s*, and so it seems natural to conclude that *stūpa* worship was not only a part of Buddhism at this date, but also that it was mentioned in canonical Buddhist texts of the time. If this is true it means that Schopen's claim is that the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and the Divyāvadāna attest a period somewhat before Aśoka, and before the advent of *stūpa* worship in early Buddhism. This is hardly likely. It is more likely that the *stūpa* goes back to the very earliest period of Indian Buddhism. There are

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[31] (A) *Devānaṃpiyena Piyadasina lājina chodasavasā[bh]i[si]t[e]n[a], Budhasa Konākamanasa thube dutiyaṃ vaḍhite*. (see Hultzsch 1925: 165 and n.7).

[32] Hultzsch 1925: 164: (B).

[33] MPNS: 41.8 (p.388): *iha bhagavāñ jātaḥ*.

[34] D II.140.17: *cattār' imāni Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyāni saṃvejaṇīyāni ṭhānāni. katamāni cattāri? idha tathāgato jāto ti Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyaṃ saṃvejanīyaṃ ṭhānaṃ. idha tathāgatena anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisaṃbuddho ti Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyaṃ saṃvejanīyaṃ ṭhānaṃ. idha tathāgatena anuttaraṃ dhammacakkaṃ pavattitan ti Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyaṃ saṃvejanīyaṃ ṭhānaṃ. idha tathāgato anupādisesāya nibbānadhātuyā parinibbuto ti Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyaṃ saṃvejanīyaṃ ṭhānaṃ.*

"O Ānanda, there are four places which excite religious feelings [that] the faithful son of a good family ought to see. Which four? [Where one can say] 'Here the *tathāgata* was born,' O Ānanda, is a place which excites religious feelings [that] the faithful son of a good family ought to see; [Where one can say] 'Here the *tathāgata* awakened to the supreme awakening' …; [Where one can say] 'Here the *tathāgata* set in motion the unsurpassed wheel of *dhamma*' …; [Where one can say] 'Here the *tathāgata* attained the final Nirvana into the Nirvana-realm without a remainder of substratum' is a place which excites religious feelings [that] the faithful son of a good family ought to see."

no reasons for taking the versions of the story in the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and Divyāvadāna to be older than the versions in the Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka and Theravādin texts.

Furthermore, Schopen fails to mention that the Pāli version of the story of the *stūpa* of Kāśyapa is found in a commentary, the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*.[35] I will point out in section 4.3 that many stories received by the Theravādins from other Buddhist schools were placed in the commentaries, probably because the canon was already considered closed: the story of the *stūpa* of Kāśyapa is probably such a story. If so, Schopen's arguments seem to show that the Pāli canon was closed to material received from other sects. This means that whereas some of the early Buddhist sects periodically shared literature and changed their canonical material in the sectarian period, the Theravādins of Sri Lanka did not: they confined the material received from other sects to non-canonical books. Schopen seems to have proved, inadvertently, that the Pāli canon was relatively closed after its redaction at an early date. Moreover, it seems that another inadvertent proof of the antiquity of Pāli canon is given by Schopen in the very same article.

4.2. Argument Concerning the Doctrine of the Transference of Merit

Schopen has shown that the belief in the transference of merit was widespread in Buddhist India from the third century B.C. onwards.[36] The idea is recorded in a late Mauryan/early Śuṅga inscription from Pauni, a few inscriptions from third century B.C. Sri Lanka, a singular early inscription from Bhārhut, as well as a significant number of later Hīnayāna inscriptions from various parts of India. If the idea was a standard Buddhist belief in early times, even in Sri Lanka, and if the Suttapiṭaka was not finally closed until its recension in the fifth century A.D., then it is reasonable to suppose that it should be well attested in the Suttapiṭaka. But this is not the case – although much is said on the subject of meritorious activity, the idea of merit transference is found in only a few places in the four principle Nikāya-s.[37] How can we explain the fact that the

[35] This information is conveniently confined to footnote 30 (Schopen 1997: 28).

[36] Schopen 1997: 34-42.

[37] D II 88.28ff = Ud 89.20 = Vin I 229.35; A V.269-73. On these passages see Gombrich 1971: 267, 272. Also see A IV.64.4 and Thī 307-311.

Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka did not compose more texts which included the idea of merit transference? There can only be one answer – the texts were closed in an earlier period, when the belief was marginal in Buddhist circles. At the least, the fact that the ancient guardians of the Suttapiṭaka did not include texts on the transference of merit shows that they must have had some idea of canonical orthodoxy, and this in turn means that the canon must have been relatively fixed in very early times. By attempting to show that the canonical texts are not reliably old, and that we must turn to the epigraphic evidence to gain any idea about the historical reality of ancient Indian Buddhism, Schopen has actually shown that some collections of texts must indeed be old and contain evidence for the period before the inscriptions begin to appear.

Exactly the same fact emerges from Schopen's article 'The *Stūpa* Cult and the Extant Pāli Vinaya'. He attempted to show that because the Pāli canon has no rules regarding *stūpa-s*, it must have been altered "at a comparatively recent date", i.e. after the supposed recensions made in the first century B.C. and the fifth century A.D.[38] These arguments have been refuted by both Gombrich and Hallisey,[39] and it seems likely that the Pāli Vinaya was closed before the section on *stūpas* was composed and added to the other Vinayas. Gombrich notes:[40]

One does not have to posit that it received no further additions after the first century B.C., merely that the Pali tradition had left the mainstream and naturally failed to record later developments on the Indian mainland.

But because it seems that the Pāli tradition remained in contact with the Indian mainstream, I think it more likely that no further additions were made after the first century B.C.

4.3. A Provisional Date for the Closing of the Pāli Canon

The points Schopen makes about the post-canonical sharing of literature and the transference of merit, if correctly interpreted,

[38] Schopen 1997: 91.
[39] Gombrich 1990: 141-142 Hallisey 1990: 205-206.
[40] Gombrich 1990: 143.

suggest that the Pāli canon was relatively fixed from at least the first century B.C. onwards. This is despite the fact that the Pāli tradition remained in contact with other Buddhist sects in India. According to Norman, "some of the best known stories in Buddhism … are known in the Theravādin tradition only in the commentaries, although they are found in texts which are regarded as canonical in other traditions."[41] Such stories must have reached Sri Lanka before Buddhaghosa, for he includes them in his commentaries. Norman thinks that they were not inserted into the canon because "at least the Vinaya- and Sutta-piṭaka had been closed at an earlier date."[42] Norman has also pointed out that certain Pāli works for which a North Indian origin is supposed, such as the *Milindapañha*, the *Peṭakopadesa* and the *Nettipakaraṇa*, are highly respected by the commentators but are not given canonical status by them. They even contain "a number of verses and other utterances ascribed to the Buddha and various eminent theras, which are not found in the canon… There was no attempt made to add such verses to the canon, even though it would have been a simple matter to insert them into the Dhammapada or the Theragāthā."[43] The point that the Pāli tradition received literature from other sects but excluded it from the canon had been made already by Oldenberg in 1879 (p. xlviii):[44]

> These additions are by no means altogether unknown to the Singhalese church, but they have been there placed in the Aṭṭhakathās, so that the text of the Tipiṭaka, as preserved in Ceylon, has remained free from them.

If we remind ourselves of Norman's point that the Pāli canon contains no clear traces of Sinhalese Prakrit, it seems quite likely that the Suttapiṭaka was not substantially altered after it was written down in the first century B.C. This means that it can be taken as a record of Buddhist thought and practice from the time of the Buddha (c. 484-404 B.C.) until the first century B.C. at the latest .[45] This is

[41] Norman 1997: 140.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] See also Rhys Davids (1903: 175): "It would seem, then, that any change that may have been made in these North Indian books after they had been brought to Ceylon must have been insignificant."
[45] Accepting Richard Gombrich's dating of the Buddha: "[T]he Buddha died 136 years before Aśoka's inauguration, which means in 404 B.C." (1992: 246). Gombrich estimates the margin of error to be seven years before to five years after

significantly older than the sceptics are willing to acknowledge, but the *terminus ante quem* can be pushed back even further; it depends upon the date at which the Pāli texts reached Sri Lanka, i.e. the beginning of sectarian formation within a branch of the old Sthaviras.

5. DATING THE SECTARIAN PERIOD AND THE EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE

According to Schopen "we do not actually know when the sectarian period began."[46] To support this view he cites Bareau's work which points out that the Buddhist sects give different dates for the schisms.[47] But he does not mention Erich Frauwallner's *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*. Frauwallner used a mixture of epigraphical and literary sources to argue that some of the Sthavira sects originated from the missions said to have taken place in the reign of Aśoka, c.250 B.C.

5.1. Frauwallner's Theory

Frauwallner's starting point was the information contained in the Sinhalese chronicles (and the *Samantapāsādikā*) concerning a series of Buddhist missions sent to different parts of India, and neighbouring kingdoms, by Moggaliputta in the reign of Aśoka. He summed up the evidence from chapter eight of the *Dīpavaṃsa* as follows:[48]

1. Majjhantika went to Gandhāra (and Kaśmīra),
2. Mahādeva went to the Mahisa country,
3. Rakkhita went to Vanavāsa,
4. Yonakadhammarakkhita went to Aparantaka,
5. Mahādhammarakkhita went to Mahāraṭṭha,
6. Mahārakkhita went to the Yonaka country,

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this date, i.e. 411-399 B.C. (p.244). He also notes that uncertainty about the date of Aśoka widens the margin of error, making the upper limit 422 B.C. K.R. Norman comments: "If we take an average, then the date is c.411 ± 11 B.C.E." (Norman 1999: 467).

[46] Schopen 1997: 26.

[47] Schopen 1997: 26 on Bareau 1955.

[48] Frauwallner (1956: 13-14), on Dīp VIII, Mhv XII, Sam 15, 19-69, 63. Frauwallner's interpretation of this evidence it is discussed by Brekke (1998: 24).

7. Kassapagotta, Majjhima, Durabhissara (Dundubhissara), Sahadeva and Mūlakadeva (Alakadeva/Ālakadeva/Alakavadeva) went to the Himavanta,
8. Soṇa (Sonaka) and Uttara went to Suvaṇṇabhūmi,
9. Mahinda, Iṭṭhiya (Iddhiya), Uttiya, Bhaddasāla and Sambala went to Laṅkā (Tambapaṇṇi).

Norman has pointed out that the Sinhalese chronicles contain other accounts of the Buddhist missions, and reckons "it is doubtful that the *thera* missions were all sent out at the same time by Moggaliputta, as the accounts imply."[49] This is the most likely explanation. The account at Dīp VIII appears to be a summary which has preserved the most important details: the historical facts, it seems, were boiled down to a few important individuals and a single missionary event. If, for example, Mogalliputta was an important *thera* at the time of the missions, and was involved in their organisation, a summary account such as that found at Dīp VIII is hardly surprising. Such a synoptic account would have been easier to remember.[50]

The historicity of the missions seems to be confirmed by some inscriptions from the ancient Buddhist centre of Vidiśā. Willis has shown that the names of five Hemavata *bhikkhus*, which appear on two different reliquaries, identify with, or are at least closely related to, the names of the *bhikkhus* who are said to have travelled to the Himavanta in the chronicles.[51] The *bhikkhus* named in the reliquaries from Vidiśā are: Majjhima Kosiṇiputa, Kotīputa Kāsapagota, Ālābagira/Āpa(Āla)gira, Kosikīputa, Gotiputa Dudubhisara-dāyāda. Willis shows that the name Ālābagira/Āpa(Āla)gira identifies with Mūlakadeva/Alakadeva etc., and that Kosikīputa is probably the metronym of Sahadeva; the explanation for the presence of the relics of Gotiputa Dudubhisara-dāyāda rather than those of Dudubhisara is

[49] Norman 2004: 78.

[50] A synoptic account is only to be expected in an oral tradition. Some of the other accounts are discussed below in section 5.2.

[51] Willis 2001: 222-23. According to Frauwallner (1956: 14), these reliquaries contain the remains of the Hemavata masters Dudubhisara, Majhima and Kāssapagotta, names which he identified with the missionaries who travelled to the Himavanta according to the chronicles. Willis (2001: 226 n.26) pointed out that Frauwallner misread this evidence by mistaking the relics of Gotiputa, heir of Dudubhisara, for Dudubhisara himself, but he has also shown a more fundamental correspondence.

that the latter were not available.[52] It seems that the chroniclers and those responsible for the reliquaries had knowledge of the same group of *bhikkhus*. Frauwallner assumed that the inscriptions prove the historical authenticity of the chronicles' account of the missions.[53] But Norman has argued that the relic caskets do not prove this at all: according to him, they only show that the same Hemavata masters were known in Sri Lanka and Vidiśā, but not that they were missionaries.[54] Evidence in the Vinayapiṭaka suggests otherwise, however.

In chapter five of the *Mahāvagga*, the Buddha allows full monastic ordination (*upasampadā*) in outlying regions to be conferred by a group of five *bhikkhus*.[55] This suggests that Buddhist missions to distant lands would have consisted of groups of five. The grouping together of relics of five *bhikkhus* is therefore significant: it suggests that the *bhikkhus* had originally been missionaries or at least closely connected to a missionary. The inscriptions on the relic caskets from Vidiśā suggest, then, that the Hemavata *bhikkhus* were missionaries from Vidiśā, regardless of the evidence in the Sinhalese chronicles. The chronicles also record that Mahinda's mother was from Vidiśā,

[52] Willis 2001: 222-223. The suffix *–deva* is an optional appendage to Indian names, and can be removed from the name of Alaka/Ālaka/Alakava-deva; the suffix *–ka* can also be removed for the same reason. This leaves us with the name Ala, Āla or Ālava. The latter can easily be identified with the Ālāba- from the inscription Ālāba-gira on the reliquary found at Sonāri *stūpa* two. The Pāli form Mūlaka-deva is to be explained as a coruption of Ālaka-deva: the Gupta and post-Gupta script symbols for 'ā' and 'mū' are similar enough to have been confused. As for the difference between the relic name Kosikīputa and the Pāli Sahadeva, Willis points out that the reliquaries include the metronym Kotīputa for Kāsapagota, a metronym which is not recorded in the Pāli chronicles. It is likely that the chroniclers did not preserve metronyms, hence the name Sahadeva was preserved rather than the metronym Kosikīputa.

[53] Frauwallner (1956: 14-15): "The historicity of this mission [to the Himavanta] is thus confirmed by epigraphic evidence of an early date. At the same time this throws a favourable light on the data of the other missions."

[54] Norman (2004: 77): "The casket relics at Bhīlsā prove nothing more than the tradition the Dīpavaṃsa was following agrees that the three named individuals were connected to the Himālaya school."

[55] Vin I.197.17 (= *Mahāvagga* V.13.11): *anujānāmi bhikkhave sabbapaccantimesu janapdesu vinayadharapañcamena gaṇena upasampadaṃ* "I allow, O *bhikkhus*, ordination in all bordering countries (to be conferred) by a group whose fifth member is a Vinaya expert." The missions to Laṅkā (Mhv XII.8) and the Himavanta were comprised of five *bhikkhus* because of this rule, although Dīp XI.40 states that the mission of Mahinda consisted of a group of seven; see n.81. It is likely that the other missions had the same number of monks.

and that he stayed there before journeying to Laṅkā.[56] If we put the various pieces of evidence together, we can suppose that the departure point of the missions was Vidiśā, and that the remains of those *bhikkhus* who left for the Himavanta were returned thence some time after their death. [57]

5.2 Rock Edict XIII and the Aśokan Missions

Frauwallner equated this epigraphic and literary evidence with evidence from Aśoka's thirteenth Rock Inscription: [58]

[56] Dīp XII.35ff, Mhv XIII.18-20.

[57] See Frauwallner 1956: 18. According to Willis, the arrival of these relics coincided with a period of renewed Buddhist activity at Vidiśā, marked by the enlargement of old *stūpas*, the building of new ones and the building of new monasteries. He says (2001: 225): "The reinvigoration of Sānchī and neighbouring sites took place with the arrival of the Hemavata school." The key figure in the period of revival appears to have been the Hemavata master Gotiputa, the disciple of Dundubhissara. Willis thinks that Gotiputa hailed from "one of the main Buddhist centres in the Gangetic plain." (Willis 2001: 226). But the evidence for this assumption – a Kuṣāna period inscription from Saṅkīsā reading *ayana hemavatana* – is weak; as Cousins has pointsed out (2001: 150-51), "inscriptions [in Magadha] cannot be used as evidence for the presence of a given school in Māgadha as a whole." The same applies for inscriptions anywhere in central North India near any major Buddhist centre, such as that found at Saṅkīsā. It seems to me that the correct answer is likely to be the simplest – because Gotiputa was a Hemavata, he probably came from the Himavant. Willis (2001: 226 n.26) also disagrees with Frauwallner's assumption (1956: 18f.) that the relics of the Hemavata missionaries were returned to their home (Vidiśā) after they died. This is because he thinks that the relics did not appear in the Vidiśā area until the middle of the second century B.C., i.e. long after the missions took place. But even if Willis is correct in thinking that the relics were returned long after the missions, it does not refute Frauwallner's thesis that the relics appeared in Vidiśā because the five missionaries came from there. In fact I agree with Frauwallner that this is the most likely answer for their appearance in Vidiśā, even if they were not transferred there immediately.

[58] Norman's translation (2004: 69-70) of RE XIII, Kālsī (Hultzsch 1925: 46-48), following Hultzsch's paragraph letters: [P] *iyaṃ cu mu... devānaṃpiyaṣā ye dhaṇmavijaye* [Q] *ṣe ca punā ladhe devānaṃpi... ca ṣaveṣu ca ateṣu a ṣaṣu pi yojanaṣateṣu ata Aṃtioge nāma yonalā... palaṃ cā tenā Aṃtiyogenā catāli* 4 *lajāne Tulamaye nāma Aṃtekine nāma Makā nāma Alikyaṣudale nāma nicaṃ coḍapaṃḍiyā avaṃ Taṃbapaṇṇiyā hevam evā* [R] *hevam evā hidā lājaviśavaṣi yonakaṃbojeṣu nābhakanābhapaṃtiṣu bhojapitinikyeṣu adhapāladeṣu ṣavatā devānaṃpiyaṣā dhaṇmānuṣathi anuvataṃti* [S] *yata pi dutā devānaṃpiyaṣā no yaṃti te pi sutu devānaṃpiyasa dhaṃmavutaṃ vidhanaṃ dhaṃmanusathi dhaṇmaṃ anividhiyaṃti anividhiyisaṃti cā.*

> [P] But this [is thought to be the best conquest] by His Majesty, namely the conquest by morality.
> [Q] And this (conquest) has been won repeatedly by His Majesty both [here] and among all (his) borderers, even as far as (the distance of) 600 yojanas, where the Yona king Antiyoga [Antiochus] (is ruling), and beyond this Antiyoga, (where) four – 4 – kings (are ruling), (namely the king) named Tulamaya [Ptolemy], the king named Antekina [Antigonus], (the king) named Makā [Magas], and the king named Alikyaṣudala [Alexander], (and) likewise constantly, (where) the Coḍas and Pāṇḍyas are ruling, as far as Tambapaṇṇi.
> [R] Likewise here in the king's territory, among the Yonas and Kambojas, among the Nābhakas and Nabhapaṅktis, among the Bhojas and Pitinikyas, among the Andhras and Pāladas, everywhere (people) are conforming to His Majesty's instruction in morality.
> [S] Even those to whom His Majesty's envoys do not go, having heard of His Majesty's duties of morality, the ordinances, (and) the instruction in morality, are conforming to morality and will conform to (it).

According to Frauwallner the areas mentioned in this edict correspond to the areas of missionary activity mentioned in the Pāli chronicles.[59] Both sources, according to him, mention the North-West, West and South but omit the East, and he commented "[t]his is certainly no freak chance." He concluded that the Buddhist missions mentioned in the Sinhalese chronicles are identical to the Aśokan missions mentioned in RE XIII.[60] Lamotte has shown at least a superficial agreement between the places mentioned in both sources,[61] but Gombrich is probably correct in commenting: "The geographical identifications are too uncertain to help us."[62] With the geographical identifications uncertain, Lamotte was sceptical of the notion that there was a single missionary effort in Aśokan times. He argued that the Buddhists were natural missionaries and would have

[59] Frauwallner 1956: 15-17.
[60] Frauwallner (1956: 17): "[W]e feel therefore justified in seeking in the data of the inscriptions of Aśoka a confirmation of the missions' account of the Singhalese chronicles."
[61] See Lamotte's table (1988: 302)
[62] Gombrich 1988: 135.

spread Buddhism throughout India from the beginning.[63] Thus he concluded his study of the early Buddhist missions by stating: "Whatever might have been said, Aśoka was not directly involved in Buddhist propaganda."[64] Gombrich, on the other hand, agrees with Frauwallner and notes:[65]

> While Lamotte is right to point out that some of the areas visited, notably Kashmir, had Buddhists already, that does not disprove that missions could not be sent there. The chroniclers, as so often happens, had no interest in recording a gradual and undramatic process, and allowed history to crystallize into clear-cut episodes which could be endowed with edifying overtones; but this over-simplification does not prove that clear-cut events never occurred.

Supporting the opinions of Frauwallner and Gombrich is the epigraphical record. Cousins (2001: 148-51) has shown that references to the related Vibhajjavādin sects in inscriptions from the first few centuries C.E. are widespread.[66] On the other hand, the epigraphic record shows that the other sects were distributed randomly across India.[67] This is exactly what is to be expected if there was a gradual diffusion of Buddhism throughout India, as well as a missionary effort by one ancient monastic community. Cousins comments on the tradition of the Buddhist missions in Aśoka's time as follows:[68]

> It seems clear that whatever the traditions about these [missions] may or may not tell us about events in the third or second century BCE, they do certainly correspond to what we know of the geographical spread of the schools early in the first millennium CE. They must then have *some* historical basis. Vibhajjavādins really were the school predominant in Ceylon and Gandhāra at an early date, as well as being present, if not predominant, in other parts of Central Asia, China, South India and South-East Asia by around the turn of the third century CE at the latest. No other school has a comparable spread at this date.

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[63] Lamotte 1988: 297.

[64] Lamotte 1988: 308.

[65] Gombrich 1988: 135.

[66] The Vibhajjavādins made up a subset of the ancient Sthaviras: according to sectarian lists of Samṃatīya and Mahāsāṅghika origin, the philosophical orientation of Theravādins of Sri Lanka, as well as the Mahīśāsakas, the Dharmaguptakas and Kassapīyas (the last two being from the North-West) was *vibhajyavāda* (Lamotte 1988: 535-36).

[67] Cousins 2001: 148-51.

[68] Cousins 2001: 169.

The evidence for a number of related Sthavira missions taking place in the third century B.C. is very good.[69] But were the missions related to Aśoka? In spite of Lamotte's doubts I think that RE XIII shows that this was probably the case. There are, of course, serious objections to a simple equation of the evidence from the Sinhalese chronicles and RE XIII. Norman has pointed out the most important of these: the *dhammas* are different, as are the senders and those who were sent; RE XIII records peoples and kings, whereas the Sinhalese chronicles record places; and "[t]he geographical areas to which the two missions were sent barely overlap."[70] The first few of these differences may simply express a difference of perspective: perhaps Aśoka and the Buddhist chroniclers mentioned only the facts relevant to them, and from their point of view. But the last objection is more difficult to explain away: the Sinhalese sources only mention Kaśmīra, Gandhāra and the Yonaka country in the North-West, whereas RE XIII mentions Greek kings further afield than this. How can both sources be talking about the same event?

The obvious answer to this is that they are not talking about the same event. But perhaps we are wrong to view the matter in terms of a singular event. I pointed out earlier that the account of the missions in the Sinhalese chronicles is synoptic. The same is probably true of RE XIII. Although Norman reads RE XIII literally, as if it is a record of a single historic event (he speaks of Aśoka's "*dūta*-missions" as if they were part of a single, co-ordinated expedition), it is unlikely that it is any such document. It is really a panegyric boasting that 'Aśoka's' *dhaṃma* had spread far beyond the interior of his own kingdom. From this perspective a lack of attention to detail is hardly

[69] Frauwallner thought that the same missionary activity led to the formation of the Sarvāstivādins as well as other Vibhajjavādin sects in the North-West (1956: 22): "The mission of Kassapagotta, Majjhima and Dundubhissara gave origin to the Haimavata and Kāśyapīya. The mission of Majjhantika led to the rise of the Sarvāstivādin. The Dharmaguptaka school is perhaps issued from the mission of Yonaka-Dhammarakkhita."). Thus he believed that the Sarvāstivādins were produced by a missionary effort that otherwise seems to have produced only Vibhajjavādin sects. This idea is based on the notion that the formation of monastic communities is different from the formation of distinct schools of thought: "From the first we have stressed the principle that the foundation of communities and the rise of dogmatic schools are two quite separate things."

[70] Norman 2004: 79. Differences of date, as Norman has pointed out, matter very little Norman 2004: 77.

surprising: it is quite likely that the places in question were mentioned without much care. Indeed, the border regions of Aśoka's kingdom mentioned in RE XIII differ slightly from those mentioned in RE II and V, although it is hardly likely that this means any difference in country or people.[71] The point of RE XIII is that Aśoka spread 'his' *dhaṃma* to the border peoples and beyond, and for this there is no need for the historical accuracy which we expect. It is quite possible that Aśoka got carried away and mentioned kingdoms well beyond his influence.

This means, of course, that the differences between RE XIII and the Sinhalese chronicles are of relatively little importance: historical accuracy is inevitably obscured in synoptic accounts. To prove that the two sources refer to the same events, it is not an obvious coincidence of evidence which is needed. Instead, we must read in between the lines and deduce some of the historical facts behind the two sources. For this purpose it is unfortunate that RE XIII is astonishingly short on detail. But perhaps this lack of detail is revealing. The most important deficiency is the lack of direct evidence about the agents responsible for the spread of *dhaṃma*. The *dhaṃma-mahāmattas* – the most likely agents of a 'Dharma victory' – are not mentioned. This is especially noteworthy since when they are mentioned elsewhere, e.g. RE V, they are located in some of the same border countries mentioned in RE XIII.[72] Nor does RE XIII mention the *yuktas*, *lājukas* and *pradeśikas*, although in RE III Aśoka orders these officials to give the people instruction in his *dhaṃma*. It seems that the Dharma victory' was not initiated by any of the expected royal officials. We can, however, infer who the agents were from the statement made by Aśoka in section [S] of RE XIII: "Even to those whom His Majesty's envoys (*dutā*) do not go…" The 'Dharma victory' must have been achieved by Aśokan envoys, i.e. the *dūta-s* rather than the *dhaṃma-mahāmattas*.[73]

[71] See RE II (A) and RE V (J) (following Hultzsch's paragraph letters). For the Kālsī version of these edicts, see Hultzsch (1925: 28, 32).

[72] See RE V (J).

[73] Frauwallner also recognised that the agents of the Aśokan missions were *dūtas* (1956: 15 n.1). Tieken (2002: 23) notes that the Rock Edicts were addressed to people living in areas "outside the emperor's direct control. While these people, unlike those addressed in the Pillar Edicts, could not be regularly visited by him, let alone be conquered, they could be brought over by persuasion. One of the means of achieving this would have been to take care that they at least heard of royal policy and, for instance, the way in which the subjects and officials are instructed. Note in this connection RE XIII." It seems to me that this is an incorrect estimation of RE XIII[S]. This part of the edict does not show that Aśoka

This is quite strange. It suggests that the 'Dharma victory' was achieved by court envoys rather than by those who were directly involved in the implementation of Aśoka's *dhaṇṃma*. Because of this peculiarity, Guruge has suggested that the *dūtas* in RE XIII were envoys of *dhaṇṃma* rather than official court envoys.[74] And Norman has even claimed, because of the similarity between the areas mentioned in RE V and RE XIII, that the missionaries were in fact *dhaṇṃma-mahāmattas*.[75] However, Norman is incorrect to identify *dūtas* with Aśoka's *dhaṇṃma-mahāmattas* simply because some of the areas coincide in RE V and RE XIII. The 'Dharma ministers' seem to have been confined to Aśoka's kingdom, whereas RE XIII claims that the 'Dharma victory' was achieved in areas beyond Aśoka's rule.[76] And against Guruge's suggestion is the complete silence about any such 'Dharma envoys' in the rest of Aśoka's edicts. Arguments from silence are never totally convincing, but the absence of details about Aśoka's *dhaṇṃma* policies is significant: the entire subject matter of the Aśokan edicts is *dhaṇṃma*, and if Aśoka had such officials, it is hardly likely that he would have failed to mention them. We can tentatively conclude that there were no such officials. So how did mere envoys (*dūtas*) bring about a 'Dharma-victory'? It is possible that the answer is contained in the Sinhalese chronicles, for they state that the court envoys sent by Aśoka to Laṅkā were related to the arrival of Buddhism there. Perhaps, then, when Aśoka claimed his 'Dharma victory,' achieved through his

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intended to convert people living in areas beyond his control to his 'Dharma instruction' through the erection of Rock Edicts. Tieken seems to have taken the statement "where my envoys do not go" to refer to the areas beyond Aśoka's control where the envoys did not travel, and concluded that Aśoka erected edicts in these places in order to convert the to his ideas. But the whole of RE XIII shows that the opposite is true – it shows that the *dȕta-s* travelled to bordering countries and beyond, in order to spread *dhaṇṃma*, whereas where they did not go must refer to areas in Aśoka's kingdom under his direct control.

[74] Guruge 1987: 243.

[75] Norman 2004: 70, 79 (2).

[76] See RE V, RE XII and PE VII. RE V (N) makes this clear: …*sav[a]tā v[i]jitas[i] mamā [dha]ṇṃa-yutasi viyāpaṭā te dhaṇṃmam[a]hām[a]tā*. "These *Mahāmātras* of morality are occupied everywhere in my dominions with those who are devoted to morality…" (Hultzsch's translation, 1925: 34). It would have been beyond the jurisdiction of a visitor to another kingdom to carry out some of the duties of a *mahāmatta*; see especially RE V (K-L).

dūta-s, he was referring to the fact that the *dūtas* facilitated the spread of Buddhism. Such a scenario is suggested in chapter XI of the Mahāvaṃsa:[77]

> 33. The Lord of Men [Aśoka], having given a palm-leaf message (*paṇṇākāraṃ*) at the appropriate time for his companion [Devānaṃpiyatissa], sent envoys (*dūte*) and this palm-leaf message concerning the true doctrine (*saddhammapaṇṇākāraṃ*), [which said:]
> 34. "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, I have indicated that I am a lay disciple in the instruction of the Son of the Sakya-s.
> 35. "You too, O Best of Men, having appeased your mind with faith, should take refuge in these supreme jewels."
> 36. Saying: "Carry out the consecration of my companion once more," and having honoured his friend's ministers, he dispatched [them].

There is no mention of Buddhist monks and nuns in the imperial embassy of *dūta-s*, but Buddhists must have been involved if there were contacts such as this between Aśoka and his neighbours. The same point is made more explicitly in other similar accounts in the Dīpavaṃsa.[78] Each account describes how Mahinda arrived in Laṅkā soon after the envoys, without any mention of Moggaliputta; they imply that the Aśokan envoys paved the way for the Buddhist monks who soon followed. The most elaborate account (Dīp XII.1ff) describes how Aśoka sent gifts and a request that Devānaṃpiya of Laṅkā should have faith in the triple jewel: after this, the *thera-s* of the Asokārāma requested that Mahinda establish the faith in Laṅkā:[79]

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[77] Mhv XI.33-36: *datvā kāle sahāyassa paṇṇākāraṃ narissaro/ dūte pāhesi saddhammapaṇṇākāraṃ imaṃ pi ca // "ahaṃ buddhaṃ ca dhammaṃ ca saṅghaṃ ca saraṇaṃ gato/ upāsakattaṃ vedesiṃ sakyaputtassa sāsane // tvam p' imāni ratanāni uttamāni naruttama/ cittam pasādayitvāna saddhāya saraṇaṃ bhaja" // "karotha me sahāyassa abhisekaṃ puno" iti/ vatvā sahāyāmacce te sakkaritvā ca pesayi //*

[78] As pointed out in section 5.1, it seems that the author of the Sinhalese chronicles, as well as Buddhaghosa, had various sources available to them, sources which recorded different versions of the mission to Sri Lanka. See Norman 1983: 118.

[79] Dīp XII.5-9:*ahaṃ buddhañ ca dhammañ ca saṃghañ ca saraṇaṃ gato/ upāsakattaṃ desemi Sakyaputtassa sāsane// imesu tisu vatthesu uttame jinasāsane/ tvam pi cittaṃ pasādehi saraṇaṃ upehi satthuno// imaṃ sambhāvanaṃ katvā Asokadhammo mahāyāso/ pāhesi Devānaṃpiyassa gatadūtena te saha// Asokārāme pavare bahū therā mahiddhikā/ Laṅkātalānukampāya Mahindaṃ etad abravuṃ // samayo Laṅkādīpamhi patiṭṭhāpetu sāsanaṃ/ gacchatu tvaṃ mahāpuñña pasāda dīpalañjakaṃ //*

5. [Aśoka sent the following message:] "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, I have made it known that I am a lay supporter in the Dispensation of the Sakyaputta.
6. You too should appease your mind in these three things, in the supreme Dispensation of the Teacher. Take refuge in the Teacher."
7. The most illustrious Asokadhamma, making this honour [to Devānampiya], sent [messengers] to Devānampiya [of Laṅkā]; when they had departed,
8. At the excellent Asokārāma many *theras* of great magical power spoke this to Mahinda, out of compassion for the country of Laṅkā:
9. "Now is the time to establish the Dispensation in the island of Laṅkā. Go, O one of great merit, convert Laṅkā."

Further evidence is found in the Sinhalese Chronicles: at Dīp XI.35-40 and Dīp XVII.87-88 it says that Mahinda arrived in Laṅkā soon after the Aśokan envoys, without any mention of Moggaliputta.[80] It

[80] Dīp XI.35-40: *buddho dakkhiṇeyyān' aggo dhammo aggo virāginaṃ/ saṃgho ca puññakkhettaggo tīṇi aggā sadevake// imañ cāhaṃ namassāmi uttamatthāya khattiyo// pañca māse vasitvāna te dūtā caturā janā/ ādāya te paṇṇākāraṃ Asokadhammena pesitaṃ// visākhamāse dvādasapakkhe Jambudīpā idhāgatā/ abhisekaṃ saparivāraṃ Asokadhammena pesitaṃ// dutiyaṃ abhisiñcittha rājānaṃ Devānampiyam/ abhisitto dutiyābhiseko visākhamāse uposathe// tayo māse atikkamma jeṭṭhamāse uposathe/ Mahindo sattamo hutvā Jambudīpā idhāgato//*

"The Buddha is the foremost among those worthy of gifts, the Dhamma is foremost of those who are without passion. The Saṅgha is the foremost field of merit; [these are the] three foremost [things] in [this world] along with its gods (35). I pay homage to these, for the sake of the highest bliss." (36). Those four messengers, having waited five months [in Pāṭaliputta], took the palm leaf message sent by Asokadhamma (37). In the month of Visākha, on the twelfth day of the fortnight, they arrived here [in Laṅkā] from Jambudīpa. The requisites for the coronation having been sent by Asokadhamma, (38) they coronated King Devānampiya for the second time, [who] was coronated for the second time on the Uposatha day in the month of Visākha (39). When three months had passed, on the Uposatha day of the month of Jeṭṭha, Mahinda along with his six companions arrived here [in Laṅkā] from Jambudīpa (40).

Dīp XVII.87-88: *Laṅkābhisekatisso ca Asokadhammassa pesito/ abhisitto dutiyābhisekena Tambapaṇṇimhi issaro// dutiyābhisittaṃ Tissaṃ atikkami tiṃsa rattiyo/ Mahindo gaṇapāmokkho Jambudīpā idhāgato//*

"The requirements for the coronation as [king] of Laṅkā having been sent by Asokadhamma, the Lord was coronated with a second coronation in Tambapaṇṇi (87). When thirty nights had passed since the coronation of Tissa, Mahinda, the foremost of the group, arrived here [in Laṅkā] from Jambudīpa (88)."

is not far fetched to equate Aśoka's claim that he sent *dūtas* to Taṃbapaṇṇi (among other places), and achieved a 'Dharma victory' there, with the Sinhalese chronicles' claim that Buddhist missionaries arrived with or soon after the Aśokan *dūtas*. It is possible, then, that RE XIII and the chronicles do indeed look at the same events from different perspectives. This is not easy to see if both sources are read as records of singular, epoch-making events. But if both are read as synoptic accounts which contain a core of historical truth, it is quite possible that they refer to the same events. The different versions of the Buddhist missions found in the Sinhalese sources, and the eliptical nature of RE XIII, make it more or less impossible to be certain about the matter. But it appears that claims such as that of Norman are exaggerated, if not wrong.[81] At the least, it is safe to assume the following: related Buddhist groups spread to Sri Lanka, north-western India and elsewhere in the Aśokan period; a record of this is found in the reliquaries from Vidiśā; it is likely that these missions were related to Aśoka's court envoys; and it is probable that a reference to this is found in RE XIII.

The evidence suggests that the early portions of the Pāli canon are pre-Aśokan, and this must mean that they of considerable historical value. In the next section I will attempt to prove that this is indeed the case, by showing that details about the Buddha's biography – those which record some of his activities as a Bodhisatta – contain accurate historical information about events that happened in the fifth century B.C. If this is true, it means that we possess historical information about early Buddhism that is about as old as it could possibly get.

6. SOME HISTORICAL INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Various Suttas describe the Bodhisatta's visits to the sages Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, although the source for the account is probably the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* (M no.26: APS).[82] André Bareau has translated a Chinese Sarvāstivādin Sūtra that corresponds to the APS as well as a similar account found in the Chinese version

[81] Norman (2004: 79): "[I]t is hard to imagine why anyone should ever have thought the missions [Buddhist and Aśokan] were the same."

[82] The other Suttas including this account are the *Mahā-Saccaka Sutta*, the *Bodhi-Rājakumāra Sutta* and the *Saṅgārava Sutta* (the thirty-sixth, eighty-fifth and one-hundredth Suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya respectively).

of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya.[83] There are also versions of the narrative in the Mahāsāṅghika Mahāvastu[84] and the Mūlasarvāstivādin Saṅghabhedavastu.[85] It seems that the account of the training under the two teachers was embedded in the pre-sectarian Buddhist tradition. There is also material on the two teachers scattered throughout the Suttapiṭaka. Some scholars have accepted Bareau's opinion that the tradition of the two teachers' instruction to the Bodhisatta was a fabrication,[86] but more recently Zafiropulo has shown that Bareau's arguments are fallacious.[87] If we are to take the tradition of the two teachers seriously, as we must do in the light of Zafiropulo's comments, we must also take into consideration the fragmentary information about the two teachers which is scattered throughout the early Buddhist literature. This information, correctly considered, establishes the historicity of the two teachers beyond any reasonable doubt, and thus leads to the conclusion that the two men must have been teachers of some repute in northern India in the fifth century B.C., teachers of meditation who probably taught the Bodhisatta.

Diverse sectarian literature agrees on the location of Uddaka Rāmaputta. Hsüan tsang mentions some legendary evidence that relates Udraka Rāmaputta to Rājagṛha; it seems that this represents the local tradition of Buddhists living in the area of Rājagṛha.[88] This

[83] Bareau 1963: 14-16.

[84] Mvu II.118.1ff.

[85] SBhV I.97.4ff; Skilling (1981-82: 101) points out that there is a Tibetan translation of this SBhV account, as well as a "virtually identical" Mūlasarvāstivādin version, preserved in the Tibetan translation of the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-Sūtra*.

[86] Vetter (1988: xxii), Bronkhorst (1993: 86); Bareau sums up his view as follows (1963: 20-21): "Personnages absents, morts même avant que leurs noms ne soient cités, ils sont probablement fictifs. Plus tard, on s'interrogea sur ces deux mystérieux personnages et l'on en déduisit aisément qu'ils n'avaient pu être que les maîtres auprès desquels le jeune Bodhisattva avait étudié."

[87] Zafiropulo 1993: 22-29. There is no need to repeat Zafiropulo's arguments here, and we can simply agree with him when he comments (p.23): "Ceci dit, nous affirmerons expressément n'avoir pu trouver aucune donnée de critique historique et textuelle nous permettent de traiter les peronnages d'ĀRĀḌA KĀLĀMA et d'UDRAKA RĀMAPUTRA d'une façon différente de celle qu'on applique généralement au cas des 'Six Maîtres Hérétiques' du SĀMĀNAPHALA-S. et autre sources. En effet et d'un commun accord, semble-t-il, l'historicité de tout les six paraît partout accepté."

[88] See Beal 1906: II/139ff.

tradition is confirmed by the account of the Bodhisatta's training in the Mahāvastu, which also places Udraka Rāmaputra in Rājagṛha.[89] The coincidence between these two sources may have been reached in the sectarian period, for it is possible that the Lokottaravādin branch of the Mahāsāṅghikas and other related sects existed in the area of Rājagṛha. There is, however, similar evidence in the Suttapiṭaka which suggests that the tradition is presectarian. In the *Vassakāra Sutta*, the Brahmin Vassakāra, chief minister of Magadha, is said to visit the Buddha in Rājagaha and tell him that the *rājā* Eḷeyya has faith in the *samaṇa* Rāmaputta; the commentary names the *samaṇa*, no doubt correctly, as Uddaka Rāmaputta.[90] Vassakāra also appears in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* as the chief minister of King Ajātasattu of Magadha.[91] Vassakāra's connection with Rājagaha and Magadha suggest that Eḷeyya was a local chieftain in Magadha, probably situated somewhere near to Rājagaha. If so, it suggests that Uddaka Rāmaputta lived in the vicinity of Rājagaha.

The coincidence of this different evidence from the Pāli, Sanskrit and Chinese sources is not to be overlooked. It is inconceivable that this correspondence was produced by a later levelling of texts, for it is entirely coincidental: different source materials, not corresponding Suttas, state or imply the same thing.[92] It is hardly likely that a Mahāsāṅghika *bhikkhu* gained knowledge of obscure Pāli Suttas and deduced that Uddaka Rāmaputta was based in Rājagaha, following which he managed to insert this piece of information into the biographical account in the Mahāvastu. And it is even less likely that a Theravādin *bhikkhu*, in the early centuries A.D., studied the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya and learnt that Udraka Rāmaputra was based in Rājagṛha, following which he fabricated Suttas (rather than insert it in the biographical account of the APS) containing circumstantial evidence which indirectly relate Rāmaputta to Rājagaha. The information on the geographical location of Uddaka Rāmaputta must precede the Aśokan missions, and even the schism between Sthavira-s and Mahāsāṅghika-s. This implies that the biographical tradition of the training under the two teachers goes back to the very beginning

[89] Mvu II.119.8.

[90] Mp III.164.23: *samaṇe rāmaputte ti uddake rāmaputte.*

[91] D II.72.9ff = A IV.17.12ff (*Sattakanipāta*, *anusayavagga*, XX). He also appears in the *Gopakamogallāna Sutta* (M III.7ff), which is set in Rājagaha. At Vin I 228 (= D II 86.31ff, Ud 87), he and Sunīdha are in charge of the construction of Pāṭaligāma's defences.

[92] I have written elsewhere on the historical value of circumstantial evidence (Wynne 2004, section seven).

of Buddhism. It surely means that accurate historical information has been preserved, for this is descriptive material that serves no normative agenda. It suggests that Uddaka Rāmaputta existed, and that he was based in Rājagaha, no doubt as a famous sage of Magadha.

Another detail, found in almost all the sectarian accounts of the training under the two teachers, can hardly have been produced by a later levelling of early Buddhist literature. It occurs in the account of the training under Uddaka Rāmaputta, which is identical in almost all regards to the description of the training under Āḷāra Kālāma. In the Pāli account we are told that the Bodhisatta first of all mastered the teaching of Uddaka Rāmaputta, i.e. he gained an intellectual understanding of it,[93] after which he attained a meditative realisation of it.[94] But the account of the training under Uddaka Rāmaputta makes it clear that it was not Uddaka Rāmaputta who had attained the sphere of 'neither perception nor non-perception,' but Rāma, the father or spiritual teacher of Uddaka.[95] This is seen in the following exchange. The Bodhisatta is said to have contemplated that Rāma (not Rāmaputta) did not proclaim (*pavedesi*) his attainment through mere faith, but because he dwelt (*vihāsi*) knowing and seeing himself.[96] The corresponding passage in the account of the training under Āḷāra Kālāma says that Āḷāra Kālāma attained the sphere of 'nothingness,' and uses the same verbs in the present tense (*pavedeti*,

[93] M I.165.22ff: *so kho ahaṃ bhikkhave nacirass' eva khippam eva taṃ dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇiṃ. so kho ahaṃ bhikkhave tāvataken' eva oṭṭhapahatamattena lapitalāpanamattena ñāṇavādañ ca vadāmi theravādañ ca, jānāmi passāmīti ca paṭijānāmi ahañ c' eva aññe ca.*

"O *bhikkhus*, after a short period of time, quite quickly, I mastered that *dhamma*. With just that much striking of the lips, that much talk about talk, I spoke the doctrine of the elders; I and others declared 'I know, I see'."

[94] M I.166.7-8.

[95] Skilling discusses this in detail; the point had been made earlier by Thomas (1927: 63) and Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995: 258 n.303).

[96] M I.165.27ff: *na kho rāmo imaṃ dhammaṃ kevalaṃ saddhāmattakena sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharāmī ti pavedesi, addhā rāmo imaṃ dhammaṃ jānaṃ passaṃ vihāsī ti.* "Indeed Rāma did not declare 'I pass my time having understood, realised and attained for myself this entire *dhamma* through mere faith,' clearly Rāma passed his time knowing and seeing this *dhamma*."

viharati),[97] indicating that in the narrative Āḷāra Kālāma was living whereas Rāma was dead, and that Rāmaputta had not attained and realised the *dhamma* he taught.

Similar references to Rāma are found in the rest of the passage. Thus the Bodhisatta is said to have asked Rāmaputta: "To what extent (*kittāvatā*) did the venerable Rāma declare (*pavedesī*): [I pass my time] having himself understood, witnessed [and] realised this *dhamma* myself?"[98] The reply, of course, is that Rāma had attained as far as the sphere of 'neither perception nor non-perception.' The Bodhisatta is then said to have contemplated that not only did Rāma have faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and insight, but that he too possesses these virtues. And at the end of the episode, Uddaka Rāmaputta is reported to have said: "Thus the *dhamma* that Rāma knew (*aññāsi*), that you [the Bodhisatta] know (*jānāsi*); the *dhamma* you know, that Rāma knew."[99] This is different from the corresponding speech that Āḷāra is reported to have made to the Bodhisatta: "Thus the *dhamma* I know (*jānāmi*), that you know (*jānāsi*); the *dhamma* you know, that I know."[100] And whereas Āḷāra is willing to establish the Bodhisatta as an equal to him (*samasamaṃ*), so that they can lead the ascetic group together (*imaṃ gaṇaṃ pariharāmā ti*),[101] Uddaka acknowledges that the Bodhisatta is equal to Rāma, not himself (*iti yādiso rāmo ahosi tādiso tuvaṃ*), and asks the Buddha to lead the community alone (*imaṃ gaṇaṃ pariharā ti*).[102]

The distinction between Uddaka Rāmaputta and Rāma is also found in the Sarvāstivādin, Dharmaguptaka, and Mahāsāṅghika accounts of the Bodhisattva's training.[103] Although the Saṅghabhedavastu (plus parallel Tibetan translations) and the Lalitavistara fail to distinguish Rāmaputta from Rāma,[104] this must be because of a later obfuscation of the tradition. Exactly the same mistake has been made by I. B. Horner, the PTS translator of the Majjhima Nikāya, who has been

[97] M I.164.7-10.

[98] M I.165.32ff: *kittāvatā no āvuso rāmo imaṃ dhammaṃ sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja* [VRI: *viharāmīti*] *pavedesī ti*?

[99] M.I.166.22ff: *iti yaṃ dhammaṃ rāmo aññāsi, taṃ tvaṃ dhammaṃ jānāsi; yaṃ tvaṃ dhammaṃ jānāsi, taṃ dhammaṃ rāmo aññāsi.*

[100] M.I.165.3ff: *iti yāhaṃ dhammaṃ jānāmi, taṃ tvaṃ dhammaṃ jānāsi; yaṃ tvaṃ dhammaṃ jānāsi, tam ahaṃ dhammaṃ jānāmi.*

[101] M I.165.5ff.

[102] M I.166.24ff.

[103] Skilling 1981-82: 100-102.

[104] Skilling 1981-82: 101.

duped by the repetitive oral style, into believing that the accounts of the training under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta must be the same apart from the difference between the names of the two men and their meditative attainments.[105]

In an oral tradition where adjacent passages are often composed in exactly the same way – one passage is often a verbatim repetition of the previous one with a minor change of one or two words – there would have been no need to trouble over these details. Reciters of this autobiographical episode would have tended to make the two accounts identical bar the substitution of Uddaka's name for Āḷāra's. A conscious effort has been made to distinguish Uddaka Rāmaputta from Rāma, and not to let the repetitive oral style interfere with this. This effort must surely go back to the beginning of the pre-sectarian tradition of composing biographical Suttas, and the distinction can only be explained if Rāma and Rāmaputta were two different people.

Bareau maintained that the almost verbatim correspondences between the two accounts proved their artificial (i.e. unhistorical) nature.[106] But repetition is normal in Pāli oral literature. And it seems that the two parallel accounts, having preserved the important distinction between Rāmaputta and Rāma, rather than giving the impression that they were contrived, have preserved valuable historical information. The conclusion is that the three men were real.[107] It is hardly likely that Buddhists from sects as far apart as central Asia and Sri Lanka convened a council a few hundred years after the Buddha's death and decided to make up the idea that Rāma and not Rāmaputta had attained the sphere of 'neither perception nor

[105] Horner (1954: 209-10). Jones, translator of the Mahāvastu, preserved the distinction between Rāma and Rāmaputra, but failed to notice that in the Mahāvastu Rāmaputra does not establish the Bodhisattva as an equal to him: it says that he established the Bodhisattva as the teacher (Mhv II.120.15: *ācāryasthāne sthāpaye*). Jones translates (1949: 117): "Udraka Rāmaputra … would make me a teacher on an equal footing with him himself."

[106] Bareau (1963: 20): "Mais le parallélisme avec l'épisode suivant, l'ordre trop logique et le choix trop rationnel des points de doctrine d'Ārāḍa Kālāma et d'Udraka Rāmaputra nous laissent un arrière-goût d'artifice qui nous rend ces récits suspects."

[107] Zafiropulo (1993: 25) does not point out the difference between Rāma and Rāmaputta, but on the stereotyped description of the training under the two teachers he comments: "Justement cela nous semblerait plutôt un signe d'ancienneté, caractéristique de la transmission orale primitive par récitations psalmodiées."

non-perception.' The idea must have been in the Buddhist tradition from the beginning, and can only be explained as an attempt to remember an historical fact. There is no other sensible explanation. It is also worth pointing out that if this biographical material is so old and really does represent an attempt to record historical facts, then it means that this portion of the Bodhisatta's biography is most likely to be true. It is likely that the Bodhisatta really was taught by Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. In short, this account shows that the early Buddhist literature contains descriptive material that is 'historical' in our sense of the term, or indeed anyone's. The careful study of the early Buddhist literature itself refutes the sceptical claim that it contains no historical facts.

7. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this essay I argued that the epigraphical and archaeological evidence is limited, and suggested that its worth ought not to be exaggerated at the expense of the literary evidence. I then attempted to show that sceptical arguments based on epigraphical sources actually show that the Pāli Canon must have been closed at a relatively early date. After that, I considered the arguments put forward by Frauwallner and others about the tradition that there was an expansion of Buddhism during Aśoka's reign. By reconsidering the evidence of RE XIII alongside the evidence from the Sinhalese chronicles, I concluded that the tradition of the Buddhist missions in Aśoka's time is relatively accurate, and is probably referred to in RE XIII. This means that much of the material in the Pāli Canon, especially the Sutta and Vinaya portions, reached Sri Lanka at around 250 B.C. Finally, I attempted to show that some of the information preserved in the literature of the various Buddhist sects shows that historical information about events occurring in the fifth century B.C. has been accurately preserved. I therefore agree with Rhys Davids, and disagree with sceptics such as Sénart, Kern and Schopen, that the internal evidence of early Buddhist literature proves its historical authenticity.

The corresponding pieces of textual material found in the canons of the different sects – especially the literature of the Pāli school, which was more isolated than the others – probably go back to pre-sectarian times. It is unlikely that these correspondences could have been produced by the joint endeavour of different Buddhist sects, for such an undertaking would have required organisation on a scale which

was simply inconceivable in the ancient world. We must conclude that a careful examination of early Buddhist literature can reveal aspects of the pre-Aśokan history of Indian Buddhism. The claim that we cannot know anything about early Indian Buddhism because all the manuscripts are late is vacuous, and made, I assume, by those who have not studied the textual material thoroughly.

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