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Introduction

Annette Schmiedchen, Dániel Balogh

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Self-Representation
and Presentation of Others
in Indic Epigraphical Writing

Edited by
Dániel Balogh and Annette Schmiedchen

Asien- und Afrika-Studien 63
der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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Introduction

by Annette Schmiedchen and Dániel Balogh, with contributions by Natasja Bosma

1. Preface

This volume investigates the specific forms of “self-representation” of the issuers of inscriptions in a range of epigraphic texts from South Asia, focussing on political ideology as well as on patronage policy. In this connection, “self-representation” is not to be understood as the way in which particular persons (such as kings) represent themselves, but rather as the way in which the socio-political institutions embodied in these persons (such as kingship) articulate their own representation. The contributors have paid particular attention to the description of intra-dynastic rivalries and rivalries between dynasties as well as to comparing the self-representation of dynasties and rulers with the depiction of the same kings in the records of their adversaries. They also examine the presentation of religious figures and the relationship between overlords and their subordinates. The eleven papers collected here are based on talks given at the 34th Deutscher Orientalistentag held in Berlin on 12th to 17th September 2022. With one exception, these were presented during the panel entitled “Self-Representation and Presentation of Others in Epigraphical Writing” organised by the Berlin team of the European Research Council project “The Domestication of ‘Hindu’ Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia (DHARMA).” Six of the articles in this volume are authored by DHARMA members, the remaining five by invited guests.

The panel addressed a range of questions related to epigraphic (re)presentation in South Asia. Inscriptions are far from neutral reflections of the periods in which they were produced, for they transmit texts that were created to serve particular legal, political, social, and religious purposes. The majority of pre-modern epigraphs from the subcontinent are official (or semi-official) documents of specific kinds, namely public inscriptions on stone and donative charters on copper plates. These inscriptions often contain panegyric passages

describing the kings and their dynasties, the donors, and their families, as well as religious figures and their lineages. Eulogies of the rulers and their ancestors are in most cases not factual “self-portrayals,” yet they project an image of authenticity and authority inasmuch as they are frequently said to be compositions of named court officials, and royal copperplate charters bear a seal and/or an imitated signature of the king. These panegyric descriptions contain not only “self-representation,” but also “presentation of others”: the records of sovereign rulers can include eulogies of their subordinates; and vice versa, the inscriptions of subordinates often comprise laudatory depictions of their overlords. Moreover, eulogies may contain descriptions of adversaries – intra-dynastic rivals and enemies from other dynasties –, and the presentation of opponents was used as a backdrop for self-representation.

As copperplate charters constitute the main sources of many of the papers, and as they are a specific category among the different types of epigraphic material from South Asia, their distinct features will be shortly discussed here. Such charters are official legal records, written on sheets of copper as if to emphasise their permanent character. The common purpose of these title-deeds was to report on financial support (mainly in the form of income from land) to Brahmins, temples or temple gods, monasteries, and other religious people or institutions. Their appearance became widespread after the fourth and fifth centuries CE, alongside the religious developments that took place at that time in the Indian subcontinent (Hawkes and Abbas 2016). Since most of these grants were made by a reigning king, by a member of the royal family, or by a subordinate ruler, the numerous corpora of copperplate charters preserved today are a testimony to this practice of royal endowments.

Despite the fact that the composition of these copperplate inscriptions can be diverse, they typically contain a certain set of components. The first lines often form a preamble to the official notification, usually with a religious invocation, a reference to the place of issue, an introduction to the grantor, and an address to all those involved in the grant (such as the officials concerned and the inhabitants of the granted village or land). Then follows the formal notification, in which the grant is specified, together with the name or names of the receiving party, possibly with a reference to the occasion and intention of the grant. In the last lines, the villagers are sometimes warned to pay the royal share of their crops at the proper time to the grantee, and a few relevant verses are often quoted to emphasise this exhortation. Names of functionaries or officials that were involved in the execution of the endowment may be mentioned (for example, the court poet who composed the inscription, the messenger who conveyed the order, or the goldsmith who engraved the characters on the sheets of

copper), and the grant is authenticated with a date and a final reference to the ruler.

The main focus of this volume is on the descriptions of the protagonists mentioned in copperplate charters and other inscriptions, particularly on the portrayal of the donor, generally a reigning king (e.g. Chhabra 1962, 10; Gaur 1975, x; Salomon 1998, 116). Some accounts are plain and utilitarian catalogues of the ruler's pedigree, but in a typical case they go far beyond simple lists of names and relations: they feature a cavalcade of magniloquent epithets as well as elaborations of present and past rulers' mental acuity, corporeal beauty, martial prowess, and beneficent generosity written out at length as a eulogy (*praśasti*) in poetic prose or verse. Such panegyric passages cannot be read as accurate reflections of historical events, because they combine legendary and factual history to make an inspirational narrative. But impression management requires a grain of truth to be effective. Hence, Daud Ali (2000, 184) refers to these introductions as "living narratives." For some dynasties, a standard version would be developed for all grants issued by a king during his reign, whereas changes would be made and new feats would be added whenever the political circumstances allowed or required it. The added value of the panegyrics lies not only in the extensive "self-portrayal" of the donor, but also in the references to "others" (such as overlords and subordinates) that occur along the way. The depiction of other players in the grant process, especially of the donees, is also not infrequent, although less pervasive and less extensive.

Within such passages, references to dynastic links, political actions and historic events have long been appreciated by scholars as valuable (if somewhat distorted and unreliable) sources of knowledge. Claims to various virtues have been accepted at face value by some historians (perhaps out of patriotic sentiment), but in general they received less attention from early scholars and were indeed often ignored (presumably as blatant flattery of the "oriental despot"), or perceived as an idle excrescence resulting from the dictates of fashion, worthy of attention only as exemplars of poetic expression, but as irrelevant to the historian as they are to the legal or documentary function of copperplate charters (Chhabra 1962, 10). Yet, as Emmanuel Francis (2018, 413) has recently put it, "why take so much effort in placing at the beginning of copperplate grants lengthy eulogies of kings, if these documents were not meant in the first place to be read?"

The answer begged by the question, namely that such charters were, after all, meant to be read, has received ever more recognition in the last half century or so, even though little is known about the particular circumstances in which copperplate grants may have had a "public life." The royal order embodied in

them was in at least some cases proclaimed with much pomp already prior to the issue of the copper plates (Ali 2000, 172–74), and it is plausible to assume that they were displayed and read out when a grant was first made as well as whenever a legal dispute occurred concerning the granted land (Kulke 1997, 239). Moreover, copperplate eulogies represent just one of the rather few surviving segments of a larger, dialogical “scale of texts” (Inden 2000a, 12–13), whose participants were not limited to other inscriptions in copper and stone (both of which were certainly produced in much greater numbers than the specimens now extant), but definitely included more ephemeral creations such as bardic panegyrics, royal proclamations recited by itinerant agents, and missives exchanged between rulers and other prominent personages, conveyed either orally or written on a perishable substrate. Such texts carried a similar message to varying audiences who engaged with them in different ways. The vast potential of these mass media of the time to shape (while being in turn shaped by) public perception is easy to overlook while working with the relatively small number and presumably limited reach of the lithic and copper inscriptions now available for study.

Even if that wider ecosystem of texts is disregarded, inscriptions may be seen as spreading “the standardized message of a great kingship” (Stein 1977, 17) in order to maintain a link between centre and periphery. A fanciful royal genealogy may be perceived as “an assertion of the king’s status pride couched in the idiom of kinship[, ...] an idealised view of the king as a larger-than-life figure,” and moreover as “an ideological construct, a statement about the nature of the world and the place of kingship in it” (Spencer 1984, 416). In addition to articulating sovereignty, a copperplate endowment (in all its gleaming, clangorous materiality and with the ceremony accompanying its bestowal) also had great impact on the status of the donee (Kulke 1997, 238).

Although the main focus is on epigraphy, several articles draw upon other textual sources, too. The majority of the papers study regional inscriptional corpora, often mainly consisting of copperplate charters and occasionally including stone epigraphs (Bosma, Balogh, Furu, Gururaja, Schmiedchen, Shin, Watelier-Bricout). The bulk of the records investigated here dates from the early medieval period, namely from the sixth to thirteenth centuries, and is written in Sanskrit. Some of the papers explore later inscriptions exclusively engraved on stone (Detige, Obrock) and partly composed in other languages. The epigraphic sources originate from Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Uttar Pradesh. Most of the articles are philological-historical explorations of inscriptional and literary sources. In addition, some of the

contributions also make use of statistical methods (Bosma) and content analysis (Balogh). Whereas most authors study material from the reigning periods of certain rulers or dynasties, one paper provides a *longue-durée* perspective (Ghosh and Porel). Moreover, while the majority of the contributions investigate the epigraphic records of temporal rulers, two presentations focus on Jaina sources (Detige, Chojnacki).

Suchandra Ghosh and Soumya Porel explore the representation of a particular group of “others,” namely forest people, in inscriptions of the third century BCE to the twelfth century CE and in contemporary literary texts. They point out indications of the transformation of forest spaces into kingdoms, as a consequence of which persons of tribal origin appeared in positions of power and status.

Natasja Bosma evaluates the copper plates of the Pāṇḍava dynasty of Dakṣiṇa Kosala in the sixth and seventh centuries, pointing out radical differences in the lengths of passages dedicated to royal self-representation by various rulers. In particular, she asks why King Tīvaradeva, not mentioned by his successors, went to great lengths to establish his image.

Amandine Wattelier-Bricout studies the “coronation names” — normally alternating Mahābhavagupta and Mahāśivagupta — used by the Somavamśins of Orissa, with particular attention to cases where a ruler’s records do not employ a coronation name. Using the inscriptions of successors, she seeks to identify the circumstances explaining this absence.

Ryosuke Furui revisits the struggle over Kannauj at the end of the eighth century, contrasting the different accounts left by the dynasties involved. He shows that the Pālas, the Gurjara-Pratihāras, and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas highlighted respectively a single moment of triumph, the sentiment of victory through valour, and the establishment of superiority over other kings.

Jae-Eun Shin investigates the representation of self and others by sub-regional powers, namely by the Pālas of Kāmarūpa and the Candras of Vaṅga in the tenth and eleventh centuries. She points out how the imperial Pālas remained a benchmark in the self-representation of these lesser dynasties, but with a starkly differing perspective depending on current power relations.

Dániel Balogh analyses the descriptions of Eastern Cālukya kings and their underlings in copperplate grants. Deriving representational profiles from a content analysis of these descriptions, he demonstrates that subordinates as well as court officials tend to be depicted more in terms of individual qualities than the rather stereotypically characterised rulers.

Samana Gururaja juxtaposes the genealogies of the Hoysala kings in their own records with those presented in the inscriptions of their subordinates in

the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. She observes that while some subordinate houses emphasised their loyalty to the Hoysaḷas spanning generations of both families, others recalled ancestors serving predecessors of the Hoysaḷas.

Annette Schmiedchen scrutinises the epigraphic self-representation of the Yādava dynasty and its presentation in the literary work of Hemādri, a minister at the thirteenth-century Yādava court. She indicates that the latter provides a fuller list of the male members of the dynasty, albeit cursory in detail, while the epigraphs foreground only the key political figures, but record more about them.

Luther Obrock explores the continuation of epigraphic Sanskrit into the sultanate period. Using the late sixteenth-century Arabic and Sanskrit bilingual inscriptions of the mosques at Asirgarh and Burhanpur as illustrations, he points out how Sanskritic *topoi* were adapted to an Islamic context and examines the division of labour between the Sanskrit and the Arabic parts of the inscriptions.

Tillo Detige presents early modern Digambara Jain memorial stone inscriptions from Western and Central India, attesting to the status of *bhaṭṭārakas* in the ascetic hierarchy of the Ḍhūṇḍhāḍaśākhā and to the relations of this Jain community to local and imperial rulers. He interprets the repeated shifts of the seat of this religious group as a continued reaction to a changing political environment.

Christine Chojnacki examines four major Śvetāmbara Jain narrative works composed between the eighth and tenth centuries in Western India, selected by her for matters of content. She focusses on the key question whether these texts reveal an ideology of kingship distinct from the well-known and also better studied model(s) of the Digambara Jains.

The papers in this book touch on many concepts that elude an accurate definition. In particular, we emphasise that the word “Hindu” does not occur in any of the primary sources in its present meaning, and is used here as an umbrella term for the theistic religious world-views that characterise the Indian subcontinent in the period under study. For the sake of facility, all authors have generally endeavoured to use plain English terms of their own choice in discussion and especially in translations of source texts. This is not meant to imply that the concepts denoted by these terms carried precisely the same meaning and connotations in their original context as they might in the mind of any particular modern-day reader. Thus, technical terms associated with the European Middle ages – such as “king,” “prince,” “vassal” or “feudatory,” and “baron” – and with generic social and political roles – such as “priest,” “chaplain,” “minister,” “general” – are used as convenient terms only loosely equivalent to the terms used in the original, which are cited where necessary and discussed where

relevant. The editors have fostered consistency throughout the volume, but did not see any advantage to enforcing a uniform translation of technical terms.

We would like to illustrate this on the basis of one example which is relevant for our topic. The presentation of the interaction between overlords and their subordinates is discussed in several articles of this volume. There can be no doubt that relationships of suzerainty and subordination played a significant role in early medieval Indian history and were also echoed in epigraphic sources of that period. The Sanskrit terminology to denote subordinates could differ from region to region and must have also changed in the course of time. Even if the same term was used, it may reflect different concepts, and it has been rendered in several ways. Most authors in this volume use the terms “subordinate” or “subordinate ruler,” either for general references or for the translation of specific Sanskrit terms. Samana Gururaja explains to have chosen “the words ‘overlord’ and ‘subordinate’ to highlight the relative status that individuals had to one another, rather than trying to locate them in absolute hierarchy, as suggested by terms like ‘feudatory’ or ‘vassal’.” Furthermore, she observes that “there were several terms that delineated the role of a subordinate in a complex political structure, and while it is difficult to map the exact structure of these hierarchies from epigraphical material, what we can often determine is their position in relation to one another.” Annette Schmiechen states to have used the terms “subordinate” and “vassal” interchangeably, “due to a lack of better alternatives,” for all those who seem to have acknowledged the suzerainty/sovereignty of another ruler, although “the concept of vassalage has been borrowed from descriptions of medieval European history and might be almost equally problematic as the terms related to ‘feudal’ and ‘feudatory’.” One could perhaps add that the terms “vassal” and “sub-vassal” have at least the potential to reflect the rather great diversity in and the ramified system of medieval hierarchical relations.

A central Sanskrit designation for a subordinate is *sāmanta*, or derivations from this basic term, for instance, *mahāsāmanta* or *mahāsāmantādhipati*. Natasja Bosma translates *sāmanta* as “feudatory” or “feudatory chief.” Ryosuke Furui and Jae-Eun Shin refer to subordinate rulers in general. Dániel Balogh uses the renderings “subordinate” and “underling” in a broader sense, and translates the term *mahāsāmanta* in a more specific way as “baron.” In the corpus studied by Amandine Wattelier-Bricout, the designation *rāṇaka* is more common, which she also renders as “subordinate.” Samana Gururaja distinguishes for her corpus between the rank of a *mahāsāmanta* or “ruler of a peripheral region,” and the higher rank of a *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* or “lord of a circumscribed domain.”

Although the term *sāmanta* (or *mahāsāmanta*) was not the only designation for a subordinate rank, it was the most commonly used in epigraphical sources from many parts of early medieval India. Moreover, this expression has also become the key term in historiographical discussions on the structure of medieval Indian polities since the 1960s (e.g. L. Gopal 1963; K. K. Gopal 1964), namely in the debate on a so-called “Indian feudalism” (e.g. R. S. Sharma 1961; Yadava 1966). Hermann Kulke (1996, 31) coined the expression “*sāmantization*” to describe the increasing influence which *sāmantas* exerted on the royal administration. Such subordinates probably had to pay tributes and deliver troops to their suzerains. Reciprocally, *sāmantas* received privileges and elevated positions at the court. It can be assumed that they were also repaid for their services through the allocation of tax income from villages and landed property (R. S. Sharma 2001, 24). In pre-tenth-century land-grant charters engraved on copper plates, *sāmantas* appear as donors or as petitioners requesting the ruler to bestow an endowment on a religious person or institution. But these records rarely mention secular fiefs. Thus, the emergence of the *sāmanta* network remarkably pre-dates any attestation for service assignments to “feudatories” (Chattopadhyaya 1994, 194). With regard to subordinates, this volume does not focus on their potential economic role, but on their presentation vis-à-vis that of their overlords, either in their own epigraphic records or in inscriptions commissioned by their suzerains.

2. Editorial conventions

All of our papers make extensive use of primary sources of the manuscript and epigraphic traditions. Texts of both kinds are referred to with titles (and, where known, the name of their authors), which are always italicised (e.g. the *Moharājaparājaya* of Yaśaḥpāla; the *Kharod stone inscription of Īśānadeva*), and may be abbreviated after the first occurrence (e.g. the *Moharājaparājaya*; the *Kharod inscription*). In discussions involving many inscriptions, the DHARMA identifiers introduced below may be used instead of titles. The texts referred to within each chapter are listed at the end of the chapter under the heading “Primary sources,”¹ where each list item gives the reference to the preferred edition (and/or translation) of the source concerned, which may be either a print publication or a DHARMA digital edition. Print publications are shown in this list as a standard author-date reference (with publication details in the bibliography at the end of the book). Specific parts of epigraphic sources are referred to with

1 Except in Tillo Detige’s chapter, where the editions of the texts are appended.

line numbers (l., ll.) or, when applicable, verse numbers (v., vv.) as found in the preferred edition. In referring to primary sources of the manuscript tradition, the indices applicable to the work in question (e.g. chapter, section, verse) have been used or, where none are relevant, page numbers (p., pp.) of the preferred edition have been specified.

DHARMA editions are preferentially cited whenever they are available, as not only do they represent the latest scholarly position on the respective texts, but they also include references to earlier printed editions, a “critical” apparatus showing deviations from such editions, and usually an English translation and some commentary. Digital editions may continue to evolve dynamically; citations in this book reflect the state of the editions at the time when the respective articles were written. The DHARMA editions are classified into named corpora, and have a five-digit number within each corpus. Accordingly, DHARMA editions are referred to in this book with an abbreviated identifier composed of a label for the corpus and the number of the text, such as BengalCharters00091. In the future, DHARMA editions will be accessible through a searchable database and displayable in various renditions. As of 2024, they may be viewed via a provisional front end by simply opening <https://dharmalekha.info/texts> in a web browser and entering the edition’s identifier in the search box. To access a digital edition directly, open the URL <https://dharmalekha.info/texts/ID>, where ID stands for the full identifier of the edition, consisting of the prefix DHARMA_INS followed by the above abbreviated identifier, e.g. DHARMA_INSBengalCharters00091. This provisional website shows several alternative renditions of each digital edition, as well as the machine-readable (XML) file. The full XML files may also be retrieved from GitHub at <https://github.com/erc-dharma>. Once the completed database and web interface become available, it will be likewise easy to retrieve individual inscriptions on the basis of their identifiers.

Dates throughout this book are to be understood in the Common Era unless otherwise indicated (e.g. VS for Vikrama *saṃvat* and ŚS for Śaka *saṃvat*). The abbreviation CE (or BCE) only appears when a date in the Common Era is juxtaposed to a date in a different reckoning.

Words and names in non-European languages are generally presented throughout this book in accurate transliteration reflecting their original orthography. The exceptions to this primarily consist of contemporary proper names, in particular the names of published authors and internationally well-known geographic names (e.g. Deccan, Maharashtra, Jaipur). Less prominent geographic names are transliterated or Anglicised on a case by case basis. A few words that have gained enough currency in (technical) English to qualify as loanwords rather than as foreign words have also been used in an Anglicised

form and without italics (e.g. sandhi). To reduce confusion and ambiguity, transliteration in citations from other publications has in most cases been silently normalised to the standards followed here.

Words of languages normally written in a form of Arabic script are transliterated according to the IJMES standard, except when such items are cited verbatim from a source in an Indic script, in which case the transliteration reflects the orthography of the latter.

Languages written in an Indic script are Romanised according to the ISO 15919 standard (ISO 2001).² Thus, *anusvāra* is transliterated *m̐*, and syllabic liquids are represented by *r̥* and *l̥*, while *ṛ* and *ḷ* are dedicated to the retroflex flap consonant of New Indo-Aryan languages and the retroflex lateral approximant respectively. The retroflex central approximant of Dravidian languages is represented as *ḷ*, and the alveolar trill as *r̥*. The *upadhmanīya* is transliterated with *ḷ* where distinguished from a *visarga* in a primary source.

For Sanskrit and other languages where the phonemes /e/ and /o/ are always long, these Latin vowels are used without a macron. In Dravidian languages such as Kannada, where short and long forms of these vowels are distinguished, the transliteration without a diacritical mark (*e*, *o*) means the short form, while that with a macron (*ē*, *ō*) means the long form. When pertaining to the context of such a language, loanwords and names consisting partly or wholly of Sanskrit components also employ the macron (e.g. *Sōmēśvara*, *sēnādhipar* as opposed to *Someśvara*, *senādhipa* in a Sanskrit context). However, Sanskrit technical terms appearing in English discussion are transliterated according to the Sanskrit standard even when pertaining to a Dravidian context (e.g. *maṇḍaleśvara*, as opposed to *maṇḍalēśvara* in citing the text of a primary source). In the transliteration of Middle Indo-Aryan languages, the diaeresis (¨) has been added to *i* and *u* when occurring adjacent to *a*, in order to distinguish the vowel clusters *aī* and *aū* in hiatus from the Sanskrit diphthongs *ai* and *au*. In New Indo-Aryan languages, the silent final *a* inherent in the orthography has been generally preserved in transliteration.

Words, phrases, and longer citations from texts in Indic languages have been segmented with spaces (for separate words) and hyphens (for words in compound) to facilitate parsing. Taking advantage of Romanised transliteration, such separators have also been inserted at points where it would not be possible to do so in an Indic script (e.g. *tad api*, *tat-putra*) but vowels fused in sandhi have

2 The full editions appended to Detige's article follow the DHARMA transliteration scheme (Balogh and Griffiths 2020), which is an extension of ISO-15919. The relevant details are introduced next to the editorial notation on page 257.

not been broken up to allow segmentation (e.g. *tathāpi*, *rājendra*). Hyphens for compound segmentation are not ubiquitous: they are generally avoided in short compounds established in a particular sense (e.g. *dinakara* ‘sun’) as well as in close-knit units within a longer compound, and never used within proper names.

Excerpts of primary sources in general preserve the orthography of the original, except that *avagrahas* (apostrophes) have been silently supplied where initial *a* is elided in Sanskrit sandhi, and elision in Kannada sandhi is likewise indicated with apostrophes. The readings of the preferred edition have been adopted even when they are marked by the editor as uncertain, or when they are editorial emendations or restorations. To verify such philological details, please consult the editions of these texts. Editorial punctuation has been silently supplied in longer excerpts, consisting primarily of *daṇḍas* (vertical bars) at the ends of hemistichs and double *daṇḍas* at the ends of stanzas. When isolated words of a primary source appear in English discussion, peculiarities of the original orthography are also silently normalised (thus, e.g. *dharma* even if the original spelling is *dharmma*).

In translations of primary sources, square brackets indicate words added or repeated by the translator for the sake of clarity and syntax, e.g. “bowing [to him] by bending [their] shaking crowns.” Parentheses mark explanatory additions by the translator, e.g. “an abode of (the goddess of) Fortune” as well as words of the original inserted for explanation or clarification, e.g. “qualities (*guṇa*).” In the translation of bitextuality (*śleṣa*), curly braces have been added around alternative translations of text already translated in a primary sense, e.g. “his famous lineage {bamboo cane}.”

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