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Review of 'Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia. Dynamics in the History of Religion, vol. 2.' by Jason Neelis

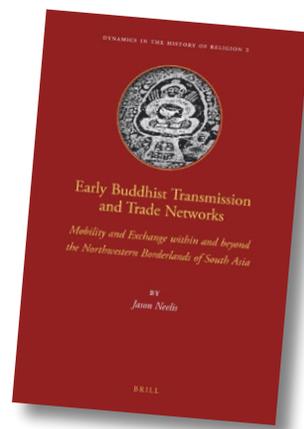
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Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia. Dynamics in the History of Religion, vol. 2.

Jason Neelis. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
Pp. xiv+371. \$179.00 (cloth).
ISBN 978-90-04-18159-5.

Reviewed by John Vincent Bellezza

Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks is part of a series of books published under the auspices of an international consortium based at Ruhr University Bochum (Germany), which is engaged in the study of relations between the religions of Europe and Asia over the last three millennia. This book is concerned with the historical and economic factors involved in the transmission of Buddhism and the dissemination of its institutions in ancient South and Central Asia (and also Persia and China to a lesser extent). It charts the spread of Buddhism primarily through trade networks and the economic, social and political catalysts responsible for their formation. This study highlights the central importance of trade as the force behind Buddhist transmission and institutional expansion through two main economic channels: 1) donor patronage and 2) the participation of monks and nuns in commercial exchanges.

Simply put, the thesis of this book is that the growth of Buddhist institutions connected to both

itinerant monks and coenobitic communities was directly linked to the generation of surplus economic resources. Neelis demonstrates that there was indeed a symbiosis between Buddhist monastic institutions and trade networks, spurred on by the notion of gift giving for the acquisition of merit. Marshaling an impressive battery of secondary sources, the author admirably develops and defends his thesis and, in the process, opens up the fantastically rich world of ancient Buddhism to the reader. The methodological strength of the book lies in the author's adroit handling of a huge and disparate range of references while maintaining thematic coherence throughout. Synthesizing archaeological, art, epigraphic and textual materials dating from circa 500 BCE to 1000 CE to elucidate localized and trans-regional aspects of Buddhist transmission and trade routes, this study is a very useful addition to the field of Buddhology. By furnishing a broad economic historical perspective, it supplements ideological perspectives on how Buddhism gained ground well beyond its homeland.

Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks is a major reference work that should be incorporated in undergraduate and graduate Buddhist studies programs, as part of a growing trend to augment text-based approaches to religious traditions with perspectives drawn from a variety of other disciplines.

Unfortunately, the inordinately high price of the book will deter its use in coursework.

Chapter One reviews various theories that have been devised to explain how ideological, symbolic, textual and material entities move over time from one place to another. Briefly discussed are two models of diffusion: contact expansion and long-distance transmission. Also touched upon are flow theories with their hydraulic metaphors, as well as economic utilitarian models. Nevertheless, as becomes apparent throughout the course of the book, Neelis favors network models for understanding religious mobility and the intellectual and economic exchanges upon which they are built. Perhaps his work would have been better served if he had more clearly stated his theoretical preference in the first chapter. Networks, as applied in the book, are comprised of nodes serving as points of transfer and transmission joined through conduits along which people, ideas and goods flow. These networks were continuously recreated by the actions of administrators, merchants, scholars and religious specialists. Felicitously, the author remains aware that network models, especially when applied to religious studies, may be overly functional or reductionist, marginalizing the role of intentionality and agency.

Chapter Two, by far the longest in the book, offers excellent insights into the adaptability of Buddhism against a wide array of data. Neelis

presents four key arguments. First, he cautions us that while the Buddha is now often portrayed as a social reformer or revolutionary, the rise of his doctrine must be understood against a background of dynamic social change. This Iron Age upheaval was brought about through emerging urbanization, political consolidation, material and agricultural surpluses, and the expansion of systems of trade in the plains of the Ganga-Yamuna. Neelis convincingly shows (pp. 74, 75) that the advent of Buddhism and urbanization were concurrent phenomena, rather than Buddhism being the causal factor in the development of large urban centers, as is sometimes presupposed. Second, Neelis argues that royal support of Buddhists and other religious communities was carried out for the rather pedestrian reasons of insuring the prosperity of the realm, military victory and divine sanction of kingship, as much as for any personal predilection. Third, he demonstrates that intercultural exchange had a large impact on Buddhist material culture, especially in northwest India. Trans-regional Hellenistic influences that contributed to Buddhist art and patronage (fourth to second centuries BCE) are explored (pp. 98-109). Also included is an analysis of long-distance trade networks between South and Central Asia controlled by the Saka rulers (first century BCE and first century CE), a critical time in the formation of Buddhism as a cosmopolitan religion (pp. 109-132). This examination of the Sakas not only strengthens the author's

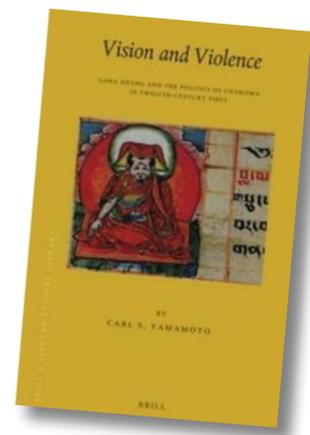
fundamental theme of the nexus between religious dissemination and economic increase; it leads to a reappraisal of the role they played in directly contributing to the growth of Buddhist institutions. Fourth, Neelis proceeds to show (pp. 157-159) how in the post-Kushana period and Gupta period (fourth and fifth centuries CE) Buddhist institutions were able to successfully cope with economic and political fluctuations despite often voiced assertions to the contrary. The theme of the spread of Buddhism and trade going hand in hand is recapitulated for each of the major powers that ruled South Asia up to the close of the first millennium CE.

Chapter Three consists of the synchronic treatment of trans-regional networks with an emphasis on how patterns of Buddhist transmission contributed to cross-cultural mobility and material exchange. The major nodes or entrepôts of the Uttarapatha (Northern Route) and Dakshinapatha (Southern Route) are described individually. Chapter Four examines Gandharan religious, cultural, economic and political features that helped shape Buddhist literature, art, architecture and devotional practices. This exercise buttresses the basic thesis of the book by revealing that Buddhist monasteries and stupas were situated near cities and fertile agricultural areas, in addition to being located along lines of trade.

Chapter Five describes capillary trade routes in far northern Pakistan and the Buddhist inscriptions and rock

art that document their existence. According to the author, the presence of precious stones and metals in the northern areas of Pakistan probably furnished a powerful incentive for undertaking journeys through these very rugged mountain tracts. As Neelis opines, these capillary routes were mainly used for transit because of the difficulty of generating adequate surpluses to support communities of monks and nuns in a high mountain environment.

Chapter Six conveys the significance of the Tarim Basin as a Central Asian Buddhist hub with a distinctive cultural identity and preponderant role in trans-regional exchange. To account for the later founding of Buddhist monastic institutions in the Tarim basin compared to western Central Asia and China, Neelis suggests that diffusion through contact expansion of Buddhist institutions was not possible because the arable lands of the region could only maintain a population at subsistence level. While viewing the mountainous areas of northern Pakistan as hosting a system of transit corridors is valid for that very reason, I do not think the same can be said for the Tarim Basin. The Tarim basin has a rich agricultural potential, even more so in ancient times before the cumulative impacts of desiccation were felt. Why did the Tarim basin seemingly first function only as a stage on long-distance transmission of Buddhism to China is a historical enigma that demands more scrutiny.



Aside from the analytical shortcoming mentioned above, the adept use of datasets to explicate the concomitant expansion of Buddhism and trade distinguishes this book from start to finish. The only other criticism I would like to make is a stylistic one: the use of periods inside single sentences when citing bibliographic sources is hard on the eyes.

Chapter Seven, the conclusion, reiterates themes that run through the entire book. Paramount among these is that the ability of Buddhist traditions to adapt to change is rooted in the history of transcultural exchange, the result being a hybridization and cosmopolitanism (characterizing Buddhism to this day). *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, a skillfully conceived and executed compendium of Buddhist dispersal and economic growth in ancient times, is essential reading for all those looking beyond scriptural exhortations and pious explanations to understand the great and lasting success of Buddhism.

John Vincent Bellezza is a senior research fellow at the Tibet Center, University of Virginia. His main area of research is the formation and development of civilization in pre-Buddhist Upper Tibet. Residing in India for many years, he also shares a keen interest in the history of religions on the Indian subcontinent.

Vision and Violence: Lama Zhang and the Politics of Charisma in Twelfth-Century Tibet

Carl S. Yamamoto. Leiden: Brill, 2011. Pp. xiv+371. \$179.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-90-04-18159-5.

Reviewed by Stefan Larsson

Lama Zhang (1122/23–1193) is a somewhat overlooked figure in the field of Tibetan studies who deserves an in-depth study in his own right, rather than mere mention in passing. It is therefore highly appropriate that a full-length book dedicated to Lama Zhang has been published.

Lama Zhang personifies some central yet paradoxical and puzzling poles of tension within Tibetan Buddhism, tensions that also exist in other forms of Buddhism and in other religions as well. Lama Zhang's life epitomizes the complicated, and oftentimes intimate and interdependent, relationships between religion and politics, exoteric and esoteric forms of religion, non-violence and violence, meditators and scholars, and so forth. Lama Zhang is a controversial figure about whom there are different opinions: according to some, he is an enlightened *siddha* who benefitted beings and the Buddhist teachings, and, according to others, he is a violent leader who harmed beings and the Buddhist teachings.

Carl Yamamoto mentions how his own view of Lama Zhang shifted during the course of the work, from holding Zhang to be “a volatile—possibly psychotic—minor character” who “engaged in ethically suspect activities, and employed the less reputable forms of Buddhist tantra as a smokescreen for his misconduct,”

to the view that Lama Zhang was an important and influential figure and “more than just a marginal ‘crazy’ in the history of Tibetan Buddhism” (p. xi). An underlying motivation behind Yamamoto's study is an attempt to bring out Lama Zhang's importance and provide a more balanced picture of this fascinating and versatile figure. This is an important and needed endeavor since stereotyped presentations of Lama Zhang still abound, both in traditional and scholarly accounts.

Lama Zhang's impact as a political leader oftentimes overshadows his many other facets. Zhang was, for example, also an important literary figure, the founder of one of the four major suborders of the Kagyu tradition, the Tsarpa Kagyu, and an early advocate of the “Great Seal” (*mahamudra*) meditative/philosophical system. It is of course impossible to cover all of Lama Zhang's many facets in full detail in one book, but Yamamoto manages to cover many of them with both care and depth.

Although some of Lama Zhang's numerous facets have been touched upon in previous scholarship, there is a need to contextualize these, both within Zhang's own activities and within the larger historical, political, religious, and cultural milieu in which Zhang lived. Yamamoto's book provides us with such broader investigation and contextualization to a larger degree than done previously. With Lama Zhang as a vehicle, Yamamoto also sheds light upon several broader issues such as textual production, literary genre, the formation of traditions and lineages, and the relationship between politics and religion.