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Published on H-Asia (July, 2024)

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Understanding the life and times of King Aśoka (c. 304–232 BCE) is a fraught and difficult task. Contemporary sources (such as the well-known Aśokan inscriptions, or archaeological remains of great cities and temples) paint a fragmentary picture, while much later Buddhist sources spin richly detailed yet ultimately fantastical tales. In Nayanjot Lahiri’s engaging 2015 book *Ashoka in Ancient India*, the archaeologist attempted, insofar as it is possible, to distinguish these types of sources, focusing mostly on historically verifiable facts while weaving an engaging and readable biography of the ancient Mauryan king. *Searching for Ashoka: Questing for a Buddhist King from India to Thailand* serves as a fitting sequel, allowing Lahiri the freedom to move beyond who Aśoka was historically into more complex questions of what Aśoka would become mythically.

The book contains an introduction, seven main chapters, and an eighth concluding chapter. Lahiri frames the chapters as a series of travelogues, inviting the readers to journey with her as she encounters ancient sites in search of Aśoka’s legacy. Lahiri strikes this reader as a learned, engaging, accessible, and above all wryly humorous travel companion. Throughout these journeys Lahiri reveals her lively personality with generous tributes to helpful colleagues past and present, with frequent apt quotations of Shakespeare, and with razor-sharp critical wit.

The introduction takes us to Nakhon Si Thammarat, a city in southern Thailand. A Thai medieval chronicle speaks of a letter carried to Thailand by an Indian king, Aśoka, who had built 84,000 reliquaries but needed relics for them. The Thai king commissions an archaeological treasure hunt, and his people eventually find Buddhist relics within the realm and send them to the Indian Aśoka. The story is of course unbelievable historically, and that is precisely the point. Lahiri will center her book on this recurring pattern “of making a historical figure visible while simultaneously re-inventing him, and of adapting faint memories and echoes of him to new political or other purposes” (p. 4). The remainder of the introduction
summarizes some of the unique features of Aśoka's reign on the basis of the numerous Aśokan inscriptions scattered throughout his realm. Lahiri sees throughout the inscriptions, especially the Rock Edicts, a consistent pattern of the king recounting an imperfect past in order to correct it with a new agenda that drives his kingdom toward a more perfect future. This pattern—using historical memory to construct a desired future—would recur again and again in more mythic registers elsewhere.

Chapter 1, “Imaging Ashoka at Sāñci,” contains a useful and breezy overview of the many stages of construction and accretion at the Sāñci stūpa complex, and addresses the two representations of Aśoka at Sāñci: one detailing his failure to secure relics from the nāgaśas at Rāmagrāma, the other depicting his visit to the Bodhi Tree. Lahiri writes, “What Sāñci highlights is an emperor of insufficient power: he cannot prevent near-disasters” (p. 48). Lahiri is puzzled by these depictions of frailty and failure, and notes that historians must struggle to explain even when the evidence is scant. This chapter is a frank lesson to the reader that the interpretation of archaeological and artistic remains often requires creative guesswork.

Chapter 2, “Among Kings at Kanaganahalli,” begins and ends with a passionate indictment of the poor work of the Archaeological Survey of India in preserving the Kanaganahalli site. Among the many depictions of animals and narratives of the Buddha at the site, Lahiri focuses on royal representations: a few of Aśoka as well as many unique depictions of Sātavāhana kings and their queens, some of whom are depicted in postures of drunkenness and sexual play. Here we see Aśoka heralded not just as a Buddhist king, but as a figure of authorization for the majesty of new royal lineages with new agendas.

Chapter 3, “On the Edge of a Junagadh Lake,” details the massive rock inscription at Girnār, containing edicts of Aśoka, as well as later inscriptions by the Saka king Rudradāman I (r. 130–150 CE) and the Gupta king Skandagupta (r. c. 455–c. 467 CE). We learn here not just about the religious Aśoka, but about the practical details of dam building and water management that Aśoka engaged in but never mentioned in his own edicts. In this chapter as in all others, Lahiri draws us into the scene with richly detailed descriptions of the landscape and environment of the archaeological sites. She also introduces the reader to the history of excavations at each site, including not only the writings of British colonizers but also of the many brilliant Indian archaeologists and local antiquarians with deep knowledge of the sites.

In chapter 4, “Looking Back at Barabar,” Lahiri visits Jehānābād, in southern Bihār, where the memory of Aśoka’s sponsorship of the beautiful Barābar Caves for the Ājīvikas had faded, supplanted by Anantavarman’s patronage of Vaishnava projects on site, and even later, E. M. Forster’s use of the caves in the novel Passage to India (1924). Here we see an example of Aśoka receding into the background and fading away, rather than the usual stories of elaboration and exaggeration that most often come to mind.

Chapter 5, “Searching Siblings in Śrī Lanka,” introduces readers to the fantastical tales of the Mahāvaṃsa, in which the son and daughter of Aśoka travel to Śrī Laṅkā to convert the king to Buddhism and establish Aśokan-style Buddhist kingship on the island. After noting the tremendous incompatibility of the textual and archaeological evidence for early Buddhism in Śrī Laṅkā, Lahiri notes the many ironies of the Mahāvaṃsa’s appropriations of Aśoka, with particular attention to King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s very un-Aśokan victory in war over the Tamils. This is but one early example of the brutal and occasionally genocidal Buddhist nationalisms that recur in the Theravāda Buddhist world to the present day.

In chapter 6, “Among Relics and Shrines in Myanmar,” Lahiri introduces readers to the cosmopolitan Buddhism of Myanmar, a world in
which rulers constantly reinforced Buddhism with allusions to the Buddhist worlds of the Indian subcontinent and Śrī Laṅkā. Highlights of the chapter include the beautiful paintings of the twelfth-century Bagan prince Rājakumāra, whose depictions of Aśoka draw from close readings of Śrī Laṅkān chronicles; the literary moves of the eighteenth-century Mahayazawingyi to associate King Anawrahta with Aśoka; and a remarkable modern Aśokan gesture by British imperialists, who having excavated Buddha relics in Peshawar, installed them in a temple in their newly conquered Burmese territory. Lahiri demonstrates here the constant redeployment of the idea of Aśoka as essential to the model of Southeast Asian kingship.

Lahiri continues her exploration of Southeast Asian Aśokan kingship in chapter 7, “Ashokas in Thailand.” Here she explores actual trade connections with the Indian subcontinent at the ancient port of Khao Sam Kaeo; the unique dharmacakras of the Dvāravatī culture at Nakhom Pathom, which evoke Aśokan imagery while never exactly reproducing it; the chronicles of Chiang Mai which deliberately adopt Aśokan myth to connect Northern Thai kingdoms to the realms of India and Śrī Laṅkā; and the chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat mentioned in the introduction, which invent fantastical stories of an Indian Aśoka asking a Thai king for relics. For Lahiri, these adaptations of Aśoka “had little to do with the historical emperor and everything to do with new ways of creating cultural identities and framing political lineages” (p. 203).

In chapter 8, “Fabricating Remembrance,” Lahiri concludes that Aśoka’s historical memory lived for the most part outside of the Indian world, in places like Śrī Laṅkā, Thailand, and Myanmar. Beyond a mention of Aśoka by Rudradāman I in Jūṇāgaḍh, the most significant Indian appropriator of Aśoka turns out to be Jawaharlal Nehru, who enthusiastically adopted the iconography of Aśoka’s dharmacakra pillar to symbolize the new nation of India. Lahiri writes that “all history is, in the end, the malleable handmaid of those in pursuit of political power” (p. 216). It turns out that this breezy, chatty, and eminently accessible book on the legacy of Aśoka ends on the most somber of notes. In the age of Modi, with scholars like Audrey Truschke receiving harassment and threats for daring to write about the life of Aurangzeb,[1] with the consecration of the Rām Mandir at Ayodhyā, one cannot help but wonder what new fashionings of historical memory are on the horizon. Lahiri’s work on the ancient King Aśoka seems at first glance happily removed from the troubles and contradictions of the modern world, but the lessons she draws from the legacy of Aśokan remembrance are all too relevant.

Searching for Ashoka is not written for specialists in Buddhism or South and Southeast Asian history and archaeology. Many of Lahiri’s arguments about Aśoka as a continuously updated model for Buddhist kingship in Southeast Asia, for example, were already made in numerous works, including Tambiah (whom Lahiri cites) and Swearer (whom Lahiri doesn’t cite).[2] And of course specialists in Buddhist studies might have wished for more sustained acknowledgment of Aśoka’s interesting role in East Asian history as well.[3] The book does not fuss with diacritics, and the footnotes are spare and concise. Its target audience is a more general educated public, making this book especially ideal for the undergraduate classroom. I am most grateful to Nayanjot Lahiri for penning such an accessible and readable introduction to the complex workings of historical memory and mythmaking.

Notes

[2]. See Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Histor-
[3]. For one example of Aśokan kingship and relic distribution forming the paradigm of Sui imperial policy, see Chen Jinhua, *Monks and Monarchs, Kings and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics*, Italian School of East Asian Studies Essays 3 (Kyōto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2002). See also the numerous references to Aśokain the essays collected in Stephanie Balkwill and James A. Benn, eds., *Buddhist Statecraft in East Asia*, Studies on East Asian Religions 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).