Nuns, Laywomen, Donors, Goddesses: Female Roles in Early Buddhism, by Peter Skilling

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I. Gender pairing

In this paper, I will examine several aspects of the role of the female in “early Buddhism”, defined here as from the time of the Buddha up to the early centuries of the Christian Era¹. Since a study of female roles should not neglect the broader context of gender relations within the Buddhist community, I will begin by examining a structural feature of Buddhist social organization and literature (the one reflecting the other), which I describe as “gender pairing”. For this we will start in the middle of the 3rd century BCE, with the reign of King Asoka, whose edicts are both the earliest lithic records of India and the earliest extant information on Buddhism.

Asoka’s famous edict on samghabheda, which was set up at three important centres of Buddhist activity — Kauśāmbi, Sāncī, and Sāmāth — refers to both monks and nuns (bhikkhu, bhikkhuni)². The Sāmāth inscription was to be communicated to both the order of monks (bhikkhu-samgha) and the order of nuns (bhikkhuni-samgha). In the “Calcutta-Bairāṭ” edict, the King conveys his wish that both monks and nuns, both laymen and laywomen, frequently listen to and reflect upon selected teachings of the Buddha — the famous dhammapaliyāya³.

* I am grateful to Ulrike Roesler (Marburg) and Justin Meiland (Oxford) for their careful reading, comments, and corrections.

¹ The classic study of the subject remains Horner 1930. Her work makes thorough use of Pāli sources, but does not take into account inscriptions or the literature of other Buddhist schools. See also Paul 1979. For a variety of views on the date of the Buddha, see Bechert 1991, 1992, 1995: for this article, I assume that the parinirvāṇa took place between 400 and 350 BCE.
³ Bloch, pp. 154-155; Schneider 1984, pp. 491-498. The edict is from a hill 52 miles north of Jaipur in Rajasthan; the “Calcutta” of the title signifies that the inscription was removed to Calcutta, then capital of British India.
For our purposes, the edicts tell us two things. Firstly, they show Aśoka’s concern for the welfare of both saṅghas, and his regard for the order of nuns as an important social body, on a par with the order of monks⁴. Secondly, the language of the inscriptions reflects the fact that the monastic ordination lineage, established by the Buddha himself, was dual in nature: men became bhikkhu-s, and women became bhikkuni-s. Lay disciples were also classed by gender: laymen (upāsaka) and laywomen (upāsikā).

From Aśoka’s edicts we may thus deduce that the leading participants in the early Buddhist movement were two gendered pairs: monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen⁵. A similar picture may be drawn from the scriptures, where the two pairs make up the “four assemblies”⁶. At the beginning of his career, the Buddha expressed his intention that the four groups become independent of him in their ability to absorb, teach, and explain his teachings. This is recounted in the Theravādin Mahāparinibbāna-sutta, where the Buddha relates how, not long after his enlightenment, Māra came and requested him to enter final nibbāna immediately (that is, fearing loss of influence, Māra did not want the Blessed One to teach the dhamma). The Buddha replied: “I will not enter parinibbāna, Evil One, until my monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen have become auditors who are intelligent, trained, confident, learned, bearers of dhamma who practise in accordance with dhamma, who practise correctly, who follow dhamma; who, taking up what they have learned

⁴ Let us remember that according to Sri Lankan tradition Aśoka’s daughter Samghamittā became a nun, and took a sapling of the bodhi-tree to the isle of Lankā, where she established the order of nuns.

⁵ A shorthand for the orders of monks and nuns was ubhato- or ubhaya-saṅgha, “both orders”, “the two orders”. In pācattika 84 of the Mahāsāṃghika and Lokottaravādin Bhikṣunī Vinaya-s, Viśākhā invites “the two orders” to a meal together: see Hirakawa 1982, p. 273; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, § 198. In the Dakkhinā-vibhaṅga-sutta (Majjhima-nikāya III 255.28) the first two of seven classes of offerings made to the order (saṅghagata dakkhinā) are to “both orders” (ubhatosamgha dānam deti); these are followed by offerings to the order of monks, the order of nuns, an appointed number of monks and nuns, an appointed number of monks, and an appointed number of nuns.

⁶ See PTSD 437a, s.v. parisā, and Takasaki 1987, pp. 250-252. It is remarkable that the Catuspariṣat-sūtra, a Sarvāstivādin text which according to its title deals with the [origins of] the “four assemblies”, entirely omits the tale of the foundation of the order of nuns. The Jainas also have a “fourfold community” (caturvidha-saṅgha): Dundas 1992, p. 129.
from their teacher, will announce, teach, proclaim, establish, reveal, explain, and clarify it; who, when a dispute arises, will admonish correctly, following the dhamma, and, having admonished, will teach the marvellous dhamma. I will not enter parinibbāna, Evil One, until under me the holy life is successful, flourishing, widespread, popular, and far-famed: until it is well-proclaimed among humans."7 The phrasing of (Mūla)-Sarvāstivādin parallels — the Divyāvadāna and the Central Asian Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra — differs, but also stresses the wisdom and capability of all four groups equally.8

In this passage, the Buddha defines the conditions for the success of his teaching, of the “holy life” (brahmacaryā). When the Buddha is eighty years old Māra reminds him of the statement, and asserts that the conditions have now been fulfilled. The Buddha offers no direct comment, but tells Māra that he will enter nibbāna in three months’ time, thereby implicitly accepting the truth of Māra’s verdict. Similarly, in the Pāsādika-sutta, in the latter years of his career, the Buddha tells Cunda that he now has “senior monk disciples who are intelligent, trained, confident, who have attained release from bondage; who are able to proclaim properly the holy dhamma; who, when a dispute arises, are able to admonish correctly, following the dhamma, and, having admonished, to teach the marvellous dhamma”. He goes on to list the other members of his flock: middle-ranking monks, and newly-ordained monks; senior,

7 Dīgha-nikāya II 112-113, na tāvāham pāpīma parinibbāyissāmi yāva me bhikkhū ... bhikkhuniyo ... upāsakā ... upāsikā na sāvikā bhavissantī viyattā vinītā visāradā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammānudhammā-patipannā sāmāci-patipannā anuddhамmacārīniyā, sakaṃ ācariyakaṃ uggahetvā ācikkhisantī desessantī paññāpessantī paṭṭhapesantī vivarissantī vibhajissantī uttānikarissantī, uppannaṃ parappavādaṃ sahadhammena sunigghaṅtaṃ niggahetvā sappāṭṭhāriyaṃ dhammaṃ desessantī. na tāvāham pāpīma parinibbāyissāmi yāva me idaṃ brahmacariyaṃ na iddhaṃ c’eva bhavissati phītaṃ ca vitthārikāṃ bāhujaṅnam puthu-bhūtam, yāva devamanussehi suppakāsitam.

8 Māndhātavādāna, Divyāvadāna § XVII, Cowell & Neil 1987, p. 202.11, na tāvat pāpyan parinirvāyaṃ yāvan na me śrāvakāḥ paṇḍitā bhavissantī vyaktā vinītā visāradāḥ, alaṃ utpannotpannāṃ parapravādināṃ saha dharmena nighṛṭāraḥ, alaṃ svāsaṃ vādasya pariṇavādayitāro bhikṣavo bhikṣunyā upāsakā upāsikā vaistārīkaṃ ca me bhramacarīyaṃ carīyaṃ bāhujaṅyaṃ prthubhūtaṃ yāvad devamanusēbhyaḥ samyaksamprakāśitaṃ. The Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra has a different string of words at the beginning, but is otherwise the same (except for some orthographical variation) (Waldschmidt 1986, § 16.8) paṇḍitā ... vyaktā medhāvinaḥ (= Tib. mkhas pa gsal ba šes rab tu ldan pa), alaṃ ... . Cf. also Buddhacarita XXIII 63-68.
middle-ranking, and newly-ordained nuns; laymen and laywomen house-holders, both celibate and non-celibate, and concludes with the assertion that: “Now, Cunda, under me the holy life is successful, flourishing, widespread, popular, and far-famed, well-proclaimed among humans”.

The four assemblies are also put on an equal footing in the Sobhana-sutta. Here the Buddha states: “These four [individuals], O monks, intelligent, trained, confident, learned, bearers of dhamma who practise in accordance with dhamma adorn the order (saṅgha): a monk who is intelligent ...; a nun ...; a layman ...; a laywoman ...” By way of contrast, according to the Theravādin Saṅgīti-sutta and an Ekottarāgama cited in the Sūtrasamuccaya, one of the characteristics of barbarous frontier regions is that they are not visited by monks or nuns, laymen or laywomen. That is, the presence of the four assemblies in an area was the defining mark of “civilization”, since only then was there a chance to hear and practise the dhamma.

Other members of the movement were also classed in gendered pairs. Disciples of the Buddha in general were known as male-auditors (śvaka) and female-auditors (śvikā); lower ordination consisted of śmanera-s and śmaneri-s. For further examples, see Table 1.

9 Dīgha-nikāya III 125.17, santi kho pana me cunda etarahi therā bhikkhā sāvakā viyattā vīnītā viśāradā patta-yogakkhemā, alam samakkhātuṃ saddhammassa, alam uppannaṃ parappavādaṃ sahadhammena sinnaggatiṃ niggahetvā sappāṭhāriyam dhammaṃ desetum... etarahi kho pana me cunda brahmacariyam tathā saṅgīti viyattī vīnattī viśāradā puthu-bhiitam, yāvad eva manussehi suppakāsitaṃ.

10 Aṅguttara-nikāya, Catukka-nippata: PTS II 8; Čhaṭṭhasaṅgīti [I] 314; Syāmasṛtha Vol. 21, pp. 9-10; Nālandā II 9-10, cattāro ‘me bhikkhave viyattā vīnītā viśāradā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammaṅudhamma-patipannā saṅghaṃ sobhenti. Only Čhaṭṭhasaṅgīti and Nālandā give the text in full. (Note that the omission of dhammadharā in the description of the bhikkhunī at PTS 8.13 must be a typographical error, since the epithets are applied equally to all four in the opening and closing statements.) The commentary (Čhaṭṭhasaṅgīti ed., Aṅguttaraṭṭhakathā II 252.4) has little to say: viyattā ti pañña-veyyattiyaṃ samannāgatā, vīnītā ti vinayaṃ upetā suvinītā, viśāradā ti vesāra ḍhena somanassa-sahagatena ṇāṇena samannāgata, dhammadharā ti sutaḥdhammānaṃ ādhārabhūtā. For a parallel in the Ekottarāgama, see Przyluski 1923, pp. 207-208.

11 Dīgha-nikāya III 264.12, paccantimesu janapadesu paccājato hoti milakkhusu aviṅnātāresu yattha n' athi gati bhikkhunāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ upāsakānaṃ upāsikānaṃ ...; Pāśādika 1989, p. 6.15, mitha’ ’khob kyi mi dahn, rku ’phrog byed pa dahn, kla klo dahn, brnab sems can dahn, gnod sems can gahn du, dge sloṅ dahn, dge sloṅ ma dahn, dge bsñen dahn, dge bsñen ma mi ’on ba’i naṅ du skyes pa yin no.
Table 1. Gender pairing in terminology

a. General

- Sāvaka: Śrāvaka
  - Sāvikā: Śrāvikā
- Kulaśattva: Kulaputta
  - (Kuladhūthi)²: Kuladhūthi

b. Renunciants

- Samanā: Śramaṇa
  - Samaṇī: Śramaṇī, Śramaṇa, Śramaṇikā
- Bhikkhu: Bhikṣu
  - Bhikkhunī: Bhikṣunī
- Sāmaṇera: Śramaṇera
  - Samañeri: Śramañeri, Śramañerikā
- Thera: Thavira
  - Therī: Thavirī, Therī, Thavirī
- Upajjhāya: Upādhyāya
  —: Karmakāra
  - Upajjhāyī: Upādhyāyī, Upādhyāyini, Upādhyāyikā
  —: Karmakāriṇī³
- Ācariya: Ācārya
  - Ācariṇī: Ācāryā, Ācāryikā
- Saddhīviharī: Sārdhamviharī
  —: Antevāsi
  - Saddhīviharini: Sārdhamviharini
  —: Antevāsinī
- Antevāsi: Antevāsi
  —: Sahajīvinī⁷: —
  —: Sikkhamāṇā: Śikṣamāṇā
  —: Upasthāyikā⁸
  —: Pavattini⁹: —

c. Lay persons

- Upāsaka: Upāsaka
  - Upāsikā: Upāsikā
- Gahapati: Gṛhapi
  - Gahapatāni: Gṛhapatinī
- Ghī: Ghī
  - Ghīnī: Ghīnī

¹ This is a preliminary list, and does not include all possible terms or forms. For each term I give first Pāli then (Buddhist) Sanskrit (largely Lokottaravādin), as available. References are given for only a few rarer terms. For further equivalents in Prakrit and Sanskrit from inscriptions and literature, see Skilling 1993-4, pp. 29–30. Nolot 1991, pp. 30, n. 80, and pp. 533–534, discusses several of the terms (not all of which are uniquely Buddhist).
² See remarks in text, n. 67.
³ See Nolot 1996, p. 89.
⁴ For Pāli Ācariṇī see Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga) IV 227.4, 317.26 and 29, 320.3, 322.11.
⁵ For Pāli saddhīviharini see Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga) IV 291.27, 325.11, 326.penult.
⁶ For Pāli antevāsi see Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga) IV 291.31.
⁷ Vinaya (Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga) IV, pācittiya XXXIV, LXVIII, LXX.
Since the monastic lineages were dual in nature, the related monastic literature was made up of paired texts: Vinaya, Pātimokkha, Kammavācā for both monks (bhikkhu) and nuns (bhikkhuni). These texts pertain to the regulation of the monastic life. Other paired texts are found in the Khuddhaka-nikāya of the Sutta-piṭaka, as may be seen in Table 2. The “feminine” pairs consist of three collections of verse that include, I believe, some of the oldest examples of (ascribed) female composition in Indian literature. The Therī-gāthā contains verses spoken by over seventy senior or elder nuns (therīs), expressing their enlightenment or relating their spiritual careers. A few of the nuns’ verses are incorporated into the Lokottaravādin Bhikṣunī Vinaya. That the Mūlasarvāstivādins transmitted a counterpart of the Therī-gāthā is seen from references in lists of titles corresponding roughly to the Kṣudraka or miscellaneous collection: the Carma-vastu and Adhikaraṇa-vastu of their Vinaya refer to a Sthavirī-gāthā, and the Samyuktāgama in Chinese translation mentions a Bhikṣunī-gāthā. The collection has not been preserved either in the original Sanskrit or in translation.

In the Therī-apadāna, forty therīs relate in verse the deeds of their past existences and the joy of their present freedom. The Therī-gāthā and Therī-apadāna give the verses of the therī-s only, with no narrative elements. The Itthivimāṇa has a different structure: in answer to verse questions put by others (for example, Mahāmoggallāna), goddesses explain in verse the meritorious deeds that have led to their rebirth in fabulously beautiful conditions. It is noteworthy that the stories present, without comment or condemnation, female continuities across rebirths: in their past lives the goddesses were also female.

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12 “Ascribed” because monks were certainly involved in at least the later stages of editing, and because the Itthivimāṇa belongs rather to narrative literature. Female authorship was not uniquely Buddhist: for example, some hymns of the Rg Veda are attributed to women. Women act as astute philosophical interlocutors in the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad: Olivelle 1996, §§ 3.6, 8 (Gārgī Vācaknāvi) and 2.4, 4.5 (Maitreyī).


14 Dutt 1984, Vol. III, pt. 4, p. 188.9; Gnoli 1978, p. 64.17.


16 For the Sthavira-gāthā from Central Asia see Bechert 1974.

17 For the Apadāna see Cutler 1994.

18 For the Vimāṇavatthu see Horner 1974, Masefield 1989, and Falk 1990, pp. 139-142.

Table 2. Paired Texts in the Theravādin tradition

a. Texts related to monastic discipline (Vinaya)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga</td>
<td>Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhikkhu Pātimokkha</td>
<td>Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhikkhu Kammavācā</td>
<td>Bhikkhunī Kammavācā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Texts included in the "Miscellaneous Collection" (Khuddaka-nikāya) of the Sutta-piṭaka

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verses of Elder Monks (Theragāthā)</td>
<td>Verses of Elder Nuns (Therīgāthā)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploits of Elder Monks (Therāpadāna)</td>
<td>Exploits of Elder Nuns (Therī-apadāna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purisa-vimāna</td>
<td>Itthi-vimāna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 As different schools or lineages evolved, each codified and transmitted texts in its own recensions. In this table I list only the Theravādin versions.

While the Theragāthā and Therāpadāna are much longer than the Therīgāthā and Therī-apadāna, the Itthivimāna is longer than the Purisavimāna. The closest non-Theravādin parallels to the Vimānavatthu that I know of are Parables 51 to 57 of the Tsa-pao-tsang-ching, all of which concern goddesses.

Gender pairing also occurs within the texts of the Nikāya-s/Agama-s, particularly (by nature of its structure) the Aṅguttara-nikāya/Ekottarāgama. The most famous example is the Etadagga-vagga of the Ekaka-nipāta, in which the Buddha praises outstanding monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen according to their individual talents. A parallel text is included in the Chinese translation of an Ekottarāgama of unknown school. In the Theravādin version, the Blessed One lists thirteen...

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20 See Willemen 1994, pp. 121-129.
22 "Ekottarāgama (Traduit de la version chinoise par Thich Huyen-Vi)", in BSR 3.2 (1986), pp. 132-142; 4.1 (1987), pp. 47-58. This text, the Tseng-i-a-han-ching, is preserved only in Chinese translation; for its school affiliation, see Skilling 1994a, n. 21.
outstanding nuns; in the Ekkottarāgama he extols fifty-one nuns\(^{23}\). The Sanskrit Karmavibhaṅgopadesa (of unknown school) refers to a similar collection as the Bhikṣuṇīnām-agraṭā-sūtra\(^{24}\). References to nuns using the etad-agra formula are scattered here and there in Mūlasarvāstivādin literature: in the Avadānasaṭṭaka, for example, Supriyā is praised as “foremost of those who have made merit” (kṛtapuṇyānām)\(^{25}\). Some other examples will be given below.

(It is worthy of note that the Uppātasanti, a Pāli protective verse text believed to have been composed in Northern Thailand [Lān Nā] during the Ayutthaya period, lists the thirteen therīs of the Pāli version along with their attainments, and invokes their protection — along with that of past Buddhas, the great male disciples, deities, and so on)\(^{26}\).

From a verse of the Apadāna of Paṭācārā we learn that past Buddhas (in this case Padumuttara) also made etad-agga declarations\(^{27}\). Indeed, each Buddha of the past, present, and future has two “chief male-auditors” (aggasāvaka) and two “chief female-auditors” (aggasāvikā). The Buddhavaṃsa names the pairs of monks and nuns who held this position for each past Buddha; in the case of Gotama, the chief female-auditors were Khemā and Uppalavanṇā\(^{28}\). The Anāgatavaṃsa gives the same information for the future Buddha Metteyya\(^{29}\).

In another paired text — found in the Āyācana-vagga of the Aṅguttara-nikāya, a Sanskrit Ekkottarāgama from Gilgit, and the Chinese Ekkottarāgama — the Buddha names model pairs of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, whom their peers should emulate\(^{30}\). In the Pāli and Chinese versions, Khemā and Uppalavanṇā are the model nuns, while Khujjuttarā and

\(^{23}\) Aṅguttara-nikāya I 25.17 foll.; BSR 4.1 (1987), pp. 47-51 (see p. 58, n. 11, for the total number).


\(^{25}\) Speyer 1970, p. 11.2; Feer 1891, p. 267.

\(^{26}\) See Phra Dhammānanda Mahāthera (ed.), Uppātasanti, verses 172-186, in Agramahāpaṇḍitāṇusaraṇa, Lampang, BE 2535 [CE 1992].

\(^{27}\) Theri-apadāna, Nālandā ed., verse 471, tato vinayadhārīnām aggam vaṇṇesi nāyako, bhikkhunīm lajjinim tádim kappākappavisāraṇam.

\(^{28}\) Buddhavaṃsa XXVI, 19 khemā uppalavanṇā ca bhikkhunī aggasāvikā; see also Dipavamsa XVIII, 9.

\(^{29}\) Chit Tin & Pruitt 1988, verses 97-98.

Velukanṭakī Nandamātā are the model laywomen. The Gilgit version has Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Utpalavarnā in the first instance, and Viśākhā Mrgāramātā of Śrāvastī and Kubjottarā of Kauśāmbī in the second.

Laymen and laywomen are not neglected. The Buddha praises the qualities of ten laywomen in the Theravādin *Etadagga-vagga*, and thirty-one in the Chinese *Ekottarāgama*. The Sanskrit *Karmavibhangopadeśa* refers to a similar collection as the *Upāsikānām-agratā-sūtra*. The *Buddhavaṃsa* names the two chief female lay-supporters (*agga’ upaṭṭhik’ upāsikā*) for each past Buddha, as does the *Anāgatavaṃsa* for the future Buddha Metteyya.

There is also a *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* in the *Sagātha-vagga*. Here there is no matching *Bhikkhu-saṃyutta* (but several *saṃyutta*-s of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* are devoted to individual monks). A Sanskrit counterpart of the *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* is known from Central Asia, and a similar section is found in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama*; both belong to the (Mūla)Saṃvāstivādin school. Verses from this *saṃyukta* are cited in Sanskrit works such as the *Abhidharmakośa*. The Dharmaguptakas and Mahīśāsakas also included a *Bhikṣunī-saṃyukta* in their *Saṃyukta-gama*-s.

These examples show an even-handed treatment of gendered pairs in Aśoka’s edicts and in texts of several schools: monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, are recognized and valued social roles or bodies. This gendered pairing — which goes beyond a simple acknowledgement of the natural fact of sexual polarity (classed in Buddhist texts as the male and female faculties, *purisa* and *itthi indriya*-s) — pervades early Buddhist literature. I do not think that gender pairing was accorded the same degree

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31 That is, if in the Chinese *Ekottara*, Kiu tch’eou to lo = Khujjuttarā.
34 Chit Tin & Pruitt 1988, verse 99.
36 Lévi & Chavannes 1916, p. 35; Przyluski 1926, p. 194.
37 There are, of course, hierarchical disparities: monks are mentioned first, followed by nuns, laymen, laywomen, and it is well-known that the order of nuns was subordinate to the order of monks. Furthermore, the lists of outstanding nuns and the verse-collections of nuns are shorter than those of the monks.
of significance in early brahmanical or Jaina literary traditions. Although these traditions also had paired terms (as is only natural) — especially the Jainas, whose terminology was similar to that of the Buddhists — they did not transmit paired texts, or anthologies devoted exclusively to women.

II. Nuns and the transmission of the scriptures

What role did nuns — or women — play in the transmission of scriptures? For practical purposes, the Bhikkunī Pātimokkha and Bhikkunī Kammavācā must have been transmitted by the nuns themselves, since these texts had to be memorized and recited. What about other texts? Traditional accounts of the Buddhist councils (saṅgīti) (available for a number of schools) record that the oral traditions and (later) written scriptures were rehearsed, redacted, and handed down by monks: or at least they do not mention nuns.

That nuns did participate in the transmission and explication of the sacred texts is, however, proven by both literary and epigraphic records. Several nuns are known to have been outstanding preachers. An important discourse, the Cūlavedalla-sutta, is spoken by the nun Dhammadinnī to her former husband Visākha. The Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin counterparts, included in the Madhyamāgama, were known as the Bhikṣुṇīdharmadinna-sūtra. It was a well-known and authoritative text,
cited in the *Abhidharmakośa* and other works. In the *Khemātheri-sutta* of the *Avyākata-saṃyutta*, Khemā Therī delivers a profound discourse to King Pasenadi. The nun Thullanandā — whose behaviour was less than ideal — is described as “learned, eloquent, confident, outstanding in the ability to preach sermons”. Many people came to hear her preach, including, on at least two occasions, King Pasenadi of Kosala. The same epithets are applied to Bhaddā Kāpilāni.

According to *pācattika* 93 of the Mahāsāṃghika and Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇi Vinayas*, the ten qualifications of a nun who can induct other women into the order include being learned (*bahuśruta*) in *abhidharma* and *abhivinaya*. According to *pācattika* 104, a nun who acts as preceptor (*upasthiyikā ti upādhyāyīni*) must train her charge (*upasthāpitān ti sārdham vihārīni*) for two years in *abhidharma* and *abhivinaya*. In the *Sobhana-sutta* cited above, a nun who is, among other things, “learned, a bearer of dhamma” (*bhikkhunī ... bahussutā dhammadharā*) is said to adorn the

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42 *Saṃyutta-nikāya* IV 374-380. According to Akanuma (1990, p. 235) there is no Chinese parallel.

43 *Vinaya* IV 254.4, 255.4, 256.23, 285.18, 290.4, *bahussutā hoti bhānikā visāradā paṭṭhā dhammad kathāṃ kātūṃ* I interpret bhānikā as “eloquent”, rather than as the feminine of bhānaka in the technical sense of a trained reciter of a section of the scriptures (*dīgha-bhānaka*, etc.), since in this sense bhānaka/bhānikā does not appear in the *Tipiṭaka*, but only in later literature such as paracanonical texts and *Aṭṭhakathā* (and also early inscriptions). The occurrences of bhānikā listed above seem to be the only ones in the *Tipiṭaka*, except for maṇji-bhānikā, “sweet-voiced, uttering sweet words”, *Jātaka* VI 422: see *PTSD* 501b, s.v. bhānaka. The term paṭṭhā is also rare (*PTSD* 402b). The word bhānikā is not listed in the indexes to the Lokottaravādin *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* (Roth 1970; Nolot 1991). I reluctantly render *bahussutā/bahuśruta* as “learned”, for want of a better equivalent: we should remember that the term belongs to the realm of aurality/orality, and means literally “having heard many [teachings]”.

44 *Vinaya* IV 254-256.

45 *Vinaya* IV 290.7.

46 Hirakawa 1982, p. 290; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, §207. There is no Pāli parallel to this rule.

47 Hirakawa 1982, pp. 313-314; Roth 1970, Nolot 1991, §218. The text defines abhidharma as nava-vidhāḥ sūtrāntāḥ and ahbhivinaya as prātimokṣaḥ vistara-prabhedena. Here, and in other epithets, terms such as (abhi)dharma or (abhi)vinaya do not refer to the written texts that we know today, but to earlier oral transmissions and explications of the Buddha’s teachings and the monastic guidelines. The Pāli parallel (*pācittiya* 68) does not give the ten qualifications, or mention abhidharma and ahbhivinaya (but the ability to train in abhidhamma and abhivinaya are among the five qualities that a monk should possess in order to ordain another: *Vinaya* I 64.penult.) For the two terms see Watanabe 1996, pp. 25-36.
order. The *Cūḍāpakṣāvadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna* mentions nuns who are “versed in Tripitaka, preachers of dharma, coherent and fluent speakers” (*bhikṣunīyas tripiṭā dharma-kathikā yuktamuktapratibhānā*)\(^{48}\).

The accomplishments of nuns related to the transmission or preaching of *dhamma* are singled out in statements phrased in the *etad-agga* formula. It is important to observe that these exemplary nuns are described as “foremost among my female auditors, among the nuns” (*etad aggam ... mama sāvikānāṁ bhikkhunīnāṁ*) in a certain ability: that is, other nuns had the same accomplishments, but to a lesser degree. In the *Etadagga-vagga*, the above-mentioned Dhammadinna is extolled as “foremost among preachers of *dhamma*”\(^{49}\). Paṭācārā is singled out as “foremost among bearers of *vinaya*”\(^{50}\). According to the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya* and the *Avadānaśataka*, Kacāṃgalā is “foremost among those who explain the *sūtras*”\(^{51}\). According to the *Avadānaśataka*, Somā is “foremost among those who are learned and who preserve the oral tradition” (*bahuṣrutānāṁ śrutadharināṁ*), and Kṣemā is “foremost among those who are very wise and very eloquent” (*mahāprajñānāṁ mahāpratibhānāṁ*)\(^{52}\). In the *Etadagga-vagga*, the latter is described as “foremost among those who are very wise”\(^{53}\).

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\(^{48}\) Cowell & Neil 1987, p. 493.8, 15. The same passage occurs in the *Vinaya-vibhaṅga* and *Vinaya-samuccaya* with the variant *dvipiṭā vā tripiṭā vā:* *Vinaya-vibhaṅga*, Q1032, Vol. 43, ‘dul baṅ ṇe, 65b1, 7 and *Vinaya-samuccaya*, Q5607, Vol. 121, ‘dul ’grel mu, 104a7, b6, dge sloṅ ma rnams ni sde snod gnī pa dañ, sde snod gsum pa chos sgrog pa, rigs pa dañ, grol ba’i spobs pa can dag. (The few minor variants in the Tibetan need not trouble us here.) For *yuktamuktapratibhāna* cf. Braarvig 1985, pp. 18 and 25, nn. 3, 4.


\(^{52}\) Speyer 1970, pp. 22.4, 50.9, respectively; Feer 1891, pp. 277, 295, respectively. For the skills implied by *bahuṣruta* and *sutadhara* see *Majjhima-nikāya* I 213.1.

An early Pāli chronicle, the *Dīpavāmsa*, gives a long list of nuns, starting with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and other nuns in India, who are described as “learned in vinaya” (*vinayaññū*) and “adept in the path” (*maggakvidd*)\(^54\). It then gives long lists of nuns: Therī Saṃghamittā and nuns who came with her from Jambudīpa to Sri Lanka, followed by other nuns both from India and Ceylon. A refrain states that the nuns “recited the *Vinaya-piṭaka* in Anurādhapura, recited the *Five Nikāyas* [of the *Sutta-piṭaka*], and the *Seven Treatises* [of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*]”\(^55\). The account goes up to at least the time of Abhaya, son of Kuṭivānṇa, that is to the first half of the first century of the Christian Era\(^56\), and concludes with the statement: “At present there are others — senior, middle, or newly-ordained — ... bearers of vinaya, guardians of the transmission of the teaching: learned and virtuous, they illuminate this earth”\(^57\). The nuns were honoured by Kings Abhaya and Devānampiya Tissa. King Lajjitissa listened to the well-spoken words (*subhāsita*) of the nuns and offered them whatever they desired\(^58\).

Epigraphic evidence for the accomplishments of nuns in the field of learning is scant. At Śāṇcī Avisinā from Maḍalāchikaṭa is described as “versed in the *sūtras*” (*sūtātikini*)\(^59\). No title is supplied to indicate her status, so we do not know whether she was a nun or a laywoman. A *bhikṣunī* named Buddhāmitrā, who set up images of the Buddha, is described as “versed in the *Tripiṭaka*” (*trepīṭikā*)\(^60\). Buddhāmitrā is associated with her teacher the *bhikṣu* Bala, also “versed in the *Tripiṭaka*”. It is likely that both Buddhāmitrā and Bala belonged to the Sarvāstivādin school.

Although early literary and epigraphic evidence thus shows that nuns contributed to the transmission of the texts — as is only to be expected —

\(^{54}\) *Dīpavāmsa* XVIII, 7-10.
\(^{55}\) *Dīpavāmsa* XVIII, 11-43: the refrain runs (with variants) *vinayam tāva vācesum piṭakaṃ anurādhhasavhye*, *nīkāye pañca vācesum satta c' eva pakaraṇe*.
\(^{56}\) Geiger 1953 II, p. x, gives regnal dates CE 16-38 for Kuṭakaṇṇatissa, 38-66 for Bhāṭikābhaya.
\(^{57}\) *Dīpavāmsa* XVIII, 44 *idāni atthi aṁnāyo therikā mañhīmah navā*, *vibhajjavadī vinayadhārā sāsane pavaṇijalakā, bahussutā silasampannā obhāsenitī mahīṃ imaṃ*.
\(^{58}\) *Dīpavāmsa* XIX, 12.
\(^{60}\) Sharma 1984, p. 184, notes 46 and 49. For *trepīṭikā* (masc. *trepīṭaka*) see Damsteeg 1978, pp. 179 and 248 (where he notes that the feminine *trepīṭikā* is not in any of the dictionaries that he consulted).
their role seems to have eventually been forgotten or ignored. Furthermore, no commentaries or independent treatises composed by nuns are known to have survived. It may be that they were never written down, or, if they were, they were not preserved in later ages, when the influence and status of the order of nuns waned. This may have been a decision made by the monks, who controlled the redaction of the scriptures.

If the scriptures were transmitted by males, by monks, there is one intriguing exception: the Itivuttaka. According to the commentary (attributed to Dhammapâla), the Itivuttaka was transmitted by the laywoman (upâsikâ) Khujjuttarâ, first of all to the ladies of the royal harem of King Udena at Kosambi, who learnt it by heart. Later the monks learned the collection, which was recited by Ānanda at the First Council. This is a unique case of an entire collection being transmitted by a woman. Khujjuttarâ is praised for her “wide learning” (bahussutatâ) in both the Pâli Etadagga-vagga and the Chinese Ekottarâgama. As seen above, she is presented as a model laywoman in the Pâli, Gilgit, and Chinese Āṅguttara-nigâya/Ekottarâgama.

Nuns and laywomen in Mahâyâna sūtras

In Mahâyâna sūtras, we meet another gendered pair: kulaputro vâ kuladuhitâ vâ, “son of good family or daughter of good family”. The pair occurs frequently, for example in the Prajñâpâramitâ Sūtras where it often refers to the exemplary audience or potential practitioners of the “Perfection of Wisdom” — and in the Saddharma-puṇḍarîka.
The pair also occurs in (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin literature, for example in the *Gautamī-sūtra of the Chinese Madhyamāgama, in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, and in a sūtra cited in the Abhidharmakośa66, but the extent of its use remains to be determined. It does not seem to be known in Pāli67.

The openings (nidāna) of some Mahāyāna sūtras mention the presence of nuns in the audience. Some, such as the Vimalakirti-nirdeśa, the Susthitamati-devaputra-paripṛcchā, the Bhdrakalpika-sūtra, and the Ratanagunasaṃcaya-gāthā simply record the presence of the four assemblies, or what I have described above as the two “gendered pairs” (monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen). The qualities, names, and size of the attendant śrāvaka assemblies are often mentioned, more often for monks but sometimes for nuns as well. The Pañcavimśatisāhasrikā and Daśasāhasrikā Prajināpāramitā-s state that 500 nuns, laymen, and laywomen were in the audience, “all of them stream-enterers”68. The Sadharmapuṇḍarīka and Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka Sūtras give the most detailed nidāna that I have found: “6000 nuns headed by Mahāprajāpatī, Bhikṣunī Yaśodharā Rāhulamātā and her following”. Similarly, some sūtras mention (e.g. the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka) or list (e.g. the Vajracchedikā) the four assemblies in the closing formula. Many other Mahāyāna sūtras do not mention nuns at all. Although these nidāna-s are formulaic and ahistorical, they tell us something about the attitude of the compilers or editors of the texts towards nuns, and deserve further study69.

66 Tsukamoto 1985, Vol. II, pp. 1094-1095; Waldschmidt 1986, §41.5, 10; Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya IV 4ab (Pradhan 1975, p. 196.15); IV 117ab (Pradhan 270.11): for a fuller citation see Abhidharmakośa-vyākyā ad IV 4ab (Dwarikadas 1971, pp. 580-582).

67 For kula-putta see PTC 63b, which gives only 3 references for kula-dhītā (63a), to Vinaya II 10 and Mahāniddesa 229, 392. In none of these references is kula-dhītā paired with kula-putta. Where the Sarvāstivādin *Gautami-sūtra has “believing son or daughter of good family”, the Pāli counterpart (Dakkhināvibhanga, Majjhima-nikāya III 254-255) has no equivalent. Where the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra has both kula-putra and kula-duḥṣṭṛ, the Pāli Mahāparinibbāna-sutta has only kula-putta. In both Pāli and Sanskrit, kula-putta/kula-duḥṣṭṛ (and, in the latter, kula-duḥṣṭṛ) is regularly prefixed by “faithful, believing” (saddha, śrāddha), and is frequently used in connection with the creation of merit (punya). A comprehensive study of the usage and contexts of kula-putra/kuladuḥṣṭṛ in Theravādin, (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin, and Mahāyāna literature is a desideratum.

68 Since the passages referred to may easily be found at the beginning of any edition or translation of the texts in question, I do not give any references.

69 I would not be surprised if in some cases different recensions or translations of the same sūtra give different nidāna-s.
One Mahāyāna sūtra which allots to females an outstanding role as teachers of the profound bodhisattva practices is the Gaṇḍavyūha. Out of the 52 kalyāṇamitra-s consulted by the pilgrim bodhisattva Sudhana, one is a bhikṣuṇī named Simḥavijrīmbhītā. Another kalyāṇamitra, the “night goddess” (rātri-devatā) Sarvanagararakṣasambhavatejasūri, relates her deeds in a former life as a nun named Dharmacakrānaprabhā, who had a retinue of 100,000 nuns (bhikṣuṇī-śatasahasra-parivārā). Out of the 52 kalyāṇamitra-s, four are described as laywomen (upāsikā), and four others are female. Others are goddesses: these will be discussed below.

The Mahāyāna was not a monolithic entity, and different texts present different views of women. An example is the discrepancy in attitude between the Sukhāvatī and Aksobhya Vyūha-s. In Amitābha’s “pure land” there are no women — devotees are reborn as men, albeit within beautiful lotus-flowers — while both genders are present in the pure land of Aksobhya. Neither sūtra mentions the presence of nuns or laywomen in the audience. In contrast, the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka includes a large group of nuns in the audience, as seen above, and predicts the future Buddhahood of Mahāprajāpatī and Yaśodharā. After they have heard their predictions, the nuns offer to teach the Lotus Sūtra. These differences may reflect the influence of time and place, of social milieu, upon the composition of the sūtras, as well as the attitudes of the compilers towards women.
III. Nuns and laywomen as donors

During his lifetime, the Buddha and the community of monks and nuns attracted the support of female donors. One of the best-known, and most liberal, was Visākhā, "Migāra’s mother", lauded by the Buddha as "foremost among female donors". She endowed a monastery at Sāvatthī, at which the Blessed One spent several rains-retreats. One of the classical *sutta* opening formulas (*nidāna*) begins with: "At one time the Blessed One was staying in Sāvatthī, in the Eastern Pleasance, at Migāra’s mother’s residence …". As noted above, on at least one occasion Visākhā invited both orders to a meal.

In the period beginning about a century after Aśoka, women participated in the sponsorship of the construction of the earliest surviving monuments of Buddhism, the great *caityas* at Bhārhat and Sāncī. These edifices — the earliest large-scale stone monuments of India — were not erected and adorned by a single donor, but rather through collective sponsorship of men and women from various walks of life: royals, merchants, artisans, and their wives and relatives. Donative inscriptions from these monuments and from other early sites record the names, and sometimes other details, of individuals who sponsored component parts of the structures, such as coping stones or pillars.

(A study of the family and social relationships recorded in the dedications is much needed, since it would tell us a great deal about individual and collective acts and dedications of merit. Many donations were joint [family or corporate, rather than individual] acts; even when they were individual, the ensuing merit was dedicated to family members and teachers. The inscriptions show that family relationships retained their importance for renunciant monks and nuns. This is borne out by the monks’ rules, the *Pātimokkha*, in which certain practices that are normally

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76 *dāyikānaṃ aggā*, *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 26.18. For Visākhā see Horner 1930, pp. 345-361; *DPPN* II 900-904; Falk 1990.
77 e.g. *Majjhima-nikāya* III 104.2, *ekam samayaṃ bhagavā sāvatthiyam viharati pubbārāme migāramātu pāsāde.*
prohibited are allowed if the person involved is a relative. For example, nissaggiya pācittiya no. 4 states: “Should any bhikkhu get an old robe washed or dyed or washed by beating by a nun not related to him [aṅṅātikāya bhikkhuniyā], this entails expiation with forfeiture”. Similar exceptions involving nuns are found in nissaggiya pācittiya-s nos. 5 and 17; exceptions involving male or female householders [aṅṅātako gaha-pati vā gahapatānī vā] are given in nos. 6 to 9 and 27. Biographies of the Buddha relate that he returned to Kapilavastu to convert his father [and other clan-relations], and ascended to the Trāyaśtrimśa heaven to convert his mother. In the [Mūla]Sarvāstivādin tradition these two acts are among the necessary deeds performed by all Buddhas [avāsyakarāṇīya]. The first convert after the Group of Five monks was the householder Yaśa, who became an arhat and a monk. Immediately afterward, Yaśa’s father, mother, and former wife all became stream-winners and lay-follower. Thus, from the beginning of the order, family relationships were important.)

Inscriptions from Sāncī, Bhārhat, Kanheri, Kārle, Kuḍā, Nāsik, Pauni, Amarāvatī, and Mathurā show that nuns were major sponsors of the early monuments. Gregory Schopen has calculated that at Sāncī there were 129 monk donors, and 125 nuns. He notes that “at Pauni there were three monk donors and five nuns; at Bhārhat 16 nuns and 25 monks; at Amarāvati there were 12 monk donors and 12 nun donors”80. The inscriptions, which date from roughly the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, show not only that nuns played an active role in the erection of caitya-s and vihāra-s, but also that they had the social and economic status that enabled them to do so. Inscriptions from Nepal, belonging to the Licchavi period (5th to 9th centuries) record a number of donations made by nuns81.

Other inscriptions commemorate donations made by women: some described as laywomen, others not. A thorough study of the role of laywomen as revealed in inscriptions remains to be undertaken, and I can give here only a few examples. At Sāncī the term upāsikā occurs in fifteen dedications, upāsaka in four82. At Sannati a beam was sponsored by upāsikā

FEMALE ROLES IN EARLY INDIAN BUDDHISM

Samā. Queens, or other female members of the court, played a role. Mahādevi Gautamī Balaśrī, mother of Gautamiputra Sri-Sātakaṇi, donated a cave (leṇa) at Nasik (LL 1123). Also at Nasik, upāsikā Viṣṇudattā gave an endowment to the order (LL 1137), a cave (layāna) was offered by upāsikā Mammā (LL 1145), and cells (ovaraka) were donated by Dakṣamitrā, wife of Ṛṣabhadatta (himself an active donor in the region) (LL 1132, 1134). At Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh, female members of the royal elites were prominent donors. In Sri Lanka, ten of the early (3rd century BCE to 1st CE) Brāhmi inscriptions edited by Paranavitana record the donation of caves to the saṃgha by nuns (saṃañī) — as against nearly 300 by monks.

Nuns and laywomen also participated in the sponsorship of some of the earliest Buddha images, such as those produced at Mathurā. At Mathurā a seated bodhisattva was set up by upāsikā Nāgapriyā, housewife of the goldsmith Dharmaka. At Sāncī, in the Kuśāṇa period, an image of the jambu-chāyā episode was installed by Madhurikā, an image of Śākyamuni by Vidyāmaṭī, and an image of Bodhisattva Maitreya by a woman whose name has been lost. At a later date, a fine bronze standing Buddha was donated by “Lady Buddhakaya” in Uttar Pradesh.

The pedestals of early stone images frequently bear scenes in relief representing worshippers or donors (in addition to geometric, floral, animal, or architectural motifs). I have not seen any studies of these reliefs in their own right. They are rich in detail and variety, and might be described as relief miniatures (especially in most reproductions, in which the scenes are so small that they are difficult to read). Examples from Mathurā show a variety of devotees: couples, or men and women, including children, paying respect to dharma-cakras, trees, or auspicious

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84 For references see Chaudhury 1982, pp. 229-232.
85 Paranavitana 1970, pp. cv-cvi, cxvii. Paranavitana describes saṃañī as “the recognized form of referring to a nun”, and notes that “the equivalents of the terms bhikkhu and bhikkhunī have not been applied to Buddhist monks and nuns” in the early inscriptions.
86 For examples of participation of nuns, see Schopen 1988-89, pp. 159-163; Skilling 1993-94, pp. 31-32.
87 Lüders 1961, §150.
89 Czuma & Morris 1985, §117.
symbols (the nandyāvarta)\textsuperscript{90}. In several cases what appear to be whole families are lined up in homage\textsuperscript{91}. Pedestals from Gandhāran show couples, monks, or groups of men and women, standing or kneeling beside images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or "fire altars". Examples from Zwalf's handsome study of Gandhāran sculpture in the British Museum include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Image Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 monks and a couple</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a bodhisattva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male figures</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kneeling monks</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men and women</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a bodhisattva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pair of gods (?) or bodhisattvas (?) with a pair of monks</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pair of monks</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>3 Buddhas and 2 bodhisattvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pair of men and women</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a bodhisattva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men and women</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a &quot;fire altar&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man, woman, and girl</td>
<td>worshipping</td>
<td>a bodhisattva</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The exact relations between the devotional figures and the donative inscriptions (when such exist), or between the miniature Buddhas or bodhisattvas on the base and the main image, are not clear\textsuperscript{93}. A comprehensive study of the components of these reliefs would be instructive. It is interesting that, while Gandhāran reliefs show monks at worship, the Mathurā pedestals do not seem to do so, even though Mathurā inscriptions record the donations of monks and nuns\textsuperscript{94}. One such image, a kapardin Buddha in the National Museum, New Delhi, was dedicated by a

\textsuperscript{90} See e.g. Sharma 1984, figs. 83-86, 89-91. A small child is present in fig. 90.

\textsuperscript{91} See e.g. Rosenfield 1967, figs. 33, 104. Similar scenes are depicted on the bases of Jaina images: see e.g. Huntington & Huntington 1985, fig. 8.44.

\textsuperscript{92} Monks are also shown, in homage to a seated bodhisattva, on the base of a standing Gandhāran bodhisattva in Czuma & Morris 1985, § 115.

\textsuperscript{93} See Zwalf 1996, Vol. I, p. 41, "Seats and bases". Zwalf remarks that "although an iconographic programme often seems present, systematic relationships between an image and the carving on its base remain to be established in detail".

\textsuperscript{94} As far as I have noticed, monastics are not depicted in the earliest reliefs of Bhārhat and Sāñcī, whether in narrative or homage scenes. For two monks worshipping a dharmacakra on a tympanum described as from the 1st century CE see Czuma & Morris 1985, §7.
monk named Virqa; the base depicts four lay figures, of which at least two are female, paying homage to a bodhi-tree. The examples given here make it abundantly clear that early Buddhist building, monumental art, and iconography were joint projects, sponsored by monastics and lay-followers, male and female. Nuns, laywomen, queens, wives, and mothers played a significant role, and without their participation the monuments would have been poorer places. Records — inscriptions, or reliefs on caitya pillars or the bases of images — show that couples and whole families participated joyously in the cult, paying homage and making offerings at the shrines.

**IV. Goddesses in text and stone**

I have spoken above of the “paired texts” of the Pāli canon. One pair that is missing concerns deities: there is a Devatā-saṃyutta, but no *Devi-saṃyutta; a Devaputta-saṃyutta, but no *Devadhītā-saṃyutta; a Yakkha-saṃyutta, but no *Yakkhini-saṃyutta. And generally speaking, goddesses figure rarely in the canonical Pāli texts.

I can think of two exceptions: the Itthi-vimāna of the Pāli Vimānavatthu, and the Sanskrit Mahāsamāja-sūtra. The former (referred to

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95 Czuma & Morris 1985, §15.
96 The role of women as donors remains strong today (except that the order of nuns is no more): an observer at a temple ceremony in Siam will be struck by the fact that the assembly consists largely of women, who present offerings of food and requisites to the monks. On special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, or funerals, the whole (extended) family usually participates in merit-making. Just as the components of the ancient caitya-s were labelled by the donors, so the components and furniture — a kuṭi, a gate, a bench, an electric fan — of the modern monastery bear the names of the donor(s) and of those to whom the merit is dedicated.
97 Male-female couples flanking caitya-s are a frequent theme in Sānci reliefs, and men and women are shown worshipping at tree or footprint shrines. See also the worshipping couples on the door-jambs in Czuma & Morris 1985, § 11, and the giant couples at Kārle (Huntington & Huntington 1985, figs. 9.3, 9.4) and Kanheri (ibid, fig. 9.20).
98 Devatā-s can be male or female, but in the Devatā-saṃyutta they are all male. devadhītā is rare in Pāli: see PTSD 330a (not in PTC).
99 For a Sanskrit Sarvāstivādin version from Central Asia see Waldschmidt 1932; for a Mūlasarvāstivādin version in Tibetan translation see Skilling 1994b, Mahāsūtra 8. Both Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin versions bear the title Mahāsamāja-sūtra. For the Theravādin version, the Pāli Mahāsamaya-sutta, see Dīgha-nikāya 20; in this version there are fewer female deities.
earlier in Part I) gives verse descriptions of the delightful floating palaces or “mansions” (vimāṇa) enjoyed by goddesses (devī) as a result of meritorious deeds performed in their previous lives as humans. According to the commentary, and the occasional context, these goddesses belong to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three (tāvatiṃsa).

In the Mahāsamarāja-sūtra, hosts of female deities are among the divine assembly that gathers to pay homage to the Blessed One and 500 arhats in the Kapilavastu Forest. The goddesses figure mainly among the “60 groups of deities” who illuminate the forest. Included in their ranks are some whose names are known elsewhere, some whose nature is straightforward (such as goddesses of the four elements), and many who are otherwise unknown, whose sole claim to immortality rests in the Mahāsamarāja verses. Also present in the assembly is “Hāritī, most exquisite in complexion and shape, surrounded by her children.” Hāritī, with her children, is mentioned in the Mahāmāyūrī and other Pañcarakṣśa texts, and in the Suvarnaprabhāsa and Lalitavistara.

Another early text, the Āṭānāṭīya-sūtra, is available in Pāli, Tibetan, Chinese, and in Sanskrit fragments from Central Asia. The Āṭānāṭīya-sūtra does not catalogue female divinities by name, but does list supernatural beings in gendered pairs: male gandharva-s and female gandharva-s; senior male gandharva-s and senior female gandharva-s; boy gandharva-s and girl gandharva-s; male gandharva attendants and female gandharva attendants; male gandharva messengers and female gandharva messengers: and so for piśāca, kumbhāṇḍa, preta, nāga, etc.

These are listed in six sets of verses, each of which names ten groups of deities: Skilling 1994b, Mahāsūtra 8, §§ 20-26. The deities catalogued in §§ 20, 22, 23, and 24 are all female. Fa-t’ien’s Chinese translation of the Mahāsaṃāja describes the deities of § 22 as “Göttermädchen”, of §§ 23 and 24 as “Yaksamädchen”: see Waldschmidt 1932, pp. 184-188.


I use here the title as given in the Mūlasarvāstivādin version. In the Central Asian Sanskrit version the title is Āṭānāṭika, in Pāli (Dīgha-nikāya 32) it is Āṭānāṭīya.

For other beings see §§ 4.2, 5.7, 6.2, 7.7, 8.2, 9.7, 10.2. Pāli § III.2 is less scrupulous. I do not know if it would be safe to conclude that the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin editors were especially gender-sensitive, since the context — protective invocation — requires comprehensiveness.
Other apotropaic (rākṣā) passages — such as those in the Mahāmāyūrī, Laṅkāvatāra, and Mahābala, also list powerful beings in gendered pairs.

Goddesses play a significant role in other early texts. The Lalitavistara lists in verse the goddesses who watched over the bodhisattva at birth, and female deities play prominent parts in other chapters of that text. The Āśīrvādagāthā — a verse blessing bestowed by the Buddha upon the merchants Trāpuṣa and Bhallika, just after his enlightenment, transmitted both independently and in the Lalitavistara, the Mahāvastu, and other texts — invokes 32 devakumārī-ś, in addition to 28 constellations, the four Great Kings, and a shrine for each quarter. In a story related in the commentary to Mātṛceṭa’s Śatapañcāśatka, 700 Brahmakāyika goddesses (tшаңs ris kyi lha mo) pay homage in verse to the low-born Ārya Nīla. A number of rākṣasi-ś are named and summoned with mantras in the annex to the Nagaropama-sūtra. Local goddesses are listed (alongside male deities) in the Candragarbha-sūtra of the Mahāsannipāta.

Elements common to the mantras of a wide range of texts — of Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna — invoke the names of female deities. Usually found in association, they include gauri, gandhāri, caṇḍāli, and mātāngī, which feature in the mantras of the Āṭānāṭīya-sūtra, the Bhadrakarātārī-sūtra, the Mahāmāyūrī, the Mahādaṇḍadhāraṇī, the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, the Mahābala-sūtra, the Ārya-avalokiteśvaramātānāma-dhāraṇī, and the Central Asian Nagaropama-vyākaraṇa. For these phrases the editors drew on a common pool of mantra elements that seem to have been connected with the cult of female deities.

Examples have been given above of the outstanding position of women as teachers of the Mahāyāna in the Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra. Out of the 52 spiritual guides consulted by Sudhana, a total of twenty are

107 Shackleton Bailey 1951, pp. 119, 205.
110 For references see Skilling 1992, p. 155.
women. Out of these twenty, eleven are goddesses, who relate their attainments and give instruction. Some recount their past lives, in which they were also female: that is, as in the Itthi-vimāna (see above), female continuities across rebirths are presented in a positive light. Goddesses take the stage elsewhere, such as in Chapter 44, in which a city goddess (nagaradevatā) named Ratnanetrā, surrounded by a host of sky goddesses (gaganadevatāgaṇaparivṛtā) gives Sudhana a sermon on guarding and adorning the “city of mind” (cittanagara).

On the testimony of literature, we may conclude that reference to goddesses — some local, some mainstream — was widespread in early Buddhism. This is corroborated by archaeological evidence. The earliest surviving Buddhist records — the great caityas of Bhārhat and Sāñcī, the Bodh Gayā railings, the stone monuments of the Deccan, and the caitya of Sanghol in the Punjab — swarm with female forms. Although they in part reflect the perennial Indian fascination with the feminine form, with the exuberance of existence, their function is not merely decorative. They are there to celebrate, to pay homage, and to protect, along with their male counterparts. That many are divine is shown by the fact that they perch upon lotus blossoms, or on a variety of “vehicles” (vāhana), animal, mythological, and human. Divine mounts — including elephants, horses, camels, bulls, buffaloes, rams, sheep, serpents, birds, men, women, boys, and girls — are mentioned in the Ātānātiya-sūtra, as well as in the Vimāna-vatthu.

Are these female figures anonymous, are they stereotypes, or are they individuals, with their own names? Could some of them be the goddesses enumerated in the Mahāsamāja-sūtra? They participate in a sacred complex that represents the protective circle, the maṇḍala, that is invoked in

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111 Or 21, counting the “young maiden” (dārikā: see above, n. 73). A paper on this subject was announced at the 35th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (Budapest, 7-12 July, 1997): Yuko Ijiri (Leiden), “The Role of Female Kalyāṇa-Mitras in the Gandavyūha-sūtra”.

112 Vaidya 1960, table, nos. 31-40, 43.


114 See Roth 1986 for a study of the motif of a woman bending down the branch of a tree, the śālabhaṇjikā pose.

115 Skilling 1994b, Mahāsūtra 9, § 2.33-36.

116 E.g. stories no. 5, 41, 60-62.
the *Mahāsamāja* and Āṭānātiya Sūtras, with the Four Kings standing guard at the cardinal points. Unfortunately, few of the images seem to have borne inscriptions, and in their present condition the monuments — with fragments and sculptures scattered in dozens of museums — are difficult to read and interpret. A narrative scene from Bāhrūt includes the *apsaras* (ācharā) Subhādā, Padumāvati, Misakosi, and Alāmbusā\(^{117}\) — none of whom are mentioned in the *Mahāsamāja*-sūtra, although they are known in other texts such as the *Vimānavatthu* and the Āśīrvāda-gāthā. Also represented at the great caitya were the *yakṣinī*-s Cāḍā and Sudasana, and the goddesses (devatā) Cukalokā, Mahakokā, and Sirimā\(^{118}\). At Sānci (and elsewhere) Śrī is ubiquitous\(^{119}\), while Hārītī is popular in Gandhāran sculpture\(^{120}\). Other images, both free-standing and relief, represent unnamed nāgī-ś and *yakṣinī*-ś.

The role of goddesses in early Buddhism has yet to be adequately studied, whether from the point of view of archaeology or of literature — perhaps because it fits uneasily into the “original Buddhism” constructed over the last century\(^{121}\). This Buddhism is ethical, philosophical,

\(^{117}\) Barua & Sinha 1926, pp. 48-52. Padumāvati is placed in the northern quarter in the Āśīrvāda texts (see e.g. Radloff & von Staël-Holstein, table, pp. 100-101). In the Āṭānātiya (Skilling 1994b, *Mahāsūtra* 9, § 2.43) she is a consort of Kuvera, guardian of the north (so the Sanskrit and the Tibetan: the Pāli is different).

\(^{118}\) Barua & Sinha 1926, pp.72-78.

\(^{119}\) For an inscribed Gandhāran Śrī see Zwalf 1996, § 95.

\(^{120}\) See Zwalf 1996, Vol. II, fig. 92; Czuma & Morris 1985, §§74, 75, 80; Huntington & Huntington 1985, pl. 5 and figs. 8.26, 8.27. For a later image from Ratnagiri see Snellgrove 1987, pl. 21a.

\(^{121}\) It strikes me that many modern works attempt to rationalize the role of deities, and to limit the discussion to cosmology (treated as a carry-over from earlier beliefs) — the levels of rebirth as determined by karma and meditation — with a grudging recognition of the role of gods (Śakra, certain Brahmā-s) as interlocutors (treated as symbolic). On gods in (early Theravādin) Buddhism see Marasinghe 1974, *EB* IV 412-418, s.v. deva, and Wagle 1985; (in general) Lamotte 1976, pp. 759-765. For deities in Gandhāra see Zwalf 1996, Vol. I, pp. 43-44. For goddesses in Jainism see Dundas 1992, pp. 181-183. For female deities from Hindu contexts, see Daniélov 1964 (especially part 4) and Kinsley 1988. (On the Hindu/Buddhist distinction, Sylvain Lévi’s remarks with reference to Nepal at the beginning of this century may be fairly applied to the India of the centuries after the Buddha: “A rigid classification which simplistically divided divinities up under the headings, Buddhism, Śaivism, and Vaiṣṇavism, would be a pure nonsense; under different names, and at different levels, the same gods are for the most part common to different confessions [eglises]” [Le Népal, Étude historique d’un royaume hindou, Vol. I, Paris, 1905, repr. New Delhi, 1991, p. 319, as rendered in Gellner 1992, p. 76]).
intellectual; it is austere and male, and it has no room for cults, no place for gods, let alone goddesses. Beyond this, the reaction of early European scholarship to texts like the Mahāsamāja and Āṭṭāṭṭīya Sūtras — not to speak of the Pañcarakṣā and other mantra texts — was generally unfavourable: the genre was regarded as peripheral, even beyond the pale of “true” Buddhism. No connection seems to have been drawn between the deities and the early monuments.

V. Conclusions

The testimony of inscriptions and other historical materials establishes that the order of nuns was a socially active and influential institution during the early centuries of Buddhism, into the Christian Era. We have seen above that new female members of the order were instructed by their preceptors, from the start of their careers. As they themselves advanced in accomplishment and seniority, they would in turn train other nuns. Nuns were taught by nuns, by monks, by the Buddha; nuns taught other nuns, taught lay-followers and the public, taught kings. Nuns travelled: this is known from inscriptions, from the monks’ and nuns’ rules, and other records. Thus the order of nuns flourished not only in India, but also abroad, for example in Sri Lanka, and in Khotan and Kucha in Central Asia.

With the passage of time, the order declined and died out. Since Indian society has never been monolithic — and the status of women would never have been consistent throughout the vast and diverse continent — the process must have been gradual and piecemeal, occurring at a different pace, to a different degree, in different regions. The order may have flourished in one place, and withered in another, or even have waned and then waxed anew: surviving records are insufficient to determine what

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122 For examples of colonial conceptions of Buddhism, see Scott 1994 and Almond 1988.
123 For further details see Skilling 1993-94.
124 See e.g. Hirakawa 1982, p. 337, or Theravādin bhikkhu pācittiya no. 27.
125 See above, references to Dipavaṃsa. As a boy Kumārajīva travelled from Kucha to India and back with his mother, who had become a nun: Watson 1993, p. xxv. In 429 and 433, nuns from Sri Lanka travelled by sea to China, where they assisted in the establishment of the nun’s ordination lineage: see Tsai 1994, pp. 53-54.
happened. The factors that contributed to the decline, whether social (a parallel decline seems to have happened in "Indian" society) or internal (assertion or usurpation by the male order or male elites) remain to be defined.

In the early period, both nuns and laywomen were prominent sponsors of *caitya-s*, caves, and images. With the Gupta period the nature of Buddhist monument building changes: no longer do we meet with enduring edifices like the early *caitya-s* and caves, with their wealth of donative records carved in stone. Later monuments, constructed largely from brick and stucco, succumbed to the ravages of impermanence and war, and survive (if at all) as ruined foundations. If the practice of cooperative sponsorship continued, there is little evidence for it: either the donations were recorded on perishable materials, or the nature of sponsorship and record-keeping had changed. Whatever the case, the body of available evidence shrinks from the Gupta period onwards, and the role of female donors becomes difficult to determine. We do know that women (laywomen more often than nuns) continued to dedicate images and manuscripts into the Pāla and Sena periods, but our records — scattered inscriptions and colophons — are fragmentary.

Gods and goddesses may enjoy fabulously long lives in their heavens, but on earth their cults rise and fall according to the whims of fickle humankind. Many of the early female deities, such as those listed in the *Mahāsamāja-sūtra*, disappeared without trace, with a few exceptions, such as Hārītī and Śrī. But in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna new goddesses and female bodhisattvas — such as Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā, or the five Pañcarakṣā deities — took their place, to play a vital role in day-to-day cult and practice.126

The present paper has only scratched the surface of a vast and complex topic. There is scope for much more research, investigation, and analysis, which should amplify, improve, and correct these preliminary findings. Dundas has noted that "female religiosity in south Asian religions is a subject which up to comparatively recently has been inadequately treated ... as further ethnographic data about the role of women, both lay and ascetic, starts to appear, there should be a partial readjustment away from

126 Cf. Snellgrove 1987, pp. 150-152.
the standard exclusively male-oriented perception of Jain society”127. The same holds for Buddhist society, history, religiosity. Texts — inscriptions and monuments, and the vast and largely unindexed Buddhist literature — wait to be read and interpreted. We should not expect the resultant data on the status of women to be consistent, especially in literature, since our texts belong to different periods and schools, and were composed, revised, and edited in different social milieux. I hope the present modest contribution to the social history of early India and early Buddhism, to some aspects of gender studies, is a step towards the sort of readjustment envisaged by Dundas for Jainism, and that it will inspire others to investigate the roles of women in Buddhism more thoroughly.

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Abbreviations and titles

BCE Before Christian Era
BSR Buddhist Studies Review (London)
CE Christian Era
EB Encyclopaedia of Buddhism (Colombo)
JPTS Journal of the Pali Text Society (Oxford)
LL H. Lüders, “A List of Brāhma Inscriptions from the Earliest Times to about A.D. 400 with the Exception of those of Aśoka”, Appendix to Epigraphia Indica, Vol. X, Calcutta, 1912 (reference by list number)
PTC Pāli Tipiṭakam Concordance
PTSD The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary
Q see above

127 Dundas 1992, p. 49.
SHT

Ernst Waldschmidt et al., Sanskrit handschriften aus den Turfan-Funden, Wiesbaden, 1965-

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\[128\] The article was originally published (with numbers of misprints) in Pathompong Bodhiprasiddhinand (ed.), Pāli and Sanskrit Studies: Mahāmakut Centenary Commemorative Volume and Felicitation Volume presented to H.H. The Supreme Patriarch on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday, Mahāmakuṭa Rājavidyālaya Foundation, Bangkok, BE 2536 (1993), pp. 208-251.


