Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/
Volume 32, 2025

Selling the Buddha's Relics Today

Conan Cheong and Ashley Thompson

SOAS University of London

Selling the Buddha's Relics Today

Conan Cheong and Ashley Thompson[1]

Abstract

On May 7, 2025, Sotheby's Hong Kong will offer for sale "gem relics" of the Buddha that were dug up by British colonial landowner W. C. Peppé out of the Piprahwa stūpa in Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1898. In Buddhist contexts, they are considered *śarīra*—corporeal remains imbued with the living presence of the Buddha. Centering Buddhist ontologies of relics evidenced in epigraphic and ritual traces, this article calls attention to the ethical implications of placing such sacred remains on the art market. It situates the continued division of "gems" from "bones and ash" in colonial processes of extraction, classification, and revaluation through archaeological and museographic practice.

On May 7, just days before the major Buddhist holiday of Vesak, Sotheby's Hong Kong will put relics of the Buddha—what they call "The Piprahwa

[1] SOAS University of London. The authors thank Christian Luzcanits for his comments on a draft of this article, two anonymous reviewers for theirs, and Stephen Berkwitz, Trent Walker, and Peter Skilling for their support. The views expressed are wholly our own.

Gems of the Historical Buddha"—on the auction block.[2] Now on display in its flagship Sotheby's Maison showroom in Hong Kong Central, the relics are artfully arranged in three glass showcases, two of which were made by the British colonial landowner who had them dug up. In the sales catalogue, they are categorized as a "Premium Lot," which means prospective bidders are required to provide financial references before being able to register to bid. Price estimates are made available only on request, and it is clear that Sotheby's is expecting astoundingly high bids from a select few.

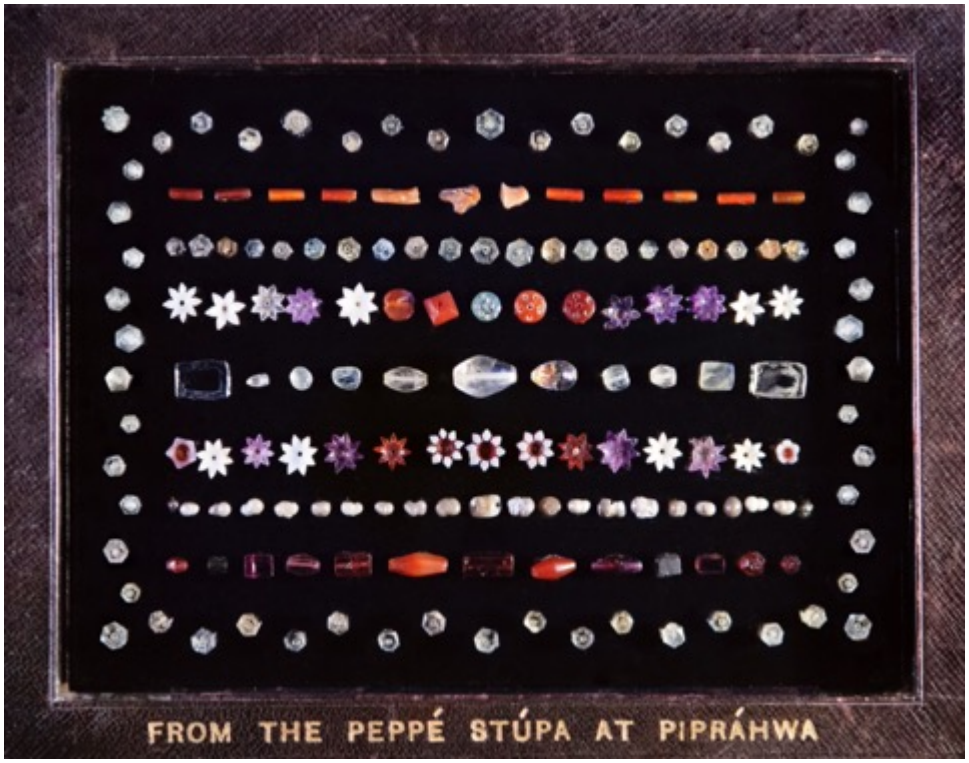

Figure 1: Relics in one of the cases made by William Claxton Peppé in 1898

At a time of increased attention to provenance in the antiquities market, Sotheby's buyers are to be reassured by the claim to legal

[2] Sotheby's The Piprahwa Gems of the Historical Buddha/Lot 1 (https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2025/the-piprahwa-gems-of-the-historical-buddha/the-piprahwa-gems-of-the-historical-buddha-mauryan).

ownership emphatically set out in the catalogue: "Property from the Descendants of William Claxton Peppé." Peppé, an Aberdeen-trained engineer, was the man who ordered the excavation of a stupa near the village of Piprahwa on his father's Birdpur estate in present-day Uttar Pradesh in 1898. These relics were found in five reliquaries contained within a stone coffer itself contained within the stupa. An inscription on one of these reliquaries has been dated to the reign of King Aśoka (circa 240-200 BCE) and affirmed by a series of eminent epigraphists, most recently Harry Falk, to name the relics contained within as those of the Historical Buddha himself.

Figure 2: The relics on display in Sotheby's Maison showroom, Hong Kong Central

However, the Sotheby's sales catalogue is careful to distinguish the "gems" on sale from the bone fragments and ash with which they were found inside the reliquaries. Potential bidders are invited to see these gem relics as man-made artefacts, to be appreciated for their material value and fine workmanship. We see this separation of "gems" from bone and ash to be the enduring result of the violence of colonial archiving

processes, whose modes of appropriation including the removal of materials as well as their classification, continue to efface forms of knowledge embedded in the materials themselves and to dispossess the (previously) colonized of their tangible and intangible heritage. Given the exceptional nature of these relics said to be of the Buddha himself, this latest iteration of colonial process, channeled as it is to private sale, works to perpetuate dispossession of today's practicing Buddhists writ large.

It was Peppé who separated the reliquary contents into two distinct sets: bone and ash in one set, gems and precious objects in the other. The British Raj, which claimed Peppé's finds under the 1878 Indian Treasure Trove Act, distributed the spoils accordingly. The bone and ash went to King Chulalongkorn of Siam (Thailand), a portion of the "gems" to the colonial museum in Calcutta (Kolkata), and the remaining "gems" back to Peppé.[3] It is this last portion of the relics that are now being offered for sale by Peppé's descendants.

For the Buddhists who deposited them, as for many Buddhists today, gems, bone and ash are all relics. Sotheby's acknowledges this. In fact, the auction house takes pains to establish the sacred authenticity of the relics—for instance, they quote the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s "where the relics are seen, the Buddha is seen" to make the point that *śarīra*, or corporeal relics, are "embodying the actual person of the Buddha, not merely

[3] Peppé retained 433 "duplicates" out of 1,153 items found in the reliquaries, by John Strong's count (*Beads and Bones*, 191), referencing the inventory Peppé made with V. A. Smith (Royal Asiatic Society Archives, GB 891 WCP/1/38). Peppé gave an unspecific number of these to Prince Jinavaravamsa, twenty gems and one gold roll to the Venerable Subhuti in Sri Lanka, and some others to his sister and to the Royal Asiatic Society in London. The remainder of this is presumably what is on sale today. The Sotheby's catalogue does not give a precise number, but states that the amount Peppé was "approximately one fifth of the total find," which we note is less than Strong's count.

memorializing him."[4] And yet, they do not follow this line of thought to its logical conclusion. Nor do they encourage their buyers to do so, diverting attention instead to the distinct nature of the materials as established in the immediate wake of the colonial find. The "gems," they write, were "found buried together in reliquaries with the corporeal relics of the Historical Buddha." While trading on the relic's sacredness to increase interest in the sale, and to drive up the hammer price, Sotheby's sidesteps the ethical implications of auctioning the *śarīra* of the Buddha to the highest bidder. Were Buddhist ontologies to be taken seriously rather than instrumentalized to mercantile ends, the *śarīra* classification would confirm the conceptual assimilation of "gems" with bone and ash, duly reflecting their physical assimilation within the stupa. Likewise, Sotheby's claim that the *śarīra* are "embodying the actual person of the Buddha" would need ample consideration, beginning with conceptions of personhood and embodiment operating in the diverse contexts involved in this find—from Asoka's time to that of the Raj to our own. At the very least, we can affirm that for many Buddhists, historically and today, these "gems" are *śarīra* of the Buddha and as such are imbued with the Buddha's living presence.

Colonial Entanglements

While the military and political subjugation of India comprised the dominant external manifestation of the Raj, "cultural technologies of rule" underpinned and sustained it, and continue to have effects today (Dirks 9). Of particular relevance to our argument here is the systematization of knowledge of India's past which the Raj ordered through archaeological,

[4] Sotheby's Mahāvaṃsa reference is from XVII.3-4, in Wilhelm Geiger and Mabel Haynes Bode's translation: "If we behold the relics we behold the Conqueror" (116).

antiquarian, and museum practice as a distinct means of administering India's then present. As the historian Bernard Cohn has put it:

> In coming to India, [the British] unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well. The "facts" of this space did not exactly correspond to those of the invaders. Nevertheless, the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable." (4)

The Piprahwa stupa, in the Birdpur estate in Basti district, was on land ceded by the Kingdom of Oudh (or Awadh) to the British East India Company in 1801, as part of territorial concessions local rulers were increasingly pressured to make after the Bengal Nawab's defeat in the Battle of Plassey in 1756-7 (Crooke 122). William Claxton Peppé's father, also named William, took over this land when he married the widow of Mr. Hugh Gibbon, the previous managing proprietor, after 1848 (Nevill 98). He was later granted additional land in Gorakhpur District by the colonial state for services rendered in suppressing the Indian uprisings of 1857, which included villages confiscated from rebels in this restive region.[5] William Claxton Peppé's rights to the exploitation of this land were directly derived from these two pivotal moments in the British military subjugation of what they then called the N.W. Provinces and Oudh, later the United Provinces.[6]

---

[5] More specifically, "a portion of the Teghra Mehal" as stated in the official correspondence. Letter: December 31, 1860, from G. Cowper Esquire, the Secretary of the Government, North Western Provinces, to W. Grey Esquire, the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department (The National Archives UK: IOR/L/PJ/3/1086 No. 47)

[6] The economic dimensions of this exploitation are out of the scope of this essay but see references by Whitcombe and R. Mukherjee. Popular historian Charles Allen, whose 2008

In his excavation report, Peppé makes clear that it was the recent discovery of a pillar, at nearby Lumbini, with an Aśokan inscription indicating it to mark the birthplace of the Buddha that prompted him to excavate the largest of several mounds, known locally as *koṭ*, on his family's land (Peppé and Smith 573). He corresponded regarding his finds with historian Vincent A. Smith, then District Judge of the N. W. Provinces and Oudh, and Alois Anton Führer, Assistant Archaeological Surveyor at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) who was then in search of the ancient city of Kapilavastu (S. Mukherjee 23; Allen 32). The excavation can therefore be seen as part of colonial efforts to map the locations of ancient Indian cities in north India, particularly those associated with Buddhism. This was spearheaded by Colonel Alexander Cunningham himself, founder of the ASI in 1861, whose program of research followed the itineraries of the Chinese monk pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang who visited India in the 5th and 7th centuries. Cunningham systematized the practice of field archaeology in India, which consisted of ad-hoc excavations of Buddhist stupas in the northwest (like Piprahwa), largely by military men and engineers, to find Indo-Greek coins and other treasures (Chakrabarti 37–38). As Tapati Guha-Thakurta has observed, an imperial logic underpins this Western preoccupation with India's Buddhist past, as exemplified by Cunningham's belief "that Buddhism underlined the lesson that India was politically strong and resistant to external invasions only when

book was pivotal to the contemporary "rediscovery" of the Piprahwa relics and who had close access to the family, in particular W. C. Peppé's grandson Neil, portrays W. C. Peppé as a kind of benevolent colonizer: "It was, after all, the Peppés who had transformed a wilderness into a going concern and in the process given employment, security and a modicum of prosperity to a large labour force and their families. A stern man and a hard task master Peppé-Sahib might be but he was also a just man who knew the ways of his people and who listened to their concerns" (23).

united under one ruler, as it was once again under the British Empire" (*Monuments* 37).[7]

Ultimately, the treatment of the Piprahwa relics follows a familiar pattern of imperial archaeology, whereby objects of the past, and by extension India's past itself, was revalued to, directly or indirectly, serve British goals. Cohn writes that "it was the British who, in the nineteenth century, defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined" (77). This value was determined not only in scholarship and in museum displays, but also in legal terms. Of particular relevance here is the Indian Treasure Trove Act of 1878, which was "primarily designed to consolidate the compulsory acquisition powers of the state over moveable antiquities and bullion buried under the soil" (S. Mukherjee *Transmissions* 220). This is the Act by which the crown claimed the rights to Peppé's finds. In V. Smith's letter to the Government of India in his official capacity as Chief Secretary to the N. W. Provinces and Oudh with recommendations of what to do with the relics, he designates the "actual relics" as the "bones and ashes," while the "gems" and reliquaries are "objects of interest to European scholars."[8] This was also an attempt to cut through competing claims on the find and to determine the value of relics, on the one hand re-inventing the bones and ash as instruments of diplomacy, and on the other, transforming the "gems" and reliquaries into artefacts. While the portion of the finds designated "actual relics" were donated to King Chulalongkorn of Siam, the reliquaries and a portion of the gems were

[7] See Cunningham 246–47.

[8] Letter: Naini Tal, May 18, 1898, from Vincent Smith, Chief Secretary to the Government, North Western Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department. Reprinted in *Foreign Records of the Bangkok Period* 169–70. Also reproduced on the website of the Peppé family The Piprahwa Project: Research, Information and News about the Discovery at Piprahwa 1898 (https://www.piprahwa.com/letters-2).

deposited in the colonial Indian Museum in Calcutta;[9] the remaining "gems" were granted to Peppé himself.

Of course, at the time, Buddhists were not idle. It was Thai royal Venerable Jinawarawansa (Prince Prisdang) who successfully petitioned the British Crown to give the bone relics to King Chulalongkorn, to serve his own political ends (Loos 115–21). Chulalongkorn enshrined some of the relics at the Golden Mount of Bangkok's Wat Saket but also redistributed portions to other Buddhist countries in an expression of himself as an exemplary Buddhist king (S. Mukherjee *Relics* 34–37).[10] Meanwhile, Sinhalese reformer Anagarika Dharmapala was leading a challenge to the definition of sites associated with the Buddha as being of archaeological value only, reinventing them as sites of pilgrimage for contemporary Buddhists. This was part of a broader response by Buddhist communities to Victorian characterizations of Buddhism as "pessimistic, nihilistic, devoid of any power for promoting goodness, and in a state of degradation and decline" (McMahan 94). If these modern Buddhist responses can be said to have been inflected by the very colonial structures they aimed to combat, they are, in our view, no less Buddhist for it.

Śarīra: Corporeal Relics

The first credible find of the Buddha's relics in modern times, the inscribed reliquary dug up from the Piprahwa stupa quickly captured the imagination of Buddhist scholars and devotees alike. Vincent A. Smith wrote excitedly to Peppé with his first attempt to decipher the inscription that "your find turns out to be of even greater interest than we thought

[9] Falk notes that these are now "untraceable" as of his visit to the Indian Museum (54).

[10] There were other contenders in Buddhist Asia for the relics, see S. Mukherjee *Transmissions* 231–34. For Chulalongkorn's self-fashioning as universal Buddhist monarch, see Peleggi 37–39.

as the bones were believed by the depositor to be those of the Buddha himself."[11] Due to the cursory association with Führer who was subsequently disgraced for egregious forgeries and plagiarism, however, the authenticity of the inscription was called into question and doubts lingered into the 20th century (Falk 44–45). The epigraphist Harry Falk, in a 2013 article and as documented in a *National Geographic* feature titled *The Bones of the Buddha*,[12] settled the debate, confirming that the inscription, in late Mauryan Brahmi script, reads:

> *sukitibhatinaṃ sabhagiṇikanaṃ saputadalanaṃ iyaṃ salilanidhane budhasa bhagavate ⟨saki⟩yanaṃ*
>
> This enshrinement (*nidhāna*) of the corporeal remnants (*śarīra*) of the Buddha [of the Śākyas], the Lord, (is to the credit) of the [Śākya] brothers of the 'highly famous', together with their sisters, with their sons and wives. (60)[13]

While the general meaning of his translation is consistent with the earliest readings by Smith, Georg Bühler, Auguste Barth, H. Lüders, and others, Falk makes two important refinements. The first is the translation of the compound "*salilanidhane*" (Skt: *śarīra-nidhāna*) as not merely denoting the "container" (*nidhāna*) in which the *śarīra* (relics) were placed (i.e., the inscribed stone reliquary), but in fact referring to the act of depositing the *śarīra* in the stupa in its entirety. The second refinement is that those who deposited the relics at Piprahwa counted themselves as members of the Śākya clan, that is, the clan into which the Buddha Śākyamuni was himself born. This is derived from the final "[*saki]yanaṃ*" modifying both the

[11] Letter: 23 January 1898, from Vincent Smith to William Claxton Peppé (Royal Asiatic Society Archives: GB 891 WCP-WCP/1-WCP/1/6)

[12] PBS "Secrets of the Dead" (https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/bones-of-the-buddha-about-this-episode/1023/)

[13] See Milligan 9–11 for a discussion of how this was a joint donation by several members of the Sakya clan.

opening "*sukitibhatinaṃ*," which refers to the people who made the donation, as well as "*budhasa*," referring to the Buddha. This double referent is likely intentional. As Falk explains:

> Seen this way, the dimension of the statement changes completely, from a simple 'this is the reliquary box of the Śākyas holding the relics of the Buddha' to mean 'this whole stupa construction has been installed by us Śākyas for the relics of the Buddha.' (Falk 2013, 60)

In foregrounding the totality of the stupa and the Buddha relics enshrined within, this precise reading of the inscription affords a critical understanding of the identification of the donors with the Buddha himself. We have here a multifaceted expression of indivisibility, where the identification between the Buddha and the donors is operated not just in linguistic terms but also in the physical terms the inscription records. The Śākya clan, its members dead-and-living, literally comes together in the body of the stupa, the incorporation of the relics functioning to consolidate the family corporation. The epigraphic expression contradicts also the colonial logic of division that designates "bones and ash" as corporeal relics, while everything else is but gems and stones. Indeed, while only one out of five of the reliquaries that survived Peppé's excavation—several wooden boxes disintegrated upon contact with the outside air—was inscribed, the inscription can be taken to apply to all of them, and more broadly to the stupa itself. At the risk of belaboring the point, let us highlight that it clearly indicates that all relics deposited in the desecrated stupa were considered the *śarīra* of the Buddha, that is, his *bodily remains*.

Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century philosopher of Sri Lanka whose commentary became canonical, described how the *śarīra* of the Buddha "found in the remains of the Buddha's cremation fire were of three types—'like jasmine buds, like washed pearls, and like [nuggets] of gold'—and came in three sizes—as big as mustard seeds, as broken grains of rice, and

as split green peas."[14] The slippage between bone and gem here is not merely rhetorical; it is a real identification. There is no categorical difference between "bones and ash" and "gems and stones"—both are "*śarīra*," where even the term "relics" is an imperfect translation. Buddhists today still look for such gem-like *śarīra* in the cremation pyre of acknowledged masters.[15]

As a consequence of their being corporeal remains of the Buddha or Buddhist masters, for the vast majority of Buddhist practitioners, such *śarīra* are not inanimate objects: they are imbued with the living presence of beings who have not truly died but have reached Awakening. If Orientalists in Peppé's time sought a "true Buddhism" in India's classical past which had been obscured by the ignorant superstitions of its living followers, the "material turn" of the 1990s has quickened scholarly contempt for such contempt while fueling serious examination of the ontological status of Buddha relics on their own terms. Gregory Schopen's "Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha" is an oft-cited touchpoint in this regard, highlighting inscriptions describing Buddha relics as "actually present and alive." For instance, the 2nd Century BCE Shinkot relic casket describes "a relic of the Blessed One Sakyamuni which is endowed with life (*prāṇasametaṃ śarīraṃ*)" and the first century CE Senavarma inscription describes relics as "infused" with qualities that only living persons would have (Schopen *Burial Ad Sanctos* 126–27). Robert Sharf and others have explored further how relics make the Buddha present in absence, working in tandem with Buddha images.[16]

---

[14] Quoted and translated from the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* 2:603–4 in Strong *Relics* 11.

[15] On the relics of the famous Thai forest monk Acharn Mun, see Tambiah 109. See also the discussion of the ambivalence of some revered Thai monks about the possible commodification of their "crystallized" relics in Taylor 175–80. In the Tibetan tradition, these are known as *ring-bsel*; see discussion in Martin 283–85.

[16] See Sharf, Thompson, Strong *Buddhist Relics*, and Kinnard in references.

Śarīra as Offerings

In recent years, colonial modes of categorization of the Piprahwa relics have been perpetuated in the form of scientific analyses. Motivations for scientific testing lies in the need to prove their authenticity, due in part to the association with A. A. Führer as mentioned above. In the acknowledgements of his sensational 2008 book, Charles Allen thanks John Eskenazi, prominent London dealer of Asian art, for his support in testing "three organic artefacts from Piprahwa" (271).[17] Charles Ogden, founder of the Society of Jewellery Historians, also performed non-destructive analysis of the gems, leading to the conclusion that their craftsmanship "indicates that it must have been made or collected for a person or purpose of considerable importance" (6). This kind of testing can shed light on historical dating, modes of production, socio-economic context, etc. It also firmly supports market value. Yet, in what ways does the valence of "authenticity" operating here pertain to the ontological status of the Piprahwa Buddha *śarīra*? For our part, we refrain from arbitrating the question of what the gems "are"—were they produced from the Buddha's cremated body? Or were they offerings that were mixed in with the Buddha's ash and bone post-cremation by donors?—instead choosing to probe the motivations, implications and consequences of such determinations up against the vital written and physical evidence of the *śarīra*'s ontological status on their own terms.[18]

That is not to deny the historical possibility that at least some of the contents of the Piprahwa reliquaries may have been donations that were made during stupa renovation campaigns, or other holy celebrations

[17] The results of this testing seem to have remained unpublished.

[18] All this is not to say that Buddhists are unconcerned with the authenticity of relics—see the case of the Burmese monk U Ma in 1897, who protested to A. A. Führer that the tooth relic the latter had sent him, claiming it was excavated from Kapilavastu, was too big to be that of an ordinary human (see article by Huxley).

after the original foundation. However, we question if these donors, or indeed Buddhist practitioners today, could see the precious materials added to the reliquary or stupa as mere objects, and not partaking in the same sacrality as that of the bones and ash. In fact, subsequent donors would have made these offerings with the intention that they remain in the presence of the Buddha's remains, thereby making merit for them in perpetuity and in this sense fusing with them. Buddhologists have teased out a range of ritual processes by which Buddhist practitioners have, physically and conceptually, associated and assimilated precious materials with human remains for well over 2000 years. The Piprahwa case can be taken as exemplary in this regard.

In his essay on the Piprahwa gem relics, John Strong references Wannaporn Rienjang's work on Gandhāran relic deposits to suggest four possible reasons for donors to have placed precious materials together with the remains of the Buddha. We note that these identifications are not mutually exclusive: that is, the relics could have been seen as some or all of these things simultaneously by the donors. One is more or less commensurate with how we have regarded the relics thus far, that the beads and gems are themselves regarded as Buddha relics, but of "a rather different kind, stressing purity and permanence in contrast to corporeality and impermanence" (*Beads* 196). This derives from Rienjang's observation that in the later Gandhāran reliquary finds, no bones and ash are found whatsoever, instead appearing to be completely replaced by pearls. Strong suggests that this may have been in order to address possible cultural concerns about the impurity of dead bodies in ancient India, in the early phases of the development of relic worship practices.

Strong further suggests that the gem relics could have been, firstly, offerings made in reverence to the Buddha to make merit for the donor in perpetuity; secondly, as "adornments" of the bones and ash to frame them as sacred remains (as opposed to those of the ordinary dead);

and finally as substitutes for the bodies of their donors, such that they remain in the presence of the Buddha's remains, effectively melding with them (*Beads* 193–96). Returning to Falk's second refinement of the translation of the Piprahwa inscription mentioned above, we see a mirroring of this synthesis in the syntactic identification of the donors with the Buddha through the double referent of "*<saki>yanaṃ*" (Śākya) modifying both "*sukitibhatinaṃ*" (brothers of the "highly famous") and "budhasa" (the Buddha). It is clear that even if one insists on the gem relics as "originally" human-made offerings, they were nevertheless never meant to be severed from their proximity to the Buddha's remains. More importantly, the distinction between "offering" and "relic" is effaced at the ritual moment of enshrinement (*nidhāna*). Here, again, we stress the indivisibility of *śarīra*, and the colonial violence perpetuated in separating "offerings" from "actual relics."

Belongings

To bring Buddhist perspectives manifest in the Piprahwa case otherwise into global conversations seeking to transform contemporary arts sector practices, could *śarīra* be seen as "belongings"? This term was coined by Jordan Wilson, Musqueam Cultural Education Resource Centre curator in 2015 to reframe cultural "artefacts" in museum and private collections as the personal belongings of the First Nations communities whose ancestors made them. These communities have maintained intangible connections with these belongings, including knowledge of their power and of how to care for them. As Wilson explains, the deliberate use of the term "belongings":

> . . . is meant to convey that our ancestors continue to have a strong connection to these belongings [held in museum collections], and that Musqueam community members

> today feel a deep sense of responsibility for these belongings. While our belongings . . . may not always be owned by the Musqueam community in a Western legal sense, *belongings* references a difference [*sic*] sense of ownership, one that is continuous and unbroken. (emphasis in original)

Śarīra are belongings in more ways than one: they are belongings of the Buddha, being the remains of his human body; they are belongings of those worshippers seeking through donation to assimilate their own bodies with that of the Buddha; and they have always belonged to Buddhist communities.

There is a growing recognition today that the removal of human remains and associated funerary materials from burial sites in colonized lands, and their then use in scientific investigations and display in museum collections by European settlers and colonists, is a historical wrong for which redress and restitution must be given. In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has since 1990 required Federal agencies and institutions that receive Federal funds to repatriate Native American human remains and other cultural items to their lineal descendants and tribes. Describing NAGPRA as "one of the most powerful human rights mechanisms in United States history," anthropologist Kathleen S. Fine-Dare highlights how the Act engages a cultural process of undoing not only the actual looting of Native American graves by amateur and federally permitted archaeologists alike, but also the suppression of traditional Native American funerary practices through forced conversions to Christianity (62).

The supposedly scientific and orderly colonial era excavation of Buddhist stupas in northwest and central India has since been re-evaluated by archaeologists. In fact—in contradiction to the Orientalist stereotype of local Muslim populations as iconoclastic—Sikander Begum, the ruler of Bhopal, was persuaded in 1853 by British military officer H. M.

Durand to offer the Sanchi gateways (*toraṇa*) to Queen Victoria as a gift in order to protect them from vandalism by archaeologists, in response to Cunningham's excavations (Lahiri 102).[19] Political machinations on all sides here notwithstanding, the exemplary Muslim ruler in this case appears to have sought to protect the integrity of the Buddhist site threatened as it was by archaeological investigation.

The indivisibility of the stupa, as alluded to above in the Piprahwa inscription, is not meant to be breached. Buddhist Studies scholar Peter Skilling discusses how the fifth of the canonical list of five sins of immediate retribution (*ānantarya-karma*), shedding the blood of the Buddha, should be interpreted as equivalent to breaking open a stupa of a Buddha "with malicious intent" (71).[20] Upon committing such a transgression, one is said to be reborn in the hells in the very next life. Such admonishments are not limited to scriptural texts but also appear in inscriptions on stupas. For instance, the West Gate of Stupa I in Sanchi (which British colonial civil servant T. H. Maddock violently breached around 1835, causing the same gateway to collapse)[21] bears the imprecation:

> Anyone who from this Kākaṇāva removes stonework (*selakama*) or has stonework removed, or transfers [the stūpa] to another lineage of teachers (*ācariyakula*), will share the fate of those who commit the five deeds of immediate retribution (*pac-ānatariya-kārakāna*). May these sins befall him. (Skilling 76)

[19] Also see Guha-Thakurta *Many Lives*.

[20] Skilling's article later addresses the "Three Seals Law Code" issued under Rama I of Thailand in 1805, and laws of other Buddhist societies, which elaborate on these laws against stūpa desecration. See also Silk 260–62.

[21] See Lahiri 100.

The date of this Prakrit inscription, in an early Brāhmī script, most likely dates to within a hundred years of the Piprahwa inscription.

In his analysis of this inscription and other texts in the same vein, Schopen notes that the stupa, and the relics enshrined within it, were considered in India at the time the Piprahwa relics were installed to be also the legal equivalents of living persons, able to own property (Schopen *Burial Ad Sanctos* 128–31).[22]

Do such prohibitions simply not maintain after the passage of time, or in altered religious, political and legal circumstances? Are they simply charming historical artefacts themselves? Is radical change over time not precisely what the prohibition anticipates—such that the rupture serves at once to validate and invalidate its vision? Do the purported ends of science justify their means? Can such ends be evaluated short of the colonial context in which they have been articulated? Can "malicious intent" lurk within scientific progress, aesthetic appreciation and even sacred awe? The Sotheby's Piprahwa sale begs these questions, and more.

What do Museums have to do with it?

As curator at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) until 2023, one of the authors of the present article was responsible for borrowing the Piprahwa relics for the exhibition *Body & Spirit: The Human Body in Thought and Practice* (2022-23). On the last day the relics were on display, people came to meditate in their presence. Over the last six years, the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have also hosted these relics. This exhibition history is highlighted in the Sotheby's sales materials. An essay penned by the

[22] Also see Schopen *Buddha as an Owner of Property*.

Metropolitan curator for the catalogue of the Metropolitan exhibition on early Buddhist art for which the relics were centered as prime objects of focus is, in fact, reprinted in the Sotheby's sale catalogue.[23]

Chris Peppé, and other members of the Peppé family, who couriered the relics in person to the ACM, repeatedly conveyed their motivations for the exhibition: to make the relics publicly accessible, particularly in a city like Singapore with a substantial population of practicing Buddhists. They even requested that the ACM publicize the exhibition to local Buddhist temples. Accordingly, the museum did not charge ticket fees.

Figure 3: Visitors meditating in the presence of the Piprahwa relics on display in ACM, 24 March 2023

[23] Titled "Buddha and the Jewel-Filled Casket: The Piprahwa Reliquaries and the Cult of Relics in Early Indian Buddhism," this essay was accessed on Sotheby's online catalogue as recently as 20 February 2025 but has since been removed.

In retrospect, the contradiction between the Peppé family's stated wish to share this sacred heritage with Buddhists worldwide, and their current action to put them up for auction, makes their museum collaborations look like market strategy. The author acknowledges his own complicity in this process.

While some museums have safeguards in place to mitigate their use as vehicles for inflating the financial value of artefacts loaned from private collections—for instance, the ACM implemented a no-sale clause in its loan agreement with the Peppés, to expire a year after the closure of the exhibition—these are, evidently, not always effective. As Laura D'hoore discusses in the context of Belgian collectors of contemporary art, the enduring practice of lenders selling artworks immediately after withdrawing them from loan is leading some museums to become increasingly wary of accepting private art loans at all (109).

Taking a historical perspective, the museum as an institution has since the colonial period been complicit in the revaluation of sacred objects into art objects of purely antiquarian interest, enlisting them in narratives of civilizational hierarchies. Recall that the stone coffer, all the reliquaries, and the larger portion of the gem and metal relics found in the Piprahwa stupa were presented to the Indian Museum in Calcutta by W. C. Peppé in 1898. The Indian Museum, previously a part of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, was reconceived as the first "Imperial Museum" in India in 1866 and became by the 1880s (with the aforementioned 1878 Treasure Trove Act) a repository for materials acquired by an increasingly professionalized corps of archaeologists at the Archaeological Survey of India (Guha-Thakurta *Monuments* 53). Through the codification of India's past in ordered objects, the Museum aspired to popular education—although, as Guha-Thakurta notes, the complaints by British archaeologists and curators that the "natives" saw the museum more as a "Wonder House" for

recreation rather than an educational institution demonstrates the intractability of their colonial subjects (*Monuments* 79–82).

In the inventory of these objects that V. A. Smith sent to Pāli scholar T. W. Rhys Davids, he refers to the gems that Peppé was allowed to keep as "duplicate objects" (868). This designation is reiterated today in the Sotheby's catalogue. The notion of the "duplicate" is derived from the phenomenon of what Walter Benjamin famously called the "exhibition value" of an object superseding its "cult value" (106). In the context of the Indian Museum, the logic of the "duplicate" is that only unique objects, or sufficient representatives of a particular type of object, need be collected and displayed for the purposes of delineating an exhibition narrative. In a Buddhist context, however, the duplication of relics is an expression of fecundity, and of the Buddha's power—the *Mahāvaṃsa* (XXXI: 98-100), for example, describes how when King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi consecrated the Great Thūpa in Anuradhapura, the relics "taking the form of the Buddha . . . performed, even as the Buddha (himself) at the foot of the gaṇḍamba-tree that miracle of the double appearances, that was brought to pass by the Blessed One during his lifetime" (Geiger and Bode 217).

Perhaps the identity of the "duplicate" in the Sotheby's sale is meant to assuage potential misgivings of buyers—after all, the "original" or "real relics" are elsewhere, and one would only be bidding on incidental duplicates. As we have tried to demonstrate in this article, however, this rupture of the totality of the stupa and its relics can be traced to colonial epistemologies.

In 2015, Chris Peppé claimed to have experienced an enlightenment of his own on observing the fervor of Buddhist pilgrims venerating a portion of the Piprahwa relics now held in Sri Lanka: "'[Before my travels] I still viewed the gems as something that would be [seen] primarily in museums. However, my trip seemed to indicate otherwise. Although I insisted that the gems should really only be regarded as relic offerings, I was

. . . made aware of a much larger religious significance . . . . It seemed as if the jewels were almost being treated as relics themselves'" (Strong *Beads* 197–98).[24]

As Peppé realized, there is a community of Buddhists worldwide to whom these relics matter deeply. King Chulalongkorn himself, after enshrining a portion of the relics in the Golden Mount of Wat Saket Ratchawora Mahawihan in Bangkok (where they are still venerated), redistributed the rest to temples in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Japan (Strong *Beads* 189–90).

Many potential bidders on the Sotheby's sale might consider themselves Buddhist, and in fact the gamble of Sotheby's in offering it in Hong Kong suggests they expect buyers to come from Asia. We are not suggesting there to be any single "Buddhist" way of valuing the relics now—or even that the Buddha's relics have ever been valued solely in philosophical or doctrinal terms devoid of social, historical and economic context. The very fact that the tradition of distributing the Buddha's relics identifies its roots in a diplomatic context in the aftermath of the Buddha's death speaks to the longstanding entanglement of multiple factors at play in claims made to possession of the relics as in practices of care. Still, we ask, how do colonial structures maintain in the present case of the Sotheby's auction—and what might constitute a response attentive to both Buddhist ontologies and contemporary initiatives to decolonize epistemologies and their attendant institutions such as the art market and its friend in the museum?

[24] Strong quotes this from an email Chris Peppé sent him on September 3, 2015.

Works Cited

Allen, Charles. *The Buddha and Dr Führer: An Archaeological Scandal*. Haus Publ., 2008.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Second Version (1936)." *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 101–33.

Chakrabarti, Dilip K. *A History of Indian Archaeology from the Beginning to 1947*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1988.

Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. Princeton University Press, 1996.

Crooke, W. *The North-Western Provinces of India: Their History, Ethnology, and Administration*. Methuen & Co., 1897.

Cunningham, Alexander. "An Account of the Discovery of the Ruins of the Buddhist City of Samkassa." *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1843, pp. 241–49.

D'hoore, Laura. "Are Private Art Loans Philanthropic? Private Art Collectors as a Key Element in the Collection Management Policy of Public Museums." *Cultural Philanthropy and Entrepreneurship*, edited by Annick Schramme et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2025, pp. 101–15. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003488712.

Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Falk, Harry. "The Ashes of the Buddha." *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 27, 2013, pp. 43–75.

Fine-Dare, Kathleen S. *Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Foreign Records of the Bangkok Period up to A.D 1932, Published on the Occasion of the Rattanakosin Bicentennial 1982. The Committee for the Publication of Historical Documents, Office of the Prime Minister, 1982.

Geiger, Wilhelm, and Mabel Haynes Bode. *The Mahavamsa or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. Pali Text Society, 1912.

Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*. Columbia University Press, 2004.

_____. "The Production and Reproduction of a Monument: The Many Lives of the Sanchi *Stupa*." *South Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 77–109. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2013.772801.

Huxley, Andrew. "Mr Houghton and Dr Führer: A Scholarly Vendetta and Its Consequences." *South East Asia Research*, vol. 19, no. 1, Mar. 2011, pp. 59–82. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2011.0030.

Kinnard, Jacob N. "The Field of the Buddha's Presence." *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*, edited by David Germano and Kevin Trainor, State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 117–43.

Lahiri, Naranjot. "From Ruin to Restoration: The Modern History of Sanchi." *Belief in the Past: The Proceedings of the 2002 Manchester Conference on Archaeology and Religion: The Proceedings of the 2002 Manchester Conference on Archaeology and Religion*, edited by Timothy Insoll, University of Michigan Press, 2004, pp. 99–114. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.30861/9781841715759.

Loos, Tamara Lynn. *Bones around My Neck: The Life and Exile of a Prince Provocateur*. Cornell University Press, 2016.

Martin, Dan. "Pearls from Bones: Relics, Chortens, Tertons and the Signs of Saintly Death in Tibet." *Numen*, vol. 41, no. 3, Sept. 1994, pp. 273–324.

Milligan, Matthew D. "Corporate Bodies in Early South Asian Buddhism: Some Relics and Their Sponsors According to Epigraphy." *Religions*, vol. 10, no. 1, Dec. 2018, p. 4. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010004.

Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. "Trade and Empire in Awadh 1765-1804." *Past & Present*, no. 94, Feb. 1982, pp. 85–102.

Mukherjee, Sraman. "Relics in Transition: Material Mediations in Changing Worlds." *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 48, no. 20220203, Oct. 2018. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0048.002.

_____. "Transmissions, Translations, Reconstitutions: Revisiting Geographies of Buddha Relics in the Southern Asian Worlds." *Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites*, edited by Andrea Acri, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019, pp. 215–50.

Nevill, H. R. *Basti: A Gazetteer, Being Volume XXXII of the District Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. Superintendent, Government Press, United Provinces, 1907.

Ogden, Jack. *Report on the Beads and Related Objects from the Piprahwa Stupa*. Striptwist Ltd, 2018, https://www.piprahwa.com/s/Piprahwa-Report-JO.pdf.

Peleggi, Maurizio. *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*. University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

Peppé, W. C., and Vincent A. Smith. "The Piprāhwā Stūpa, Containing Relics of the Buddha." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 30, no. 3, July 1898, pp. 573–88.

Schopen, Gregory. "Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions." *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, pp. 114–47.

_____. "The Buddha as an Owner of Property and Permanent Resident in Medieval Indian Monasteries." *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, pp. 258–89.

Sharf, Robert H. "On the Allure of Buddhist Relics." *Representations*, vol. 66, Apr. 1999, pp. 75–99. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2902880.

Silk, Jonathan A. "Good and Evil in Indian Buddhism: The Five Sins of Immediate Retribution." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 35, no. 3, Aug. 2007, pp. 253–86. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-006-9005-1.

Skilling, Peter. "Ideology and Law: The Three Seals Code on Crimes Related to Relics, Images, and Bodhi-Trees." *Buddhism, Law, and Society*, vol. 1, 2016 2015, pp. 69–104.

Smith, V. A. "The Piprāhwā Stūpa." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 30, no. 4, Oct. 1898, pp. 868–70. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00146635.

Strong, John S. "Beads and Bones: The Case of the Piprahwa Gems." *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary*, edited by Vanessa R Sasson, University of Hawai'i Press, 2021, pp. 185–207.

_____. "Buddhist Relics in Comparative Perspective: Beyond the Parallels." *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*, edited by David Germano and Kevin Trainor, State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 27–49.

_____. *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Taylor, J. L. *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*. ISEAS, 1993.

Thompson, Ashley. "In the Absence of the Buddha: 'Aniconism' and the Contentions of Buddhist Art History." *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, edited by Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, 1st ed., Wiley, 2011, pp. 398–420. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444396355.ch16.

Whitcombe, Elizabeth. *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: The United Provinces Under British Rule, 1860-1900*. University of California Press, 1971.

Wilson, Jordan. "'Belongings' in 'Ċəsnaʔəm: The City before the City.'" *IPinCH: Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage: Theory, Practice, Policy, Ethics*, 27 Jan. 2016, https://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/outputs/blog/citybeforecitybelongings/#_ftn1.