

A HISTORICAL BUDDHA AFTER ALL?*

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In a previous paper for this journal, I argued that scholars have not yet identified any good reason to think the Buddha was a historical figure and that we should no longer treat him as such. To get from the gold-skinned, blue-haired, forty-toothed, teleporting, omniscient, and nearly omnipotent being of the early texts to a figure we can situate in history requires a long leap, and we lack the evidence to cover it. While the early tradition may perhaps have coalesced around a single teacher, its initial formation could just as well have followed any number of other patterns, with the Buddha adopted as its mythical founder and supernatural authority. Oskar von Hinüber published a response, also in this journal, defending the Buddha's historicity.¹ While we must be grateful to him for taking up the issue and providing a sense of the case that can be made, his reasoning is somewhat flawed, and he himself seems more than once to admit that his arguments do not provide much support for his view.

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¹ Drewes 2017, von Hinüber 2019b. Von Hinüber states that I argue that the Buddha "never lived" (2019b : 231), but I would never say this; my argument is simply that we lack the means to know how Buddhism originated. In empirical discourse, lacking relevant evidence, we must remain silent. We might imagine a grand commission appointed to audit our field, asking what we have been able to accomplish in the two centuries since Wilson, Colebrooke, and Rémusat posed the question of the Buddha's historicity. Proudly we would inform them that we had discovered that the Buddha was a historical figure. "That is great!" they would reply, "How did you do it?" and there would be nothing but embarrassed looks all around. For those familiar with scholarship on Chinese Buddhism, an analogous case would be having just the *Platform Sūtra* and trying to use it as the basis for a history of early Chan; the result would be completely wrong in a dozen ways we could never guess. Along with von Hinüber's, two somewhat less interesting responses have also appeared, but they do not seem to make any significant points not covered here (Levman 2019, Wynne 2019).

Von Hinüber begins rather weakly by stating that “it seems to have escaped” me that later scholars – he specifically mentions J. W. de Jong, Alfred Foucher, and Étienne Lamotte – who had greater access to “old and original sources” than the mostly earlier scholars I focused on, were “more and more convinced” of the Buddha’s historicity. He adds that scholars have given the Buddha dates and that the question of the Buddha’s historicity “was not even raised” at the 1988 symposium, “The Dating of the Historical Buddha.”² This is just another ad populum argument of the sort I discussed at length in my paper: The Buddha lived because eminent scholars believed he did. Although such arguments have been a mainstay since the time of Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, they are fallacious in failing to bear on the actual question. If later scholars found something convincing, it should be possible to say what it was.

If we look at the three scholars von Hinüber mentions by name, they not only do not claim to have found anything new, but explicitly make it clear that they did not. Foucher says that “tout ce que nous savons, ou croyons savoir d’à peu près sûr” about the Buddha are the legendary details of his birth, family, renunciation, enlightenment, preaching, and death, which were all known to earlier scholars (1949: 9). As I point out in my paper, Lamotte goes further, concluding that no evidence whatever is to be found, and using strong language to caution against future

² Von Hinüber 2019b: 231–232. On “The Dating of the Historical Buddha” symposium, it should perhaps be obvious that the attempt to give the Buddha dates, far from proving his historical existence, was based on its presumption. Lacking anything that could properly be considered evidence, the dates that participants proposed were merely speculative, as leading scholars of the day recognized. K. R. Norman comments, for instance, that “almost all methods which were employed were purely subjective.” Although he himself suggests a date of 411 +/- 11 years for the Buddha’s death, he does so only very tentatively, pointing out that its acceptance requires “faith” in traditional dates given for Jain and Buddhist patriarchs, and commenting that those who have this faith “might concede that there is a possibility that [these] dates are not wholly incorrect” ([1999] 2001: 136, 143–144). De Jong comments, “No consensus was reached by the participants of the symposium, but there was a general tendency to reject the early date of circa 480 B.C. in favour of a later date ranging from 420 to 350 B.C. Bechert rightly remarks that the only way to fix the date of the Nirvāṇa seems to be the use of indirect evidence. However, it is doubtful that the indirect evidence suffices to conclude that the Buddha’s Nirvāṇa took place in the fourth century. For the time being it is perhaps advisable not to go beyond the very vague statement that the Buddha lived in the state of Magadha ... between 600 and 300 B.C.” (1993: 14). For the symposium’s proceedings, see Bechert 1991–1997.

attempts – such as the present attempt by von Hinüber – to isolate a historical core in the texts, arguing that they would be “vaine, inutile et préjudiciable à la recherche.”³ De Jong follows Lamotte, writing that “the texts do not allow us to discover a historical kernel in the legend of the Buddha,” and adding that “it will never be possible to know exactly, or even approximately, the contents of the teachings of the Buddha.”⁴ It bears repeating: or even approximately. Rather than making claims about the Buddha’s life or teachings, Lamotte restrained his efforts to stratifying the development of his legend and de Jong to commenting on the teachings of “Buddhism in its early period” (1993: 27). Although von Hinüber chides me for not acquiescing to these scholars’ authority, their views on the evidence agree with mine.

Von Hinüber builds his main approach on the premise that the earlier a Buddhist text is, the more likely it is likely to be historical:

Any attempt to establish the historicity of the Buddha requires an early date of the sources rather near to the Buddha himself, while the likelihood of an “invented” Buddha grows with an increasing distance in time from the supposed date of his life time. For, only after all possible memory on the Buddha ... was lost, and after all his contemporaries and their immediate descendants ... were dead, would fantasy be able to run free (2019b: 233).

Making his point a bit more explicitly in specific reference to the *Mahāparinibbāṇasutta*, he writes:

It is not easy to conceive how all the events told in this long text ... could have been invented at such an early date, most likely only a few decades after the death of the Buddha in about 380 and the accession of Candragupta Maurya in about 320 BC, when the end of the Buddha’s life was still living memory for many persons. As long as the date of the composition falls within the range of possible living memory, it is hard to imagine how the description of such an event stretching over many days if not weeks could be accepted as reality ... if all this never happened (2019b: 253).

Since the text was composed as little as sixty years after the events it depicts, people who were there, or their descendants, would not have allowed it to pass if it did not have a basis in truth.

³ Lamotte 1947: 48, cited in Drewes 2017: 13.

⁴ De Jong 1993: 21, 27. For the author’s views, see also de Jong 2000.

Putting aside for the time being the very early date von Hinüber gives for the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* and the very late one he gives for the Buddha's supposed death, the problem here is that a text's merely being early is a long way from its being historical. In the history of religions, ahistorical events and figures are often set in contemporary or nearly contemporary times. The stories of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were composed much closer to the time of Jesus than even von Hinüber would put the *Mahāparinibbāna* to the time of the Buddha. The early *Upaniṣads* are more realistic than early Buddhist *sūtras*, and seem similarly to be set close to the time they were composed, but have fairly clearly been shown not to be historical.⁵ Even much closer to our own time in the West, the origins of such traditions as the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Mormonism, and QAnon have been attributed to ahistorical founders or revealers claimed to be living or active in the present day.

Von Hinüber presumes that at least some early Buddhist authors were trying to record history, and that their audiences received their texts in some historically critical way, but this is anachronistic. Though it may seem obvious and natural to us, what we think of as history was unknown before Herodotus and Thucydides, and they lived half a world away. Even such rudiments as annals or chronicles are unattested in India until significantly later times. The very notion of keeping an accurate record of events, that there might be some value in doing such a thing, was not there. Although the supernatural elements in the texts are often read as superficial embellishment, they represent the core of the story their authors are trying to tell and their whole justification for telling it. Everything that makes the Buddha a Buddha is supernatural: his discovery of the Dharma by his own power; his understanding of karma, the geography of the world, the structure of the cosmos, the path to liberation, and the makeup of living beings and the material world; his freedom from desire; his omniscience; his thirty-two marks; his special characteristics and powers. Since the dialogue in the early *sūtras* focuses mainly on the supernatural and afterlife, with the Buddha speaking in the role of omniscient authority, it can only have been composed after he was

⁵ Black 2007: 20–21, cited in Drewes 2017: 18–19; see also, e.g., Lindquist 2011.

understood as such. If the texts we have could be dated so close to the time of Buddhism's origin as von Hinüber would like, rather than the Buddha's historical existence, it would more strongly suggest that he was originally conceived as a supernatural being.

Von Hinüber in fact several times acknowledges that earliness does not show historicity, undercutting his own approach in an unusual way. Presenting his methodology near the beginning of his paper, he states that determining how close the sources are to the "time of the Buddha" "can either establish a likely historicity of the Buddha, or at the very least a date at which he was 'invented'" (2019b: 233). Later, he states that Aśoka's Lumbinī pillar inscription "demonstrates that the Buddha was considered a historical person less than 150 years after the assumed date of his death, or alternatively had been invented by this time" (2019b: 237). He also states that "genuine memory ... may be contained in a few casual remarks about his biography ascribed to the Buddha himself," "if it can be found at all" (2019b: 240), suggesting that it may not be. At least as I read them, these disclaimers apply to almost all the arguments in the paper. While von Hinüber is certainly right to offer them, they make it difficult not to wonder whether he is arguing for his thesis or mine. If he is willing to allow that the early sources may show no more than that the Buddha was invented by a certain time, that is precisely my view. It should be added that it is not quite correct to say that "the Buddha was considered a historical person" in Aśoka's time. The notion of a historical as opposed to supernatural Buddha is a modern one; for Aśokan Buddhists the Buddha was a supernatural being who had walked the earth. It is important to keep in mind that ancient Buddhists would have regarded the idea of the Buddha as a simple human teacher as striking at the foundations of their belief.

A clue to making sense of von Hinüber's disclaimers can perhaps be found in his abstract (2019b: 264), which is almost the same as the one he used for a paper entitled "The Buddha and History," delivered at the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology in 2018 and Stanford University in 2019 (2018, 2019a). Here he does not mention any intention to argue for the Buddha's historicity, but states his aim as being merely "to trace possibly early texts containing information on the biography of the Buddha" and "to determine their relative chronology." The

strongest claim he makes is that “if texts show traces pointing to an early date fairly near to the assumed life time of the Buddha, this might either indicate the historical existence or at least the date of the creation of the person called the Buddha.” These comments suggest that von Hinüber may originally have developed his arguments to support a more modest project, following an approach closer to Lamotte and de Jong’s. What may have led him to present them in defense of the bolder thesis of the Buddha’s historicity, which they do not actually support, is unclear.

We find conceptual problems with von Hinüber’s individual arguments as well. Near the opening of his paper, he begins to argue that the existence of Buddhist texts proves the Buddha’s historicity, but loses his way halfway through. Citing a claim in the *Milindapañha* that the existence of the Dharma proves that the Buddha lived, he writes, “Here, the *Milindapañha* is certainly right: We do see the teaching of the Buddha, and, consequently, somebody must have created these texts. For the very existence of this vast literature points to a person or a number of persons who composed it” (2019b: 234). What von Hinüber starts to say here, and needs to be able to say for his assertion to be relevant, is that the existence of the texts proves the existence of a “somebody” who created them, a single founder. Since of course it does not, he rightly adds “or a number of persons” at the end, apparently not considering that doing so vitiates his point. He ends up with no more than the idea that the texts were composed under human authorship, which can never have been in doubt. Indeed, what he says turns out to look remarkably similar to assertions made by H. H. Wilson and R. Otto Franke, quoted in my original paper, that cast doubt on the Buddha’s historicity. Wilson writes, “Although we may discredit the actuality of the teacher, we cannot dispute the introduction of the doctrine, and there may have been, about the time attributed to Sākya’s death ... a person, or what is more likely, persons of various castes ... who introduced [the] new system.”⁶ Franke writes, “Naturally somebody (or somebodies) has (or have) created [Buddhist doctrine], otherwise it would not be there. But who this somebody

⁶ Wilson 1856: 248, cited in Drewes 2017: 8.

was, and whether there were not rather several somebodies, we have no knowledge.”⁷

In another argument, von Hinüber cites the *Mahāsaccakasutta*’s version of the story of the Buddha’s attainment of the first *dhyāna*, sitting under a *jambu* tree, which, in his translation, the Buddha describes as taking place, “while [his] father the Sakka was working” (*pitū sakkassa kammante*).⁸ Suggesting that the passage depicts the Buddha’s father as a “simple peasant,” he writes:

That the Bodhisatva’s father ... works in a field is of course in stark contrast to the belief of later Buddhists that Suddhodana was a king. Consequently the commentary skilfully assumes a ceremonial ploughing with a golden plough to eliminate this glaring contradiction... The discrepancy between text and interpretation points to an old and genuine memory of a living person... While the commentary invented a slightly fantastic explanation, the sober canonical text ... could be very close to reality (2019b: 241–242).

There are a few problems here. First, the Pali passage does not in fact say that the Buddha’s father works in a field; it uses just the word *kammanta* (Skt. *karmānta*), which can refer to farm labor or to work or activity very generally. As the fourth limb of the Eightfold Path, *sammā-kammanta* is generally translated into English as “right action,” or “right conduct.” The standard translation by Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi renders the clause, “when my father the Sakyan was occupied.”⁹ The text thus does not say anything very surprising, and there is nothing to suggest that the commentary is trying to explain anything away. By reading *kammanta* as farm labor, the commentary’s author is able to create an evocative scene, likely drawing on a version of the well-known story of King Janaka discovering the infant Sītā while plowing with a golden plow, as well as other Buddhist traditions that locate the episode in farming

⁷ Franke 1915–1917: 1.455, translated in Thomas 1927: 233–234, cited in Drewes 2017: 13.

⁸ Von Hinüber 2019b: 241. In Pali texts, the episode and commentary occur at M 1.246 and Ps 2.290–291. The episode also occurs at M 2.93 and 2.212. For references to versions in other texts, see Anālayo 2011b: 1.240–241.

⁹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 340. Ñāṇamoli’s original manuscript translation reads, “while my Sakyan father was busy” (1956: 1.475).

contexts.¹⁰ Second, the passage's Sanskrit parallels, which von Hinüber does not seem to have considered, suggest that it may be corrupt. The Gilgit Mūlasarvāstivāda *Saṅghabhedavastu* twice refers to the event using the phrase *karmāntān anusaṃyān* and the *Dīrghāgama* manuscript parallel seems to read “*pituḥ śākyasya śuddhodanasya karmāntān anusaṃyān*,” “checking on [my] father the Śākya Śuddhodana's affairs.” This, and the way *kammante* is used in early Pali texts, suggest that the Pali passage has lost the participle *anusaññāyamāno*, corresponding to *anusaṃyān*.¹¹ If we supply it, *kammante* would be an accusative plural, rather than a locative singular, and the passage would have the same meaning as the Sanskrit. Finally, as is well known, the early texts depict the Śākyas as *kṣatriyas* administered by a sort of council, or councils, rather than a monarchy. Even if we take the Pali passage as it stands and read *kammanta* as field labor, there is no reason to think that this would have been something unusual for an ancient, non-royal *kṣatriya* to be involved with.

Further along, von Hinüber asserts that “it is very likely that the place of enlightenment was known to or at least remembered by all early monks,” which must give us pause.¹² Although scholars often talk about

¹⁰ On these traditions, see the reference in note 8.

¹¹ In the *Dīrghāgama* manuscript, the final word in the passage reads *anusaṃyo-*, followed by a lacuna. Zhen Liu reconstructs it as *anusaṃyogya* and translates the passage, “als ich die Arbeiten [meines] Vaters, des Śākya Śuddhodana begleitete” (2008: 122). The *Saṅghabhedavastu* passages (Gnoli 1977–1978: 1.107 and n. 1, 190), however, suggest that it should be *anusaṃyān*, or a close equivalent. This, and that the Pali passage is corrupt, is also suggested by the fact that, uncompounded, *kammante* seems to occur in canonical Pali texts only as an accusative plural, as the direct object of forms of only four verbs, *payojetī*, *abhisambhotī*, *ārabbhati* (single occurrence, at M 1.144), and *anusaññāyati*. *Kammante anusaññāyamāno* occurs twice, at M 3.8 and Vin 3.43. Another passage in the Gilgit *Saṅghabhedavastu* describes the bodhisattva going to sit in the shade of the *jambu* tree, “*pituḥ śākyasya śuddhodanasya karmāntān avalokya*,” “having seen the *karmāntas* of [his] father, the Śākya Śuddhodana,” with the *karmāntas* identified as the harsh labors of Śuddhodana's slaves in a farming village (Gnoli 1977–1978: 1.75–76).

¹² Von Hinüber 2019b: 243. I agree, though, with von Hinüber's translation of *bodhi* as “enlightenment,” rather than “awakening,” which other scholars have preferred on etymological grounds. Although *bodhi* is derived from *√budh*, “to wake,” in early Buddhist thought, rather than anything analogous to waking from sleep, it involves the acquisition of new knowledge and the abandonment of the *āsravas*. In several passages, the Buddha repeats after the attainment of each of the three stages of his enlightenment, “*tamo vihato āloko uppanno*,” “darkness was destroyed, light arose” (e.g., M 1.22–23). There

enlightenment as if it had some recognized empirical referent, it does not. Could “the place of enlightenment” be the place where the Buddha attained omniscience and put an end to desire, mental suffering, and future rebirth, becoming the teacher of gods and humans? Or perhaps the texts are accurate in reporting that the Buddha attained enlightenment, but inaccurate in presenting what this involved? If so, what actually happened, and how has it been possible to intuit it over an expanse of millennia? Although D. T. Suzuki’s depiction of enlightenment as a transformed psychological state has been highly influential in scholarship, early texts show no awareness of anything that could answer such a description, and no such state is known to science. Even if it were possible to show that the Buddha was a historical figure, there is no way that we can treat the enlightenment as a historical event. A possibility that is perhaps more likely, suggested by Ananda Coomaraswamy nearly a century ago, is that the Bodh Gayā site was a tree or *yakṣa* shrine that was converted to Buddhist use, as recent archaeological work has strongly suggested was the case for the traditional site of the Buddha’s birth at Lumbinī.¹³

Von Hinüber devotes six pages to a discussion of the story of Upaka the Ājīvika, the first human being the Buddha is said to have encountered after his enlightenment, whom the texts depict as being unconvinced by the Buddha’s claim to be an omniscient teacher.¹⁴ He argues that the fact that the story depicts the Buddha unfavorably is “a strong indication of genuine memory” and that “it is not easy to imagine that this failure of the Buddha ... was ‘invented,’” because “every Buddhist expects of course that ... the first human being ever to be able to profit from the

is no English word that can convey the whole of even early Buddhist understandings of *bodhi*, just as there was no Middle Indic one; “enlightenment” is a good choice.

¹³ Coomaraswamy 1928–1931: 1.17, Drewes 2017: 16, n. 28, referencing Coningham et al. 2013. André Bareau also argues against Bodh Gayā as the site of the enlightenment. See mainly Bareau 1980. Passages in Pali commentaries that I cannot recall having been discussed say that before the Buddha there were many *caityas* of *yakṣas*, *nāgas*, and other beings and that these were destroyed and replaced with Buddhist *vihāras* (Pj II 1.344, Spk 1.268).

¹⁴ Von Hinüber 2019b: 244–250. In canonical Pali texts, the Upaka episode occurs in the *Ariyapariyesanasutta* (M 1.170–171) and at Vin 1.8. For occurrences in other texts, see Anālayo 2011b: 1.183–184.

Buddha's newly acquired knowledge would praise him enthusiastically and accept his teachings" (2019b: 246–247, 249). Von Hinüber thus suggests that the episode satisfies the famous criterion of embarrassment, used convincingly in New Testament studies to establish the historicity of certain events in the life of Jesus, primarily his crucifixion and baptism by John the Baptist. Since these episodes depict Jesus unfavorably, gospel authors would not have included them unless they were known facts. Since the Upaka episode presents the Buddha unfavorably, it must be historical as well.

While quite inventive, this seems unlikely because, whether or not the Buddha was historical, it was surely obvious to everyone in all periods that many did not accept Buddhist teachings, making it difficult to imagine Buddhist authors feeling a need to acknowledge a single case. A private encounter would also be easy to ignore.¹⁵ A simpler explanation, which von Hinüber actually suggests himself at the close of his discussion, is that the episode pairs with the one that appears immediately before it, in which the Buddha expresses an unwillingness to teach on the grounds that few will be able to understand his teachings. If this is correct, rather than depicting the Buddha unfavorably, the passage depicts him accurately predicting the future. Von Hinüber even comments that "it is certainly not by chance that Upaka is an Ājīvika, a member of a rival sect," suggesting that the story has a polemical intent.¹⁶ While this seems quite reasonable, von Hinüber again undercuts his own argument. If it is possible to identify a good reason for authors to include an episode without its being based on historical fact, it fails to satisfy the

¹⁵ Von Hinüber comments that "it might have been the Buddha himself who admitted that he did not convince everybody at the very beginning" (2019b: 249). Of course, if the event took place, it could only have been the Buddha who reported it, presuming that it was not Upaka!

¹⁶ Von Hinüber 2019b: 249. In some Chinese translations, Upaka is identified as a brahman (Anālayo 2011b: 1.183, n. 206). For the episode of the Buddha's unwillingness to teach in Pali texts, see M 1.167–168 and Vin 1.4–5. For other occurrences, Anālayo 2011b: 1.178–182. Anālayo draws attention to the fact that the episode is not found in the *Madhyamāgama* and suggests that it may have been added later (2011a: 29–32). Because the Buddha's reluctance is inconsistent with the standard idea that the Buddha was destined to teach the Dharma, however, an omission seems more likely than an interpolation. If it were added later, the story would also lose the cohesiveness of the Upaka story's connection to the Buddha's prediction.

embarrassment criterion. We can add that, as Brian Black points out, “reluctance to teach, at least initially, is one of the most common traits of the Upanishadic teacher” (2007: 42), which suggests that its attribution to the Buddha represents no more than the iteration of a standard trope.

As mentioned above, von Hinüber wishes to claim a very early date for the *Mahāparinibbāṇasutta*. His argument, presented in greater depth in his paper, “Hoary Past and Hazy Memory,” published in the 2006 volume of this journal, is based on a passage in which the Buddha predicts the future greatness of the city Pāṭaliputra, referring to it as a *puṭa-bhedana*, or “customs station,” without using the word for capitol, *rājadhānī*, or mentioning the city’s future political importance. He presents this as evidence that the text was composed prior to Candragupta Maurya’s accession in about 320 BCE.¹⁷ There are two main problems with this. First, although von Hinüber acknowledges that a date for this passage does not necessarily apply to the text as a whole, he treats it as if it did.¹⁸ Since the *sūtra* was clearly composed in several phases, this is not feasible.¹⁹ Second, and more serious, von Hinüber neglects that the passage not only predicts that the city will become a *puṭabhedana*, but that it will become the “foremost city” (*agganagara*) of the Āryan world. As von Hinüber himself points out, *puṭabhedana* seems to be a word play, or we might say a so-called folk etymology, explaining the name Pāṭali-putta (2006 [2008]: 202). This would seem sufficient to account for the use of the term without requiring the redundant explanation that it was used because the city had not yet become more than a center for trade. Put differently, the term was used because *-puṭa* sounds like *-putta*, not because it was necessarily a comprehensive descriptor of the city. Though canonical Pali texts apply the term *rājadhānī* to several mythical cities, they do not seem to apply it to any historical city except Śrāvastī, so there is no reason that we should expect them to apply it to the

¹⁷ Von Hinüber 2006 (2008): 202–204, 2019b: 252–253. For the passage, see D 2.87–88. For versions in other texts, Waldschmidt 1950–1951: 2.148–149, Bareau 1963–1995: 2.66.

¹⁸ Von Hinüber 2006 (2008): 204, 2019b: 253, quoted above.

¹⁹ On this, see primarily Bareau 1979, although the author’s specific chronology is speculative.

Mauryan capitol.²⁰ Pāṭaliputra under the Mauryas was roughly ten times as large, by area, as any other city that had yet existed in South Asia (Allchin 1995: 200–204, 207). The use of *agganagara* can probably most straightforwardly be taken as a reference to this preeminence, suggesting that the passage was composed during or after Candragupta’s reign, as scholars have thought since the time of Oldenberg.

Von Hinüber comments that my statement that the Buddha “has not been linked to any historical facts” “is hardly tenable,” pointing out that “the Mallas are there, many Kings are mentioned, and the foundation of Pāṭaliputta is referred to” (Drewes 2017: 1, von Hinüber 2019b: 253). Here I fear he has missed my point. There is much that is historical in *Waverly*, but this does not make its protagonist a historical figure. We can add that the historicity of the kings mentioned in early Buddhist texts is hardly any better established than that of the Buddha. We do not find any firm footing in Indian history until we get to Chandragupta Maurya. Von Hinüber appreciatively quotes a passage from Erich Frauwallner, which I also quote in my paper, suggesting that requiring evidence of the Buddha’s historicity is “excessively exigent” and that doing so “would paralyse all scientific inquiry.”²¹ By definition, however, inquiry not based on evidence is not scientific. No scholar should find it difficult to imagine that we could have the stories that we do, of this all-knowing, infallible being, without there necessarily being an actual person at their root; it is not as if it is unusual for religions to have origin myths. As Wilson suggested long ago, the fact that the Buddha is depicted as being human – or at least semi-human, in being the child of human parents – rather than as a god, is unsurprising against the backdrop of Vedic tradition, which subordinated gods to brahmans (1856: 252). Humans are the revealers of the most profound truths in the *Upaniṣads* as well.

Before closing, it may be helpful to consider a final argument that can perhaps be taken as emblematic of the standards involved in historical-Buddha scholarship. In a passage in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the

²⁰ Canonical texts also apply the term to Vārāṇasī in the time of the Buddha Kāśyapa and to Kapilavastu, but neither of these can properly be regarded as historical.

²¹ Von Hinüber 2019b: 257, Frauwallner 1957: 310, Drewes 2017: 16. I use the spelling of Frauwallner’s original publication, from which von Hinüber slightly strays.

dying Buddha orders a monk not to stand in front of him so that he will not obstruct the view of a vast number of invisible gods who wish to see him; von Hinüber cites as “apt” Paul Harrison’s suggestion that “this strikes me as a rather feeble attempt to cover up for a perfectly understandable moment of grouchiness on the part of a sick old man.”²² In another passage found in some versions of the text, albeit not the Pali, the dying Buddha removes his robe and gives his monks a final chance to look at his body, stating that the sight of a Buddha is extremely rare; von Hinüber cites Ernst Waldschmidt as “certainly right” in suggesting that “it seems to me that the historical core is that the Buddha wished to demonstrate the decay of every human being to his monks, even of his own body.”²³ According to von Hinüber, these episodes, so interpreted, “underline the existence of the Buddha as a historical person” (2019b: 252). “It strikes me ...,” “it seems to me ...”: I fancy this, I fancy that. Though it may be unusual to see it presented so baldly, nothing any more robust than this lies behind anything that scholars have claimed we know about the historical Buddha. If we would like to do history, we cannot just make it up as we go along. If we presume the Buddha’s historicity, it is natural to imagine facts lying behind every realistic-seeming detail. If we do not, the texts provide nothing to establish it.

It is often supposed that scholars long ago discovered factual bases for identifying the Buddha as a historical figure, as they have done, say, for Jesus. Surely if we were to comb through the dusty old tomes we would find something? The main importance of von Hinüber’s contribution may lie in confirming that they did not. Apart from the *ad populum* argument he opens with, all his arguments are new. Though he makes a commendable attempt, lacking evidence, he is not able to say anything persuasive, which is surely why such scholars as Lamotte and de Jong cautioned against the effort in the first place. If one would maintain that the Buddha is historical, one must either admit, like Lamotte and de Jong, that one does not have any basis for doing so, or pretend, like von

²² Von Hinüber 2019b: 251, referencing Harrison 1995: 13. For the passage, see D 2.138–140.

²³ Von Hinüber 2019b: 251–252. For the passage, see Waldschmidt 1950–1951: 3.392–395. For versions in other texts, Anālayo 2014: 1–8, Allon 2021: 59–62.

Hinüber, that one does. Although some may find it reassuring that other scholars share their faith in the Buddha's historicity, that no basis for this faith has yet been identified is a plain fact. Prior to the Buddhism of the early texts and inscriptions, there lies only the darkness of prehistory. As historians, we find no path there.

Abbreviations

All references to Pali texts are to the PTS editions.

D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā II</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
S	<i>Saṃyuttanikāya</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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