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## *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha*

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# A Review of *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha*

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*From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha.* By Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 978-0-226-49320-6 (hardback), \$26.00.

This rich volume may be seen as a prequel to Lopez's *The Scientific Buddha* (2012), though it is perhaps more properly a continuation or expansion of his introduction to the recent (2010) republication of Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, translated by Lopez and Katia Buffetrille. And for readers acquainted with Lopez's earlier work, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (1998), for example, there is much here that will be stylistically and methodologically familiar. With *From Stone to Flesh*, Lopez trains his gaze on the figure of the Buddha in the Western imagination. Tracking the development of this Buddha from the earliest European accounts up to Burnouf's presentation in the mid-nineteenth century, Lopez presents the evolving and shifting European perceptions of the Buddha while contextualizing them with reference to European religious and cultural movements as well as to Asian Buddhist theories, practices, and views. What emerges is a meticulous meditation on intercultural exchange viewed through the lens of the Buddha. There is much

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in these earlier European perceptions of the Buddha and of Buddhists that will strike the contemporary reader as mistaken or even offensive, and throughout Lopez evaluates the accuracy of these early European accounts in light of what we now know. However, in so doing the reader is also implicated in this historical narrative. Lopez thereby indirectly demonstrates the provisionality of our own knowledge and the extent to which we are heirs to Burnouf.

Although he was not unknown in Europe previously, the relatively detailed accounts of the Buddha that early European travelers to Asia produced in the thirteenth century—Marco Polo's being, perhaps, the most notable—mark the substantive beginning of Lopez's narrative. For these Europeans in Asia, the Buddha was one among many idols worshipped throughout the heathen world. Lopez relates these views in reference to the larger history of iconoclasm in the Christian tradition, but also in relation to the creation of Buddhist images as reflected in various Buddhist textual sources and the archeological record, to a variety of traditional Asian etiologies of Buddha images, and in consideration of Buddhist views as expressed in rituals consecrating the image of the Buddha. As a preface to this discussion of the early European vision of the Buddha, Lopez also provides a survey of the Buddha's life story as reflected in a few Buddhist textual sources. Here Lopez privileges a very narrow set of texts—the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, the *Mahāvastu*, and Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*. This establishes a standard—or, more accurately, is predicated on an established standard in Western scholarship—against which one may judge the accounts of Marco Polo, *et al.* However, in determining an “authentic” or “Buddhist” account drawn from select Sanskrit and Pāli texts according to which we might measure the “accuracy” of early Western versions of the Buddha, Lopez tacitly embraces and recapitulates Burnouf's project. In so doing, Lopez draws the reader into the book's hermeneutic circle, a circle that draws tighter as his historical narrative develops. This constricting circle, as it were, finally leads the reader to an awareness of his or her own expectations and understanding of the Buddha and the degree to which it binds us.

With his second chapter Lopez's narrative turns toward Roman Catholic missionaries to Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This period is marked in part by a dawning European awareness that the various images worshipped throughout Asia were somehow the same and that they were connected to a once living figure. The key personalities in this chapter are Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) and Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), Jesuit missionaries to Asia who gained facility in Buddhist canonical languages—Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, respectively. In this chapter Lopez also introduces Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) and the theory of Divine Simplicity, "according to which God created a single human race to be united in a single faith, a universal religion based on the worship of the one true God" (71). To varying degrees this theory drove the interpretations of the Europeans treated in this chapter. For many, the religious diversity presented by the existence of Buddhism issued from human folly or demonic intervention. Interestingly, for some missionaries, including Postel, the Buddha was simply a case of mistaken identity; the Buddha was taken to be Jesus, unfortunately misunderstood by Asian populations. The interpretive mirroring of Self and Other that we see here is a major force in this segment of Lopez's narrative. Although Postel was refashioning the Buddha into Jesus in Japan, Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), initially imitating the dress, cropped hair, and shaved faces of Buddhist monks, were actively remaking themselves as Buddhists in China. This was soon abandoned in favor of a more Confucian appearance coupled with an active repudiation of Buddhism by Ricci, but this sort of conflation or mirroring continued as an interpretive tool for the Catholic missionaries to Asia. However, in a fascinating discussion of Devadatta, the "human villain" of the Buddha's life story, Lopez reveals that some Buddhists at the time identified the Christ figure on Catholic crucifixes with this Buddhist scoundrel. Thus, Lopez reminds the reader that Asian Buddhists were subject to culturally-determined interpretive forces no less than those who sought to convert them. This larger point comes out most clearly in Lopez's discussion of Ippolito Desideri, whose works reveal "a deep and nuanced understanding of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine

and philosophy, one that would not be matched by European scholarship until the late twentieth century” (108). Desideri is an important figure in Lopez’s account, not simply by virtue of his understanding of Tibetan Buddhist literature, but because that understanding did not prevent him from interpreting Buddhism as a Satanic idolatry. The issue, then, cannot be reduced to a matter of linguistic skill or knowledge of the source material. Neither can it simply be attributed to “misunderstanding.” Rather, the issue is one of the hermeneutical force of culturally bound subjectivity that drives interpretation. This is a force, Lopez reminds the reader, to which we are no less subject.

We feel a certain indignation, even a righteous indignation, at the way the story of the Buddha was distorted by Europeans, especially the missionaries. Sometimes it seems maddeningly muddled, at others willfully misread in an effort to portray the Buddha in a negative light. We know better now, and can only feel embarrassed at the folly of our forebears. But our indignation rests, at least in part, on the notion that there is a single life story of the Buddha to be distorted, a story that is somehow historical, somehow factual. (126)

Through his developing narrative, Lopez obliquely challenges this notion, demonstrating its provisionality by laying bare its archeology.

Lopez next turns to the concern that characterized European inquiry regarding the Buddha from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth: determining the identity of the Buddha as a historical figure. Here, Lopez’s main characters tend to be affiliated with the East India Company and the field of activity tends to be India. It was during this era that we encounter the bizarre (to the modern reader) hypothesis that the Buddha was not from India, but had travelled to India from Africa. This theory, which Lopez refers to as “the African hypothesis” was proposed by Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) based in part on the iconographically standard depiction of the Buddha as having tightly curled

hair. This theory was coupled with another, the “two-buddha theory,” according to which the African personage was combined with an Indian figure in order to produce the Buddha known and worshipped throughout Asia. Although the “African hypothesis” has fallen out of fashion, Kaempfer’s contributions to the Western image of the Buddha continue to resonate. The individual that Kaempfer (and others) took to be the Indian figure behind this composite Buddha was believed to have been a reformer, a man who rejected animal sacrifice and the dictates of the caste system. This figure was a product of European imagination based on Hindu representations of the Buddha as an avatar of Viṣṇu, whose actions were intended to mislead the wicked. Thus, the Buddha emerged in part through a failure to recognize a distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism, and to a degree this conflation continues to inform the contemporary image of the Buddha.

[T]wo elements of the Hindu myth . . . would attach themselves to the person of the Buddha, both in post-Buddhist India and in the West: his condemnation of animal sacrifice (especially of the beloved cow) and his rejection of the caste system. The caste system is something that Europeans would also come to condemn, and the Buddha’s condemnation of it two millennia earlier would prove to be an important element in his subsequent appeal in the West, where he was presented as a “reformer.”  
(142)

Thus, Kaempfer was faced with two different Buddhas, one African and the other Indian, one an idolater and the other a reformer. With this bifurcated Buddha—part enlightened Indian reformer who resisted the caste system and the animal sacrifice, part Egyptian source of Asian idolatry and the heretical belief in the transmigration of souls—we see the European image of the Buddha as resulting from a cleavage between that which appeals to and that which offends European sensibilities and convictions. The former is embraced while the latter is rejected. Here we see

an important step toward the positive, human Buddha who is now so well-known and beloved in the West.

This sort of cleavage, emerging in part from the absence of Buddhist contributions to their own representation, continued to inform scholarship on the Buddha from this period. And here we also see that the absence of Buddhists in India is a significant element in the development of the European image of the Buddha in Lopez's telling. Among other effects, the disjunction between the presence of Buddha images and the absence of Buddhists in India allowed European authors to establish a distinction between the Buddha as a historical figure and the lived tradition found elsewhere throughout Asia. Thus, the Buddha that we know was born in part from a series of cleavages—between the Indian Buddha and the African Buddha, between the enlightened social reformer and the idolater, between the ancient Buddha and practicing Buddhists—with the former consistently privileged to the point of the latter's effacement. This disjunction and effacement, following Lopez's narrative, continued to inform the image of the Buddha in the Western imagination in subsequent eras. Left with only traces of the Buddha in India in the form of crumbling monuments, Europeans searched for their source. This search eventually led to a different sort of trace: the text.

In his penultimate chapter, Lopez's narrative turns to the early nineteenth century European interest in classical Buddhist texts. Here we see the birth proper of the image of the Buddha that continues to hold sway in the Western imagination. Lopez refers to a number of luminaries representative of the developing European interest in Buddhist texts—Julius Heinrich Klaproth (1783-1835), Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788-1832), Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784-1842), and others. But the real protagonist here is Eugène Burnouf with his collection of Sanskrit texts from Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801-1894). It was Burnouf's self-appointed task to correctly determine the identity and history of the Buddha through reliance on the Sanskrit Buddhist texts that he identified as “the original teachings of the Buddha himself, untainted by trans-



lation” (199). We may note the irony here that Burnouf wished to discount Asian translations (that is, non-Sanskrit sources) of these putative originals as corruptions or variations from the source while he himself was engaged in producing European translations. Here we see, perhaps, a dim recognition that translation (understood broadly) is a creative process involving the active intervention of a translator such that the result is a hybrid product reflecting both the source material and the subjectivity of the translator.

Yet Burnouf, reflecting his own cultural location as an elite nineteenth-century European classicist, fails to recognize that this logic applies equally to himself and his intended project. This fact and the various interpretive forces that informed Burnouf’s work, however, are made plain by Lopez. For Burnouf, following Lopez, the Buddha was understood first and foremost as a human being, an Indian “man of the people” who presented a path to liberation available to all (204). In this we hear echoes of Kaempfer’s Buddha-as-social-reformer, but Lopez also locates this human and egalitarian Buddha as a product of the French Republic and Burnouf’s embrace of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s humanism. With Burnouf’s project we also see a continuation of the trend of bifurcation and selection highlighted in earlier chapters of Lopez’s narrative. Burnouf’s Buddha is one that also emerges from the selective reading of available Sanskrit texts and the distinction Burnouf made between “simple” and “developed” *sūtras* with the former privileged over the latter. Although Burnouf claimed to have established this distinction on the basis of linguistic and stylistic considerations, this division between the simple and developed *sūtras* was not just a matter of form. As Lopez observes, the “developed” *sūtras* are also filled with what he deemed “mythological elements.” In other words, Burnouf is after the human Buddha and his human history; that which did not conform to Burnouf’s post-Enlightenment European humanism is prejudicially dismissed. It is this Buddha, shorn of those aspects too incredible for the post-Enlightenment European intellect and created by Burnouf in the mid-

nineteenth century at the end of a long chain of European developments and representations, that is still so well-known in the West today:

Burnouf described the Buddha and Buddhism for the first time in ways that would become so ingrained and natural that their origins in an 1844 French tome would eventually be forgotten. These would include that Buddhism is an Indian religion, that the Buddha is a historical figure, and, perhaps of particular consequence, that the Buddha was a human teacher of a religion. Or perhaps a philosophy, that preaches ethics and morality without recourse to dogma, ritual, or metaphysics. (211)

This is a Buddha who will be familiar to a number of readers.

In his concluding chapter, Lopez provides examples of alternative directions taken but swiftly forgotten in the years following Burnouf's death. What remained consistent in these years is the fact that this discourse about Buddhism remained essentially European, even when adopted in Asia by modernist reformers. Thus, the effacement of the Asian Buddhas would appear to be complete. Yet, Lopez's intention is to recover the panoply of now forgotten European Buddhas and to lay bare their intellectual and cultural backgrounds such that the seemingly universal Buddha that exists now in the minds of both Western and Asian scholars and adherents becomes productively provincialized. Rather than simply debunking or denying the validity of the Buddha as constructed by Burnouf and enshrined in the contemporary Western imagination, Lopez reveals the contingency of that story and thereby provincializes it as one among many possible images of the Buddha. As such, this work is of great significance for both scholars and non-specialists interested in Buddhism. Rife with detailed information concerning Asian Buddhisms as well as Western religious and cultural forces, this work will also be of interest to those working in comparative religion and religious historiography. Detailed and rigorous in its scholarship, yet readable and engaging, with *From Stone to Flesh*, Lopez has produced an im-

portant contribution to the understanding of Buddhism as a cross-cultural phenomenon.