Material Culture and Asian Religions

Text, Image, Object

Edited by Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2014
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Material culture and Asian religions: text, image, object / edited by Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann. — 1 [edition].
pages cm. — (Routledge research in religion, media and culture ; 4)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Asia—Religion. 2. material culture—Asia. 3. Material culture—Religious aspects. I. Fleming, Benjamin J., 1967–, editor of compilation.
BL1033.M38 2014
200.95—dc23
2013041860

ISBN: 978-0-415-84378-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-75303-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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The Aura of Writing and the Shape of Artistic Productions in Medieval South Asia

Jinah Kim

Opening a palm-leaf manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* now in the Asia Society, New York (Acc. No. 1987.001), we encounter six panels of beautiful paintings and a sea of Sanskrit letters on the first two pages of long, narrow folios (Figure 3.1).[1] Four decorative bands divide each folio into three compartments, and a rectangular panel is placed in the middle of each section. The colorful painted panels shine like studded jewels against the earthy color of palm leaf, although the pigments used on these panels are not luminous. Despite their miniature size, each panel measuring only roughly two by two inches, the paintings' presence is visually powerful enough to command our attention. Equally commanding are the six rows of letters written in black ink from left to right without any spaces, comparable to the practice of *scriptura continua* in ancient and early medieval manuscripts from Europe (Saenger 1997).

Written in *siddhamātṛkā*[2] script with very controlled and pronounced hooks on the bottom of each letter, the calligraphy presented in the Asia Society manuscript showcases the masterful skill of its scribe, Ānanda. This was no ordinary scribe, as the colophon tells us: He was a *dharmabhāṇaka* (reciter or preacher of the doctrine) at the illustrious Nālandā monastery, a Buddhist monastery located in the ancient region of Magadha (today's Bihar, India).[3] Both the text and the images on these two opening folios highlight the concern for achieving outstanding visual quality. Indeed, it may be argued that visual beauty was a main concern for those involved in its conception and articulation, that is, both scribe and patron.[4] Confronted with the two dimensionality of the written and painted surface, it is easy to forget that an illustrated Sanskrit manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*, especially the redaction in eight thousand verses (the *Aṣṭāsāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, henceforth *AsP*), is a beautifully constructed three-dimensional object: a book in *pothi* format.[5]

This three-dimensional object, the material manuscript, with beautifully written letters all over its surface and carefully painted images systematically placed within its space, is similar to a temple, such as the much celebrated Rājarājeśvara (Bhṛhadīśvara) temple of the Cōḷa king, Rājarāja. Like one sees with the Buddhist manuscript, we find a sea of inscribed letters on the surface of the temple, and the entire space is bedecked with fine images of deities in the niches and other architectural and decorative motifs (Figure 3.2).

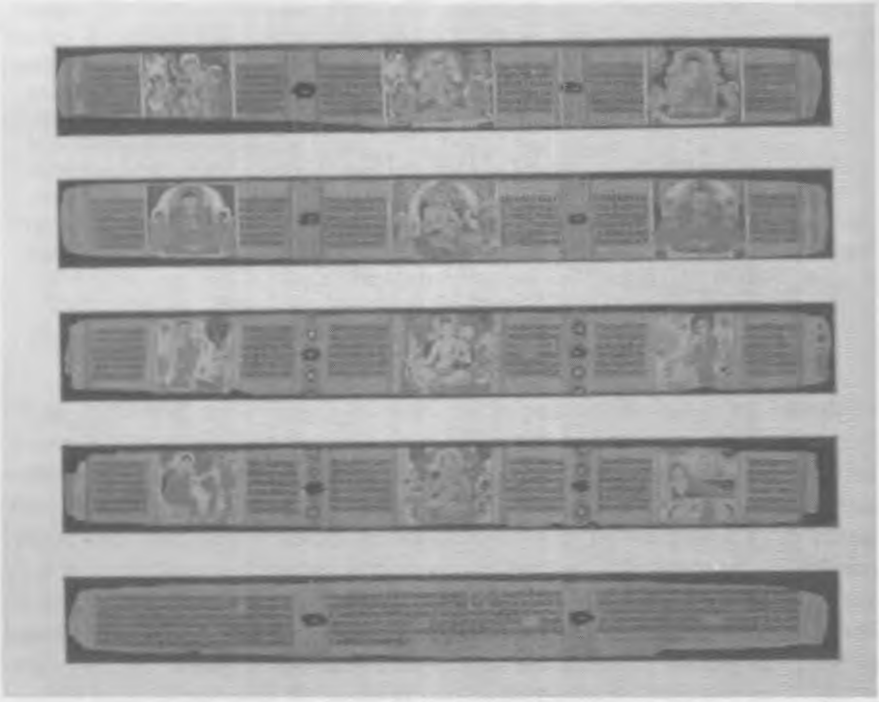

Figure 3.1 Four illustrated folios and the colophon folio of the Aṣṭāsāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra [henceforth *AsP*] (from top: folios 1v-2r, 299v-300r, 301v), Vigrahapāla III's fifteenth year (ca.1058 CE) and Gopāla IV's eighth year (ca. 1140 CE: folios 1v-2r), Nālandā monastery, Bihar, India. Pāla period. Ink and opaque watercolor on palm leaf. Each, approx., H. 2¼ × W. 22⅝ in. (7.3 × 56.8 cm). Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Acquisitions Fund, 1987.1. Image courtesy of Asia Society, New York.

These two objects, text and temple, may seem an unlikely pair for useful comparison. Bhṛhadīśvara is an architectural masterpiece of a grand scale dedicated to Lord Śiva, with its soaring *śikhara* (peaked tower above the sanctum) hovering over the surrounding landscape at 216 feet. It was built by the Cōḷa king as a statement of political might and authority in Tanjavur (in today's Tamil Nadu). The manuscript, on the other hand, is a small portable object, a Buddhist scripture made with palm-leaf folios measuring 56 × 5 × 6.25 cm, a religious gift expressing Mahāyāna Buddhist piety, and prepared for private use in a monastery in today's Bihar. Despite their apparent physical and geographical incongruity, in order to put both into historical and conceptual terms, I approach these two artifacts as religious "monuments,"[6] which will help examine the visuality and the materiality of written works in medieval India. As sacred objects bearing both text and image, the Buddhist manuscript and the Śaiva temple use ornate and controlled writing

Figure 3.2 Inscriptions on the plinth of the Bhṛhadīśvara temple, southeastern side corner next to the eastern entrance to the main maṇḍapa, consecrated in 1010 CE during Rājarāja I's reign (r. ca. 985–1014), Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. Cōḷa period. Photo by the author.

for expressing authority that speaks to a shared discourse between two distinct religious communities of this time period.

Ancient India is commonly characterized as a predominantly oral culture where the transmission of authority and knowledge is primarily restricted to oral and aural transmission. Consequently, the value of writing and scribal practices is traditionally downplayed.[7] Recent studies have shown the limitations of this perspective, especially in light of the "Cult of the Book" (Schopen 2010). This is true, not only in the well-known Mahāyāna Buddhist context to which our manuscript belongs, but also in the Puraṇic Hindu traditions (Brown 1986). Following scholars like Schopen and Brown, I propose to consider art historical and religious values of the written script in medieval India by highlighting its visual and material aspect. I bring together two types of source material, one art historical and the other epigraphic, into discussion with the materiality of writing. Material sources of this type, despite their proximity in the realm of physical evidence, have been unnecessarily distanced in our disciplinarily bounded academic inquiries (Asher and Gai 1985; Salomon 1998).[8] This chapter attempts to demonstrate the fruitful results that can occur when one considers groups of material evidence not normally clustered together within traditional disciplinary boundaries.

By reading architectural, iconographical, and epigraphic evidence on the same visual and material plane, I will address the value of calligraphy in medieval India in art historical and material cultural contexts. Indeed, one of the main questions

is an art historical one—what is the relationship between the text and image in the eastern Indian Buddhist context of the late tenth through twelfth centuries during Pāla dynastic reign? Through an examination of the calligraphy on Pāla era manuscripts and inscriptions on sculptures and temples commissioned during this period, I demonstrate that the formal and material aspect of writing inscribed on them imbues them with both sacred and political authority. I suggest that the materiality of the writing itself implies meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words themselves.

While my observations are mostly drawn from a regionally specific group of objects, my conclusion about the political and religious value of writing in medieval India points to the close relationship between the text and the images that can be applied to other examples from the Indian subcontinent. Another goal of this chapter is to locate the production of the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts in the context of the rise of the written script as a fit vessel for the transmission of authority in early medieval India, for which, I argue, the visual and material aspects of writing played a major role.

CONNECTING THE DOTS, THE WRITTEN AND THE VISUAL

An illustrated manuscript is a good place to start our inquiry on the relationship between the text and the images. The most immediate and rudimentary connection between the text and the images in a manuscript, like the Asia Society manuscript of the *AsP* discussed above, may be made through their physical container, the book (Skt. *pustaka*).[9] This is particularly true in the context of the development of a book-cult in medieval South Asia, in which the materiality of a book as an object is emphasized. This material relationship may seem semiotically meaningless, but if we understand a manuscript as a three-dimensional object from the perspective of material cultural study, the relationship between image and word becomes meaningful as it enables us to see the structure of a sacred object; the images are systematically placed in a three-dimensional space filled with the written words, providing it a skeleton frame to create a potent sacred object worthy of veneration.

The meaning that I propose to elucidate in relation to image and writing is not aimed at those who seek to understand any direct relationship between the text and image in this important Mahāyāna text, a well-known philosophical treatise on "emptiness" or "voidness" (*śūnyatā*). By contrast, I propose to understand the text in terms of the spirit of the Buddhist book-cult. In this context, what matters most in illustrating the *AsP* text is not the articulation of the finer points of the text in the most comprehensible manner.[10] The production of a beautifully made book presupposes the importance of the teaching contained within the book and the acceptance of this teaching as the fundamental doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The function of the illustration is, in my view, to make that presupposition and acceptance visible. This function is, in particular, achieved through the employment of canonical images such as the standardized set of eight scenes

of the Buddha's life and the images of well-established cultic bodhisattvas and wisdom deities.

The effort to highlight the presumed importance of the text through visual means is simultaneously achieved through beautiful calligraphy and careful writing down of the text. Arguably, this trend developed relatively late in Indian Buddhist history, with the earliest surviving manuscript of this kind dated to the end of the tenth century. The illustrated Buddhist manuscripts prepared in the ancient region of Magadha are most often written in a variety of the *siddhamātṛkā* script,[11] sometimes called *kuṭila*. The letters are evenly spaced with slightly angular, rhomboid-like slanted shapes on the heads and rhythmic hooks on the bottom as we can clearly see in the specimen from the manuscripts prepared in the Nālandā monastery (Figure 3.3). At times, we do see a more pronounced scribal effort for creating a beautifully written text in the use of curved and swirly strokes that mark medial vowel signs and in the curlicue treatment of rounded inner ends of certain consonants such as "*da,*" "*dha,*" and "*ṛ*" of "*kṛ*".[12] An example from the Vikramaśīla monastery, another famous seat of learning located in today's Bhagalpur district in Bihar, now in the British Library (Or. 6902) demonstrates what great attention was paid to the art of writing. The scribe[13] not only executed each letter with masterful precision, but also added little playful ornate details such as a curlicue foliage-like pattern added on top of the medial vowel sign for marking "*au,*" or on the numeric sign for the number nine.

Figure 3.3 Examples of chapter-ending marks in twelfth-century Nālandā manuscripts. Top: symbols on folio 204r marking the end of chapter 32 and the end of the entire text, *AsP* Ms, Govindapāla's fourth year (ca. 1179 CE), Nālandā monastery, Bihar. Donor: Prince Lakṣmīdhara. Royal Asiatic Society, London. Hodgson Ms. 1. Bottom: symbols on the colophon folio marking the end of chapter 32 and the beginning of the text-end colophons, *AsP* Ms, Rāmapāla's thirty-seventh year (ca. 1114 CE), Nālandā monastery, Bihar. Donor: Tibetan monk Vijayakīrti; scribe: Kanakamunijageśvara. Tibet Museum, Lhasa. Image by the author.

While it may be difficult to make an argument of a single style across the boundaries of text and image, we can discern a similar level of visual efficacy in the degree of control and ornamentation in both the written letters and the lines delineating the figures and their physiognomic features in paintings.[14] There is a strong visual conformity between text and image in their presentation in illustrated Buddhist manuscripts of medieval India.[15] This visual turn is noticeable in the explosion of the production of illustrated manuscripts centered around the Magadhan monasteries during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This can also be appreciated, for instance, in the precedent of inscribing the sculptural images, another cultic phenomenon established in the same region from a much earlier date.

By way of comparison to writing on manuscripts, a cursory examination of the surviving material demonstrates that a Buddhist sculpture of early medieval Indian origin often bears at least one type of inscription, that of the so-called dharma relic (Boucher 1991). It is common to see the verse epitome of the *Pratītyasamutpāda gāthā* (beginning with "*ye dharma hetuprabhava . . .*") neatly inscribed in the upper part of a stone sculpture. Except for occasional errors in *sandhi* rules, this verse is written in a perfectly clear manner with little variations, on an easy-to-see location such as around the head of the Buddha or a bodhisattva (Figure 3.4). This verse appears ubiquitously on eastern Indian Buddhist sculptural production from the eighth century onwards as if an image is incomplete without it. It is not just an add-on text but an essential part of the iconography and, perhaps, what ultimately made an image sacred. This verse may have been a visual sign of proper consecration and a piece of evidence that confirmed the efficacy of the patrons' merit-making projects. This visible sign is most often inscribed using a script in the *siddhamātṛkā* variety, and although not as ornate or artful as the type of script we see in an illustrated manuscript, they are carefully carved with pronounced angularity and rhythmic regularity with slight curves. Here, too, we can consider the visual conformity between the text and the image in terms of their formal qualities. Crisp and curvy lines delineating sculptural forms, which may be one of the stylistic characteristics of the Pāla period sculptures, make the image and the inscribed text appear together harmoniously. At the level of individual images, there is consistency between the quality of the image and that of the inscription. When the image is of the finest kind as seen in a tenth-century stele from Nālandā depicting the Buddha's descent from the Trayātriṃśa heaven, we can see that the inscription is executed in a precise and controlled manner matching the production quality of the image (Figure 3.4).

The visibility of the dharma relics on many images is quite uncharacteristic for a Buddhist relic cult in which relics are usually hidden from view. As Boucher (1991: 2) suggests, the emphasis on "seeing" the Buddha may have been an impetus behind the development of the cult of the dharma relics. The use of the dharma relic marking religious donations as seen in sculptures also has a strong relation to the increased appreciation of the visuality and the materiality of the text in the general religious milieu of early medieval India. This appreciation is also apparent in another type of inscription we often find on Buddhist sculptures. More than half of the images with the *ye dharma* verse have accompanying inscriptions

Figure 3.4 Inscriptions on the stele of the Buddha's Descent from the Trayātriṃśa heaven, Nālandā, Bihar, India. ca. tenth century. Archaeological Survey of India Site Museum. Photo by the author.

that identify the donors with a stock phrase claiming Mahāyāna piety. The phrase beginning—*deya dharmo 'yaṃ pravaramahāyānayāyina* . . . (or *-yāyinyā*) meaning "this is a pious gift of an excellent Mahāyanā follower . . ."—attributes whatever merit acquired from the donation to go to the spiritual attainment of the donor's teacher, parents, and all sentient beings. While donor inscriptions are common in earlier Buddhist sites such as Bharhut and Sāñcī, this specific formula affirming Mahāyāna piety is found only in the epigraphic material dating from the fourth century CE onwards (Schopen 1979: 14–5), and its use in image donation is meager until the eighth century or so. On stone sculptures of the Pāla period where the space for a long inscription is limited, it is often inscribed in an abbreviated manner, using the first part of this formula, *deya dharmo 'yam . . . sya*. This is exactly what we see carved on the tenth-century stele from Nālandā mentioned above. On the bottom register of the stele, we see another line of neatly carved inscription right beneath the double lotus pedestal that the Buddha stands on. The

inscription reads, *deya-dhamo-yaṁ stha-tathāgatadevasya* ("this is a pious donation of an elder[16] Tathāgatadeva").

It is clear from the calligraphy that favors angular and curvy lines for consonants and slightly decorative shapes of the vowel markers that the donor inscription was carved by the same hand as the *ye dharma* verse, which is carefully inscribed on the space between the rim of the stele and Buddha's arms. Moreover, it is as visible as the dharma relic. Although they are not placed right next to each other, their similar visual quality forces us to see them together as a set. They both announce a presence: the dharma relic, that of the Buddha, and the donor inscription, that of the donor, Tathāgatadeva. Their visual proximity could be translated as an expression of the donor's piety and reflects the donor's desire to be permanently near the Buddha, in a way not too different from what is seen in the donor inscriptions at early *stūpa* sites observed by Schopen (1997: 129–34). While the monastic artistic productions, be they manuscripts or sculptures, seem to display more calligraphically minded approaches to writing and inscribing, it is often the case that the dharma relic and the donor inscription on a medieval Indian Buddhist sculpture often demonstrates visual conformity, being carved by the same hand using the same style of lettering and occupying the same visual field on an image.[17]

The pervasiveness of the inscriptions on sculptures (e.g., of the dharma relic and the donative formula) also connects this body of material with the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts. Though some of these objects were made within the same monastic compound (e.g., at Nālandā), these illustrated manuscripts and sculptures are only occasionally brought together in the same sphere of academic discourse. However, when we consider their functions and purpose, both the sculptures and the illustrated manuscripts may be understood as religious offerings, explicitly stated through the phrase "*deya dharmo 'yam* . . ." The practice of using script for expressing piety and religious authority on the physical surface of religious donations seems to have been a common strategy found in all religious offerings in early medieval India, regardless of their size, medium, or even sectarian affiliations. The dharma relic verse is found at the end of almost every manuscript of the Buddhist *sūtras*[18] prepared in medieval eastern India.

Similarly, just as the inscription of the dharma relic verse on an image is often paired with a donor inscription, a donor colophon often follows the dharma verse in a manuscript. Like that on an image donation, the verse on a manuscript is added where the text of a *sūtra* ends, marking the completion of the project, as if sealing the text with a magical, invincible protective force field. The formal qualities of the script, such as the *siddhamātṛkā*, seem to reinforce the cultic value. As we will see shortly, this formal aspect contributed to the rise of the script as a fit vessel for statements of authority. In a way, this cultic use of the dharma verse and other *dhāraṇīs* based on the visual and material efficacy of the written relates the Indian practices to the pan-Asian use of the *siddham* characters outside India from Tibet to Japan.[19] Especially in East Asia where the linguistic and physical distance from the Indian sources is great, the script's foreignness and the formal and ornamental quality seem to have contributed to

its effectiveness in stating religious authority and exclusive connection to the root of the tradition.

ON THE AURA OF WRITING

A painted panel on the last folio of the *AsP* (*the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in 25000 verses*) now in the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery represents a scene of *pustaka pūjā* or a ritual worship of the book (Figure 3.5). A male donor, who, according to the accompanying colophon next to the painting, is a Mahāyāna layman (*upāsaka*), Rāmadeva, kneels in *añjalī mudrā*, and on his opposite sits a monk. In between these two men, in the centre, is a book represented here as a long narrow rectangular bar with rounded ends. It is placed on a bulbous shaped pedestal. The book's importance as a cultic object is much emphasized by its prominent scale hovering over the two figures. This painting leaves us little room for the discussion of the visuality of the written in an illustrated manuscript.

This typical representation of a Buddhist book in worship appears to support the argument that the illustrated manuscripts were never meant to be read or seen. However, manuscripts like this as well as others mentioned above, were rarely left untouched and locked away for eternity. Examining final colophons added at the end of such manuscripts attests that they were used ceremonially and ritually, and they also make a record of other activities such as a repair and recitation of the text.

Another source of evidence supporting the ceremonial and ritual use of manuscripts comes from a contemporary *praśasti* (eulogistic donative) inscription from

Figure 3.5 Donor Rāmadeva (left) and a monk worshiping a book, folio 560r, Pañcaviṁśatī-Prajñāpāramitā manuscript, ca. 1100 CE (Harviarman's eighth year), Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery. Photo by the author.

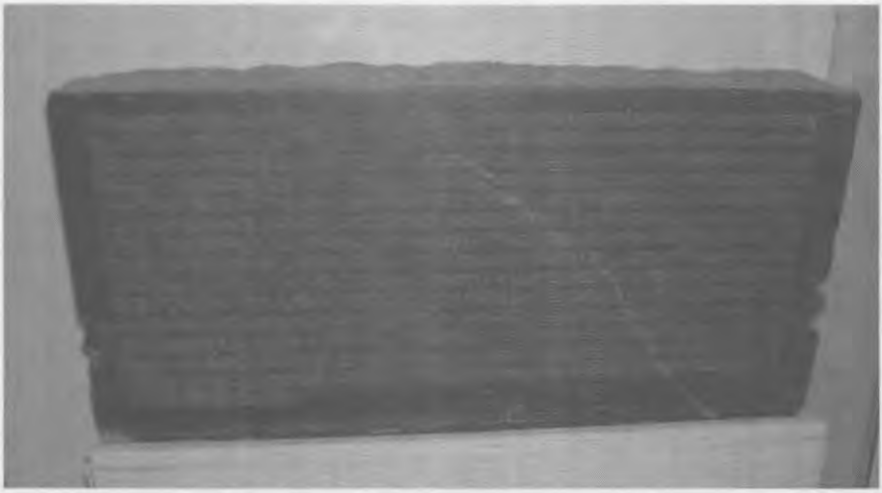

Figure 3.6 Praśasti inscription of a monk, Vipulaśrīmitra, monstery no. VII, Nālandā, Bihar, India. ca. early eleventh century. Nālandāa. Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Site Museum, Nālandā. Photo by the author.

Nālandā (Figure 3.6). Found in the monastery no. VII at Nālandā, written neatly in *siddhamātṛkā* type script, the inscription records the monastic lineage and the meritorious deeds of a Buddhist monk, Vipulaśrīmitra (Majumdar 1931–1932). In verse 6, the inscription refers to the mother of the Jinas (*jananījinānāṃ*) as Prajñāpāramitā (the Perfection of Wisdom) and was said to be constantly in motion (*bhramaty-aviratam*) thanks to Vipulaśrimitra's meritorious act.[20] Gregory Schopen (2005: 347–48) gives an insightful reading of this verse and suggests the possibility that the term *mañjuṣā*, translated as "contrived bookcase," can also mean "mechanized recitation" similar to what is seen with "Tibetan prayer wheels" in eleventh century India. It may be possible to consider that a beautifully produced book with its encasing book covers was in itself conceived as a case (*mañjuṣā*) in medieval India where illustrated manuscripts were introduced.

It became a common practice by the mid-twelfth century to have the inside of the wooden covers painted and illustrated and to incorporate this space into the iconographic design of the whole manuscript. The outer surface of these wooden covers was also painted and decorated. More elaborate wooden covers were even ornately sculpted in relief carving, a later development especially in Nepal and Tibet but also in Southeast Asia, and were likely influenced by this tendency. It is likely that such books were conceived in much the same way that reliquaries were—to encase or package a relic—but in this case, it is the text, which serves as the revered and sacred object of worship, contained within.

Considering the development of almost three-dimensional embellishment of the covers of manuscripts, it may be possible to read the reference to motion in the Nālandā *praśasti* above as suggesting a ritual turning of folios of a manuscript. This is to say that the phrase "constantly in motion" (*bhramaty-aviratam*)

evokes the continuous recitation of the text as well as the incessant movements of a hand turning folio leaves. Furthermore, if we are to understand the whole phrase *mañjuṣayā vihitayā* as referring to an illustrated manuscript, then it can be argued that *jananījinānāṃ* refers to the text of the Prajñāpāramitā. If this text "incessantly moved about" through the "continuous effort" (*prayatnāt*) of Vipulaśrīmitra (*yena*) in the great temple of Khasarpaṇa (Avalokiteśvara), we may propose that a ritual turning of folios of a manuscript that accompanied continuous recitation of the text could have created such movements. We may even consider the possibility of a ceremonial procession of the book (Salomon 1998: 302). Whichever interpretation we follow, it seems clear that the Vipulaśrīmitra's *praśasti* inscription gives a sense of the text on display and in motion. This is an important aspect to underscore for our next discussion as it establishes the book's status as a ceremonial object and by extension suggests the visibility of the text within it as an important contributing element to this status.

In the general milieu of manuscript production in medieval India, a manuscript was made with little to no care for its appearance and quite hastily written with little regard for spelling and even the contents, a fact that seems to underline the impression of emphasis on oral over written transmission of knowledge. Tibetan translators were often frustrated and complained about the clumsiness of Indian scribes (Davidson 2005: 128), and Albiruni (ca. 973–1048 CE), a Persian scholar who visited India, notes that Indian scribes were careless scribal copiers. Accordingly, the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts from eastern India are remarkable for their quality. They were prepared with careful attention to appearance, most notably the inclusion of painted panels and the use of *siddhamātṛkā* in writing the text. Despite their uniqueness, however, they were part and parcel of a longstanding development and concern for the appearance of the texts going back to Mauryan times of Aśoka (see below) and should be considered within this broader context.

A manuscript as a small portable object may seem to dictate its use in the private sphere, but in the context of the Buddhist "book-cult," it was rarely intended as a private object to be read by only a few. This is especially true with respect to the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts, which were, more often than not, ceremonial objects, created for a community, be it a lay householder family or a monastic group. Such use emphasized a manuscript's career as a cultic object in the ritual, public sphere.[21] Many representations of Buddhist manuscripts discussed here, and a manuscript's larger than life presence, often expressed through its visual programs with attention to a book's materiality and visuality, all resonate with this public aspect of the book. As a statement of visual and material piety as well as religious authority, a Buddhist book of this kind shares many common characteristics with the *praśasti* inscriptions on stone and royal grants on copper plates. In this regard, we can locate the production of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts alongside the increase of written public documents during the medieval period.

Although underappreciated due to the perceived notion of the primacy of the oral transmission of knowledge, premodern India nonetheless has a long tradition of using the written for making public statements of authority since the time of the Mauryan emperor, Aśoka that needs to be considered alongside other practices of

the transmission of knowledge and authority. Recent scholarship in ancient and medieval Indian history has drawn our attention to the possibility of reading more than just dynastic and factual information from epigraphic sources (Ali, Inden, et al. 2000). For example, Daud Ali rightly urges us to shift our attention from an inscription's intention toward its literary qualities to consider it as a historical writing (Ali 2000). Through his careful and constructive rereading, the "Order of the King Rājarāja Cōḷa (Rājendra I, r. 1012/14–1044)," the son of Rājarāja Cōḷa, the patron of the Bhṛhadīśvara temple mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, emerges as an excellent example of a new style of writing royal history in which the inscription speaks to a larger discourse about the past.[22]

Ali's suggestion to see a larger discursive pattern of writing in medieval India is an important one, but for our purposes, I would like to focus on the material object of the inscription. The inscribed copper plates collated together through a pre-bored hole with a ring is an impressive object prepared with thirty-one sheets of copper bound together with a huge copper ring with an embossed regal impression. The letters are clearly written and the inclusion of a royal "order" (Skt. *śāsanaṃ*; Tamil, *tirumukam*) in *pothi*-format reminds us of the palm-leaf manuscripts mentioned above. Its mere physical presence as a metal object weighing nearly two hundred pounds with neatly carved letters could invoke the royal authority in the Cōḷa court or in whatever place it may have been sent (Ali 2000: 173).

Copper plates and stone inscriptions that record land grants and/or eulogies (*praśasti*) for a royal person or religious master are carefully and often beautifully carved objects. They often demonstrate physical presence and aura, not only through size and material as in the case of many stone inscriptions, but also through calligraphy and ornamentation. This is seen, for instance, with royal emblems soldered on top of copper-plate grants in the Bengal region (Fleming 2010: 3). Another example, the inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra found at Nālandā is meticulous and beautifully carved on a piece of stone, almost two feet wide (Figure 3.6).[23] Its horizontal alignment, twice as long as it is wide, is similar to a horizontally aligned palm-leaf folio. Written in a *siddhamātṛkā* script and written by a neatly controlled hand, the text looks just like a section of a folio of an *AsP* manuscript prepared in Nālandā (Figure 3.1).

Many such inscriptions were intended as public documents of religious, political, or liturgical authority on permanent display. For example, there are eulogies issued by the Pallava king Rājasiṃha I (r. ca. 700–725 CE) written in four different scripts on the Kailāsanātha temple in Kāñcīpura at the beginning of the eighth century. The employment of four types of scripts, including one northern script, suggests an inclination to reach beyond the Pallava territory. Extensive networks established through a long history of dynastic interactions as well as trade routes in early medieval India, suggest the possibility that diverse groups of people visited sacred and political centres like Kāñcīpura. The elaborate *virudhas* eulogizing Rājasiṃha I's achievements on the *vimāna* (towered shrine) of the temple, emphasized the visual presence of the scripts over their legibility (Lockwood 2001).[24] The unfamiliarity and the extreme ornamentality of the northern script on the bottom register on the inner face of the *prākāra* (rectangular precinct wall

surrounding the complex), for instance, likely marked the far-reaching ambition of the royal patron most effectively. The formal quality of the controlled writing of the inscriptions, especially those on the *vimāna*, likely contributed to the visibility, power, and authority of the written statement.

It may be argued that the legibility and visibility of the *praśasti* portion of the inscriptions was one of the main concerns of the patron. This can be seen, for instance, in the *saṃvat* 1059 (1001–1002 CE) *praśasti* of king Dhaṅgadeva of the Chandella dynasty at Khajuraho (Kielhorn 1892). Placed inside the entrance hall (*mukha- maṇḍndapa*) of Viśvanātha temple,[25] and re-inscribed due to damage to the original in *saṃvat* 1173 (ca. 1117 CE; Kielhorn 1892: 139). The colophon on the new inscription issued by prince *Jayavarmadeva* was (re) written in clear letters (*prollikhat-akṣarāṇi*) by Jayapāla, a *kāyastha* (clerk) of the royal court from the Gauḍa district (modern West Bengal). The script in this inscription shows a few later paleographic features than another *praśasti* inscription now placed on the opposite wall of the same space, corresponding to the later date of the re-inscription.[26] Though less ornate, this later inscription also clearly presents the script through elongation of each line and spacing. This re-inscribed work of king Dhaṅgadeva is similarly concerned for the legibility and presentation of the text.

Another, earlier example of the *praśasti* inscription in Khajuraho issued by the Chandella king Yaśovarman, dated *saṃvat* 1011 (953–954 CE), states unequivocally a clear aim of presenting the text in beautiful letters. The inscription is placed at the entrance porch of the Lakṣmaṇa temple at Khajuraho and is written in the *siddhamātṛkā* script, with the pronounced hooks we have seen in Buddhist material. It was composed by the poet Mādhava and said to be written "in pleasing letters by the son of Jayaguṇa, the writer of legal documents (*karaṇika*) Jaddha," who was also from Gauḍa (Kielhorn 1892: 135). Indeed, the letters of this inscription bear this statement out and are pleasing to the eyes with flowing curvy lines marking the vertical components of each character.

Despite the geographic distance between the various inscriptions mentioned (Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal), we can discern a great similarity between the royal *praśasti* inscriptions and the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts. Such similarities include their manner of presentation that emphasizes the formal, controlled, and ornate qualities of the writing. Additionally, such similarities also help to emphasize and highlight the visual quality of the script and reflect a widespread attitude toward the pragmatic and authoritative value of the written in early medieval India.

Through the above set of examples, it may be suggested that the art of writing in India developed steadily during the medieval period with the established royal and imperial practices of using ornate, decorative, writing for the establishment of authority. It is in this historical period that the production of the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts showcasing the calligraphic skills of professional scribes and monastic practitioners came into bloom. Although we have noted that foreign scholars sometimes criticized scribal standards throughout the subcontinent, and that this might seem to support the general observation that Indians favored oral

transmission, the emphasis on writing as a visual medium points to an alternative model. This alternative should be considered alongside the more traditional means—a certain type of scribal practices came to play an important role in the dissemination of knowledge, power, and religious authority.

The connection between the Chandella inscriptions and the Buddhist manuscripts of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla is not as remote as it might at first seem. For instance, we have already discussed the two Gauḍa officials living in the Chandella court at Khajuraho, Jaddha, and Jayapāla who produced inscriptional documents. Furthermore, the boundaries of Gauḍa often overlapped with the ancient areas of Magadha and Varendra where many Buddhist monasteries were located. In addition, the Chandella inscriptions are contemporaneous to a number of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts. While making a direct historical connection between the temple-building activities in Khajuraho and the production of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts in Magadha seems farfetched, it is important to acknowledge that production of religious monuments and objects were contemporaneous. This allows us to see a larger historical picture and to refine our understanding of the past.

To help further solidify our speculations, I turn to some final notes of comparison of inscriptional and manuscript data. These include an inscription and a manuscript issued by wives of Govindacandra (r. 1114–1154 CE) of the Gahaḍavālas at Sārnāth (queens Kumaradevī) as well as the Nālandā manuscript now in the Asia Society (Acc. No. 1987.001) mentioned at the beginning. It can be argued that there is an interconnected historical process behind the production of all of these artifacts.

The inscription issued by Kumaradevī bears what Sten Konow (Konow 1907–1908: 76) calls "Nāgarī of a very ornamental kind," and, upon close inspection, we notice that the letters with pronounced hooks on the bottom in the inscription are remarkably similar to those in the *AsP* manuscript prepared in Nālandā we began this chapter with (Figure 3.1). The manuscript, held at the Asia Society, was initially prepared during the fifteenth regnal year of Vigrahapāla III (ca. 1058 CE), and was repaired during the eighth regnal year of Gopāla IV (ca. 1140 CE). Though the twelfth-century scribal hand in the colophon is possibly related to the original, I could still discern a few distinctive features that appear to separate it from the latter. The second hand makes an angular curve above the letter in the short "i" vowel sign whereas the original hand makes a rounder top for this same vowel sign. That a number of folios, including the first two illustrated folios were prepared during this later phase can be confirmed through paleographic analysis.[27] This feature, an angular topped medial vowel "i" sign of the later mid-twelfth-century hand, is also seen in the Kumaradevī inscription.

According to Kumaradevī's inscription (verse 7) she had a close connection to the Pāla royal house as her maternal grandfather, Mahaṇadeva, is identified as Rāmapāla's maternal uncle (Konow 1907–1908: 77).[28] Though the surviving evidence for connections between the monastic establishment at Sārnāth and at Nālandā in the early twelfth century is limited, we may nonetheless note that the similarity in the style of script used in Kumaradevī's inscription and that in the

portion of the Asia Society *AsP* manuscript from Nālandā may indicate close ties between the two.[29]

The similarity in the style of script is further highlighted when one considers another *AsP* manuscript prepared for Govindacandra's other wife, Vasantadevī.[30] The calligraphy of this manuscript is distinct from Kumaradevī's inscription, despite their dynastic closeness, further supporting the latter's connection with the Nālandā manuscript.[31] I emphasize the connection between Kumaradevī's inscription and the Asia Society's Nālandā manuscript beyond their visual similarity to locate the medieval Buddhist manuscript production on par with the production of public statements in the form of inscriptions whose legibility is rarely questioned even though they are written in almost identical hands.

Inscriptions like Kumaradevī's and Vipulaśrīmitra's were intended to convey physical proof of their meritorious acts, and letters written in ornamental scripts contribute to creating such an uncontestable aura. The same could be said of all the *praśasti* inscriptions and the inscriptions of the dharma verse and the donative formula on Buddhist sculptures discussed above. The choice of more archaic and formalized scripts in the production of illustrated manuscripts works in a similar fashion, as it helps to create a sacred aura for a manuscript, transforming a hand-written text into a Buddha's true relic. In this regard, the ultimate role of images is identical to the text as they, too, help transform a manuscript, a man-made object, into a sacred object.

EPILOGUE: SEEING IN BETWEEN THE SPACE

Another twelfth-century manuscript from Gauḍa (in today's West Bengal and part of Bangladesh) is the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* ("*Casket*" *of* "*the Magnificent Array*," of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, henceforth *KV*) now in the British Library (Or. 13940). This *sūtra* eulogizes the fantastic abilities of Avalokiteśvara and portrays him as a compassionate savior. Every folio has an illustrated panel in the centre with flanking illustrated bands around the holes on both recto and verso. Fifty-three folios with 105 illustrations survive, and when complete, the manuscript would have consisted of sixty-three folios, with about 125 painted panels. Fifteen extant folios from folio 17 recto (f. 15a) to folio 30 verso (f. 26b) have panels depicting the adventures of the bodhisattva.[32] The panels include his encounter with the legendary king Bali, the king's interaction with Vamāna-Trivikrama[33] (folio 17 recto, [f. 15a]), Avalokiteśvara in the form of a magic horse (Bālāha) saving the future Buddha, Siṁhalarāja (folios 19r-v, 22r; Losty 1989: 10–11).[34] Because the narrative panels are not placed next to the corresponding text, some scholars have argued that the images do not illustrate the text and that they were never meant to be read or viewed (Losty 1989). Unlike European or Islamic illustrated manuscripts in which one finds a direct one-on-one relationship between the text and the images, it has been suggested that the only reason that Indian Buddhist manuscripts have images of the Buddha and of the Buddhist divinities is "because they are more merit-worthy than anything else despite the fact that

they had nothing whatever to do with the text of the *Prajñâpâramitâ . . .*" (Losty 1989: 7–8).

I do not doubt that the images in this text were chosen and included to enhance the meritorious effect of the donation, but they are also integrated with and integral to the narrative as a whole. Losty's denial of this possibility is likely driven more by an emphasis on India's oral tradition than by what we actually see in these manuscripts.

If we start understanding a manuscript as a sacred object and a material expression of piety, it is not too difficult to see connections between the text and the image in other contexts as well. Just as the interplay between the written and the visual makes a Buddhist manuscript religiously meaningful, the same can be said about medieval Indian temples like Rājarāja Cōḷa's Bhṛhadīśvara discussed above. Through these unlikely and wide-ranging comparisons that I have attempted here, I believe we can locate the production of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts during the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the rise of the written script as a fit, permanent vessel for the signification of authority, be it liturgical, political or religious. Arguably, there was often harmonious coexistence of written and visual elements on the surface of a sacred structure in medieval India, whether it is a palm-leaf manuscript, sculpture, or temple wall. Writing is pervasive in all three of these physical contexts, yet we rarely consider them as expressions of the same or integrated vision. Of course, by emphasizing the visuality and the materiality of writing, I do not mean to argue that textual meaning and their readability do not matter to effective historical inquiry.

My point is that the significance of visual and material aspects of written scripts in all of these contexts (palm leaf, sculpture, copper plate, temple wall, etc.) deserves equal attention as is given to their literary and literal meanings. In some instances, even more attention is in order, as is the case with many of the examples I have explored above. Recognizing the perceived aura of writing and investigating the way it functions with other visual and literary strategies can further elucidate and enlighten the processes of negotiations that took place among the involved actors with respect to the production of religious objects. And here, by connecting the dots between the written and the visual and seeing the space that emerges therein, we may have a tiny glimpse of what George Kubler (2008 [1962]) called the "shape of time" as it was in various specific locales of medieval South Asia.

NOTES

1. This is an imagined scenario rather than what one could do today by picking up the manuscript. The illustrated folios are now encased together with a colophon folio in a black frame for easy display.
2. Another common name for this script is *kuṭila* or literally "hooked" script. I use *siddhamātṛkā*, a term more commonly used to designate the script used in stone and copper plate inscriptions, to locate the manuscripts within the context of the written culture in early medieval India.

3. The term *dharmabhāṇaka* may not necessarily imply monastic status, but it could have been a special title for a master scribe. Compared to those written by a *lekhaka* (scribe), those written by a *dharmabhāṇaka* are of superior quality in their paintings and writings.
4. The patron is said to be a Mahāyāna layman (*upāsaka*) named Naesutaṣohāsitna who is difficult to identify due to the formulaic nature of the donor colophon. However, one clue is found in his non-Sanskritic name. Furthermore, there are Tibetan post-colophons on folio 301 verso identifying a number of eminent Buddhist scholars as later owners of the text. These include the Kashmiri master Mahapaṇḍita Śākyaśrībhadra who was active in Tibet between 1204 and 1213. Such evidence raises a tantalizing possibility that Naesutaṣohāsitna was a Tibetan visitor to Nālandā during the mid-eleventh century. At the museum, the illustrated and colophon folios are mounted under a glass frame, and I have not been able to verify the Tibetan colophons on the verso of folio 301. The Tibetan colophon on the recto of folio 301 translates the scribal colophon in the original literally. It reads, "This was written by Kun dga' (Ānanda), the dharma instructor (*dharmabhāṇaka*) who resides at the illustrious Nālanda." I thank Andrew Quintman for reading and translating this colophon. See Huntington and Huntington (1990: 186–88) for the Tibetan colophons on the verso of folio 301.
5. In pre-Islamic South Asia, a book (Skt. *pustaka*) was traditionally made in *pothi* format. A *pothi* format manuscript was prepared with over two to three hundred long, narrow palm-leaf (or birch-bark) folios cut into uniform shape and size, which were stacked together to form a book, bound by a cord or two metal sticks threading the loose folios together through two pre-bored holes.
6. I discuss the illustrated Buddhist manuscripts with systematic iconographic programs as temples in microcosm in chapter 2 of my recent book (Kim 2013).
7. As Gregory Schopen (2010) points out, one good example of such characterization is found in Frits Staal's works, which emphasize the predominance of the oral-aural tradition in the transmission of religious authority and knowledge to the extent to deny any place of authority for the written, in his case, the books, in what we shorthandedly call Hinduism.
8. The volume edited by Asher and Gai tries to remedy this situation by emphasizing the importance of epigraphic evidence. Salomon also points out how calligraphic writings are not uncommon in pre-Islamic India, despite the relatively low status of the written ascribed in early Indian texts, i.e., *Vedas*. While it may be true that calligraphy was never a major artistic pursuit in India compared to China or the Islamic world, I wonder if the perceived notion of the predominantly oral culture has discouraged any serious scholarly investigation of the development of calligraphy in India.
9. I use "manuscript" and "book" interchangeably throughout this chapter. The term book is used to emphasize the physical aspect of the book as an object, and this usage follows the use of the Sanskrit term *pustaka* in the *AsP*. This sūtra mentions two separate stages of a manuscript production: writing the text and making it into a beautiful book. For example, in chapter 3 of the *AsP*, we find "a son or daughter of good family, having written down this perfection of wisdom, made it into a book" (*imam prajñāpāramitāṃ likhitvā pustakagatām kṛtvā*; P. L. Vaidya 1960: 28).
10. This is not to say there is no semiotic relationship between text and image. The text practically defies any confinement of meaning through various clever and rhetorical strategies, the most famous of which can be summarized in the paradoxical phrase, "emptiness is form, form is emptiness." Nonetheless, the images successfully illustrate the two main points of the text: (1) the importance of the Prajñāpāramitā as the root cause of enlightenment and (2) the promotion of the cultic value of the book of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.
11. According to Salomon (1998: 39), this script reflects "the influence of pen-and-ink writing on the epigraphic script."

12. As Salomon (1998: 69) observes, embellishing vowel signs, i.e., diacritic decoration, seems to have been the most common strategy in calligraphic writing in early medieval India. The technique of embellishing consonants by adding curlicues as we see in the twelfth-century manuscripts from Vikramaśīla (British Library Or. 6902), and a folio now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.72.1.23) may be a development limited to the production of Buddhist manuscripts.
13. Unfortunately, the colophon does not identify the name of the scribe. The manuscript was prepared for a monk, a *sthavira* (a monastic elder) named Sumatiśrīmitra.
14. We should also note that the choice of *siddhamātṛkā* script in the face of developing regional scripts is intentional. The consistent use of *siddhamātṛkā* or *kuṭila*, the most calligraphic variety, for writing this particular type of manuscript into the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries despite the rise of the regional scripts such as proto-Bengali or early Nagari, suggests that their ornamental qualities were considered important for the makers and the patrons of these Buddhist manuscripts.
15. A good example of this visual conformity is found on a single folio of the *AsP* now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.72.1.23), where we see angular hooked features and pronounced curlicue patterns on the letters mirrored on the angularity of physiognomic features and other details such as fingers, ends of robes, and limbs.
16. The syllable *stha* likely represents *sthavira* (elder), an intentional abbreviation allowing the donor inscription to fit directly under the Buddha's feet.
17. This is a generalized statement and there are exceptions to the rule. Sometimes a well-made sculpture bears a clumsily construed donor inscription. While a discussion of the economics of artistic production is beyond the scope of this paper, it is likely that this discrepancy (between the quality of an image and its inscription) is evidence that some religious images were chosen from ready-made samples on which the inscriptions were added at a later time by less-skilled hands while many were made-to-order in workshops near or around major pilgrimage sites.
18. The verse also appears in a number of Buddhist *tantras*. For example, a manuscript of the *Guhyasamāja* in the Asiatic Society, Kolkata (G.8070), bears the dharma verse on the verso of the last folio (folio 68).
19. This does not necessarily mean that this tradition originated from India and spread outward. If anything, I would like to emphasize how frequent interactions with outside visitors had an impact on the pattern of artistic production in Buddhist India. I believe it is more useful to consider a multi-directional model for understanding the development of the artistic and cultic practices in different parts of the Buddhist world than a unidirectional, diffusionist model. On *siddham*, see further Glassman, in this volume.
20. It reads: "*śrīmatkhasarppaṇamahāyatane prayatnāt mañjūṣayā vihitayā jananījinānām/ yena bhramatyaviratam pratimāś catasraḥ sattreṣu parvvaṇi samarppayati sma yaś ca//*"
21. This model can be aligned with contemporary practices of manuscript production in Nepal and Tibet, where the Indian manuscripts were often celebrated as possessions of monastic communities.
22. Ali (2000: 170) suggests how we should start to understand India's history, as envisioned and articulated by those who lived it, by approaching inscriptions not as sources, but as "histories in and of themselves."
23. According to Majumdar (1931–1932: 97), the inscribed area measures 19⅞" by 8¼" and the averages size of letters is ¾".
24. Michael Lockwood (2001) provides the most recent discussion of the content of the inscriptions. I thank Padma Kaimal for her generous help with identifying primary and secondary sources for the study of the inscriptions on Kailāsanātha temple.
25. The inscription was re-inscribed due to the damage to the previous inscription in *saṃvat* 1173 (1117 CE; Kielhorn 1892: 139).

26. The square box-like shape of each letter seems to be related to the scribe's connection with the Gauḍa region, reflecting the features of the Gauḍi or proto-Bengali script.
27. Although some scholars initially suggested that the first two folios belong to the original date of production, the mid-eleventh century, their later date can be easily proven through stylistic and paleographic analysis. It is common to find the first two folios damaged more severely than the rest due to exposure. Some manuscripts with pūjā marks and burns on the first two pages, for instance, suggest that they might have been employed during a ritual.
28. Although the Nālandā manuscript is dated with a Pāla regnal year and Kumaradevī is a queen of the Gahāḍavālas, whose seat of power was located in Kanauj, her husband Govindacandra's advancement and political success in Magadha is known from his land grants (Niyogi 1959).
29. Movements between different monastic centres beyond dynastic lines are quite plausible, and many cultural and intellectual productions must have benefited from such movements, and possibly from a well-connected monastic network. A further study on the relationship between Buddhist monasteries during the twelfth century will expand our understanding of the state of affairs in Buddhist institutions in general.
30. The donor colophon identifies Vasantadevī as the queen of Govindacandrā of the Gahādavālas. Unfortunately, we do not know where this was prepared due to the lack of a scribal colophon. It was probably prepared in the Gahāḍavāla territory, perhaps east of Sārnāth.
31. Vasantadevī's manuscript is also written in ornamental *siddhamātṛkā*-type script as in Nālandā manuscripts, but with a slightly more angular and slender line and without any pronounced hook on the bottom of each letter. The microfilm printouts of this manuscript's last two folios are on display at the Lumbini Museum. According to the museum label, the manuscript is in the National Archive, Kathmandu, but I could not locate it during my research there in 2004. I thank Christian Luczanits for the photos of the printout pages.
32. The manuscript has fifteen extant folios, but several are missing. I give the original foliation as well as the British Library's foliation in parentheses.
33. This mythic figure is well known as the dwarf incarnation of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu and is renowned for his transformation into a colossal form of Viṣṇu, taking three steps.
34. The story of Bali is related in chapter 11, part 1 of the *KV*, while the story of Bālāha is told in the first chapter of part 2 of the *KV* (Studholme 2002: 128–31, 134–36).

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