SETTING OUT ON THE GREAT WAY

Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism

Edited by

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SHEFFIELD UK BRISTOL CT

PUBLISHED BY EQUINOX PUBLISHING LTD.
UK: Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S1 2BX
USA: ISD, 70 Enterprise Drive, Bristol, CT 06010
www.equinoxpub.com

First published 2018
First printing in paperback 2019

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978 1 78179 096 0 (hardback)
ISBN-13: 978 1 78179 853 9 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 978 1 78179 685 6 (ePDF)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Harrison, Paul M. (Paul Maxwell), 1950– editor.
Title: Setting out on the great way : essays on early Mahåayåana Buddhism / edited by Paul M. Harrison.
Description: Bristol, CT : Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017048841 (print) | LCCN 2017050834 (ebook) | ISBN 9781781796856 (ePDF) | ISBN 9781781790960 (hb)
Subjects: LCSH: Mahayana Buddhism–History.
Classification: LCC BQ7374 (ebook) | LCC BQ7374.S48 2018 (print) | DDC 294.3/9209–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017048841

Typeset by Advent Publishing Services, London

CONTENTS

2

EARLY MAHĀYĀNA

Laying out the Field

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OPENING REMARKS

When Richard Gombrich first approached me on behalf of the United Kingdom Association of Buddhist Studies (UKABS) about arranging a symposium on early Mahāyāna in honour of the late Sara Boin-Webb, I had some misgivings about the idea. Although I have great respect for Sara and her work in making the pivotal contributions of Étienne Lamotte to the field of Buddhist studies available to a wider, non-Francophone audience, and was happy to help to organise a conference to honour her memory, I was less than enthusiastic about the proposed topic, which, to some extent, I believed I had put behind me. That is to say, I had grown accustomed to thinking that 'early Mahāyāna' was a little passé, in part because the search for origins has come to be seen as intellectually suspect and unfashionable, and in part because I felt

there might not be very much more to say on the subject. Be that as it may, I said yes to Prof. Gombrich.

The Early Mahāyāna conference did take place (in Cardiff, 7–8 July 2012) and it fell to me to make some introductory remarks to frame the issues that we hoped to discuss over that weekend. This chapter is a revised and updated version of that address. I should explain also that the conference was deliberately set up as a meeting of scholars who do not always see eye to eye, mixing people at various stages of their careers and with differing opinions, as opposed to convening a cosy reunion of senior scholars who have known each for a very long time and are content to sing in harmony from the same hymn sheet. In that regard the genesis of the conference lay not in Prof. Gombrich's invitation, but in the meeting of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Atlanta in 2008, where on the last day I had the novel and bracing experience of sitting in the audience for a panel on Mahāyāna listening to junior scholars firing on the positions of my generation, myself included. Two of the panelists – David Drewes and Douglas Osto – were among those invited to Cardiff,[1] and their contributions to the meeting and to this volume testify to a level of disagreement which I take to be a sign that the subject has some life left in it after all.

I shall refrain here from giving a detailed history of scholarship in this field and of the various ideas and theories that have formed around the topic. Drewes (2010a; 2010b) has already done this for us and produced a very useful two-part article plotting the major developments, and this can be taken together with a more recent contribution by him on early Mahāyāna to the online Oxford Bibliographies project.[2] I do not always agree with Prof. Drewes's take on things, but he does do a very good job in these pieces of outlining the main issues, among them the notion that Mahāyāna Buddhism was a reaction, possibly spearheaded by lay Buddhists, against monastic privilege and self-absorption, and was moreover institutionally distinct from the *nikāyas*, the ordination fraternities or lineages according to which Buddhist renunciants, members of the Saṅgha in the narrower sense of the word, organised their communities. These ideas, extended and popularised by Akira Hirakawa, Étienne Lamotte, and Edward Conze among others, but springing from the work of their predecessors (Eugène Burnouf, V. P. Vassilief, Thomas William Rhys Davids), held sway until

the second half of last century, and in their diluted popular form led to the simplistic and anachronistic perception that Indian Buddhism somehow forked at a certain point in its development in two principal directions, Theravāda and Mahāyāna. It is fair to say that this idea has become so deeply implanted that even today I find it almost impossible to eradicate among my own undergraduate students; they listen politely enough to the lectures in which I explain the complexities and nuances of the situation and all the recent advances in scholarship, but their essays more often than not fall into the same old binary thinking. Thus even in the twenty-first century the 'Theravāda–Mahāyāna split' is alive and well, despite the move among scholars since the 1960s and 1970s to embrace a more complex and nuanced picture of Mahāyāna as pluralistic, as a loose set of interrelated doctrinal ideas, ritual practices and literary forms rather than as a single bounded entity, as spanning all the *nikāya*s and not institutionally separate from them (at least in India), as a movement or set of movements for renunciants, and not just for the laity (or not *even* for the laity), and as entailing different – and possibly more demanding – forms of self-engagement and asceticism, rather than a wholesale turn to devotion. Now all these elements of the new scholarly consensus, which we can see taking shape with the work of Heinz Bechert and others, turn on issues which are by no means beyond dispute, but they do show how our conception of early Mahāyāna at the beginning of the twenty-first century has moved a long way from where it was in the middle of the twentieth century. What I want to do now is look at some of those issues, to consider where the challenges lie as we continue to refine and deepen our understanding.

THE 'FOREST HYPOTHESIS'

The first thing to point out is how difficult it is to disentangle these issues for separate analysis. For example, the whole question of lay-renunciant relationships is bound up with what we might call the principal thrust of the movement, or movements, we designate by the term 'Mahāyāna', and that in turn has bearings on its (or their) institutional emplacement. It may well be fair enough to say that the defining characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism is a concern with the

pursuit of the bodhisattva path, but that does not get us very far, since we are not sure what that meant in concrete terms, apart from the fact that Mahāyāna sutras have a lot to say about bodhisattvas. Here we run up against another tangled issue, which is how to read our sources, which consist primarily, but not exclusively as we shall see, in these Mahāyāna sutras, by which we mean a fuzzily delimited set of texts supposedly assembled from pre-existing *āgama* and vinaya materials and other elements of more indeterminate origin and purporting to record the sermons of Śākyamuni and his disciples, lay patrons and others, or conversations between these figures. Drawing an analogy with Rumpelstiltskin which I have used before, somehow we have to spin the straw of this material – and there is certainly plenty of it – into the gold of history, and that, not surprisingly, is an operation which rests more on the exercise of imagination than on the processing of hard facts. One thing that more recent scholars have imagined, on the basis of their reading of Mahāyāna sutras, is that the orientation of their compilers was monastic or, perhaps better, renunciant, and of a more rigorously ascetic cast. This has resulted what has been dubbed the 'forest hypothesis', given that *araṇyavāsa* or 'forest dwelling' is emblematic of a more ascetic set of options for members of the Buddhist *saṅgha* (which are laid out in amplified form in the *dhūtaguṇas*, a list of a dozen or so supererogatory ascetic practices). Like several others I myself have pursued this idea. Other important contributions include Silk's (1994) work on the *Ratnarāśi-sūtra*, Nattier's (2003) on the *Ugra(datta)-paripṛcchā*, and Boucher's (2008) on the *Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchā*. But the definitive work that examines the forest hypothesis is Ray 1994. This monograph was a very solid contribution to the conversation, which moved it forward by positing forest ascetics as a kind of third force in the development of Buddhism, alongside laypeople and regular members of the Saṅgha in their monastic setting. While Ray was certainly right to draw our attention to the importance of forest ascetics, his portrayal of them as a separate group arguably went too far. This is partly because he ignored or glossed over references to vinaya observance on the part of *araṇyavāsins* in the historical records, references pointing to a state of affairs which is, incidentally, consistent with what we know of the modern situation with regard to such people, as amply documented in the work of Stanley Tambiah and Kamala Tiyavanich.[3] It seems

to me more appropriate to imagine early Mahāyāna *araṇyavāsin*s as people on whom the vinaya sat no more lightly than it did on their more traditional Mainstream[4] brothers and sisters, in other words as *bhikṣu*s (and possibly *bhikṣuṇī*s) in good standing (*prakṛtistha*) but pursuing a lifestyle that, then as now, laid them open to suspicion, misunderstanding, and disrepute. With all of this David Drewes has problems, and his contribution to this volume addresses the issue. I do not intend to mount a detailed defence of my position here, or attempt a strategic withdrawal from it – a detailed response must await another occasion – but I would say that many years ago I came to two conclusions, both of which have moved me somewhat closer to Prof. Drewes's standpoint. The first is not controversial at all: early Mahāyāna was not a single movement, and so even if we posit the existence of groups with strong *araṇyavāsin* self-identification, it is not the end of the story.[5] The second is a question I raise in Harrison 2003 about our notion of what this so-called 'forest dwelling' actually means.[6] Making progress here would entail sorting out with greater precision the range of meanings and connotations the word *araṇya* carries in the broader Indian cultural context, and then combing the relevant Buddhist sources for evidence of particular Buddhist understandings and uses of the term. But even if we did this, one problem would still remain, and that is the problem of translation: 'forest' conjures up a range of associations and resonances for English speakers which might be quite out of place for the Indian context two thousand years ago, and the alternatives – 'jungle', 'wilderness', 'the wild', 'countryside', and so on – are no less problematic. My own suspicion is that we have here something oscillating between a stock trope and a reference to an actual situation, but when there is an actual referent it is more likely to have been a monastery at some distance – but not too far – from cities, towns and villages, of the kind which have left ruins in the hills above the Peshawar plain (Takht-i-Bahi and other such sites), rather than the isolated cave in the mountains or the idyllic sylvan clearing where deer graze around the hermit's hut beneath trees heavy with mangos.[7] In any case we have to be careful about how we read our Mahāyāna sutras, and where we may be unwittingly led by the language we use in our translations. I have raised similar issues with respect to our use of the term 'meditation', which in the Mahāyāna context seems to be a question – at least in some cases – of a kind of textual practice. Douglas

Osto's contribution to this volume provides a different perspective on this, and although one might question the extent to which it explains what is going on in certain Mahāyāna sutras, it illustrates once again the need to interrogate our texts and try to get beyond the surface meaning of the words and concepts they use.[8]

THE ROLE OF THE LAITY

Moving on from the 'forest dwellers', who, if David Drewes is right, were far less important in the early development of the Mahāyāna than some of us once liked to think, our problems are no less acute when we turn to those who live in houses or homes (*gṛhin, gṛhastha, gṛhapati*, etc.). These are the so-called laity, of whom Ugra is clearly one of the earlier examples in the Mahāyāna sutras which have survived, Bhadrapāla is another, and Vimalakīrti a third, apparently not much later. What do these figures mean in historical terms? Even after we have said goodbye to the notion of a lay backlash against monastic self-absorption and the grand opening of the treasury of Buddhism to the men in white, as well as their womenfolk and children, we still face the difficulty of interpreting our texts on this issue. And even if we grant that the appearance of the great householders in the texts is not to be interpreted as a reflection of reality on the ground, that it is straw which cannot be spun into gold, we have yet to work out what rhetorical agenda they served.[9] Was Vimalakīrti a stick with which one group of monks were attempting to beat another? Was Ugra emblematic of an attempt to co-opt people outside the Saṅgha as partners in a new set of textual and other practices? Was Bhadrapāla part of an elaborate strategy of *captatio benevolentiae* directed towards lay patrons with shifting religious interests and loyalties? And how would we even set about answering such questions? Here, too, more sustained and systematic investigations are required to clarify what these figures are doing and what their purpose is.

MAHĀYĀNA SUTRAS AND THE PROBLEM OF PERIODISATION

These two issues point up some of the difficulties involved in interpret-

ing Mahāyāna sutras as historical evidence, and I think it fair to say that we have scarcely begun sorting out the hermeneutical problems here. Part of our predicament involves the patchy and incomplete nature of the scholarship in this area, but we do appear to be making progress. More and more Mahāyāna sutras are being edited, translated, and studied, and although some of the work in this area is not of optimal quality,[10] we have gone well past the point of basing most of what we say about early Mahāyāna on the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* (which is unlikely to be an early Mahāyāna sutra anyway, in my opinion). This is progress. At the same time, the increasing amount of this literature translated into modern languages exacerbates another problem, and that is periodisation. In this steadily increasing profusion of sources, how do we know what is early, what is 'middle period' (whatever that means), and what is late. Clearly, this has implications for our understanding of the development of this form of Buddhism as a whole, for the notoriously vexed problem of chronology, and for the need to move beyond what Peter Skilling once referred to as the 'tyranny' of the Chinese translation dates. The problem here goes beyond the sutras, and encompasses *śāstra*s as well.

To give one example from my own research, I draw on some work I did some years ago (but not yet published) on the *Sūtra-samuccaya* attributed to Nāgārjuna, which was an outgrowth of my continuing interest in the *Śikṣā-samuccaya* of Śāntideva.[11] Among other pieces of evidence (stylistic elements, content and so on) that make the attribution of the *Sūtra-samuccaya* (SS) to the author of the *kārikā*s highly unlikely, if not impossible, I considered the dating of a particular group of texts cited in it whose content seemed to be diametrically opposed to the programme which Nāgārjuna pursues in the *Ratnāvalī* and the *Suhṛllekha*. Here I went beyond the 'usual suspects' commonly brought up when people start wondering about the date of the SS, namely, the *Laṅkāvatāra* and the *Śrīmālā-devī* (both first translated into Chinese in the first half of the fifth century) to include a whole list of other sutras cited in the SS, including the following:

1. *Mahā-karuṇā-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*[12] (2 citations in the SS), first translated into Chinese by Narendrayaśas in 558 (*T*380/*K*110,[13] *Dabei jing* 大悲經);
2. *Tathāgata-bimba-parivarta* (1 citation), of which the Chinese translation was made by Tiyunboruo (*Devendraprajña? Devaprajñā?)

in 691 (*T*694/*K*419, *Dasheng zao xiang gongde jing* 大乘造像功德經);

3. *Śraddhā-balādhānāvatāra-mudrā-sūtra* (5 citations), first translated into Chinese by Dharmaruci in 504 or 508–534 (*T*305/*K*81, *Xinli ruyin famen jing* 信力入印法門經);
4. the related *Niyatāniyatāvatāra-mudrā-sūtra* (2 citations), first translated into Chinese by Gautama Prajñāruci in 542 (*T*645/*K*138, *Bubiding ruding ruyin jing* 不必定入定入印經);
5. *Saddharma-smṛty-upasthāna-sūtra* (2 citations), also translated by Gautama Prajñāruci in the period 538–541 (*T*721/*K*801, *Zhengfa nianchu jing* 正法念處經);
6. *Dharma-saṅgīti-sūtra* (2 citations), translated by Bodhiruci I in 515 (*T*761/*K*404, *Faji jing* 法集經);
7. *Praśānta-viniścaya-prātihārya-samādhi-sūtra* (3 citations), translated by Xuanzang in 663 or 664 (*T*648/*K*482, *Jizhao shenbian sanmodi jing* 寂照神變三摩地經);
8. *Bodhisattva-gocaropāya-viṣaya-vikurvāṇa-nirdeśa-sutra / Satyaka-parivarta* (2 citations), first translated by Guṇabhadra in the period 435–443 (*T*271/*K*162, Pusa xing fangbian jingjie shentong bianhua jing 菩薩行方便境界神通變化經);[14]
9. **Dāraka-ratnadatta-sūtra* = *Bodhisattva-caryā-nirdeśa* (1 citation), translated by Faxian/Tianxizai, in the period 989–999 (*T*488/*K*1227, *Baoshou pusa putixing jing* 寶授菩薩菩提行經).
10. *Sāgaramati-paripṛcchā-sūtra* (4 citations), first translated by Dharmakṣema in the period 414–426 (*T*397.5/*K*56.5, *Dafangdeng daji jing haihui pusa pin* 大方等大集經海慧菩薩品).

Looking at the dates of their first translation into Chinese, one finds that these sutras all arrived in China in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, or even later. More revealing still is a further set of texts connected with the *Mahā-saṃnipāta* compendium, which also reached China in the fifth and sixth centuries:

11. *Candragarbha-parivarta* (7 citations), first translated by Narendrayaśas in 566 (*T*397.15/*K*56.15, *Dafangdeng daji jing yuezang fen* 大方等大集經月藏分);
12. *Sūryagarbha-parivarta* (1 citation), first (?)[15] translated by Narendrayaśas in the period 584–585 (*T*397.14/*K*56.14, *Dafangdeng daji jing rizang fen* 大方等大集經日藏分);

13. *Ākāśagarbha-sūtra* (1 citation), first translated by Buddhayaśas 408–413 (*T*405/*K*62, *Xukongzang pusa jing* 虛空藏菩薩經);
14. *(Daśacakra-)Kṣitigarbha-sūtra* (3 citations), first translated during the period 397–439, translator's name lost (*T*410/*K*58, *Dafangguang shilun jing* 大方廣十輪經).

These are sutras whose point of view is radically at odds with the kind of agenda we see in other works whose attribution to Nāgārjuna rests on firmer grounds. My point here is that one text with a late Chinese translation date is neither here nor there, but when one looks at the total picture, the implication is inescapable. However, that is not all. When one examines two major commentaries translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva at the very beginning of the fifth century – the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (*T*1509/*K*549), which is the well-known encyclopaedic commentary on the Larger Prajñāpāramitā, and the *Shizhu piposha lun* 十住毘婆沙論 (*T*1521/*K*584), a commentary on the *Daśabhūmika*, two commentaries packed with citations and both ascribed to Nāgārjuna as well – not a single citation from any of the fourteen texts listed above is to be found. Rather a revealing result for a body of sutras which, if we were to accept the ascription of the SS to Nāgārjuna, ought to have been in existence by the second century or the early third. We get similarly revealing results when we start to plot the patterns of citations in commentaries written by scholars like Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (*Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra-bhāṣya*, *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, *Vyākhyā-yukti*, and so on).[16]

I dispense with the finer details here, since these examples are intended merely to be suggestive of the possibilities for further research when one starts putting all the data together, something which to my knowledge has not yet been attempted. I hope to have shown, however, that what we need to do is develop a systematic and detailed internal chronology of Mahāyāna sutras using not simply the *śāstra*s which cite those sutras but also those Mahāyāna sutras themselves which cite or allude to other Mahāyāna sutras before them – in effect a comprehensive mapping project which charts every nexus and link there is to be found. For example, the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra presupposes the existence in one form or another of the *Akṣobhya-tathāgatasya-vyūha*, or at least the traditions that passed into it, while the textual dependence of the *Vimalakīrti-*

nirdeśa on the same source is apparent in a more straightforward way. The *Druma-kinnararāja-paripṛcchā* makes a clear reference to the *Ajātaśatru-kaukṛtya-vinodanā*. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (commonly referred to as the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*) demonstrably owes a debt in various places to the *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra*. And so on. The degree of intertextuality in these works is in fact rather high, perhaps not surprising for a movement which we have begun to imagine as a largely (but not exclusively) literary enterprise, involving a vigorous trafficking in texts[17] by the groups of people – or 'textual communities', as some would call them[18] – committed to the ideas and visions they expounded, seemingly eager (or anxious) at all times to assert the authority and primacy of their own particular formulations of the Dharma.[19] The map of that intertextuality, once drawn, can then be compared with the information we have about the Chinese translations to see if any significant correlations are to be found, as well as factored into any discussion of doctrinal and other developments.[20]

Even then, when this is all done, we are still confronted with the hermeneutical challenge of how to read Mahāyāna sutras so as to derive from them useful information and sound inferences. Here there is much work to be done, although Nattier (2003) has made a good start in her chapter on methodological considerations, with its list of principles for, as she puts it, extracting historical data from normative sources (embarrassment, irrelevance, counterargument, and corroborating evidence). Other scholars have also touched upon the problems involved, but the definitive contribution has yet to be made.

NIKĀYA AFFILIATION

To scholars working in this field it is now self-evident that the kinds of activities alluded to already – ascetic practice undertaken with the ultimate intention of reaching the awakening of a buddha, that is, as a bodhisattva; the solicitation of lay patronage; the production, circulation, and discussion of Mahāyāna sutras – were undertaken not by lone individuals, but by communities of the sort addressed by Daniel Boucher in his chapter in this volume. We also believe that those communities were never made up only of the members of one *nikāya*. And this despite the fact that in the past scholars have assumed a special

connection between the Mahāyāna and the Mahāsāṃghikas. Indeed, it is true that there are many indications that the Mahāsāṃghikas and their various sub-schools have strong links with texts and ideas reflective of the Mahāyāna,[21] enough for one to see how the idea that the Mahāyāna was the exclusive outgrowth of the Mahāsāṃghikas took root, but our view today is much more cautious and nuanced. In short, we assume that the Mahāyāna ran across *nikāya* boundaries right from the start, and was no respecter of such organisational distinctions, which pertained to a different level of involvement in Buddhism.[22] That said, we still have to admit we have an imperfect understanding of how *nikāya* affiliation worked generally, especially when we come to the issue of the various canons which we assume the *nikāya*s possessed, each with its own Sūtra-piṭaka, Vinaya-piṭaka and (in most cases) Abhidharma-piṭaka. This is in the nature of a convenient and tidy fiction: the more we know, the messier the actual state of affairs appears to have been. This pertains to Indian Buddhism as a whole; it is an area where Peter Skilling has made weighty contributions. But there is more. As far as the relationship between Mahāyāna and the Mainstream canons is concerned, one conclusion we ought not to jump to is that everything that is Mainstream or Śrāvakayāna must predate everything that is Mahāyāna. Put this way it looks like a statement of the obvious, but it may in fact take some effort to envisage a far more complex situation where Mainstream and Mahāyāna texts developed simultaneously, influencing each other.[23] The Abhidharma may have been a particularly fertile site of an ongoing give-and-take in this respect, and this is certainly one of the key implications of the chapters by Shizuka Sasaki and Johannes Bronkhorst in this volume. The unfortunate upshot of such a situation, however, is that any attempt to plot proto-Mahāyāna elements in the Nikāyas and Āgamas of the Mainstream canons, no matter how carefully carried out, is open to questions about the direction of influence.[24] It is not easy to see how to resolve this problem, which is especially acute when the argument comes to rest on only one or two texts.

MATERIAL EVIDENCE

So far the evidence we have alluded to is primarily textual. If we want

to think about 'Mahāyāna on the ground', we need to look at the material evidence. We must turn finally, therefore, to the archaeological and art-historical record for early Mahāyāna, which up until recently was confidently asserted by some to be virtually non-existent.

In this area few scholars have been as influential as Gregory Schopen, and I refer in the first instance to his 1979 paper 'Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions', a paper he wrote while still a graduate student.[25] Schopen's paper was indeed groundbreaking at the time, since it attempted to assess the hard evidence, as it were, for Mahāyāna in India, and its effect was to contribute to the notion that Mahāyāna was, at least at the beginning, and perhaps until the fifth or sixth century, marginal in the land of its birth, its advocates being prophets without honour in their own country. Like much of Schopen's work, the inscriptions paper was animated by the intention to problematise and, if possible, overturn established assumptions. Indeed, most of Schopen's work on the Mahāyāna seems intent on minimising its importance in the grand scheme of things Indian and Buddhist, dominated as it is for him by inscriptions and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*. However, as influential as it has been, the paper is not without its problems. It basically proceeds by establishing a correlation between various forms of a supposed Mahāyāna formula[26] and certain terms for donors (namely, *śākya-bhikṣu* and *śākya-bhikṣuṇī* for monks and nuns and *paramopāsaka* and *paramopāsikā* for lay men and women) and then locating this correlation in mostly later inscriptions, the first of them in the fourth century, but most much later than this. The term 'Mahāyāna' itself does not appear in inscriptions until the sixth century. Schopen's identification of the terms *śākya-bhikṣu* and *śākya-bhikṣuṇī* as referring exclusively to Mahāyāna *saṅgha* members has been accepted by some[27] but questioned by others such as Cousins (2003) – drawing a spirited response in Schopen 2005: 244–246, along with an admission that more recent finds necessitate a revisiting of the issues. But Schopen's assumption that the terms *paramopāsaka* and *paramopāsikā* refer to any male and female lay supporters of the Mahāyāna certainly requires further thought. Schopen draws conclusions about the significance of these latter terms without discussing their precise meaning, a curious omission in the circumstances. Not once does he hazard an actual translation, but his paper implies – if I read it correctly – that *paramopāsaka* means something like 'lay practitioner of the supreme' (i.e. the supreme teaching of the Mahāyāna).[28] However,

if it means 'supreme lay practitioner' (i.e. referring to the king, the local ruler or some other dignitary of high status), then we might draw quite different conclusions about its significance.[29]

The only real exception to this picture of total radio silence in the early epigraphical record, at least at the time when Schopen first addressed this question, was an inscribed pedestal of an image of Amitābha, discovered in Govindnagar near Mathurā in 1977, with a date that came out as 153 CE. This could scarcely be ignored, but Schopen (1987) also strove to demonstrate the 'limited and uninfluential' role of Amitābha it betokens. His most striking claim is that the formula *sarva-buddha-pujāye*, 'for the worship of all buddhas', found in this inscription is, where it occurs elsewhere, invariably associated with 'non-Mahāyāna groups' like the Sarvāstivādins, the Kāśyapīyas and so on, and so he draws from this a conclusion he regards as 'in some ways obvious: the setting up of the earliest known image of a Mahāyāna buddha was undertaken for a purpose that was specifically and explicitly associated with established non-Mahāyāna groups' (Schopen 1987: 122; 2005: 267). The precise meaning of *sarva-buddha-pujāye* is, to be sure, open to question, but it is remarkable that Schopen overlooks the fact that Sarvāstivādins are just as capable of being Mahāyānists as anybody else, so intent is he on his long-term project of cutting the Great Vehicle down to size.[30] A second inscribed image of a partly preserved triad that was taken by some to tell a different story was later despatched by Schopen & Salomon (2002), who maintained that the alleged references to Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara were nothing of the sort. The paper makes a strong case as far as Amitābha is concerned, but its tentative reading of *oloiśpare* as a place name is less compelling.

Schopen's various papers have thus been extremely influential in establishing the notion that the Mahāyāna was marginal in the land of its birth until a fairly late date, around the fifth or sixth centuries.[31] More recent discoveries, however, are not entirely consistent with this picture, which will, as Schopen himself has pointed out, inevitably have to be revised to accommodate them. Of particular note is a stone inscription from Endere in Xinjiang from around the middle of the third century which describes a king (Aṃgoka) as one who has set out in the Great Vehicle, or on the Great Way (*mahāyāna-saṃprasthita*), a term which is also applied to the second-century Kuṣāṇa king Huviṣka or Huveṣka in a manuscript fragment dated to around the fourth

century (on these two finds see Salomon 1999 and 2002 respectively). Even more impressive, although somewhat later (the likely date is 492/493 CE), is a copper scroll inscription recording the donation of stūpas and mentioning a number of Alchon Hun rulers, including Toramāṇa, which quotes part of a Mahāyāna sutra as well as the famous opening verses of Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās* (see Melzer & Sander 2006). Especially in the area which we have taken to calling 'Greater Gandhāra' the epigraphical evidence is increasing and becoming ever more interesting.

Inscriptions are, however, not everything. There is another very substantial body of archaeological evidence that consists in images. Here we have the real elephant in the room, at least in the room known as Greater Gandhāra: hundreds of images of bodhisattvas, men in the full flower of manhood and decked out in a prodigious amount of jewellery, as befits gods or kings, or at least princes. These can hardly all be images of Siddhārtha Gautama before the Great Renunciation, and even if they were, we would still be hard pressed to come up with a convincing explanation in religious terms for their abundance.[32] In fact we are fairly sure that some of them are Maitreya, and there are other candidates for identification too, although here it starts to become very difficult to say anything with complete assurance.

Among this profusion of statuary not all pieces are inscribed, so when it comes to identification we must often rely on inference, which is to say, guesswork.[33] The Amitābha pedestal discussed in Schopen 1987 was a rare and lucky find, and if the dating to 153 CE is correct, it is rather early too, but apart from that there is little in the way of clear inscriptional evidence to assist us. However, new pieces are surfacing all the time (and some of them are genuine!), so there is always hope of finding something more solid to go on. Juhyung Rhi's paper addresses the problems of interpretation in this area, but for the time being I would say that if we set aside the problem of identification of this or that image, the sheer number of them must mean something. Otherwise we end up not seeing the forest for the trees.

Recently, Christian Luczanits and I have been trying to explore this forest, joining his expertise as an art-historian to my interest in the texts, with a project on complex Gandhāran steles. A preliminary statement of our findings can be found in Harrison & Luczanits 2012. Our project takes the famous Muhammad Nari stele as its point of

departure, but widens its focus to include all complex steles known to us (i.e., the ones whose provenance is relatively secure). The number of extant examples is not small, and the range of types raises many interesting questions. Sadly, inscribed examples are rare. It is not the place here to go into the details of this research, but if it is accepted, as we propose, that these steles are indicative of Mahāyāna ideas and practices, then at least in this part of India, the northwest, Mahāyāna has in fact left plenty of traces. Schopen's magisterial articles may have distracted our attention from the elephant in the room, so that it vanished from our sight, but sure enough, it is right there where it always was.[34]

Recent manuscript discoveries from this area also provide a steadily growing amount of evidence for the presence of Mahāyāna literature, which means, in turn, evidence for the existence of communities producing and using this literature. Indeed, it is an indication of how quickly things can change that until the end of last century we were interpreting the absence of any Mahāyāna texts in Kharoṣṭhī script and the Gāndhārī language as corroboration of the marginality thesis. Then suddenly they began to appear, either because of new discoveries, or as a result of the identification of manuscript fragments in existing finds. By 2014 we had the fragmentary remains, on either birch bark or palm leaves, of at least eight Mahāyāna sutras, several of them quite extensive; for the details at that point see Harrison & Hartmann 2014: xvi. Now, at the time of writing, the number is nine, but it will surely go on rising:

KNOWN TEXTS

Prajñāpāramitā [published][35]
Bodhisattva-piṭaka-sūtra [published][36]
Bhadrakalpika-sūtra [published][37]
Sarva-puṇya-samuccaya-samādhi-sūtra [published][38]
**Sucinti-sūtra* [not yet published][39]
Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra [not yet published]

TEXTS HITHERTO UNKNOWN

Unidentified Mahāyāna sutra with Śāriputra as the interlocutor [partially published][40]

Unidentified Mahāyāna sutra referring to the decline of the Dharma [not yet published]
'Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra' [partially published]

Ingo Strauch addresses the 'Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra' in detail in his contribution to this volume, and further information on it can be found there. As the most extensive Gāndhārī text of this sort to be discovered so far, it is especially important, but the testimony of the other items in the list, some of them mere fragments, is also significant. In terms of dates they range from the first to the third centuries CE, some of them being written in a partially Sanskritised Gāndhārī. They also provide evidence of something we already knew from the Chinese translations of the late-second century: that by this time Mahāyāna Buddhism had already undergone considerable development. Here we are seeing not the first tentative gestures in the direction of the bodhisattva path, but sophisticated and complex documents in which a whole range of literary devices and doctrinal elements are clearly working together in a way which is already well established. What precedes them we can, at this stage, only guess. Peter Skilling would like to apply the term 'Vaidalya' to this proto-Mahāyāna phase (see Skilling 2013), although in my view this may not be the best strategy.[41] But setting that problem aside, the fact that we are turning up Gāndhārī fragments of previously unknown texts, with no parallels in the Chinese and Tibetan canons, suggests an iceberg phenomenon: these manuscripts are indicating that below the waterline, as it were, there is an enormous quantity of Mahāyāna literature which must have existed during this early period and has now been lost. As my joint paper with Luczanits ends up by observing, there is a steadily growing body of evidence to suggest that, at least in the northwest of India, during the early centuries of the Common Era, the Mahāyāna may not have been so marginal after all. We look forward, therefore, to new discoveries in this area and elsewhere on the subcontinent, and to fresh interpretations of the material we already have.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, let me return to the deliberate ambiguity in the title of my

opening address to the Cardiff conference and of this introductory chapter. 'Laying out the field', in the sense of determining the field's boundaries and the disposition of its elements, invokes a metaphor which scholars of Buddhism will readily recognise, given the importance of the notion of *kṣetravyūha* in Mahāyāna discourse, and I have tried to do that, although the result may not have been a particularly splendid array. However, 'laying out' also refers to preparation for burial, and it is therefore appropriate to conclude by asking whether we should consign this field of study to its grave and concentrate our attention on other, more pressing matters. I would say the answer is no, especially in the light of recent archaeological and codicological discoveries, which indicate that we have, after all, not been barking up the wrong tree, still less a puny weed of no particular historical significance struggling to strike root in Indian soil. Furthermore, the continuing study of Mahāyāna Buddhism in its early phases promises to throw light on some important aspects of Buddhism as a whole, for example, the development of the *nikāya*s and their literatures, the use of writing alongside oral techniques for the transmission of scripture, the evolution of liturgical and other ritual forms, and the development of iconography. Having said that, one thing we can lay to rest is the idea that Mahāyāna Buddhism can be clarified in and of itself. If we have learned anything, it is that this form of the religion can only be understood in terms of the matrix in which it developed, and indeed in terms of the matrix of Indian culture more generally, still woefully neglected by Buddhist scholars. Mahāyāna has no *svabhāva*, no unitary and unchanging essence, so we should stop fixating on it as a singularity, and start seeing it as an aspect of Buddhism as a whole, focussing on continuities rather than discontinuities.[42] In fact, these continuities run both ways, both backward towards Śākyamuni himself and the earliest formulations of his teaching by his followers, and forward in the direction of Padmasambhava and Kamalaśīla, or any other Vajrayāna luminary one cares to name.[43] Seen in that light, early Mahāyāna is not a single, sudden turn in a new direction at one particular stage on the road taken by Buddhism, but a nexus of multiple impulses combining and unfolding in a long historical trajectory which began before the Common Era and continued well into the first millennium. Prolific in its creativity, and exerting a profound influence on the forms which Buddhism has taken since that time, it is unlikely to lose its fascination.

It remains for me to offer thanks, in the first instance for Sara Boin-Webb's contributions to the field of Buddhist studies, to which this volume stands as a memorial. Speaking as one who, as a graduate student, was greatly inspired by the work of Étienne Lamotte, and now, as a teacher, find that my students frequently do not have a strong reading knowledge of French, I concur wholeheartedly with Russell Webb's assessment of the value of Sara's translations. More particularly, I would like to acknowledge her generosity in leaving a sum of money in her will to the United Kingdom Association for Buddhist Studies (UKABS), a bequest which provided a substantial part of the funding for the symposium in Cardiff. Second, I thank Richard Gombrich and other office holders of UKABS for entrusting me with the responsibility for organising this symposium and for editing this volume, and for waiting so patiently during the delays which attended the latter undertaking. A third debt of gratitude is owed to the staff of Equinox who assisted me with such consummate professionalism in this endeavour, especially Janet Joyce, Valerie Hall, and Sarah Lee. Fourth, I would like to thank Adeana McNicholl for helping with the compilation of the index for this volume. Finally, I salute my colleagues, and thank them for their contributions. We do not always share the same opinions, but we are one in our abiding conviction that the study of the Buddhist tradition is worth a lifetime's devotion, a conviction that Sara Boin-Webb manifestly shared.

NOTES

[1] It was also intended that Jan Nattier and Florin Deleanu would participate in the conference, but both had to pull out for personal reasons.

[2] Accessed 31 May 31. Last modified 22 April 2013. Also of use is the Oxford Bibliographies article 'Mahayana' by Daniel Boucher (last modified 28 July 2015).

[3] Cf. Harrison 2003: 129 n. 24, 131. Cf. also Sasaki 2004, which provides ample evidence that *araṇyavāsa* and observance of the vinaya went together, and also deals with Buddhist definitions of *araṇya* itself.

[4] I continue to use this term, which as far as I know was invented by Eric Cheetham, for non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, despite the fact that it has its critics, none more persuasive than Peter Skilling (see especially Skilling 2013: 101–103). At present, the supposedly neutral alternative favoured by many in our field is 'Śrāvakayāna', but in my view that term is not free of problems either: it was coined by Mahāyānists to denote a particular religious aspiration (arhatship) and the path to it, so its original sense was rather specific and narrow; we apply it more widely

at our own risk. More serious difficulties attend the use of 'Nikāya Buddhism', 'Sectarian Buddhism', 'Early Buddhism' and, worst of all, 'Hīnayāna', which should not be used as a historical descriptor. There is no easy solution to this problem of nomenclature, of how to refer to ordinary, standard, 'vanilla' Buddhism without the optional extras that Mahāyāna offered. Note, by the way, that 'Mainstream Buddhism' as a technical term ought ideally to be capitalised, so that 'mainstream' in its normal sense can continue to be used, but not all scholars observe this convention.

[5] And it might not be the beginning of the story either. At this stage we can scarcely know what impulses set off the developments that culminated in Mahāyāna Buddhism as we know it, or as it emerged into the historical record in the first and second centuries CE.

[6] See Harrison 2003: 132–133.

[7] Revealingly, the Tibetan equivalent for *araṇya*, *dgon pa*, 'solitary place', 'desert', 'wilderness' is also the standard term for a monastery. In his chapter in this volume Ingo Strauch observes that this usage is already attested in Kharoṣṭhī documents, so it is clearly very old.

[8] Another trope that we may have to be more careful about – although here our translations do not complicate the problem as they do with *araṇya* – is that of the despised and embattled minority, struggling against the rest to assert the authenticity of their teachings. The authors of Mahāyāna sutras seem to have kept this up for a very long time. Cf. Ruegg 2004: 17–18 & n. 23.

[9] For some attempts in this direction, albeit not very conclusive, see Harrison 1995: 67–68.

[10] That said, even a bad translation can be useful, as it provides more readers with faster and easier access to what is in the text, even if they may end up having to retranslate the passages that interest them.

[11] This research was first presented in the paper entitled 'On Authors and Authorities: Reflections on Sūtra and Śāstra in Mahāyāna Buddhism', given in Tokyo on 19 May 2006 at the 51st Symposium of the International Conference of Eastern Studies (Tōhō gakkai), and has subsequently been presented in revised forms at Smith College (2007) and at Princeton University (2015).

[12] To be distinguished from the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, for which see Yamada 1968.

[13] For each text listed numbers are given for the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (T) and the so-called *Tripitaka Koreana* according to Lancaster 1979. Translation dates follow the latter source, and may require adjustment in some cases, but this will not affect the overall picture.

[14] Described in the introduction to the recently published translation by Lozang Jamspal (2010: xv) as an 'early Mahāyāna sūtra', a claim which, without foundation though it may be, is – alas – entirely predictable. Unexpectedly, however, the author goes on to develop the hypothesis that this text was compiled around the time of the reign of Aśoka, since '[t]here is considerable evidence to indicate that the compilation of the *Satyaka* was influenced by the Edicts of Aśoka or vice versa' (xlviii).

[15] The similarly titled text translated by Dharmakṣema 414–426 (*T*397.13) is apparently not a parallel to the text cited in the SS; cf. Nattier 1991: 172 n. 61. Further work is needed to clarify the situation.

[16] Again, with the singular doubtful exception of the *Śrīmālā* (doubtful in that the citation in question cannot be traced in any existing version of the text), not one of the texts listed above features in any of these commentaries, which we presume to

date from around the fourth century.

[17] It is important to make it clear that I do *not* mean by this the so-called 'cult of the book', at least not as it is commonly conceived. Cf. Drewes 2007.

[18] Led, we imagine, by the figures referred to as *dharmabhāṇakas* in the texts themselves. See Drewes 2011 and earlier work by Shizutani Masao, e.g. Shizutani 1954 and 1974.

[19] And not simply to their Mainstream coreligionists. Numerous Mahāyāna sutras, and portions of many others, are clearly addressed primarily to other followers of the Great Way and provide evidence of internal disputes within or between Mahāyāna communities.

[20] It goes without saying that until such a project is carried out, we should refrain from the reckless affixing of the label 'early' to every Mahāyāna sutra that takes our fancy.

[21] See, e.g., the work of the sixth-century scholar Bhāviveka or Bhavya, and his citation of texts belonging to various Mahāsāṃghika sub-schools which are clearly connected with Mahāyāna sutras in his autocommentary on his *Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikāḥ* ('Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way'), the *Tarka-jvālā* ('Flame of Reason'); cf. Eckel 2008: esp. 166ff. See also my work on the *Lokānuvartanā*, translated as a Mahāyāna sutra in the late second century by Lokakṣema, and cited or alluded to extensively in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (as mentioned above), but to which a similar set of connections pertains, to the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins (as seen in the *Mahāvastu*) and to the Pūrvaśailas, according to Candrakīrti (Harrison 1982).

[22] This is why the use of 'Nikāya Buddhism' for non-Mahāyāna does not work: we assume that all Mahāyānists who were ordained belonged to one or other of the *nikāyas*. On this and other related conceptual issues see especially Silk 2002.

[23] Thus the citations of the *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra* in the *Mahāvastu* may be read as Mahāyāna influence on one branch of the Mahāsāṃghikas, rather than a Mahāsāmghika foreshadowing of Mahāyāna. Without any real evidence as to the relative date of texts, which alternative is to be preferred?

[24] Note, for example, the excellent work done in this area by Bhikkhu Anālayo; see especially Anālayo 2010 and 2013.

[25] Reference to this paper here will be to the version reprinted in Schopen's 2005 book, *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India.*

[26] Schopen initially suggests that the association of this formula with the Mahāyāna has no firm evidential basis (2005: 230–231), but his argument proceeds by throwing its weight on the question of 'merit-transfer'. This is a red herring, the more salient issue surely being whether *anuttara-jñāna* is justifiably to be taken as another way of referring to *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* (especially when shared with all living beings). Schopen passes lightly over this question, but after querying the linkage of the formula with the Mahāyāna, goes on to take it as read for the rest of the paper.

[27] See e.g. Cohen 2000, who, following Schopen's lead, takes *śākya-bhikṣu* as equivalent to bodhisattva. While it draws attention to the importance of kinship language in Buddhism, this paper adds little of substance to the debate.

[28] Schopen nowhere says this, so my inference may be incorrect.

[29] Cousins 2003 is useful in this regard, although it too lacks an explicit analysis of the meaning of *paramopāsaka* (it is rather more detailed on the sense of *śākya-bhikṣu*). As Ruegg (2004: 13 n.17) observes of both sets of terms, 'their exact exten-

sional reference in Indian inscriptions is not entirely clear'. That said, the numerous parallel epigraphical expressions cited in Cousins 2003: 14 & n.52 (*parama-saugata, parama-tāthāgata, parama-vaiṣṇava, paramādityabhakta*, etc.) do seem to indicate that the reading of the compound as a *karmadhāraya* is valid: the term magnifies the donors, not the object of their devotion, in a way which is not altogether unfamiliar in the inscriptions of our own day (donors designated 'platinum level' or 'diamond circle' and so on, with their names written in a bigger font size).

[30] This tendency to slip into representing the Mahāyāna as a school on the same level as (and thus opposed to or distinct from) the various *nikāyas*, which then become the 'other schools' or the 'non-Mahāyāna schools', is also encountered in the inscriptions paper (see, e.g., Schopen 2005: 233 n. 22, 234 [1979: 10 n. 22, 11]). Found in much scholarly writing, it is evidently a habit very difficult to break.

[31] That is to say, the Mahāyāna, at least in its earlier phases, emerges as an assortment of small bits and pieces not amounting to anything much, around which some grand fantasies have been elaborated by modern scholars. This appears to be the implication of the title of the relevant volume in the series of Schopen's collected papers, *Figments and Fragments*.

[32] Nor do Mahāyāna sutras themselves help us to account for them, at least not in explicit terms. On this point see the illuminating remarks in Schopen 2005: 108–153 ('On Sending the Monks Back to their Books: Cult and Conservatism in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism').

[33] Cf. Schopen 1987: 117–118 [2005: 262–264] for remarks on the inscribed images of Kuṣāna Mathurā.

[34] Dating these more complex Gandhāran images remains a problem, it being quite possible that most are to be assigned to the third century or later. Nevertheless, if we accept that they reflect Mahāyāna ideas, it becomes more difficult to assert that Mahāyāna was little more than a textual movement.

[35] See Falk & Karashima 2012 and 2013. This is sometimes referred to as a Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, but although the text does correspond to the work we know under this name, it is clear enough that it could not have borne that title, since it would have been significantly shorter. It is therefore anachronistic to refer to it as the *Aṣṭa*.

[36] See Baums, Braarvig et al. 2016. This sutra is not to be confused with the Bodhisattvapiṭaka as a class of texts.

[37] See Baums, Glass et al. 2016. The assignment of this text to the Mahāyāna is not without problems, although it is certainly designated as a Mahāyāna sutra in various editions of the Kanjur.

[38] See Harrison et al. 2016.

[39] The fragments correspond to parts of a sutra preserved in three Chinese translations (*T*477–479), which appears to presuppose the existence of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, since the principal character *Sucintin (Gāndhārī, Suciti), is the son of Vimalakīrti. See also Salomon 2014: 9–10.

[40] Four fragments discovered by Kazunobu Matsuda in the Hirayama Collection. See Matsuda 2013. One of these fragments, however, may belong to the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra*.

[41] First, because we are not altogether sure what the term's referent would have been during this early period, that is, which doctrines, practices or literary forms it may have denoted, and second, because Vaidalya (Pāli, Vedalla) and its associated terms Vaipulya (Pāli, Vepulla) and Vaitulya (Pāli, Vetulla) went on being used to re-

fer to the Mahāyāna, both within its ranks and outside them. Especially significant is their continuing employment by Theravādins and other Mainstream Buddhists, enabling them to refer to the Mahāyāna without using the word and thereby appearing to accept the claim to supremacy which it embodies. Naturally, they would have avoided the derogatory term Hīnayāna even more assiduously. (I owe this point to Peter Skilling, private communication.)

[42] Cf. Ruegg 2004: 56–57.

[43] Already in the second century we can see the foreshadowings of the central Vajrayāna project of self-deification, to say nothing of other things that some might think of as 'tantric' (e.g. the use of mantras and *dhāraṇīs*). It remains difficult to locate the point in history at which Mahāyāna becomes Vajrayāna, and the attempt to do so is perhaps misconceived.

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