



Writing the histories of South and South-East Asia

Perspectives from two newly launched European projects

Florinda De Simini

The year 2019 has seen the launch of two collaborative projects financed by the European Research Council, both of which will study still largely unwritten aspects of the institutional, social and religious histories of medieval South and South-East Asia. These are the ERC Starting Grant project ‘Translocal Identities: The Śivadharma and the Making of Regional Religious Traditions in Premodern South Asia’ (SHIVADHARMA) and the Synergy Grant project ‘The Domestication of Hindu Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and South-East Asia’ (DHARMA). As the titles themselves strongly suggest, the two projects are deeply interrelated with respect to their methods and chronological focus, while also sharing some of the sources on which their research is founded. At the same time, they both entail, at various levels, the involvement of a new member of the European Alliance for Asian Studies (EAAS), namely the Università degli Studi di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, which in the coming years will thus be among the most active research centres for the study of the medieval history of South Asia in Europe.



Above: Inscription from Cambodia.



European Alliance for Asian Studies

The European Alliance for Asian Studies is a co-operative platform of European institutions specialising in the study of Asia. The aim of the Alliance, established in 1997, is to bring together the varied competences and expertise on Asia and Asian Studies found in Europe, strengthening this rich and unique tapestry of academic endeavour found in this region. The Alliance, moreover, facilitates a multi-level communication channel between its members, while it sets out to raise public awareness on the scholarly excellence they offer to the benefit of their constituencies and national and transnational environments.

The Alliance represents a community of institutions sharing a desire for transparency, collegiality and solidarity beyond national, institutional or disciplinary boundaries. It encourages collaborations, synergies and intellectual emulation among European academic institutions involved in Asian Studies and in collaboration with partners from Asia and the rest of the world.

The Alliance seeks to build high-quality border-transcending research, teaching and public services, including scholarly networks within Europe and beyond. It also encourages linkage between academic and non-academic actors, aiming to develop a model of how Asian studies in European academia could respond to political, economic and heuristic shifts and contexts.

The Alliance is not intended to merge the respective institutes, or blur their individual strengths, but rather to provide a framework for co-operation. Partners in the Alliance use the multiplicity of approaches, expertise and connectivities present in the network to strengthen research, teaching, collaboration and outreach.

Such a dynamic network works on various scales of expertise: (1) institutions based on policy-oriented research and competence; (2) institutions that seek to apply their Asia expertise beyond single locations and university frameworks, and (3) institutions combining research and teaching Asian Studies with an emphasis on humanistic and linguistic knowledge.

Members of the Alliance

As of 1 July 2019, the European Alliance for Asian Studies includes:
– the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS), Heidelberg;

- the Center for East Asian Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (CEAO);
- the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies (CESEAS), Lund University;
- the Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA), Lisbon;
- the Department of Asian Studies, Palacky University, Olomouc;
- the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne;
- the Faculty of Economics, University of Coimbra;
- the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg;
- the Groupement d’Intérêt Scientifique Études Asiatiques (GIS Réseau Asie), Paris;
- the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden;
- the Institut Roman de Studii Euro-Asiatice (IRSEA), Bucharest;
- the Institute of the Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University, Krakow;
- the Institute of Studies on Asia, University of Torino;
- the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), Copenhagen;
- the School of Oriental and African Studies, London;
- the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”;
- the University of Vienna.

Website

The new Alliance website, www.asiascholars.eu intends to mirror the spirit of participation and sharing of its members, providing information on conferences and calls for proposals (grants, summer schools, fellowships, positions). The website disseminates information on open access, enabling members and the public at large to construct and share knowledge and data. It is a unique vehicle to learn from the partners’ developments, their plans and their expertise.

Secretariat

The contact address for the Alliance is the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden.
Please contact dr. Willem Vogelsang, w.j.vogelsang@iias.nl for further information.

The article below introduces the main research foci of the two projects and the institutional networks involved; inaugurates a regional section in The Newsletter that will be devoted to the research activities carried out by members of the EAAS; and emphasizes the contribution offered by the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ within this framework.

Trends in historical research

Recent decades have seen the emergence of different trends of scholarship that are radically changing our understanding of the premodern history of South and South-East Asia, a macro-region that had important economic, political and cultural ties starting from the fourth century CE. The main paradigm change perhaps lies in the acknowledgement, as straightforward as it has been controversial, that history and a historical consciousness also existed in those areas before the colonial era, and that ancient and medieval textual traditions in Indic and South-East Asian languages, in whatever literary form they come, can and must also be studied as historical sources, even though we have nothing that closely resembles the genre of historiography as it has been defined in the

European scholarly tradition. As Daud Ali wrote in 2012, such a premise—namely that what we call ‘medieval India’ (roughly the sixth to the fourteenth century) has a tradition of historical writing—would have been “barely thinkable just fifty years ago”.¹

The academic study of such history started more than 150 years ago, mainly with the pioneering efforts of mid-nineteenth century scholars who embarked on an enterprise to survey, collect and publish the voluminous bodies of inscriptions from that vast geographic area that Pollock has recently called the ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’,² which spans twelve modern countries in South and South-East Asia and encompasses a wide range of regional languages. Inscriptions from these areas are often the primary if not the sole means to investigate the history of the institutions, administration and economic systems of the medieval states, as well as the their processes of state formation. Yet scholars are still far from achieving a full comprehension of these factors, which have often been disregarded in light of the greater emphasis that has traditionally been placed on the study of the philosophical, literary and doctrinal facets of these cultures. Moreover, the objective difficulties encountered in the surveying and editing of inscriptions—due to their number,

state of preservation and internal variety— continues to make this immense heritage of cultural and historical information difficult to access and study in a comprehensive way.

Our historical understanding of South Asia's past has also suffered as a consequence of the colonial process of the 'textualization' of its cultures,³ which has often turned them into purely textual objects accessible solely through transmitted texts, to the detriment of the study of material evidence. At the same time, this emphasis on textuality does not apply to all of the transmitted texts available from this area, as the first generations of scholars focused predominantly on the impressive bulk of literature in Sanskrit, the trans-regional language whose use flourished throughout the whole area. Recent years have also seen a shift of focus towards those equally old and refined textual traditions, such as for instance the ones transmitted in the Dravidian languages of South India, that have evolved side by side with the cosmopolitan Sanskrit culture and interacted with it on many levels. For medieval South and South-East Asia, just like their contemporary counterparts, were areas of many languages and regional traditions, the emergence of which can be observed as one of the major cultural phenomena of medieval and early modern times.

The DHARMA and SHIVADHARMA projects

Hinging and expanding on these trends in research, the SHIVADHARMA and DHARMA projects aim at painting a broader picture of the histories of medieval institutions and societies. Each project does so by promoting better integration of textual sources with their material and archaeological contexts, as well as the systematic study and editing of inscriptions, while also focusing on regional developments and interaction with trans-regional phenomena. The final goal is not only that of increasing the amount and quality of information that we have about the histories of the regions we study, but also that of contributing to a profound change in the way we understand this past, thus creating a more defined methodological framework for medieval history in this macro-region.

The SHIVADHARMA project is a five-year Starting Grant project (December 2018 to November 2023) awarded to Florinda De Simini of the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. It aims at attaining a historical understanding of a certain highly translocal phenomenon — broadly speaking, Śaivism, or the 'Śiva-Dharma' in Sanskrit — through its interactions with the local communities of South Asia. Śaivism is one of the main components of contemporary Hinduism and, historically, has been one of the chief vehicles of knowledge production and social mobility in South and South-East Asia.⁴ Spreading from the Gangetic plain to the entire macro-area in question from the sixth century onwards—due to its strong connections with political powers and cultural elites—it adapted to the local contexts encountered on its journey, giving rise to a network of regional traditions that in some cases are still alive today and continue to represent an important identity factor in such areas. The lens through which this phenomenon is being researched, in the framework of the SHIVADHARMA project, is that of the constitution and trans-regional spread of a normative literature addressed to medieval Śaiva communities. Such literature is precisely labelled Śivadharma, and contains little theology, being chiefly concerned with the daily business of its vast lay Śaiva audience. Being composed primarily in Sanskrit, it spread quickly throughout South

Asia and adapted to its local contexts, fuelling the composition of translations into local languages, commentaries and compendia, as well as being reused in the composition of other normative texts and referred to in inscriptions, thus leaving a lasting impact on local Śaiva traditions. The Śivadharma was thus an important agent of trans-locality in medieval and early modern times, and its study offers a vantage point in investigating the dynamics inherent in the history of Śaiva traditions and their processes of regionalization. The regions considered in this study are: Nepal, the Deccan area (with connections to the Andhra coast), the north-eastern area of the Bay of Bengal (present-day West Bengal and Odisha), Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The chronological scope of the project is not only limited to medieval developments, but extends to include the phenomena of cultural adaptation that characterized the eighteenth century, emphasizing the continuity rather than the disruption between medieval and early modern times. Moreover, by focusing on the trans-locality of a phenomenon, this study shifts the emphasis to networks and mobility, stressing the high dynamism that in fact characterized medieval polities and textual transmission. All of the project's output, from editions and translations of texts in Sanskrit and Tamil to editions of inscriptions in Sanskrit and Kannada, as well as the study of iconography and manuscripts, will eventually converge in a multidisciplinary database that, as we intend, will serve as an instrument of learning not only for specialists of Indology but also for historians in general.

The use of tools furnished by recent developments in the field of Digital Humanities also lies at the core of the DHARMA project. Since this is a 'Synergy' project, which means that it involves a cooperation between various European institutions (cf. infra for details), research within the framework of the DHARMA project aims to be broad not only in scope, but also in terms of the quantity and diversity of the source materials that will be examined and the expertise involved. The historical questions at the core of this enterprise concern the complex interplay of state, society and religious institutions in the period spanning from the sixth to the end of the thirteenth century in selected regions of South and South-East Asia. In order to tackle this issue, the project will focus on the emergence of 'Hindu' ecclesiastical foundations known in Sanskrit as āśramas and maṭhas, monastic establishments that also evolved into centres that offered services to the community and participated in the administration of local revenue collection. The research also involves the study of Brahminical settlements and the patronage offered by elites for the foundation and maintenance of temples. Among the various primary sources considered in this study, inscriptions play a major role, both because these contain the most relevant information on the subject, and because one of the aims of the project is that of collecting, editing, translating and publishing online, in a database called the 'DHARMA-base', broad corpora of inscriptions from medieval South and South-East Asia in order to render more available and easily searchable a body of primary materials that is still only very patchily published, if not completely inaccessible. The testimony of inscriptions is matched with that of specific textual traditions (notably the normative literature of lay communities, as well as Sanskrit and Old Javanese belles-lettres) and with archaeological studies in order to portray the great complexity of the historical period under investigation.

The DHARMA project is based on a synergy between three Host Institutions that will each host a Principal Investigator. These are the



Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in Paris (PI: Emmanuel Francis), which is also the corresponding Host Institution; the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Paris (PI: Arlo Griffiths); and the Humboldt Universität (UBER) in Berlin (PI: Annette Schmedchen). This synergy extends to include the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' as a partner institution in two out of the four 'task forces' that structure the project. Such task forces are the main research units into which the DHARMA project is organized, and each is assigned to one of the PIs or scientific coordinators of the project, although the division is not strict and there will be strong cooperation between the various areas. Three such units follow a regional criterion: Task Force A, 'The Tamil-Speaking South of India', coordinated by Emmanuel Francis, will cover the editing and study of relevant sub-corpora of Tamil inscriptions from the fourth to the thirteenth century. Task Force B, 'From the Deccan to Arakan', coordinated by Annette Schmedchen, encompasses the study and publication of selected corpora of inscriptions in Sanskrit, Kannada and Telugu from the Deccan, the region of Andhra, Odisha, Greater Bengal and Arakan (sixth to twelfth century). This research area will also contribute a survey of the entire Barind region (north-western Bangladesh), and thus cooperate with the archaeological campaigns that are already active at the site of Mahasthan (Bangladesh). The University 'L'Orientale' will also contribute to Task Force B, with research on medieval Kannada epigraphy. Task Force C, 'South-East Asia', directed by Arlo Griffiths, will cover the publication of inscriptions from the two areas corresponding to modern-day Cambodia and Indonesia. The work of this task force will also include archaeological campaigns at the sites of Prasat Neak Buos and Prasat Khna, in north-eastern Cambodia, and at the site of Bumiayu in South Sumatra, while at the same time involving the investigation of prescriptive literature in Old Javanese. The only non-regional task force is Task Force D, 'Other textual sources', coordinated by Dominic Goodall (EFEO) and Florinda De Simini, which will study textual sources in Sanskrit—mainly those produced by Śaiva traditions—relevant for the history of medieval religious institutions, as well as the testimony of court poetry (kāvyā) in Sanskrit and Old Javanese.

A network of European centres — and far beyond

The institutional networks established to pursue this endeavour go far beyond that of the official Host Institutions of the two projects. The SHIVADHARMA project, though located at only one Host Institution, is at the same time based on a consortium between the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' and two minor beneficiaries, namely the University of Bologna, which is mainly responsible for the Digital Humanities sector and the construction of the Śivadharma Database, and the EFEO. The latter does not contribute from its seat in Paris, but from its centre in Pondicherry, India, where local scholars, coordinated by

Dominic Goodall, have been hired to work through primary materials on the spread of the Śivadharma in the Tamil-speaking South, as well as on the Sanskrit tradition of these sources. The dissemination of EFEO centres in South and South-East Asia also makes it possible for the DHARMA project to extend its network beyond the European consortium and employ scholars to conduct on-the-ground research in Cambodia and Indonesia, with the EFEO centres of Siem Reap and Jakarta as the main partners of local institutions for the archaeological research planned in those areas. The Pondicherry centre of the EFEO is also involved in the DHARMA project in order to conduct research on texts, inscriptions and iconography with a focus on Tamil Nadu and South-East Asia.

Besides the institutionalized networks, countless cooperations are planned for both projects with scholars affiliated with various other centres (such as Leiden, Oxford, Budapest, Tokyo, Kyoto), which will allow for the integration of various types of expertise and reinforce ties between centres and scholars.

Future challenges

The recent experiences of these and other projects indicate that, in the contemporary academic milieu, collaborative research on topics in Asian Studies is one of the few viable options for pursuing ambitious scholarly achievements and attracting consistent grants. While we face a visible shrinking of the space that Asian Studies — and the Humanities in general — is allotted in university departments and academic institutions, the ability and will to join forces and cooperate on innovative research projects is one strategy that is helping us to stem this tide and bring our studies to the forefront. From this point of view, super-institutional organizations such as the EAAS, which try to address and coordinate scholarly and political trends in Asian Studies, can thus substantially contribute to creating fruitful connections and cooperations that will benefit the field.

Another idea that lies at the core of these two projects, as illustrated in the previous lines, and which has both scholarly and institutional repercussions, is that we have to be ready to take up the challenge of gradually transgressing the boundaries imposed by area studies, and being able to enter, on solid grounds, the trans-disciplinary debates on the main subjects at stake. This step is proving to be essential for experts in the many fields grouped under the umbrella of Asian Studies as a means to obtaining a deeper understanding of their disciplines as well as securing a greater relevance for their topics in the contemporary academic discourse. Some voices have already raised this issue, but we are still far from a solution. In a world that places an increasing relevance on 'global histories', we still see too little effort being made to get 'the other side' of the globe involved.

Florinda De Simini
University of Naples 'L'Orientale',
florindadesimini@gmail.com

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Notes

- 1 Ali, D. 2012. 'Indian Historical Writing, c.600–c.1400', in Foot, S. & Robinson, C.F. (eds.) *Oxford History of Historical Writing Volume 2: 400–1400*. Oxford University Press.
- 2 Pollock, S. 2006. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press.
- 3 Almond, P. 1998. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press.
- 4 For a broad historical picture based on primary materials, see: Sanderson, A. 2003. 'The Śaiva religion among the Khmers (Part I)', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 90(1):349–462; and Sanderson, A. 2009. 'The Śaiva Age: The rise and dominance of Śaivism during the early medieval period', in Eino, S. (ed.) *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, pp.41–349. Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo.



Top right: Front page detail of the Tamil commentary on the Śivadhamottara. Above: Nepalese manuscript of the Śivadharma corpus.