In 1892 Alexander Rea unearthed a small piece of bone in an inscribed stone reliquary at Bhattachiprolu (in southern India). The translation of the ancient inscriptions identified the bone as the corporeal remains of the historical Buddha. In 1916 the Government of India proposed to present the Bhattachiprolu reliqu to the Maha Bodhi Society, a prominent neo-Buddhist association. However, during the actual act of relic presentation in 1921, the reliquy itself was retained by the Madras Museum as an object of artistic and antiquarian value. The old bone was put in a new casket and presented to the Society for ritual enshrinement in the new Buddhist temple of Cuttaka, the Dharmarajika Vihara.

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**This was neither the first nor the last instance where ancient Buddhist corporeal relics discovered in the course of archaeological excavations in colonial South Asia travelled to practising Buddhism shrines. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeologists identified and excavated a number of Buddhist funerary mounds (stupas), which led to the unearthing of Buddhist corporeal remains in reliquaries. The inscriptions on the reliquaries were decoded by scholars, identifying the relics as corporeal remains of either the historical Buddha or of prominent ancient Buddhist monks. The Indian state distributed these relics to various Buddhist countries, communities and associations across South and mainland Southeast Asia. In every instance, the old reliquies housing the corporeal remains at the moments of their discovery were retained in museums, as objects of art, history, and antiquity. The bare bones were classified as purely sacred objects, having no historic value, and were given away for ritual enshrinnment in new relic caskets.**

This study explores why and how this classification of bones as essentially sacred, and the ancient relics housing them as objects of art and history, was produced. It does not ascribe the British colonial state or its political and cultural apparatuses – institutions of archaeology and museums – with the sole agency of producing meanings around ancient corporeal remains. Circulation of Buddhist relics predated both European colonialism and the rise of modern nation states in South and Southeast Asia. The study, however, seeks to bring to light the centrality of modern regimes of scholarship and religious practice in producing a new visibility and multiple identities of Buddhist relics. Both colonial and postcolonial nation states produced new networks and protocols of exchange and circulation that lent to the production of different and competing values and meanings around Buddhist relics.

**Buddhist relics at the crossroads of history, politics, and religion**

In 1898 Buddhist relics unearthed at Piprawah Kot (in eastern India) were presented by the British Indian state to the King Rama V of Siam, who had emerged as an important geopolitical buffer between the British and French colonial interests in mainland Southeast Asia. The presentation of relics to King Rama V of Siam reflected British anxieties to increase their political influence over Siam, which had emerged as an important geopolitical buffer between the British and French colonial interests in mainland

**Old bones, new caskets: dual lives of Buddhist relics**

To end this study it might be worthwhile to explore how ancient Buddhist relics and reliquaries emerged as sites of competing claims and custodies inhabiting multiple spaces of history, heritage, and religion. In a different context of the repatation of the Sanchi relics from the Victoria and Albert Museum during the 1900s, Toriel Brekke has argued that the making copies of the reliquaries by the museum authorities reveal that they did not believe in the sacrality of these objects not primarily because the objects belonged to an alien religion, but because of their modern secular worldview. Keeping in mind Brekke’s point about different epistemologies of knowledge and belief, I argue that the commitment to the making of duplicate reliquaries can also be explained by the material particularity of the objects in question – the relics and their relation to their reliquaries.

At the most fundamental level, corporeal ‘relics’ usually denote the body or fragment of the body of a deceased person revered as holy. Unlike other material objects a corporeal relic requires a physical frame that explicitly signals its status as sacred object. The symbolic potentials of such relics are contextualized in the way they are ritually framed and spatially positioned. In sharp contrast to icons and images, the relic’s absence of representational features and its recognition as a moment of unmediated corporeality is construed by the denotative work of the inscriptions on the reliquaries and their identifications. For all concerned parties the separation of the bones from the relics that these presentations ensued stood in sharp contrast to the early colonial archaeological encounters with Buddhist relics. Till the mid-nineteenth century Buddhist corporeal relics along with their relic caskets, like those unearthed from Sanchi, Sonari, and Taxila (in Pakistan) during the 1950s, travelled out of South Asia to major museum collections in London. There was no established code that could prevent Buddhist policies from the discontinuation of the reliquaries threatened to turn Buddhist corporeal relics into meaningless scraps. To prevent this, the colonial state, despite its official commitment to remain unconnected to objects of religious worship, took upon itself the task of designing new relic caskets. The new relics, now inscribed with a brief statement of the discovery of the relics and a translation of the original inscription, sought to attest to the enshrined bones’ identity as a ‘true’ relic. This divorce of the reliquaries from the corporeal remains led the production of a new order of Buddhist relics centre only on the symbolic sacrality of the bones rather than the demands of religion to gain custody over relics and reliquaries from the preserves of museums and archaeology. In the context of South and mainland Southeast Asia, it would be the demands of postcolonial nationalist repatriations that would drag bones and ancient reliquaries from museums in Europe to the sanctums of new Buddhist temples.

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