

*Rewriting Buddhism: Pali Literature and Monastic Reform in Sri Lanka, 1157–1270*, by Alastair Gornall. UCL Press, 2020. 308pp. Hb £40, ISBN-13: 9781787355170; Pb £22.99, ISBN-13: 9781787355163.

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*Rewriting Buddhism* offers an expert assessment of an important period of Pāli literary flourishing. As well as presenting us with new analyses of six works from Sri Lanka's 'reform era,' the volume places these into a wider argument about the role of the monastic reforms in the development of new genres and approaches to Pāli during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The writing is engaging, and the author makes use of imagery and metaphor to bring the subject alive for the reader. The prose is supplemented by a number of useful tables, timelines and other graphics, and there are clear and concise summaries at the end of each chapter; the volume as a whole is also very clearly structured and framed. This makes one inclined to overlook the occasional editorial lapses, such as long unpunctuated sentences that can trip the reader up. Translations and citations are used judiciously, and suggest an author completely at home in his field, and keen to share his expertise and passion with us all.

As noted on p.13, the volume has three parts, "chaos," "order" and "emotion." The first of these is in some sense the "contextual information" section of the book, in which the author provides a historical overview of the period of political instability and shifting *saṅgha* power dynamics that underpin the reform era and its literary flourishing. The literature is then the focus of the remainder of the volume: the section on "order" explores works in the genres of grammar, handbook, and anthology, while the section on "emotion" explores poetic and devotional literary works.

The main argument of Part I might be said to be that, rather than political stability, it is political *instability* that prompted the flourishing of Pāli literature in this period. The fractured state led to a new uniformity in the *saṅgha*, a series of monastic reforms, and the creation of a body of Pāli texts that provided a coherent identity and educational hierarchy for the newly refreshed community.

Part II explores those texts that offer a different perspective on the language of Pāli and the role of scripture and commentary. In chapter 4, Gornall demonstrates how a new system of grammar, the *Moggallānavyākaraṇa*, sought to use Sanskrit models to better systematise the language of the scriptures, thereby preserving the teachings from feared corruption and degeneration. Chapter 5 then shows how the very idea of scriptural commentary changed as a new form of handbook was embraced as explaining the meaning (if not the wording) of the scripture. Chapter 6 adds anthologies to the discussion, and shows how this genre reveals shifting attitudes towards what is really essential to Buddhist learning and practice. As Gornall explains in his conclusion (213),

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[S]cholar-monks had traditionally believed in an ontological connection between the state of scriptural learning and the moral condition of their social and political environment [...] Religious decline, in this regard, was primarily interpreted as a philological problem.

As such, the solutions came from grammar, handbooks and anthologies that clarified and preserved the true essence of the teaching.

Part III shifts the focus onto more literary genres, specifically poetic works that praise the Buddha, his lifestory, and his relics. The chapters in this section use Saṅgharakkhita's *Subodhālaṅkāra* ('Lucid Poetics'), Dhammakitti's *Dāṭhāvamsa* ('History of the Tooth') and Buddharakkhita's *Jinālaṅkāra* ('Ornament of the Conqueror') respectively to explore changing perceptions of buddhahood and Buddhist devotional practice. In particular, Gornall argues that we can discern a shift towards seeing devotional interactions, *kamma* and merit-making as central even on the *bodhisatta* path, to which some monks and monarchs aspired in this period; new literary genres were able to support this "emotionally charged soteriology" (6).

The concluding chapter summarises the major arguments of the volume and then draws out some of the implications of this reform-era literary flourishing for later developments, both in Sri Lanka itself, and for the history of Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia.

As can now be seen, a further structuring principle of the volume is that each of the chapters in Parts II and III is effectively a case study, and so the volume covers six important Pāli works from this era, making a different but related argument with each. This structure works well, and each of the six textual case studies could be read (or assigned to a class) as a standalone study, offering new insights on much neglected literature. Because breadth is more important to the volume's overall agenda than depth, however, each of the case studies is necessarily quite brief, and I often found myself wishing for more detailed discussion; one hopes this will follow in other publications either by the same or other authors.

While each of the main chapters offers a different case study, thematic links are nonetheless clear as well. Gornall argues that a key concern in the literature of this period is the status of Pāli as a language and literature, as observable through changing notions about how the scriptures should be studied, understood and transmitted. The influence of Sanskrit culture is evident in several of these literary innovations, which speak to a shifting philosophy of language, with the orderliness of language and text seen as key to the orderliness of the *saṅgha* and the preservation of the teachings.

Another common theme is the rise in devotional practice, and a focus on karmic merit-making. The chapters in Part III in particular contribute to wider scholarly investigations of the role of *pasāda* and *saddhā* (which Gornall translates as "serene joy" and "faith" respectively) in devotional responses to the Buddha and his relics. Gornall also makes a number of important observations about the need to understand some forms of Buddhist literature as meditative practice or cultivation (*bhāvanā*), and about the role of poetics in such practices. For example he

helpfully describes the *Jināḷankāra* as “a repository of the Buddha’s qualities that can be used by a meditator when engaging in the practice of recollection” (203). As such, these chapters will certainly be of interest to scholars of other bodies of Buddhist literature in other languages and contexts, some of whom are circling around similar ideas.

Gornall sometimes seems to imply that “canonical” Pāli literature has no interest in *kamma*, devotion, *bodhisattas* or poetry, when he highlights these areas as key innovations in the later literature that he explores (e.g. 128 where he calls an interest in merit a “marked shift from the earliest tradition”). While he is doubtless right that these themes are more prominent in the works he examines, they are not themes that are absent from the earliest literature, and there is evidence for a rise in their prominence as early as works included in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. In addition, devotional or meditative responses to literature may be discerned even in the (probably very early) *Dīgha* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*, at least as Sarah Shaw and Eviatar Shulman have argued recently (in *Listening to the Buddha*, and *Visions of the Buddha* respectively). It is my hope that, in drawing attention to the way Pāli literature developed over time, Gornall’s volume might encourage further work on the variety of voices and concerns within earlier phases of Buddhist literature too. It is not only later literature that is responding to its time and place, or offering its audiences a devotional merit-making opportunity.

As a well-crafted study of how a community responded to its environment through literary innovation, this book is certainly worth spending time with, in particular for anyone with an interest in Buddhist languages and literatures, or in premodern Pāli cultures. The volume has also been published open access, meaning it is free for all to read online, though one can also get a printed copy if, like me, one is still wedded to paper books. This is to be applauded, as is the whole volume, as an excellent contribution to our understanding of Buddhist literary history.