

Book Reviews

Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia by Jason Neelis. Brill, 2011. xx+372pp., hb. €126.00/US\$179.00. ISBN 13: 9789004181595.

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Keywords

Buddhism, Gandhāra, Silk Road, trade networks

Jason Neelis's *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* is a detailed and heavily annotated investigation of Buddhist trade routes, which is placed solidly within the historical context of the emergence and development of South Asian Buddhism. In this study, Neelis brings together and effectively summarizes a wealth of historical data on South Asian Buddhism and applies this to a network analysis of early Buddhist trade in and through the Gandhāra region — a crucial nexus for Buddhism's transmission to Central and East Asia via the Silk Road. Through careful analysis, Neelis places early Buddhist transmission and trade more broadly within the emerging study of social and cultural networks by demonstrating how the religious concerns of the Buddhist monastic community intertwined with the commercial interests of Asian traders.

In a lengthy introductory chapter (1–63), Neelis outlines the approach and content of his study. Employing a wide array of literary, inscriptional, numismatic, art-historical and archaeological evidence, Neelis sets out to understand, 'how and why various Buddhist traditions flourished outside of the original homeland of the historical Buddha in ancient India' (1). While critical of Zürcher's 'diffusion by contact expansion' and 'long-distance transmission' models for the spread of Buddhism, Neelis maintains that these models may function as useful heuristic devices for understanding, 'different patterns of Buddhist movement across transit zones between India and China' (6). Next, Neelis introduces a 'networks approach' to the study of Buddhist transmission. Despite humanities scholars' suspicion of network models as being 'overly functional, reductionist, and deterministic' (10), Neelis points out that such models have been successfully employed by scholars of religion in various disciplines and for the study of a variety of religious traditions; therefore, Neelis maintains, such a networks approach could be usefully applied to the transmission of Buddhism (10–12). After a brief discussion of the theoretical work that has been done on the relationship between religion and economy, Neelis asserts that a 'religious economics' model similar to that proposed by Stark and Finke (2002) may be useful in clarifying

relationships between Buddhist values and material cultures, commodities and other spheres of cultural transaction.

Also in his introduction, Neelis highlights the long-standing relationship between Buddhism and commerce. He points out that, 'A symbiotic structural exchange of material donations for religious merit directly connects the establishment, maintenance, and growth of Buddhist monastic institutions to networks of social and economic support' (17). Moreover, this symbiotic exchange was further enhanced by the Buddhist notion of the 'seven jewels' (*saptaratna*) – high-value/low-volume objects such as gold, silver, crystal, pearls, that were both important commodities for long-distance trade and also highly significant Buddhist symbols (22). Inscriptional, textual and archaeological sources all support the view that the interests of Indian merchants and monks were intimately intertwined. Neelis states, 'As monastic institutions expanded and consolidated support networks throughout Asia in the first millennium CE, the Buddhist *saṅgha* facilitated commercial transactions long before medieval Catholic monasteries participated in the profit economy in Europe' (38).

Neelis's second chapter on the historical context for the emergence and transmission of Buddhism in South Asia is his longest (65–181), making up approximately a third of his study. This chapter effectively summarises fifteen hundred years of Buddhist history in South Asia, drawing on a wide array of primary and secondary source material with particular emphasis on the northwest region. In this regard, the chapter will be useful for Buddhist studies students by bringing up-to-date the information in classical studies on Indian Buddhism, such as the work of the Lamotte, with more recent research on Indian epigraphy, archaeology and the Gāndhārī Buddhist manuscripts.

In chapter three on trade networks in ancient South Asia, Neelis investigates the so-called 'Northern Route' (*Uttarāpatha*) and 'Southern Route' (*Dakṣiṇāpatha*). While mentioning that both terms were also used to represent loosely defined regions within the Indian subcontinent, Neelis maintains that the Northern Route was also 'the main artery of commercial and cultural exchange between the northwestern borderlands of South Asia and the Ganges-Yamuna *doāb* in northern India' (186). Rather than a single road, the Northern Route was made up of multiple feeder routes and paths consisting of at least three main branches (197). The most significant nodes on the *Uttarāpatha* were Mathura and Taxila. Likewise, the Southern Route consisted of multiple paths connecting the Ganges-Yamuna valley with the west coast via the Deccan plateau (205). Important nodes along the *Dakṣiṇāpatha* were Bharhut, Vidiśa, Sāñcī, Ujjayinī and Pratiṣṭhāna. Also in this chapter, Neelis discusses important seaports and maritime routes across the Indian Ocean.

In chapters four and five, Neelis looks more closely at the northwest border region of Gandhāra and the capillary trade routes and Buddhist centres in the Upper Indus. In the fourth chapter, he brings together a collection of evidence demonstrating that, 'material surpluses generated through agriculture and trade permitted Buddhist complexes with *stūpas* and monasteries to proliferate in Gandhāra and neighboring regions' (229). Moreover, the localization of the Buddha's relics and narratives of his former lives in the area 'contributed to a strong and enduring Buddhist presence during the first millennium CE' (229). Here Neelis makes good use of the newly discovered Gāndhārī manuscripts from

the British Library, Senior, Schøyen and Bajaur collections. Also, in this chapter, Neelis describes Gandhāra's networks to nearby regions of Uḍḍiyāna, Kapīśa, Bamiyan, Bactria and the Tarim Basin. Through its rich Buddhist culture and extensive trade routes, Gandhāra functioned as a 'springboard for the transmission of Buddhism beyond South Asia' (256). In Chapter five, Neelis carefully examines and analyses numerous petroglyphs and inscriptions found in the high mountain desert environment of the upper Indus border region of modern-day northern Pakistan. From his evidence he concludes that traders, itinerant monks and local patrons established a Buddhist presence in the area long before the period of élite patronage by the Palola Śāhi dynasty of Gilgit from the seventh to the early eighth century (287).

In chapter six, Neelis investigates the long-distance transmission of Buddhism to Central Asia and China via the so-called 'Silk Road'. Herein, Neelis explains that the Silk Road or 'Silk Route' actually consisted of numerous primary arteries and second capillary routes used for commercial and cultural exchange, including the transmission of Buddhism (291). For instance, there were at least three main routes across the Takla Makan desert – a southern, northern and intermediate branch (292). Important nodes along these various paths included Kashgar, Khotan, Niya, Endere, Miran, Loulan, Turfan and Kucha. When examining the broader patterns of Buddhist transmission across Central Asia, Neelis suggests that prior to the establishment of élite centres of Buddhist literary and artistic productions, sub-élite agents of Buddhist transmission must have made the formidable journey across the mountains of the northwestern frontiers and Takla Makan desert bringing the word of the Buddha eastward.

In this concluding chapter, Neelis summarises his findings by stating that 'the growth of the Buddhist *saṅgha* and trade networks were mutually imbricated in two major ways' (316). First, various classes of merchants played significant roles as patrons of Buddhist monastic institutions and as agents of transmission by donating material goods in exchange, so to speak, for merit. Second, Buddhist monastic institutions seem to have participated in commercial exchanges and economic transactions (316). Throughout the monograph, Neelis supports these findings with a wealth of literary, epigraphical, numismatic, art-historical and archaeological evidence culled from numerous primary and secondary sources. Thus *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* is an important contribution to scholarship on South Asian Buddhism, the transmission of Buddhism from South Asia to Central and East Asia, the interrelationships between religion and trade, and the historical study of ancient socio-cultural and economic networks.