

Alastair Gornall. *Rewriting Buddhism: Pali Literature and Monastic Reform, 1157-1270.* London: UCL Press, 2020. Illustrations, maps, tables. 284 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-01-329541-6.

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In *Rewriting Buddhism: Pali Literature and Monastic Reform in Sri Lanka, 1157-1270*, Alastair Gornall makes an important and welcome contribution to the study of premodern South Asian intellectual history and Pali literature and to scholarship on Buddhist textuality and institutional life in what is now Sri Lanka. There are far too few scholars attempting to write something along the lines of second-millennium intellectual history for Theravada Buddhism or on Buddhist communities that were oriented toward a Pali-language *tipiṭaka* (three baskets), and it is still too rare for scholars of premodern Pali materials to engage with the wider intellectual and literary history of South Asia. *Rewriting Buddhism* establishes Gornall as a valuable contributor to these fields. Using six case studies—each developed around a single composition—addressing what could be understood as distinctive genres, or perhaps textual modalities, Gornall develops original and engaging interpretations of these individual compositions while also advancing bold and interesting hypotheses regarding textual production on the island of Laṅkā during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Gornall helps us to read developments in Pali textual culture in relation to Sanskrit domains, correctly understanding the South Asian mainland and the island of Laṅkā as tightly connected intellectual territory. Moreover, Gornall is alert to spe-

cifically southern links and contestation that characterized also Buddhist monastic interaction across the Palk Strait. *Rewriting Buddhism* is an intellectually stimulating work. I anticipate that each of the case studies developed in parts 2 and 3 of the book will inspire further discussion, and that is as it should be. Gornall's combination of bold large-scale claims (discussed further below) and close textual analysis is productive.

The first two chapters of the work provide an accessible introduction to Lankan political and institutional life and to changes in textual production at the turn of the second millennium CE. Gornall rightly emphasizes the “explosion in the number and types of works composed in Pali” beginning around the tenth century (p. 3). These included texts on grammar, *tipiṭaka* commentary, biographies of the Buddha, preaching narratives, and histories of relics and relic sites. The book attends to the relationship between Sanskrit and Pali textualities and the ways models and theories were adapted from Sanskrit literary culture into Pali. This is not an unprecedented area of investigation, but it has been studied insufficiently, as has most of Laṅkā's late premodern intellectual culture, which developed at the nexus of Sinhala, Tamil, Pali, and Sanskrit. Gornall stresses that the island's intellectual culture was not isolated and that Lankan Buddhist engagements with Sanskrit

literature and Indian subcontinental textual culture were not derivative. “The full intellectual significance of this era has been largely overlooked in modern academic writing. This book challenges both positions by demonstrating firstly that Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka was always intimately connected with the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent but that the contours of its engagement appear differently depending on the texts and genres one is looking at.... The Pali literature of this long century was not simply a mere imitation of continental literary traditions, but rather ... played a genuine and authentic role in Sri Lanka’s changing religious and political life” (p. 8). In addition to setting out this vision of island-mainland and Pali-Sanskrit interactions, Gornall proposes that the dynamism evident in Pali authorship between approximately 900 and 1300 CE be understood in relation to two overarching causal processes shaping intellectual life on the island at this time.

The first of these was the fragmentation of political power on the island after Cōla rule at the turn of the millennium (985-1044). In Gornall’s view, this fragmentation had implications for polity-*saṅgha* (the monastic community) relations as well as for intellectual culture. Gornall writes: “the old order had entirely changed after Cōla rule. Political power on the island had fragmented and the monastic community had been increasingly drawn into dynastic politics as a political actor in its own right” (p. 37). This, according to Gornall, had implications for intellectual history: changing institutional relations between sovereigns and monastics contributed to intellectual innovation. While scholars have often drawn attention to the *buddha-sāsana* (any buddha’s teachings and its supports) purification of King Parākramabāhu I (1157-86) as evidence of ambitiously centralizing sovereign aims, Gornall argues that what he calls the “reform era”—encompassing the self-proclaimed buddha-sāsana purifications of Lankan kings Parākramabāhu I, Vijayabāhu III (1232-36), and Parākramabāhu II (1236-70)—was

in fact a time of increased in-fighting among royal contenders in a political field that had been disturbed by the period of Cōla rule on the island and by the transition of the royal capital from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruva. Gornall holds that the *saṅgha* became an increasingly independent actor around the turn of the millennium and was sometimes more institutionally stable than royal governance. According to Gornall, “the reform process did not turn Buddhism into a kind of imperial religion, as is often argued.... Even when the process was overseen by powerful rulers, such as Parākramabāhu I, it primarily enabled the monastic community to regulate itself and better survive as a political entity more autonomously than before” (pp. 37-38). Gornall understands this period as characterized by “complex patronage networks” involving “petits nobles” who supported the intellectual work of monastic scholars, rather than by a singular patron-client relationship between ruler and *saṅgha* often stressed by scholars as emblematic of Buddhist political culture on the island (p. 48). Gornall holds that this multi-centric patronage environment was perceived by its inhabitants as “chaos” and contrastive with “previous stable social structure” (p. 13). According to Gornall’s analysis, this perception of “chaos” helped to generate an intellectual response tending toward new forms of systematic thought.

The second large-scale causal process emphasized by Gornall involves eschatological thinking. The study emphasizes the impact of eschatology on the intellectual ferment of the early second millennium. According to Gornall, new approaches to securing and interpretively ordering Buddhist textual corpora were encouraged by Buddhist ideas about the staged decline in Buddhist learning and monastic practice. As other scholars have argued, in many Buddhist contexts, during the first half of the second millennium CE, interpretations of *buddha-dhamma* (the teachings of Gotama Buddha) and approaches to liberating practice were shaped by the view that buddha-sāsana had entered an unprecedented period of vulnerability.

Gornall's attention to this area builds useful bridges between scholarship on Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.[1] In Gornall's account of Lankan Pali intellectual culture, tradition-internal theories of buddha-sāsana decline are understood to have heightened the urgency with which scholars sought to organize and secure knowledge related to buddha-sāsana. This helped to shape scholarly interest in particular genres and textual foci, including grammar and tipīṭaka commentary.

In sum, Gornall holds that an intersection among eschatological thinking, political order, and monastic institutional arrangements created conditions for creative innovation within Lankan Pali intellectual worlds. Having set out historical background and these framing arguments, part 2 (titled "Order") devotes one chapter each to three distinctive textual modalities. Chapter 4 addresses the grammatical tradition that developed around Moggallāna's twelfth-century Pali grammar, chapter 5 examines late twelfth-century or early thirteenth-century Abhidhamma handbook commentaries by Sumaṅgala, and chapter 6 analyzes *Sārasaṅgaha*, a late thirteenth-century anthology of tipīṭaka materials composed by Siddhattha. Each of these chapters is characterized by fruitful close readings of one or more texts, as well as generative analytical suggestions likely to inspire future scholars, and thus they repay close reading by specialists of the island's Buddhist and intellectual histories. At the meta level, if I understand Gornall correctly, *Rewriting Buddhism* suggests that studying these textual modalities illuminates how they worked interactively over slightly more than two hundred years to reshape the conceptual parameters for intellectual activity engaged with buddha-dhamma. For instance, Gornall writes that "reform-era grammarians differed from their predecessors not only in their aims but also in their radical rejection of tradition, dispensing with the older Kaccāyana grammar and adopting and better adapting new models of grammatical analysis from other Sanskrit grammars. This new orienta-

tion owed much to the wider reforming mentality of the era, characterized by the need to stem religious decline, but also to the availability of new intellectual resources ... that allowed scholars to rethink the ways in which they were taking care of their sacred language and scriptures" (p. 69).

Further, he states that the new grammatical approach (*Moggallāna-vyākāraṇa*) was marked by a turn to more "metaphysical thinking" (p. 81). "What is important from a historical perspective ... is that scholar-monks were thinking about their sacred language with deep semantic structures rather than phonetics as a starting point and that their approach was increasingly analytical rather than simply exegetical" (p. 82). Gornall also highlights innovative systematicity in commentarial practice, stating that "both Sumaṅgala and Sāriputta in their works, for instance, display skill in weaving conflicting doctrinal strands into a coherent whole" (p. 99). According to Gornall, this is reflected in Sumaṅgala's greater consistency in the use of philosophical terminology than characterized earlier commentarial approaches to Abhidhamma texts and his preference for addressing possible inconsistencies in buddha-dhamma as a whole through text-internal comparison, rather than focusing on exegesis of passages of *buddhavacana* (speech of a buddha). Handbook commentators such as Siddhattha, too, participated in the systematizing turn. "Like the commentators, the anthologists employed new philological approaches to recover and control this essence [essential meaning, *sāra*]. One such technique that became pervasive in reform-era works was the introduction of a contents list at the beginning of each handbook, often referred to as a *mātikā* ... providing the chapter division of the work ... and this possibly represents the first use of such a metatextual device in South Asian intellectual history" (pp. 124-25).

Part 3 (titled "Emotion") suggests that authors of the early second millennium were particularly inclined to seek out experiences of karmically

transformative emotions in part because of eschatological concerns that led to the prioritization of merit making. In other words, Gornall proposes that we read together buddha-sāsana decline theory and the wholehearted embrace of Sanskrit literary aesthetics by authors writing in Pali. Gornall argues that, at this time, engagement with Pali literature, especially in poetic forms, was understood as a morally transformative practice, with verse forms indebted to Sanskrit *kāvya* (Sanskrit poetry and literary prose) functioning soteriologically. The late twelfth-century or early thirteenth-century treatise on poetics—Saṅgharakkhita’s *Subodhālaṅkāra*—is the central focus of chapter 7. According to Gornall, “Saṅgharakkhita’s poetics, fusing elegance and morality, turned ornate literature from an object of spiritual danger into a potent source of stimulation for seekers of devotional sentiments. Saṅgharakkhita did not forge the connection between ornate literature and devotional practice himself, however. Rather, it had emerged in historiographical works composed in the decades prior to the composition of his treatise. These experimental texts reveal more clearly the role this new form of *kāvya* was thought to play in monastic life and underscore the fact that elite monks had begun to use the Buddha’s relics, reliquaries and ornamental Pali literature alike as tools in the search for serene joy (*pasāda*). There is, of course, a long-standing tradition that speech can inspire such devotional feeling. The *Mahāvamsa* (‘Great History’) sets out explicitly that one of its aims was to inculcate serene joy in its audience. Reform-era histories differed, however, in that a new poetic form modelled on Sanskrit *kāvya* was now used as an affective soteriological tool and, due to the historical associations with political power, also as the appropriate medium for aesthetically instantiating new relationships with the Buddha that were at once devotional and political” (p. 168). Other reviewers will be better placed to evaluate Gornall’s treatment of *Subhodhālaṅkāra* in relation to other continental and Lankan developments in

poetics from the later first millennium onward. Here, in relation to *Rewriting Buddhism*’s emphasis is on how Pali intellectuals attempted to secure buddha-dhamma against decline via new forms of systematic expression, it is worthwhile to highlight Gornall’s account of Saṅgharakkhita’s Pali language appropriation and reframing of Sanskrit *ālaṅkāra śāstra* (literary theory).

Previously, elite scholar-monks had incorporated Sanskrit literary models in their Pali works by means of direct engagement with Sanskrit poetry and treatises on poetics. In creating the *Subodhālaṅkāra*, Saṅgharakkhita was able to successfully abstract an ideal literary model from Sanskrit treatises on poetics and use it as a framework for a specifically Pali poetics based on Buddhist norms and values.

Chapter 8 treats the early thirteenth-century *Dāthāvamsa* composed by Dhammakitti. Here the segue is somewhat awkward between Saṅgharakkhita’s approach to Sanskrit poetics and the longer-standing Pali engagement with Sanskrit *kāvya* witnessed by *vamsa* (narrative genealogy) texts of the first millennium CE (see also the quotation above). In any case, Gornall’s analysis of *Dāthāvamsa* attends to how poetic accounts of buddha relics, such as the relic of the Buddha’s tooth, enhanced the power attributed to such relics. He focuses still more on how “relic *vamsas* served the autonomous political interests of monastic elites during the reform era” and how “monks viewed relics, not as tools of court power, but as potent agents in emotionally instantiating the king and the court’s status as devotional vassals to the Buddha and the Saṅgha” (p. 170). Gornall reads *Dāthāvamsa* in intriguing ways—in part through an analysis of its nested narratives—as an indication of a monastic author’s capacity to contest royal authority through arguments for a Buddhist public and for a Buddha’s overlordship contrasting with human rulers.

Rewriting Buddhism’s last case study, chapter 9, is the *Jinālaṅkāra* by Buddharakkhita, com-

posed in the late twelfth century. Here Gornall carries over questions about competitive visions of rule and moral power from the previous chapter, fruitfully suggesting ways of reading biographies of the Buddha in relation to the context of its composition. From this standpoint, according to Gornall, *Jinālaṅkāra* can be seen as an articulation of monastic power versus royal power, drawing on a cosmology centered on the Buddha as “all encompassing moral sovereign” (p. 207). Gornall sees the work as proposing a bodhisattva theory that “elevates the Bodhisattva [the being becoming the Buddha] as an extraordinary object of devotion for his audience while also ensuring that the favourable Buddhist nobility did not renounce their power or develop charismatic authority by transgressing worldly norms in imitation of him” (p. 197).

Gornall has done so much fruitfully in *Rewriting Buddhism* that it is not altogether reasonable to ask for more. Yet some scholarly readers focused on Lankan materials will understandably wish for somewhat more detailed accounts of the interactions among Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala, especially in the book’s discussion of commentarial practice and poetics. Gornall highlights the place of Pali in higher-level monastic curricula, in part on account of Pali texts described in a thirteenth-century monastic regulation, and hypothesizes that Pali was a desirable language for scholarly production at this time for several reasons. Gornall writes, “Pali specifically, rather than Sinhala, was the privileged medium for creating this ordered, conceptual space for three main reasons. First, scholar monks viewed Pali as authoritative both because it was the language of the Buddha and because it was thought to have magical properties that made it uniquely capable of expressing reality. Second, reform-era scholars, increasingly conscious of Pali’s relationship with the other literary languages of South Asia, also began to view Pali as a *sui generis*, independent language that, unlike all other languages in South Asia, was undervived from Sanskrit. As such Pali was con-

sidered to be ‘pure’ (*suddha*) and we can hypothesize that underlying ideas of moral and linguistic purity, in part, also meant that reform-era works were preferably composed in Pali before being translated and disseminated more widely in what were perceived to be derivative languages like Sinhala. Finally, as a transregional medium, Pali was the choice language for conveying the Saṅgha’s new, unified monastic identity to the increasingly cosmopolitan monastic community at home” (p. 5).

Yet we also know that this period of explosive growth in Pali textuality was also a time of robust composition in Sinhala, including innovative work in prose commentary and in poetry. Moreover, translation moved in both directions at this time, from Sinhala into Pali and from Pali into Sinhala. As Gornall himself notes, the literary corpora in Sinhala and Pali were not insulated from one another at the time but show many signs of interaction. There are indications of Sinhala’s grammatical subordination to the new Moggallāna grammar, but Sinhala sometimes took the lead as a source text in commentarial practice. Compositions in Sinhala sometimes positioned themselves as offering necessary clarification of Pali works. Given Gornall’s central interest in the relationship obtaining between grammar and scriptural hermeneutics, a more explicit discussion of the implications of the Moggallāna grammar for elite monastic literary cultures that were often trilingual (or even more widely multilingual) would not be out of place. Readers would benefit also from some further comparison in the main text (even as brief flags to further investigation) between the Pali-Pali and Pali-Sinhala commentarial practice of the period, especially in the thirteenth century. Tantalizing footnotes to chapter 5 indicate some movement along these lines. Similar questions arise with respect to *Rewriting Buddhism*’s treatment of ālaṅkāra śāstra and Pali literati engagements with Sanskrit poetics. There were already projects of adaptation from Sanskrit—and distancing from Sanskrit—evident among authors writing in Sin-

hala.[2] Was *Subodhālaṅkara* drinking from these streams even while in certain ways privileging Pali? Showing readers more about the Sinhala as well as the Sanskrit context for *Subodhālaṅkara* would be valuable.

I conclude by returning to one of the central claims of Gornall's work: that "reform-era" monk-scholars sought to develop a new intellectual order and forms of textual control as a response to the "chaos" of their time. Gornall contrasts first- and early second-millennia monastic-political contexts, emphasizing the latter as a time of chaotic fragmentation to which monastics responded through dedicated systematizing scholarship and the development of plural patronage networks. Gornall's attention to plural contexts of patronage of monastic intellectual culture and text production is excellent and ideally will stimulate other scholarship along related lines. It is possible, however, that Gornall's broader argument overstates the "order" characteristic of the island during the first millennium and that a more nuanced historical presentation would be generative. While it is certainly the case that external military threats—as well as internal competition among would-be rulers—made the first centuries of the second millennium an unstable period in the island's political life, we should be wary of attributing undue stability to political and institutional life on the island prior to the Cōlas. *Mahāvamsa* portrayals of the uneasy relationships between Anurādhapura and Rohaṇa, for instance, suggest that centers of power on the island were plural long before the end of the first millennium CE. There would have thus been dynamic relationships between saṅgha members, those who ruled or sought to rule from Anurādhapura, and also those holding (at least, regional) political authority in other locations on the island. Thus, presumably, leading members of the saṅgha were already adept at functioning within multiple and competing patronage networks long before Cōla arrivals, though the evidentiary base is too modest to argue this case fully. Perhaps what changes in the early second millennium is

new patterns in the condensation of capital that make it possible to support a greater range of decentralized centers of intellectual life and textual production. The explosion of textual production in Pali and Sinhala during the early second millennium produced an unprecedented large archive from which we can begin to reconstruct intellectual and institutional histories of that time. Gornall's very welcome *Rewriting Buddhism* helps to show how this might be done.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Georges Coedès, "The Traibhūmikathā: Buddhist Cosmology and Treaty on Ethics," *East and West* 7, no. 4 (1974): 349–52; Tilman Frasch, "A Buddhist Network in the Bay of Bengal: Relations between Bodhgaya, Burma and Sri Lanka, c. 300–1300," in *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea*, ed. Claude Guillot, Denys Lombard, and Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 69–92; and Anne M. Blackburn, "Buddhist Connections in the Indian Ocean: Changes in Monastic Mobility 1000–1500," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58, no. 3 (2015): 237–66.

[2]. See Charles Hallisey, "Works and Persons in Sinhala Literary Culture," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 689–746.

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