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Sanskrit Inscriptions in Northeastern Indian Scripts in Premodern Java and the Maritime Asian Networks of Mahāyāna Buddhist Tantra

Andrea ACRI

This survey explores artifacts like steles, metal or stone statues, metal foils, and coins, bearing inscriptions in the Sanskrit language and Siddhamātrkā (or “Siddham”), Nāgarī, and Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī scripts produced in Java between the 8th and 13th century CE, contextualizing them against the background of the pan-Asian networks of Tantric Buddhism or Mahāyāna Buddhist Tantra and especially its circulation along the maritime “Silk Routes.” Discussing the interrelationship between languages, scripts, religions, and politics in Java and relevant regions of the wider Buddhist world, it tries to answer questions concerning foreign or local agency and audience as well as transregional connectivity. In particular, it argues that the quick spread of varieties of Mahāyāna/Mantrayāna Buddhism from the Subcontinent to Java and East Asia during a “first wave” from the 8th to the 9th century appears to have occurred in parallel with the diffusion of Siddhamātrkā script in those locales, whereas a “second wave” of Tantric Buddhism linking the Indo-Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist world is associated with Nāgarī and Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī script in East Java.

Keywords: Tantric Buddhism, Mahāyāna, Sanskrit, Siddhamātrkā, Nāgarī, Proto-Bengali, Gauḍī, Java

Andrea ACRI is an Associate Professor at the Religious Studies section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), PSL University, and member of the Groupe de Recherches en Études Indiennes (GREI, EA2120), Paris, France.

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Introduction

As suggested by textual, epigraphical, and art historical vestiges, Buddhist soteriologies, cosmologies, and ritual practices based on a canon of Sanskrit scriptures called “Tantras” flourished from the early 8th century in disparate Asian locales, traveling along the maritime and land “Silk Roads” connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.¹ The strategic crossroads of mercantile traffic and political power located along the maritime routes constituted nodes that played a crucial role in the history and development of pan-Asian Buddhism, often by supporting prestigious monastic congregations-cum-centers of learning as well as monuments visited by monks and pilgrims coming from all over the Buddhist world.

This article explores an aspect of the cosmopolitan dimension of Tantric Buddhism or Mahāyāna Buddhist Tantra, i.e. epigraphical documents in the Sanskrit language written in Siddhamāṭṛkā (or “Siddham”), Nāgarī, and Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī scripts produced in Java in the medieval period (ca. 8th–13th century CE).² Siddhamāṭṛkā script, which in that period achieved a virtually pan-Asian diffusion, was one of the precursors of Nāgarī that originally developed in Northern India and became prevalent in the Northeast under Pāla and Sena rule (7th–12th century), while the latter was widely used in Northern India from the 11th century onwards. Outside of the Indian subcontinent, both scripts (and their related variants or offshoots, such as Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī) were apparently associated with Tantric Buddhism and followed its spread from the Subcontinent to Southeast and East Asia. A significant quantity of epigraphic documents—and, in the case of Siddhamāṭṛkā in China and Japan, manuscripts and painted scrolls—has been discovered thus far, spanning from elaborate royal edicts to short *dhāraṇīs* engraved on Buddhist statues, amulets, sealings and molds, coins, and rings.

The survey presented here primarily draws from, and synthesizes, the work of previous scholars. It lists and visually illustrates some of the most significant known vestiges and discusses them from the point of view of the long-distance connectivity favoured by the maritime “Silk Roads” and the networks of Tantric Buddhism. In so doing, it fulfills not only the intellectual agenda of the conference in which it was presented,³ but also the desideratum to elaborate wider-ranging questions that have seldom been raised in the relevant regional, micro-historical, palaeographic, and philological studies published so far. As documents in northeastern Indian script *and* the Sanskrit language have been found in milieux where

¹ Andrea Acri, “Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Networks along the Maritime Silk Routes, 7th–13th Centuries CE,” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, ed. Andrea Acri (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2016), 1–25; Andrea Acri, “Maritime Buddhism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion*, December 20, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.638>.

² While neighboring regions of Sumatra and Bali fall outside the scope of this article, documents that are relevant to contextualize the Javanese evidence against a wider geographical framework will be occasionally referred to.

³ “The Maritime Silk Road: From the Seas thru Siam to the Korean Peninsula,” Thammasat University, Bangkok, September 28–29, 2023.

“local” varieties of Indic scripts, as well as vernacular languages, were prevalent, the following questions are in order: why did political elites and religious agents in Southeast Asia choose to adopt this “foreign” variety of script, which was likely to be unintelligible even to the majority of local literati? Were foreign literati involved in the production and fruition of these documents? Did the maritime networks of Buddhism and their link to the prestigious learning centers of northeastern India play a role?

This article also aims to bring this often-neglected material to the attention of Indologists, Buddhologists, and historians of the “Silk Roads” and of intra-Asian connectivity more generally; and to become a resource for scholars who might wish to undertake a more comprehensive palaeographic and textual analysis of the material from Nusantara⁴ in comparison with related material from other regions of Buddhist Maritime Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, Nepal, mainland Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.⁵

Language and Script in the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” and the “Buddhist World”

Through the concept of “Sanskrit Cosmopolis,” a transregional cultural formation that extended from the Indian subcontinent as far as Central and Southeast Asia, Pollock⁶ has theorized how the Sanskrit language articulated politics not as material but as aesthetic power, being the vehicle of the elites’ self-representation. As such, the Sanskrit Cosmopolis explored the spread of Sanskrit across Asia, from Afghanistan to Bali. Similarly, the expression “Pali Cosmopolis”⁷ has been used to theorize the spread of the Pali language—a “cosmopolitan vernacular” according to Pollock’s definition—across the Indian Ocean/Bay of Bengal (Sri Lanka and Myanmar) through Theravāda networks. Thus, the focus of these concepts and heuristic models has been on language. But what about the spread of *scripts*?

Scripts, like languages, traveled far and wide across Asia and were just as important in shaping cultural transactions across geographies and cultures. As a matter of fact, there

⁴ I use this term to refer to the Western Indonesian Archipelago (especially Sumatra, Java, and Bali) and the Malay Peninsula.

⁵ A “comprehensive comparison involving also the inscriptions in similar script from South India and Ceylon as well as from mainland South East Asia” was already invoked as a desideratum by a beacon in the field of Old Javanese and Sanskrit epigraphy, Johannes G. de Casparis, in his *Indonesian Palaeography: A History of Writing in Indonesia from the Beginnings to c. A.D. 1500* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 36; in 1982, the same scholar partly fulfilled that desideratum with the publication of the chapter “Some Aspects of the Expansion of Nāgarī Script in South and Southeast Asia,” in *South Asia 1: 30th International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa*, ed. G. de la Lama (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1982), 123–38; however, that contribution does not specifically focus on Buddhist epigraphy, and only sketches some of the palaeographic aspects, which still await an in-depth comparative study.

⁶ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁷ Tilman Frasch, “A Pāli cosmopolis? Sri Lanka and the Theravāda Buddhist ecumene, c. 500–1500,” in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, eds. Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London: UCL Press, 2017), 66–76.

seems to have been a link between scripts and religions in many Asian contexts characterized by polyglossia where different religions and institutionalized, state-sponsored cults coexisted. Previous studies have explored the use of the Arabic script (and not just language) as a marker of Islamic religion in disparate locales of the “Islamicate world,” including Nusantara,⁸ and also the use of Siddhamāṭṛkā as a marker of Mahāyāna—and, more specifically, Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna—Buddhism in East Asia.⁹ Both of these aspects were only fleetingly mentioned by De Casparis in his handbook of Indonesian paleography:

There are, however, also cases where particular scripts have a religious association. Thus Arabic script is used for expressing a number of languages (including classical Malay) but is everywhere closely associated with Islam. There is a similar, though less striking, connexion between Mahāyāna Buddhism and so-called PreNāgarī¹⁰ script [...].¹¹

The use of Nāgarī script in ancient Java is perhaps in some respects comparable to that of Arabic script (*pegon*) in later times: the script of a minority used almost exclusively for the writing of religious texts.¹²

Although De Casparis admits that the use of this script, being limited to Sanskrit language and Mahāyāna Buddhist contexts,¹³ was connected with the activities of Buddhist monks

⁸ Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁹ Siddhamāṭṛkā was used not only for transmitting Tantric Buddhist texts, but also to preserve the pronunciation of mantras in different languages such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. While an even cursory (comparative) discussion of this material is beyond the scope of this article, interested readers may consult the following secondary literature: Robert H. van Gulik, *Siddham: An Essay on the History of Sanskrit Studies in China and Japan* (Nagpur: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1956); Susan Dine, *Sanskrit Beyond Text: The Use of Bonji (Siddham) in Mandala and Other Imagery in Ancient and Medieval Japan* (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2012); Bill Mak, “Magical Alphabet in the Indian and Chinese Minds: From the Garland of Letters to Master Pu’an’s Siddham Mantra,” in *Brahman and Dao: Comparative Studies of Indian and Chinese Philosophy and Religion*, eds. Ithamar Theodor and Zhihua Yao (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2013), 209–30; Richard Salomon, *Siddham across Asia: How the Buddha Learned his ABC* (Amsterdam: Jan Gonda Foundation of the KNAW, 2015); Jan Houben and Saraju Rath, “Some Siddham Inscriptions in China: Palaeography and Ritual Function,” *Oriental Epigraphy* 36, no. 3–4 (2021): 76–94. On Korea, see Hyeon-deog Kim, “Shiltam munja (Siddhamāṭṛā) ūmsa (音寫) yŏn’gu: chinŏnjip sojae chinŏnŭi hanja mit han’gŭl ūmsa pigyo·punsŏk” 실담 문자 (Siddhamāṭṛkā) 음사 (音寫) 연구: 진언집 (眞言集) 소재 진언의 한자 및 한글음사 비교·분석 [The letters depicting a sound of Siddhamāṭṛkā types-comparative analysis of Chinese characters and Hangul (Korean alphabet) depicting the sound of holywords (Mantras) in The Book of Mantras (眞言集)], *Pulgyobak yŏn’gu* 불교학연구 [Journal of Buddhist Studies] 46, no. 3 (2016): 149–88.

¹⁰ Note that De Casparis consistently used the misnomer “Pre-Nāgarī” instead of “Siddhamāṭṛkā.”

¹¹ De Casparis, *Indonesian Palaeography*, 60, fn. 35.

¹² De Casparis, *Indonesian Palaeography*, 62.

¹³ See also De Casparis, “Some Aspects,” 126: “In Tamiṇnāḍu, Sri Lanka, and some parts of South East Asia (such as Java and Cambodia) Nāgarī became a *special* script used occasionally and for special purposes;” 132: “one important aspect of Nāgarī in South East Asia [... is] its predominant association with Sanskrit and mostly Mahāyāna.”

from centers such as Nālandā, he regarded it, as Bosch and Krom¹⁴ did, as a local evolution that unfolded over several centuries in Buddhist monasteries in Indonesia, with reference to both the forms appearing in 9th-century inscriptions and its putative continuation in 13th-century East Java.¹⁵ Here I intend to cast doubt on this reconstruction and, following an idea that was already advanced by Stutterheim nearly a hundred years ago,¹⁶ emphasize that the use of these scripts was directly linked to cosmopolitan dynamics involving the displacement of Buddhist agents (monks, Tantric masters) and, possibly, objects across the vast region of Maritime Asia.

Siddhamāṭṛkā and Nāgarī in Southern India: Diplomacy, Religion, and Politics

Siddhamāṭṛkā (often called *prae-Nāgarī* by 19th and early 20th-century Dutch epigraphists) evolved from the Gupta-era Brāhmī script and superseded it by the late 6th century CE, becoming predominant in the northern, eastern, and western regions of the subcontinent, especially under Pāla and Sena rule, until the ca. early 11th century. By the beginning of the 11th century, two regional varieties of Siddhamāṭṛkā, namely Nāgarī (in the north and west) and Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī¹⁷ (in the east) started to gradually supplant it.¹⁸ Around that time, the Muslim polymath Al-Bīrūnī in his *History of India* mentions both Siddhamāṭṛkā and Nāgarī as differing from each other only in the shape of the characters.¹⁹

¹⁴ Nicolaas J. Krom, *Inleiding tot de Hindoe-Javaansche Kunst* [Introduction to Hindu-Javanese art. Second, revised edition] (s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1923), vol. 2, 129.

¹⁵ De Casparis, *Indonesian Palaeography*, 36.

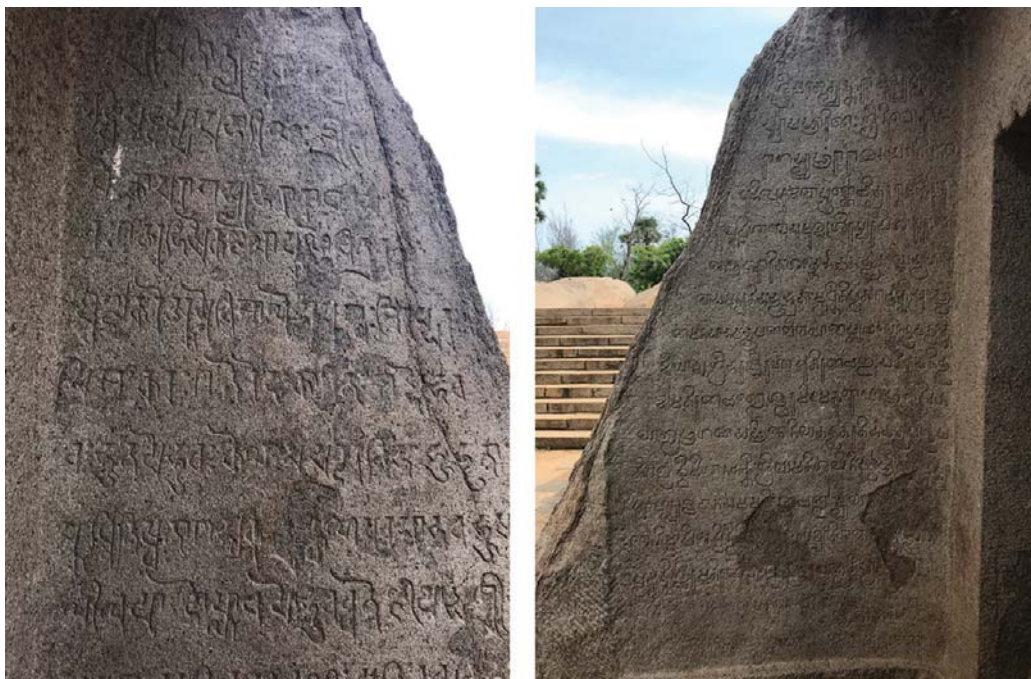
¹⁶ Willem F. Stutterheim, *Oudheden van Bali* [Antiquities of Bali] (Singaradja: Kirtya Liefrinck-Van der Tuuk, 1929), vol. 1, 36–37: “in my opinion, this *nagari* should indeed be understood as a sign of new or maintained contact with Buddhist and then especially Tantric groups in India (Nālandā)” (my translation from the original Dutch).

¹⁷ Salomon describes this script as a local derivative of Siddhamāṭṛkā, which was current from the 10th to the 14th centuries. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

¹⁸ Formigatti notes that numerous definitions, such as Kuṭīla, Nāgarī, Siddhamāṭṛkā, ProtoBengali, Nevārī, and Rañjanā, have been applied to what he refers to, following Sander, as “Pāla script,” a label that “clearly indicates the geographical and cultural origin of this script,” which “on account of Buddhist missionary activity [...] rapidly spread to neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Tibet, spawning a series of similar, yet distinct scripts.” See Camillo A. Formigatti, “A Forgotten Chapter in South Asian Book History? A Bird’s Eye View of Sanskrit Print Culture,” in *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change*, eds. Hildegard Diemberger, Karl Ehrhard, and Peter F. Kornicki (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 72–134, esp. 84; Lore Sander, *Paläographisches zu den Sanskrithandschriften der Berliner Turfansammlung* [Palaeographical Notes on the Sanskrit Manuscripts of the Berlin Turfan Collection] (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1968), 173–76.

¹⁹ Al-Bīrūnī explains that Siddhamāṭṛkā was used in the territory between Kashmir and Kanauj; see Noémie Verdon, *The Books Sāṅk and Pātāṅgal: A Socio-Cultural History of al-Bīrūnī’s Interpretation of Sāṅkhyā and Yoga* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024), 57, fn. 256. Salomon describes Siddhamāṭṛkā as “principally characterized by a strongly angular aspect, with a sharp angle (whence the term “acute-angled script”) at the lower right corner of each letter, reflecting the influence of pen-and-ink writing on the epigraphic script; by the extension of the

Siddhamāṭṛkā was used to write the Sanskrit language not only in the northe(aste)r(n) region of the Indian subcontinent but also in the southern regions, where other southern-Brahmī-derived scripts were prevalent. As argued by previous scholarship, the use of Siddhamāṭṛkā as a “foreign” script in South India may have had political as well as religious and diplomatic ramifications. Instances where the use of Siddhamāṭṛkā was probably dictated by the aesthetics of politics and power as well as what may be regarded as “religious diplomacy” are the bi-script inscriptions in Pallava-Grantha and Siddhamāṭṛkā found in the early 8th-century Śaiva cave-shrine Atiraṇaçaṇḍeśvara (figs. 1a–b) and in the Kailāsanātha temple, both sponsored by Narasimhapotavarman (650–725 CE). These inscriptions suggest that even a Śaiva king from an unambiguously and staunchly Śaiva dynasty, such as the Pallava, was eager to anchor himself to it by conforming to a cosmopolitan idiom anchored to the old and illustrious center of Buddhism that was Nālandā, as well as other monasteries in the Pāla domains, which were perceived as cultural powerhouses that dictated the religious and aesthetic paradigm in the Indic world of that period.²⁰



Figures 1a–b. Siddhamāṭṛkā (left) and Pallava-Grantha (right) inscriptions, Atiraṇaçaṇḍeśvara cave-shrine, Mahābalipuram. Photo by Andrea Acri.

head mark into wedgelike or triangular forms (whence it is sometimes referred to as “nail-headed”); and by a strong tendency toward calligraphic elaboration, especially in the treatment of the vowel characteristics and subscript consonants.” Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 39–40.

²⁰ Jeffrey Sundberg and Rolf Giebel, “The Life of the Tang Court Monk Vajrabodhi as Chronicled by Lü Xiang (呂向): South Indian and Śrī Laṅkān Antecedents to the Arrival of the Buddhist Vajrayāna in Eighth-Century Java and China,” *Pacific World*, 3rd series, no. 13 (2011): 129–222. See in particular p. 199, n. 126, where the use of Siddhamāṭṛkā, according to the authors, may constitute “an attempt to be cosmopolitan, to connect with a respected cultural powerhouse, and implies the rapid dissemination of knowledge and of religious innovation.”

Similarly, later Cōḷa coins dated to the 10th and 11th c. bear Sanskrit legends, some in Grantha script, others in Nāgarī script. Among the latter, we find “Uttamacolaḥ” for Uttamacōḷa (r. 969–985 CE), “Śrī-Rājarājaḥ” for Rājarāja I (r. 985–1014 CE), and “Śrī-Rājendraḥ” for Rājendra I (r. 1012–1044 CE); the last is especially telling in that it praises the king as the conqueror of the river Gaṅgā. Another relevant example, dated to ca. 754 CE, is found in Karnataka, at Paṭṭadakal, in the Cāḷukya realm: an octagonal pillar with inscriptions in two different scripts—one version in Telugu-Kannada script, the other in Nāgarī. According to Emmanuel Francis, these biscript inscriptions participate visually in the rivalry between the Pallava and the Cāḷukya dynasties, reflecting competing claims for authority and for the status of universal rulers of India “by showing their command of two distinctive scripts—one of southern type, the other of northern type—for the same language.”²¹

Siddhamātrkā Inscriptions in Central Java (Late 8th to Mid-9th Century)

Śailendra Royal Edicts: Between Diplomacy and Buddhist Networks

Differently from the Southern Indian examples mentioned above, where the use of Siddhamātrkā was triggered by political factors like the claim of sovereignty (actual or imagined) on a territory, the use of this script in Nusantara appears to have been dictated by the sponsorship of Mahāyāna Buddhist Tantra by the ruling elites as well as diplomacy. The same attempt to be cosmopolitan and, perhaps, even please foreign Buddhist kings reflected by the Pallava inscriptions may have triggered the issue of a set of four inscriptions in the Sanskrit language and Siddhamātrkā script by Śailendra kings in Central Java in the period from the end of the late 8th to the first half of the 9th century. The inscriptions are the following:²²

1. The Kalasan charter (67 cm in length and 46 cm in width), discovered nearby the temple of Kalasan in Prambanan (Museum Nasional, Jakarta, D. 147), in 14 lines and 12 verses in various meters, dated 778/9 CE (fig. 2). Opening with an invocation to Tārā, it mentions Mahārāja Panāṅkaraṇa Dyah Pañcapaṇa as having made a gift to the royal preceptor of the Śailendras (*śailendrarājaguru*) in order to build a temple for the same goddess.

²¹ Emmanuel Francis, “Imperial Languages and Public Writings in Tamil South India: A Bird’s-Eye View in the Very Longue Durée,” in *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts*, eds. Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Cecil (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 152–83, esp. 160; Emmanuel Francis, “North Indian Scripts & South Indian Kings,” *Hypotheses*, February 1, 2013, https://rcsi.hypotheses.org/288#identifier_3_288. See also the inscriptions from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Orissa mentioned by De Casparis, “Some Aspects,” 126–131.

²² The monograph by Long, besides making an original contribution in its own terms, admirably synthesizes, and builds on, earlier scholarship; therefore, here I refer the reader to this resource without listing all the relevant scholarship produced in the 19th as well as early to mid-20th century that is mentioned and discussed in that monograph. See Mark E. Long, *Voices from the Mountain: The Śailendra Inscriptions Discovered in Central Java and the Malay Peninsula* (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 2014).

2. The Kelurak charter (73 cm in length by 45 cm in height), discovered in the eponymous village in the Prambanan area (Museum Nasional, Jakarta, D. 44), in 16 lines and 20 verses in various meters (with lacunae due to damage in several lines), dated 782 CE (fig. 3). It contains a eulogy to Lokeśvara and King Saṅgrāmadhanañjaya; the latter is defined the ornament of the Śailendra dynasty (*śailendravanśatilaka*), who was purified and illuminated in the esoteric meaning of the scriptures by a preceptor from Bengal (*gandīdvīpa*). This preceptor, in his turn, established an image of Mañjuśrī.
3. The Ratu Boko I (Abhayagirivihāra) charter, found under the rubble of the terraced construction on the eponymous hillock, now in a fragmentary and incomplete state (Museum Nasional, Jakarta, D. 50),²³ containing 23 lines and 18 verses in various meters, dated 792/3 CE (figs. 4a–b). It mentions King Dharmottuṅgadeva and the word Śailendra, and refers to a “local” Abhayagirivihāra dedicated to Sri Lankan monks.
4. The Plaosan Lor charter, of unknown dating (late 8th–early 9th century?), found between the northern and southern building of the eponymous twin temple complex, now in a fragmentary state with the first 4 lines entirely missing (Museum Nasional, Jakarta, D. 82), containing 19 verses in various meters (fig. 5).²⁴ Deeply imbued with doctrinal themes, it contains a eulogy to a monarch and his wife, and mentions a constant flow of people coming from the region of Gurjara to worship a Buddhist temple.

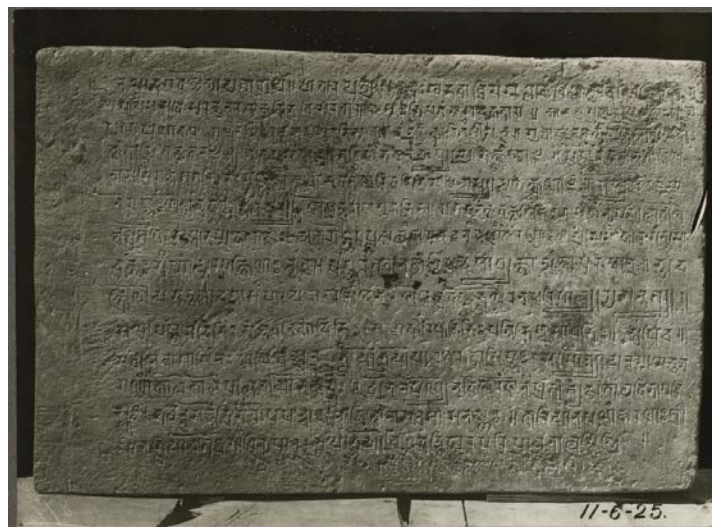


Figure 2. Kalasan charter. Photo: OD-7466, Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library.

²³ Long (*Voices*, 131) reports a size of 20 cm in length and 13 cm in height, as well as a triangular in form; in real facts, if one takes into account the fragment kept at the Archaeological Service office in Yogyakarta, those measurements appear to have been underestimated (further, the shape is not triangular but quadrangular); the actual size is likely to be ca. 50 cm in length and 30 cm in height. A reproduction of the recomposed inscription (except the arrow-headed fragment “e” in the middle) may be found in Jeffrey Sundberg, “Mid-9th-Century Adversity for Sinhalese Esoteric Buddhist Exemplars in Java: Lord Kumbhayoni and the ‘Rag-Wearer’ Paṃsukūlika Monks of the Abhayagirivihāra,” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, ed. Andrea Acri (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2016), 349–80, esp. 350, fig. 14.1.

²⁴ I have not been able to measure the charter, whose dimensions are not reported in Long’s book (*Voices*).



Figure 3. Kelurak charter, Museum Nasional, Jakarta. Photo by Gunawan Kartapranata, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manjusri_rgha_Kelurak_Inscription.JPG.



Figures 4a–b. Fragments of Ratu Boko charter. Photos: OD-7945 (left) and OD-19472 (right), Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library.



Figure 5. Estampage of the Plaosan Lor charter. Photo: OD-7946, Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library.

These charters, which can be regarded as prime examples of elaborate Sanskrit *kañya*, and which conform to the genre of royal *praśasti* documented across the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, are in many respects remarkable and unique. First, while only four of them are still extant, no other region of both maritime and mainland Southeast Asia has yielded that many Sanskrit inscriptions in Siddhamāṭṭkā and Sanskrit issued by the same line of kings within such a relatively short time span.²⁵ Another striking feature is their dimensions: their quadrangular shape, with the horizontal side longer than their height, stands in contrast with royal charters in the Kawi script and language, which develop mainly vertically; and the same can be said of their relatively small size, the larger measuring 73 cm in length and the shortest only ca. 40 cm, which leads one to wonder whether they were not meant to be stationary, but rather portable, or were in any event housed within relatively small niches inside monuments.²⁶ These edicts are also remarkable among all the royal inscriptions from Central Java because of their Buddhist persuasion; because their focus is not only on royals, but especially on Buddhist masters, who are described as the indirect or even direct agents of the construction of temples and statues; and because three out of four refer to foreign actors.

A piece of evidence supporting the scenario that these documents reflect an “outer-looking” political and religious agenda is, in fact, found outside of Java, in the Indian subcontinent: in the oft-discussed Nālandā copper plate from the 35th regnal year of Devapāla (second half of the 9th century; fig. 6), King Bālaputradeva of Sumatra, belonging to the Śailendra line of kings, is praised for having sponsored a *vihāra* for the use of monks from Śrīvijaya.²⁷ While there is a paucity of data about Bālaputradeva in the surviving historical record, De Casparis argued that this figure may have been involved in a dynastic struggle that took place in Central Java in the mid-9th century, as suggested by his mention in the coeval Śivagr̥ha inscription.²⁸ While many speculative or plainly incorrect details of De Casparis’ historical and textual reconstructions have been rightly criticized by subsequent scholars, it seems certain, however, that there existed diplomatic ties between the Pāla domains and the Sumatran branch of the Śailendra line of kings and the Śailendra Siddhamāṭṭkā inscriptions also suggest that analogous ties existed between the Pāla domains and Central Java around the 8th and 9th centuries. For instance, the existence of shared cultural, religious, and aesthetic norms is reflected by the fact that in the Nālandā copper plate of Devapāladeva, the queen-mother of Bālaputra is identified with the Buddhist goddess Tārā (“Tārā was the queen of that king, and was the daughter of the great ruler Varmasetu²⁹ of the lunar race and resembled

²⁵ It should be mentioned here that the Śailendras also issued inscriptions in Old Javanese script (but still written in Sanskrit), like the two-faced Ligor inscription in the Isthmus of Kra (775 CE), and the Kayumwungan inscription from Central Java (824 CE). On the Siddhamāṭṭkā inscriptions by Yaśovarman in the Khmer domains, see below, fn. 114.

²⁶ This is true about all the three inscriptions except that of Plaosan, which is probably the latest, and can therefore be regarded as a transition towards the monumental *praśastis*—indeed, it was even housed in its own shrine.

²⁷ See Hirananda Sastri, “The Nalanda Copper-Plate of Devapāladeva,” *Epigraphia Indica* 17 (1923–24): 310–27.

²⁸ De Casparis, *Selected Inscriptions from the 7th to the 9th century AD* (Bandung: Masa Baru, 1956), 259–60.

²⁹ While this is the reading adopted by Majumdar (see Nani Gopa Majumdar, *Nālandā Copper-Plate of Devapāladeva*

Tārā herself” [... *tāreva*]);³⁰ the same simile is found in a fragmentary line of the Siddhamātrkā Sanskrit inscription of Plaosan Lor, where the wife of an unidentified royal figure is said to appear/shine forth “like Tārā” (*tāreva virajati*).³¹ These Buddhist-inflected metaphors resonate with the popularity of the cult of Tārā on both shores of the Bay of Bengal.³² The mention of Tārā and Lokeśvara, both of which are known to function as protectors of maritime danger (among other dangers), in the charters, and also their representation as icons, may highlight the important role played by the maritime routes in the spread of Buddhism in Java and the neighboring regions.

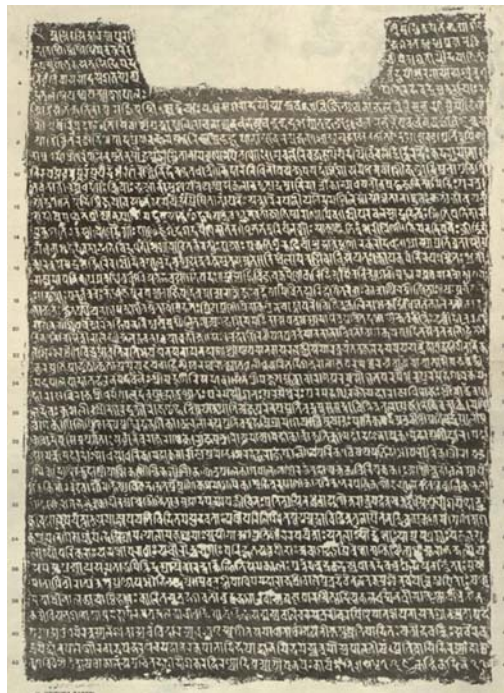


Figure 6. Estampage of the Nālandā Inscription of Devapāla, obverse. Photo by Archaeological Survey of India, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nalanda_Inscription_of_Devapāla_Obverse.jpg.

(Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1926), 13), Sastri (“The Nalanda”) and other scholars read *dharmasetu*, an expression that also occurs in both the Kalasan and Kelurak inscriptions, referred to a sanctuary and a king; indeed, the stanza is a cliché found in inscriptions from various regions of the Indian subcontinent as well as mainland Southeast Asia, with local variations. Interestingly, preliminary research by Amandine Wattelier-Bricout has shown that the Kalasan inscription may be the earliest occurrence of this word, predating the earliest occurrences in Rāṣṭrakūṭa (807 CE) and Pāla (810 CE) inscriptions. See Amandine Wattelier-Bricout, “The Dharmasetuḥ: A Bridge between Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Cambodia, South India and Java?” *Hypotheses*, January 23, 2024, <https://dharma.hypotheses.org/5590>.

³⁰ Hirananda Sastri, “The Nalanda,” 326.

³¹ Long, *Voices*, 244.

³² The Kalasan inscription opens with a salutation to Āryā-Tārā, and mentions the construction of a temple of Tārā (*tārābhavana*), which may be identified with what is now called Candi Kalasan: see Roy E. Jordaan, “The Tārā Temple of Kalasan in Central Java,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998): 163–83.

Another shared Buddhist epigraphical practice is the quoting of Sanskrit (Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna) scriptures in epigraphical documents in both locales: a 10th-century inscription from a memorial *stūpa* at Nālandā—in the same *vihāra* allegedly donated by Bālaputra—quotes verse 46 of the *Bhadracariprañidhāna*, the text that came to be transmitted as the final chapter of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* depicted in the uppermost series of reliefs on Borobudur in Central Java. Since this is the only known quotation of a Mahāyāna text (except *dhāraṇīs*) in an inscription found in the Indian subcontinent,³³ it might represent a new stimulus introduced by the Sumatran monarch or, in any event, the existence of “longstanding similarities in religious practice” in the two areas.³⁴ All these finds are in harmony with the artistic styles and architectural norms shared by the Pāla domains and Java in the period from the 8th to the early 10th century.

While there is no need to follow earlier generations of scholars in attributing the authorship of Sanskrit-Siddhamātrkā inscriptions issued by Śailendra rulers to foreign actors—like for example in the case of Kern, who even argued that the Kalasan inscription “furnishes evidence that Buddhists from northern India were involved in the construction of the sanctuary,”³⁵ it is undeniable that they document a flow of religious agents and pilgrims between the two regions as well as Pāla and Sri Lankan influences on the Śailendra-sponsored Buddhism practiced in Java in that period. See, for instance, the reference in the Kelurak inscription to the royal preceptor (*rājaguru*) Kumāraghoṣa, hailing from Gauḍīdvīpa, who installed an image of Mañjuḥoṣa (Mañjuśrī) at the request of Śailendra King Śrī Saṅgrāmadhanañjaya; the reference in the Plaosan inscription to the worship of a Buddha-temple (*jinamandira*) by pilgrims arriving from Gurjaradeśa (Gujarat, or the Gurjara-Pratihāras dominions in northern India?); and the reference in the Ratu Boko inscription to the establishment of a local branch of the Sri Lankan Abhayagirivihāra,³⁶ probably intended for the use by esoteric-minded Sinhalese Buddhist monks. In the case of the last inscription, the archaeological context supports the epigraphic data: the Abhayagirivihāra-related structures of Ratu Boko share with their Sinhalese prototypes—that is to say, some of the Abhayagiri peripheral structures apparently populated by ascetic monks—common architectural features, such as the so-called “double meditation platforms” as well as other motifs.³⁷ Thus, the inscription

³³ See Gregory Schopen, “A Verse from the *Bhadracariprañidhāna* in a Tenth-Century Inscription Found at Nālandā,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1989): 149–57.

³⁴ Hiram Woodward, “Review Article: Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 329–54, see esp. 353. More examples of such quotations are known in Sanskrit Buddhist inscriptions from Nusantara: see Arlo Griffiths, “Written Traces of the Buddhist Past: Mantras and Dhāraṇīs in Indonesian Inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014): 137–94 (esp. 147–48).

³⁵ Mark Long, *Voices*, 52 (translation of H.K. Kern, “Levensbericht van J.L.A. Brandes” [Inscriptions from the Śailendra-Period. Indonesian Inscriptions 1], *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (1906): 30–51, 35).

³⁶ See De Casparis, *Inscripties uit de Śailendra-tijd. Prasasti Indonesia 1* [Biography of J.L.A. Brandes] (Bandung: A.C. Nix & Co., 1950), 11–22.

³⁷ Véronique Degroot, “The Archaeological Remains of Ratu Boko: From Sri Lankan Buddhism to Hinduism,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34, no. 98 (2006): 55–74; Jeffrey R. Sundberg, “The Wilderness Monks of the Abhayagirivihāra and the Origins of Sino-Javanese Esoteric Buddhism,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 160 (2004): 95–123; Sundberg, “Mid-9th-Century Adversity,” 349–80.

and its archaeological context support the existence of long-distance maritime contacts between Central Java and Sri Lanka.

A striking and important finding at the eclectic, and partly esoteric, Abhayagirivihāra that links to both Java and Nālandā is a set of Sanskrit *dhāraṇīs* inscribed in Siddhamātrkā script on rectangular stones³⁸ (figs. 7a–b). These texts have been traced to Tantric Buddhist texts, such as the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṅgraha* and the *Karaṇḍamudrādhāraṇī*,³⁹ which are cataloged in the Taisho Chinese Buddhist canon as translated by Amoghavajra, an important Buddhist figure that visited Sri Lanka, Java, and China, where he obtained an important position at the Tang imperial court.⁴⁰ Further, the case of a Sri Lankan king adopting Tantric Buddhism is evidenced by an inscription of the mid-9th century, found among the ruins of a group of buildings to the north-west of the Twin Ponds (Kuṭṭampokuṇa), to the east-northeast of the Abhayagiri *stūpa*.⁴¹ It has been plausibly ascribed to Sena I (r. 846 to 866), the king who adopted esoteric Buddhism (*vajiriyavāda*) according to the chronicle *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*.⁴² Perhaps not coincidentally, the script used in this inscription displays close similarities with the Nālandā inscription of Devapāladeva;⁴³ according to Sundberg, the so-called Jetavanārāma (actually, Kapārārāma) inscription shows some stylistic features that are reminiscent of the Javanese inscriptions, including, for example, “the extended, curling superscript letters which can flow backwards for the space of as many as three characters.”⁴⁴ Similarly, De Casparis detected an influence from Devapāla also on other inscriptions from Anurādhapura, Mihintale, and elsewhere in Sri Lanka.⁴⁵ This state of affairs suggests that Buddhist circles in Sri Lanka and Java shared a similar cosmopolitan culture that was looking towards the northeastern Indian

³⁸ See Nandana Mudiyanse, *Mahāyāna Monuments of Ceylon* (Colombo: M.D. Gunasena, 1967), 99–106; Sundberg, “Appreciation of Relics, Stūpas, and Relic-Stūpas in Eighth Century Esoteric Buddhism: Taishō Tripiṭaka Texts and Archaeological Residues of Guhyā Lanḱā,” *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 18 (2017): 173–340, esp. 294–99; Rangama Chandawimala, *Buddhist Heterodoxy of the Abhayagiri Sect: A Study of the School of Abhayagiri in Ancient Sri Lanka* (Saarbrücken: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013).

³⁹ Gregory Schopen, “The Text on the ‘Dhāraṇī Stones’ from the Abhayagirivihāra: A Minor Contribution to the Study of Mahāyāna Literature in Ceylon,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5 (1982): 101–8.

⁴⁰ The *Karaṇḍamudrādhāraṇī*, originating from the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānabhāradayaguhya-dhātu-karaṇḍamudrānāmadhāraṇī mahāyāna-sūtra*, has been identified as having been among the 42 Siddhamātrkā Sanskrit manuscripts brought back to Japan in 806 by Kūkai: see Rolf Giebel, “Notes on Some Sanskrit Texts Brought Back to Japan by Kūkai,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, third series, no. 14 (2013): 187–230, esp. 218.

⁴¹ I.e. the Kapārārāma inscription of Abhayagirivihāra, previously incorrectly referred to as the “Jetavanārāma inscription.” See R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, “Buddhist Nikāyas in medieval Ceylon,” *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 9 (1966): 55–66, esp. 57; Sundberg and Giebel, “The Life,” 162–64.

⁴² But see Sundberg’s reevaluation of this inscription “as a Sanskrit Theravāda document rather than the Sanskrit Mahāyāna document, as assumed in Sundberg and Giebel (“Life of the Tang Court Monk Vajrabodhi,” 163–64), and tells an interesting story of the *tapasvin*-scholars being inducted into some sort of monastic formalism,” see Sundberg, “The Abhayagirivihāra’s Pāṃśukūlika Monks in Second Lambakaṇṇa Śrī Lanḱā and Śailendra Java: The Flowering and Fall of a Cardinal Center of Influence in Early Esoteric Buddhism,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, third series, no. 16 (2014): 49–185, esp. 132, n. 59.

⁴³ Gunawardana, “Buddhist Nikāyas,” 58–61.

⁴⁴ Sundberg, “The Wilderness Monks,” 111, fn. 23.

⁴⁵ De Casparis, “Some Aspects” 134.

centers of Buddhist esotericism like Nālandā. As correctly remarked by the same scholar, northeastern Indian scripts “must have had a strong fascination for certain circles in areas at great distance from the ancient centres in Madhyadeśa, even in areas where other and equally efficient scripts had been in use since many generations.”⁴⁶



Figures 7a–b. Two Dhāraṇī pillar inscriptions from the Abhayagirivihāra, Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka.
Photos by Andrea Acri.

According to Bosch, the adoption of Siddhamātrkā script in Java suggests that monastic centers like Nālandā inspired the innovations found in the Javanese inscriptions, as “the latest developments in the script were diffused immediately after they were created,” and even claim that the adoption of Siddhamātrkā was “ahead of the territories in India whose relations with learned Buddhist circles were looser.”⁴⁷ In noting major differences between the, in many respects idiosyncratic, scripts of the Kalasan and Abhayagirivihāra inscriptions on the one hand and those—more developed—of the (undated) Plaosan Lor and Kelurak inscriptions on the other,⁴⁸ as well as the more correct character of the Sanskrit used in the latter, he attributed such differences to Kumāraghoṣa’s arrival to, and departure from, Java.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ De Casparis, “Some Aspects,” 125.

⁴⁷ F.D.K. Bosch, “De inscriptie van Kēloerak” [The inscription of Kelurak], *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 68 (1928): 1–64, esp. 13, translated in Long, “Voices,” 60.

⁴⁸ Bosch, “De inscriptie,” 13–15, listing eight features without Indian precedents, as well as other idiosyncrasies in the formal organization of the inscriptions. See also De Casparis, *Inscripties*, 12–14; De Casparis, *Selected Inscriptions*, 176–77.

⁴⁹ Bosch, “De inscriptie,” 6–7, translated in Long, “Voices,” 60 (see also 142).

In fact, other prominent Buddhist masters who flourished between the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century are recorded to have visited Java: according to an account by Yuanzhao (a prominent pupil of Amoghavajra) compiled into the *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* and also according to the Japanese master Kūkai, Vajrabodhi (671–741, prob. from Kāñcī) first met his pupil Amoghavajra (704–774, prob. from Samarkand) in Java;⁵⁰ both also studied at Nālandā and visited Sri Lanka in search of esoteric scriptures and initiations and were granted prime positions at the Tang imperial court, thereby becoming the “patriarchs” of Chinese Tantric Buddhism. The same Nālandā-based curriculum—which no doubt included the study and copying of manuscripts in Siddhamāṭṛkā—and travel itinerary to Sri Lanka and China was also shared by the monk Prajña (744–ca. 810, prob. from Central Asia), disciple of Yuanzhao and teacher of Kūkai, who is recorded to have been shipwrecked somewhere in Southeast Asia and to have translated into Chinese the *Bhadracarīprañidhāna*. Since that text, as I have noted above, is abundantly—and for the first time in the Buddhist world—depicted at Borobudur, it is thus not impossible that, also considering the other similarities between Buddhist epigraphy of the Pāla domains and Java, Prajña himself could have been one of the agents involved, even if indirectly, in the production of the Kalasan and Kelurak inscriptions⁵¹ and, more generally, in the promotion of the remarkably cosmopolitan Tantric Buddhist religious culture of the Pāla domains in that period. Further, scholars such as Sundberg have tried to link the palaeographic peculiarities of the Kalasan and Ratu Boko inscriptions to the scribal idiosyncrasies of monks such as Amoghavajra, Prajñatāra,⁵² and Kūkai, as attested in Siddhamāṭṛkā manuscripts and paintings from China and Japan;⁵³ however, these attempts are bound to remain fruitless in the absence of a comprehensive comparative analysis based on a wider and more geographically diverse corpus.⁵⁴ While we will never know if Kumāraghoṣa himself or any of the aforementioned masters traveling from the subcontinent to China or, rather, a Nālandā-trained Buddhist monk from Java, engraved one or more of those Śailendra

⁵⁰ Sundberg and Giebel, “The Life,” 152.

⁵¹ Indeed, Prajña is recorded to have arrived in China in 781, i.e. one year earlier than the date of the Kelurak inscription; however, this chronology suggests that he traveled by sea, and probably stopped over in Java, not long before the issue of that charter, or some years before. According to Chinese sources, his maritime journey took nearly 20 years: see Paul Copp, “Prajña,” in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, eds. C.D. Orzech, H.H. Sørensen, and R.K. Payne (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 360–62, esp. 361.

⁵² Prajñatāra (Boredaluo 般若怛羅) was an Indian monk who resided at the Kaiyuan monastery and taught Enchin Siddham script in the early 850s: see Charles Orzech, “After Amoghavajra: Esoteric Buddhism in the Late Tang,” in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, eds. C.D. Orzech, H.H. Sørensen, and R.K. Payne (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 315–38, esp. 328.

⁵³ See Sundberg, “The Wilderness,” 110–13; “The Abhayagirivihāra’s Paṃsukūlika,” 177, n. 223; and “Appreciation of Relics,” 321–23, where the author corrects his earlier hypothesis in the light of an early form of Siddhamāṭṛkā developed fully in the 7th century in northeastern India, thus much earlier than the esoteric Buddhist materials mentioned earlier as possible prototypes or cognates of the Javanese inscriptions.

⁵⁴ A promising attempt to palaeographically analyze (and date) the features of the script in Siddhamāṭṛkā inscriptions as well as manuscripts from Nepal from the 7th to the 9th century may be found in Diwakar Acharya and Nina Mirnig, “A Rāṣṭrakūṭa King in the Kathmandu Valley: Reassessing Late Licchavi History in the Light of a Newly Deciphered Eighth-Century Inscription,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 143, no. 1 (2023): 87–108.

inscriptions, it seems safe to conclude, along with De Casparis,⁵⁵ that

the use of Nāgarī [actually, Siddhamāṭṛkā] in Sri Lanka and Indonesia must be attributed to close contacts between Buddhist monks in different parts of South and Southeast Asia. [...] The use by different Buddhist communities of a common script—at a time when the “local” scripts of Pallava origin had already diversified—may have strengthened the links between Buddhist “minorities” in different areas. [...] Changes in script seem to spread over enormous distances in a minimum of time, so that they sometimes actually seem to occur in the periphery earlier than in the heartland of Nāgarī. This applies already to its earliest stage, so that we cannot pinpoint its precise place of origin. Communications within South and South East Asia may have been more frequent and regular than is often thought—at least during certain periods.

On the other hand, it seems far-fetched to regard those documents, along with the introduction by the Śailendras of silver coinage featuring Siddhamāṭṛkā script⁵⁶ as evidence that those kings were of foreign origin.⁵⁷ Rather, one may attribute those innovations as being “the direct result of the Śailendra family’s religious affiliation with Mahāyāna Buddhism, irrespective of the dynasty’s geographic origin.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, the relatively high density of inscriptions in Siddhamāṭṛkā traceable to the Śailendras (or the period dominated by the Śailendras), could suggest that this dynasty’s transregional relationship with the Pālas and Nālandā on one hand and Sri Lanka on the other was considerably closer than with other dynasties or regions in Southeast Asia.

Dhāraṇīs Engraved on Gold and Silver Foils at Candi Plaosan Lor

Non-lithic epigraphic documents in Sanskrit and a type of Siddhamāṭṛkā script that resembles that of the Kelurak, Plaosan, Kalasan, and Ratu Boko stone inscriptions, and thus datable to between the late 8th and mid-9th centuries, were discovered under the Buddhist twin-shrines of Plaosan Lor in Central Java.⁵⁹ A rolled gold foil, measuring 5.2–5.8 × 25.5 cm, was found in association with a consecration deposit in the southeastern corner underneath the central

⁵⁵ De Casparis, “Some Notes,” 134–37. See also *Indonesian Palaeography*, 36: “As the script is, at least in the period under discussion, limited to Mahāyāna Buddhism its expansion is no doubt connected with the activities of Buddhist monks from centres such as Nālandā.”

⁵⁶ These are Javanese silver-alloy coins of the “sandalwood flower” type, see Jan Wisseman Christie, “Pre-Islamic Coinage of Java,” in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1994: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists Paris, 24th–28th October 1994*, ed. P-Y. Manguin (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1998), 161–72, esp. 167–69.

⁵⁷ Roy E. Jordaan, “Why the Śailendras Were not a Javanese Dynasty,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 34, no. 98 (2006): 3–22, esp. 6.

⁵⁸ Long, “Voices,” 60.

⁵⁹ Arlo Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 161–66.

chamber of the northern main shrine;⁶⁰ this contains the *Bodhigarbbālanākāralakṣadhāraṇī*, a text that exists in several other versions from India and Tibet and that relates to the practice of depositing a written *dhāraṇī* inside a *caitya* in order to multiply the *caitya* and the merit that comes with it.⁶¹ Another rolled piece of gold foil, measuring 39 × 3.7–4.0 cm, was found west of the southeastern consecration deposit in the same shrine; it contains the *ye dharmāḥ* formula followed by the *Saptasaptatisamyaksambuddhakoṭibhiruktā dhāraṇī*, which stands at the start of section 2.7 of the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, a *dhāraṇī* attested in transliteration in the Chinese canon (Taishō 1383, 21: 904b), and a third unidentified *dhāraṇī*.⁶² This document is remarkable, for “the Javanese version of the *dhāraṇī* is found in precisely the same form among the Sanskrit texts brought to Japan by Kūkai in the early eighth [*sic*, actually 9th] century.”⁶³ A third (silver) foil, measuring 56.5 × 3.6 cm, was presumably found under the same shrine; it also contains the *ye dharmāḥ* formula followed by the *Saptasaptatisamyaksambuddhakoṭibhiruktā dhāraṇī*, then a mantra that forms part of the expanded recension of the *dhāraṇī* of the *Aparimitāyuhṣūtra*, and finally a *dhāraṇī* addressed to the Buddha Ratnaśikhin—a variant of which is attested in the Chinese canon.⁶⁴

These documents are in harmony with the coeval evidence discussed in this article as well as elsewhere, which reflects a shared Sanskritic Buddhist culture between Java and the rest of the Buddhist world, the importance of “*dhāraṇī*-Buddhism,” as well as the pan-Asian circulation of Buddhist texts along with masters plying the maritime “Silk Routes” connecting South and East Asia via Southeast Asia. In these particular cases, the use of Siddhamātrkā does not appear to have political or diplomatic implications but rather reflects the “on the ground” reality of elite manifestations of (Tantric) Buddhism in the ritual context of a Central Javanese royal-sponsored monument.

Metal Statues with Siddhamātrkā Inscriptions

Central (and, to a much lesser extent, East) Java has yielded a not insignificant share of statues (all in bronze, except the silver Mañjuśrī from Ngemplak Semongan) dateable to the 8th and 9th centuries and bearing Siddhamātrkā inscriptions on their backs, on their bases, or on rolled metal foils inside their pedestals. All the objects as well as the inscriptions are Buddhist in character and several contain the *ye dharmāḥ* formula, occasionally supplemented by other mantras in Sanskrit. A tabular list is provided below (item 17 is represented in fig. 8a–b):⁶⁵

⁶⁰ For a photographic reproduction, see Arlo Griffiths, “Written Traces,” fig. 7.

⁶¹ Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 164.

⁶² Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 164–65.

⁶³ Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 165. The scholar-monk Kūkai, also known as Kōbō Daishi (776–835), the founder of the Shingon school, studied in China under Huiguo, himself a pupil of Amoghavajra.

⁶⁴ Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 166.

⁶⁵ Mathilde Mechling is to be credited with the compilation of items 9–22 as well as inputs and corrections on items 1–8.

No.	Deity	Place of provenance	Current whereabouts	Cat. nr.	Literature
1 ⁶⁶	Mañjuśrī	Ngemplak Semongan	National Museum, Jakarta	MNI 5899/A.1105	Bosch 1928; Fontein 1990, cat. 46
2	Mañjuśrī	Temanggung	?	?	Damais 1963, 580
3	Avalokiteśvara	Unknown ⁶⁷	Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin	MIK II 195	Moeller 1985, 18–20
4	Jambhala	Unknown	Musée Guimet, Paris	MG 3814	Le Bonheur 1971, 184–187; Mechling 2020, figs. 6.31a–b
5	Mahāpratisarā	Unknown	Ethnographic Museum, Leiden	RMV 1630-18	Juynboll 1909, 108 “Çakti”; Le Bonheur 1971, 208–211; Mevissen 1999, 104–105; Mechling 2020, fig. 6.194
6	Padmapāṇi	Unknown	National Museum, Jakarta	MNI A28/7990	Mechling 2020, figs. 6.1a–b
7	Buddha in <i>dharmacakra-mudrā</i> / Vairocana (?)	Ampel, Boyolali regency, Central Java	National Museum, Jakarta	MNI 554	Friederich 1850, 1–8 plates 1–2; Groeneveldt and Brandes 1887, 163, no. 1; ROC ⁶⁸ 1910, 60–61; ROC 1911 (Bijlage 60), 90 (OD-471); Mechling 2020, fig. 6.114
8	Buddha Śākyamuni (?) ⁶⁹	Rejoso, Central Java	Museum Ranggawarsita, Semarang	Reg. no. 04.2321, acc. no. R. 1578	Griffiths, Revire, and Sanyal 2013
9	Buddha in <i>bhūmiṣṭarāsamudrā</i> (Akshobhya?)	Kedu?	British Museum, London	1859,1228.4	Mechling 2020, fig. 7.164

⁶⁶ The inscription is not on the statue but on a silver foil attached to the underside of the statue; its current whereabouts are not clear.

⁶⁷ Given as Candi Sendu in East Java by Moeller, based on info by Dieduksman who owned the object before, but no Candi by that name exists in Java.

⁶⁸ *Rapporten van de Commissie in Nederlandsch-Indië voor Oudheidkundig Onderzoek op Java en Madoera* [Reports of the Commission in the Netherlands East Indies for Archaeological Research on Java and Madura].

⁶⁹ Its inscription, besides the *ye dharmāḥ*, includes the heart mantra *jinajik*: see Arlo Griffiths, Nicolas Revire, and Rajat Sanyal, “An Inscribed Bronze Sculpture of a Buddha in Bhadrāsana at Museum Ranggawarsita in Semarang (Central Java, Indonesia),” *Arts Asiatiques*, no. 68 (2013): 3–26.

10	Mañjuśrī	Unknown	Linden-Museum, Stuttgart	SA 35 246 L	Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1984, 57, cat. no. 22; Mechling 2020, fig. 7.157
11	Six-armed female goddess	Desa Kunti, Ponorogo, East Java	Museum Mpu Tantular, Sidoarjo	04.4 AK	Prasanti 1993, cat. no. 61; Wibowo 1996, fig. 50; Mechling 2020, fig. 6.82
12 ⁷⁰	Buddha in <i>dhyānamudrā</i> (Amitābha?)	Desa Batang, Yogyakarta, Central Java	Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta	MNI 5556	Notulen 1914, 155 (no. 3); OV ⁷¹ 1915, 76 (OD-2249); Mechling 2020, fig. 6.165
13 ⁷²	Four-armed Cundā	Desa Batang, Yogyakarta, Central Java	Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta	MNI 5569	Notulen 1914, 155 (no. 3); <i>Oudheidkundig Verslag</i> 1915, 76 (OD-2252 and OD-2253)
14	Bhṛkuṭī	Brebes, Central Java	Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta	MNI 6590	Fontein 1990, cat. 44; Sedyawati 1997, 93, cat. no. 52 (OD-13995)
15	Mañjuśrī / Ākāśagarbha (?)	Unknown	Unknown (Archaeological Institute of Indonesia ²)	LPPN38	Fontein et al. 1971, cat. 38; Mechling 2020, fig. 6.182
16 ⁷³	Gaṇeśa	Unknown	Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag	OM 4-1940	Lunsingh Scheurleer and Klokke 1988, cat. 16; Mechling 2020, fig. 6.14
17	Buddha with book (Bhaiṣajyaguru?)	Unknown	Sackler Gallery, Washington DC	S2015.25	Lopez et al. 2017, 83, fig. 7; Mechling 2020, figs. 6.65a–e
18 ⁷⁴	Locanā	Unknown	Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden	RMV 1403-2358	Juynboll 1909, 65–66 “Laksmi”; Lunsingh Scheurleer and Klokke 1988, cat. 40; and Klokke 1988, cat. 40; Mechling 2020, fig. 7.254

⁷⁰ The inscription is almost completely erased and barely visible.

⁷¹ *Oudheidkundig Verslag van de Oudheidkundige Dienst van Nederlandsch-Indië* [Archaeological Report of the Archaeological Service of the Netherlands East Indies].

⁷² For the inscription, which is almost completely erased, see photo OD-2253.

⁷³ The inscription has not been noticed before.

⁷⁴ According to Mathilde Mechling (email dated 4 February 2024), this is the only statuette that could possibly date from the late 9th or early 10th century.

19	Mañjuśrī (Gauḍī script)	Unknown	Weltmuseum, Vienna	VO 68767	Mechling 2020, 212–214, ⁷⁵ figs. 6.97a–e
20 ⁷⁶	Jambhala	Unknown	Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden	RMV 1403-2466	Juynboll 1909, 73; Mechling 2020, fig. 6.156
21	Seated Buddha	Unknown	Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden	RMV 1403-1878	Juynboll 1909, 81; Mechling 2020, figs. 5.100 and 5.127
22	Mañjuśrī	Unknown	Museum Radya Pustaka, Surakarta	Solo no. A. 591 - A. 196 RP	Mechling 2020, figs. 6.106a–b



Figure 8a (top). Buddha with a book (Bhaiṣajyaguru?), National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Ann and Gilbert Kinney, S2015.25.

Figure 8b (bottom). Detail of the inscription on the backslab. Photos courtesy of the National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁵ Mechling notes that the inscription, deciphered by Arlo Griffiths, contains a mantra whose textual source has not been identified yet, as well as the name *Vajratikṣṇa* (a name of *Mañjuśrī*).

⁷⁶ Items 21–23 do not bear an inscription engraved on the piece, but a sealing stamped at the back with the *ye dharmah*.

No comprehensive palaeographic study of the inscriptions listed above has been produced so far. Bosch dated the script on the foil in the pedestal of the silver Mañjuśrī from Ngemplak Semongan to the first half of the 10th century on account of the fact that it shows a development towards the actual Nāgarī, where the upper ends of the letters are connected by continuous lines.⁷⁷ But this feature has also been detected by Griffiths, Revire, and Sanyal in their detailed (yet not conclusive) description of the script of the Rejoso Buddha, which reflects “mature Siddhamātrkā script of the eastern Indian variety, prevalent in the greater Bengal-Bihar region between the late 8th and early 10th century CE.”⁷⁸ They further note similarities with the Nālandā *stūpa* inscription of the reign of Mahendrapāla dateable to the middle of the 9th century, excepting the somewhat intermediate character of the *mātrā* as well as consecutive Pāla kings in the 9th century, including the first half of the reign of Devapāladeva. Their conclusion is that “the inscription undoubtedly represents a set of letters characteristic of mature Siddhamātrkā, with some traces of slightly later developments and may, therefore, be palaeographically dated to the period 800–875 CE, but it is impossible to determine a more precise time frame on the basis of paleography alone.”⁷⁹ Commenting on the letter *ja* in the mantra *jinajik*, Sundberg links it to the “conventional” form found in inscriptions from the subcontinent and the Kelurak and Plaosan Lor inscriptions, rather than the form that the inscriptions of Kalasan and Abhayagirivihāra, as well as the Sino-Japanese Siddhamātrkā texts, shared in common.⁸⁰

Inscribed statues from the Indian subcontinent suggest that members of the royal elites sponsored the production of such images and donated them to temples in order to produce merit and this practice must have been common in Java too.⁸¹ Yet, even though most of the statues, and especially those in precious metals like gold and silver, would have constituted expensive commodities, it appears that they were not owned exclusively by the political and religious elites but also by laypeople of the wider community.⁸² The circulation of some statues may have been restricted because of their esoteric nature, while others may have been in the possession of prominent monks for personal worship.

Whatever the case may be, inscribed metal statues are relevant to the wider issue of connectivity and transfer: insofar as they are often portable objects of worship, they lend themselves to transregional circulation. In fact, in both the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, metal images were often discovered in coastal areas, deltas, and on the banks of rivers

⁷⁷ F.D.K. Bosch, “Twee belangrijke aanwinsten van het Batavia’sche Museum” [Two major acquisitions of the Batavian Museum], in *Feestbundel van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen bij gelegenheid van zijn 150 jarig bestaan 1778–1928* (Weltevreden: G. Kolff & Co, 1928), 39–48, esp. 45.

⁷⁸ Arlo Griffiths, Nicolas Revire, and Rajat Sanyal, “An Inscribed Bronze Sculpture,” 16–17.

⁷⁹ Griffiths, Revire, and Sanyal, 16–17.

⁸⁰ Sundberg, “The Wilderness Monk,” 117 fn. 33.

⁸¹ See Mathilde Mechling, *Buddhist and Hindu Metal Images of Indonesia: Evidence for Shared Artistic and Religious Networks Across Asia (c. 6th–10th century)*, 2 vols. (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2020), 125–26.

⁸² Mechling, “*Buddhist and Hindu Metal Images of Indonesia*,” 128: “the donative inscriptions of Indian Buddha images indicate that their donors were monks, nuns, lay people, and elite members alike, so anyone could commission a metal image of the Buddha. The situation was probably similar in Southeast Asia.”

and streams, i.e. in locales near commercial nodes where trade and religious centers were located.⁸³

One may regard the statues' Siddhamāṭṛkā inscriptions as suggesting that those artifacts themselves originated from northeastern India; however, this does not need to be necessarily the case, as the majority of the icons from Java display local (albeit Pāla-influenced) rather than purely northeastern Indian features. Just like in the cases of the stone inscriptions discussed above, the use of Siddhamāṭṛkā could point to a desire by local monks to anchor such images to the northeastern Indian Buddhist tradition, although it is not to be excluded that they might have been used by monks coming from the subcontinent. An instance of such personal use of an icon is documented by a Pāla bronze statue of Buddha found in the Potala palace in the Tibetan Autonomous Region bearing two inscriptions on its back, a *ye dharmāḥ* in Siddhamāṭṛkā as well as an inscription in Chinese identifying the monk who had the statue made in India, more precisely in Nālandā. The monk who had the statue made, and who brought it to Central Asia, was Huichao (Hyecho), a Korean monk of Tantric Buddhist persuasion who traveled to India from 724 to 727 CE and back—possibly even more than once.⁸⁴ In the light of some strange palaeographical features, Deeg concludes that the Chinese inscription was added in India by a scribe who did not know Chinese.⁸⁵ Could some Siddhamāṭṛkā inscriptions found in Java reflect similar dynamics?

A corpus of statues from both the subcontinent and Southeast Asia highlights idioms and religious conventions shared across distant locales: witness, for instance, a small Tārā kept in the National Museum of Songkhla in Thailand, bearing the *ye dharmāḥ* in Sanskrit and Siddhamāṭṛkā dating, according to Skilling, to the 9th or 10th century;⁸⁶ a set of three Avalokiteśvara statues dated to the second half of the first millennium from Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh), Telhara, and Bargaon (Bihar) bearing Siddhamāṭṛkā inscriptions containing the heart-mantra *ārolīk*,⁸⁷ which is found in Tantric Buddhist texts preserved in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese; as well as a bronze frame from Kurkihār, whose back bears an inscription opening with the *ye dharmāḥ* formula followed by the long *dhāraṇī* known as the “casket seal” (*Karaṇḍamudrā dhāraṇī*), variants of which are also attested on stones inscriptions from the

⁸³ Mechling, “*Buddhist and Hindu Metal Images of Indonesia*,” 29, 32, 35.

⁸⁴ Max Deeg, “Has Huichao Been Back to India? On a Chinese Inscription on the Back of a Pāla Bronze and the Chronology of Indian Esoteric Buddhism,” in *From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Eli Franco and Monika Zin (Kathmandu: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), 197–213. It is intriguing to point out that art historians, also supported by Gourishwar Bhattacharya's palaeographic assessment of the Siddhamāṭṛkā, have dated the statue to much later than the Chinese inscription implies, i.e. to the 10th or even 11th century instead of the first half of the 8th century: see Christian Luczanits, “Crowned Buddha: Intriguing Relations between India, China, and Tibet,” *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <https://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/crowned-buddha/>.

⁸⁵ Deeg, “Has Huichao,” 201.

⁸⁶ Peter Skilling, “Traces of the Dharma,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, no. 90-91 (2003): 273–87, esp 281.

⁸⁷ Nicolas Revire, Rajat Sanyal, and Rolf Giebel, “Avalokiteśvara of the ‘Three and a Half Syllables’: A Note on the Heart-Mantra *Ārolīk* in India,” *Arts asiatiques* 76, (2021): 5–30.

Abhayagiri *vihāra* in Sri Lanka (see above) and Udayagiri 2 in Orissa,⁸⁸ and which was also brought to Japan from China by Kūkai. According to Revire, these vestiges “point to possible direct cultural contacts between these regions.”⁸⁹

Inscribed Terracotta Sealings and Bronze Molds

Other types of artifacts that are highly portable and that, having been found in disparate regions of Maritime Asia, testify to the phenomenon of the circulation of Buddhism, are terracotta sealings (in the form of tablets or, also, small *stūpas*) and the bronze molds that were used to print them. According to a recent interpretation, these artifacts were not produced as mementos at pilgrimage sites but rather “to produce merit (*puṇya*) and to cleanse sin (*pāpa*), to promote welfare, whether for the one who produces the images or for the deceased as dedicated.”⁹⁰ Although by no means a rule, these artifacts, displaying Buddhist motifs, tend to be inscribed in Siddhamātrkā or Nāgarī script. Interestingly, however, this seems not to be the case in Indonesia (i.e. Java, Bali, and Sumatra), where the inscribed ones seem to be the minority compared to the Malay Peninsula, Bagan, and Campā.⁹¹

Whether inscribed or not, the objects found in Java can be associated with the type of Sanskritic/Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna Buddhism that was prevalent during the medieval period.⁹² What is by far the most common inscribed formula is the *ye dharmāḥ*, whereas the iconography includes the Buddha Śākyamuni, Vairocana, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, Jambhala, Mañjuśrī, and the goddess Cuṇḍā. Tablets bearing only inscriptions have also been found.⁹³ According to Desoutter, bronze molds from Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula “propose a coherent excerpt of the regional situation, reflecting different developments based on iconographic

⁸⁸ Kimiaki Tanaka, “Orissashū Udayagiri II shutsudo no sekkoku darani ni tsuite” [A newly identified Dhāraṇī-sūtra from Udayagiri II], *TōyōBunkaKenkyūjōKijō* 166: 134–24.

⁸⁹ Nicolas Revire, “Book Review of *Nalanda, Srivijaya, and Beyond: Re-exploring Buddhist Art in Asia*, ed. Gauri Parimoo Krishnan,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 106 (2018): 319–30, esp. 322.

⁹⁰ See Peter Skilling, “‘Buddhist Sealings’: Reflections on Terminology, Motivation, Donor’s, Status, School-Affiliation, and Print-Technology,” in *South Asia Archaeology 2001: Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists, Held in Collège de France, Paris 2–6 July 2001*, ed. Catherine Jarrige and Vincent Lefèvre (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 2005), 677–85, esp. 678.

⁹¹ On both inscribed and non-inscribed clay tablets and metal molds from Southeast Asia, see Delphine Desoutter, *Printing the Faith in Southeast Asia: The Buddhist Production of Seals and Stūpas (7th–13th century CE)*, Vol. 1: Text (PhD dissertation, Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2017). On the small inscribed *stūpas* and clay sealings at Pejeng and Blahbatu in Bali and the mantras they bear, see Arlo Griffiths, “Written Traces,” 181–83.

⁹² Apart from their iconography, their archaeological context sometimes supports this fact: see, for example, the association with a Vajrayāna ritual context can be discerned in three bronze moulds recovered in Klaten, which were associated with a *vajra* and a seat for an allegedly “Hindu” statue: see *Notulen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* [Minutes of the General and Executive Meetings of the Bataviaasch Society of Arts and Sciences], no. 31—1893 (Batavia, Albrecht & Rusche, 1894), 148. The molds are probably those preserved in the Museum Nasional in Jakarta: see Desoutter, *Printing the Faith*, cat. Nr. Indo. 6, Indo. 16, Indo. 20/1.

⁹³ See, for instance, the 13 tablets, entirely inscribed in Siddhamātrkā script, displayed at the Museum Sonobudoyo in Yogyakarta, and at least one kept at PC PusLit Arkeologi in Banyuwangi, East Java.

and aesthetic principles shared with South Asia.”⁹⁴ The corpus of objects found in Java is not insignificant, counting hundreds of them, and it is possible that more such objects exist in museums.⁹⁵ Findspots include the entire island of Java, but especially the central part of the island within the area around Klaten and Semarang;⁹⁶ as well as the site of the (probably Java-bound) *Intan* shipwreck in the Java Sea, dated to between 918 and 960 CE.⁹⁷ Commenting on the tablets and molds from the last findspot,⁹⁸ Flecker states that “There is little doubt that some votive tablets were imported from India,” most likely as protective amulets, but also that “[t]he moulds in the *Intan* cargo indicate that votive tablets were made locally in Indonesia, and not all brought in by travellers from India;”⁹⁹ interestingly, from the distribution of the small *stūpas*, which were widely distributed around the site, Flecker concludes that the objects “were therefore probably stowed separately, perhaps as the personal property of merchants or priests.”¹⁰⁰

The Sanskrit inscription in Siddhamātrkā script on a seal from Gumuk Klinting in East Java, containing a depiction of Lokanātha, can be read partially: it contains the ye dharmāḥ and another invocation to Śākyamuni and possibly some mantra; the most interesting element is the occurrence of the word *bharāle*, which could be the earliest attested in Java.¹⁰¹ The image on this mold is similar to that found in South Asian counterparts, as well as matching seals kept at Museum Mpu Tantular in East Java, at a private collection in Graz, on one seal from Tibet, and at the Fogg Museum, Harvard (allegedly found in Malaysia, inv. no. 1994.126: see fig. 9).¹⁰² Similarly, a bronze mold found in Semarang representing a Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā* flanked by two bodhisattvas (possibly *Vajrapāṇi* and *Avalokiteśvara*) and with a representation of *Jambhala* at the bottom, surrounded by a Siddhamātrkā inscription (fig. 10), reflects a cosmopolitan outlook and artistic as well as religious connections with clay tablets found elsewhere in the Archipelago as well as in the Thai-Malay Peninsula, China, and Japan.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ See Desoutter, *Printing the Faith*, 158–59.

⁹⁵ The collections reported by Desoutter (*Printing the Faith*, 28–29) are found in the Museum Nasional and the Puslit Arkenas in Jakarta, in the Batujaya Site Museum in West Java, in the Museum Sono Budoyo in Yogyakarta, in the Bogem BPCB Office for Yogyakarta, in the Mangkunegaran Palace in Solo, in the Museum Karmawibhanga in Borobudur, in the Mpu Tantular Museum in Sidoarjo, and in the Trowulan Museum in Mojokerto.

⁹⁶ This is the case of six molds (plus a seventh whose findspot is not specified) for seals and three molds for *stūpas*.

⁹⁷ Six copper-alloy votive tablet molds were recovered from the *Intan* wreck: see Michael Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation of the 10th Century “Intan Shipwreck”* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002), 43–46.

⁹⁸ These include four seals recalling types found in the Malay Peninsula, one that remains unparalleled, as well as a weathered one attested on another mold bearing central Javanese features: see Desoutter, *Printing the Faith*, 158.

⁹⁹ See Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation*, 45. Skilling has persuasively argued that clay tablets were not “souvenirs” but were printed during rituals to produce icons and generate merit, and that the bronze molds could travel, probably with religious masters. Still, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that some tablets, for a reason or another, might have travelled along with human agents.

¹⁰⁰ Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation*, 42.

¹⁰¹ The mold is difficult to date, however, Desoutter attributes its production to the Pāla empire period, between the 8th and the 12th centuries: see Desoutter, *Printing the Faith*, 129.

¹⁰² Desoutter, *Printing the Faith*, 128–30.

¹⁰³ See Mechling, *Buddhist and Hindu Metal Images*, 174–79.

The finding of these types of artifacts in Java highlights the island’s full integration in the transregional maritime network of Buddhism that involved the transfer of artistic models and metallurgic technology and also included aspects of ritual practice, pilgrimage, and personal devotion.



Figure 9 (left). Mold with seated Lokanātha surrounded by a Siddhamātrkā inscription, Fogg Museum, Harvard, inv. no. 1994.126. Photo courtesy of Fogg Museum, <https://hvr.dart/o/210593>.

Figure 10 (right). Clay seal printed from a bronze mold, representing a triad with Jambhala at the bottom, now kept at the Museum Nasional in Jakarta. Photo adapted from W.F. Stutterheim, *Pictorial History of Civilization in Java* (Wetvevreden: Java Institute and G. Kolff & Co., 1927), fig. 57.

From Siddhamātrkā to Kawi and from Buddhism to Śaivism in Central Java

The disappearance of Siddhamātrkā script from Central Javanese royal edicts strongly suggests that important socio-political dynamics, most likely a conflict between dynasties or kings, were at play. In spite of the criticism rightfully voiced by subsequent scholarship, De Casparis’ historical reconstruction was taken as a point of departure by Aichele’s as well as my own reading of the Śivagrha inscription (see below), and related allegorical portions of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa*, and was complemented by Jordaan’s and Colless’ interpretation of the regional and supra-regional historical scenario.¹⁰⁴ Some subtle political metaphors

¹⁰⁴See Walther Aichele, “Vergessene Metaphern als Kriterien der Datierung des altjavanischen *Rāmāyaṇa*” [Forgotten metaphors as criteria for dating the old Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa*], *Oriens Extremus* 16, no. 2 (1969): 127–66; Andrea Acri, “On Birds, Ascetics, and Kings in Central Java: *Rāmāyaṇa Kakawin*, 24.95–126 and 25,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 166, no. 4 (2010): 475–506; Andrea Acri, “More on Birds, Ascetics, and Kings in Central Java: *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, 24.111–115 and 25.19–22,” in *From Lan̄kā Eastwards: The Rāmāyaṇa in the Literature and Visual Arts of Indonesia*, eds. Andrea Acri, Helen Creese, and Arlo Griffiths (Leiden: KITLV,

in the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* and portions of the Śivagr̥ha inscription, if read against the background of a series of established facts, support the scenario that a struggle for succession involving a Malayo-Sumatran (mainly Buddhist) and a Javanese (mainly Śaiva) line of kings (or pretendants to the throne) sanctioned the end of the sponsorship of Buddhism as state religion as well as large-scale Buddhist architecture in Central Java, concomitantly with the rise in sponsorship of Śaivism as the state religion, as documented by the construction of the large sanctuary of Loro Jonggrang in Prambanan as well as a myriad other smaller temples across Central Java and the encroaching of Buddhist structures by Śaiva ones at the Ratu Boko hillock.

Even more significantly, it is precisely the end of the first half of the 9th century that witnessed a sharp increase in the use of the Old Javanese language (instead of Sanskrit) and of the local “Kawi” script (instead of Siddhamāṭṛkā) in royal epigraphy as well as the shift to Śaiva invocations.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the substitution of Sanskrit with Old Javanese and the efflorescence of *kakavin* literature in mid-ninth century Java could then be regarded as a shift to the vernacular for representing epic allegories of local political power.

An emblematic case of such dramatic shift, also remarkable insofar that it constitutes the earliest epigraphic attestation of Old Javanese composed in meters instead of prose, is the aforementioned Śivagr̥ha inscription issued by King Rakai Kayuvaṇi Dyah Lokapāla in 856 CE (fig. 11), commemorating the death of his predecessor Rakai Pikatan and referring to the building of a Śaiva temple, which is believed to be Caṇḍi Śiva at Lara Jonggrang. This inscription, besides allusively referring to a dynastic struggle and elliptically mentioning Bālaputra, is also relevant to the issue discussed here since on its back side there appears to be an inscription in Siddhamāṭṛkā that has been completely effaced at an unspecified time in history.¹⁰⁶ I believe that the most compelling explanation for this intriguing fact is that the face of the inscription in Siddhamāṭṛkā was deliberately erased at the order of the same king—Lokapāla—who ordered the engraving of the new inscription in Kawi script on the other face, as a deliberate act of *damnatio memoriae* towards the pre-Rakai Pikatan Buddhist line of kings and the inauguration of a new political and religious (dis)course in Central Java.

2011), 53–91; Roy E. Jordaan and Brian Colless, *The Mahārājas of the Isles: The Śailendras and the Problem of Śrīvijaya* (Leiden: Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania, University of Leiden, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Jan Wisseman Christie, “Revisiting Early Mataram,” in *Fruits of Inspiration: Studies in Honour of Prof. J.G. de Casparis*, eds. Marijke J. Klokke and Karel R. van Kooij (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2001), 25–55, esp. 39.

¹⁰⁶ De Casparis, *Selected Inscriptions*, 281, notes that the type of “Pre-Nāgarī” (i.e., Siddhamāṭṛkā) used at the back of the stone is quite different from that known from other Śailendra inscriptions: “The ‘nailheads’ at the top of the *akṣaras* already became small horizontal strokes, which do not yet constitute a continuous line although some *akṣaras* almost have their typical Nāgarī forms. In a *ma* of (probably) line 12, the *e* is a real horizontal line at the top of the *akṣara*; in addition, the *akṣara* is characterized by a little loop, which is completely absent in the Çailendra [= Śailendra] inscriptions. Unfortunately, there are only four or five *akṣaras* which are sufficiently well preserved for a palaeographical analysis. They might permit the conclusion that the type of script represents a far more advanced stage in the development of PreNāgarī script than that used in the Çailendra inscriptions; it is, however, impossible to base any more positive conclusions on the few *akṣaras* that have remained visible.”



Figure 11. Kawi script-inscribed face of the Śivagrha inscription (the effaced Siddhamātṛkā script is on the backside), Museum Nasional, Jakarta (D28). Photo by Gunawan Kartapranata, Wikipedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shivagrha_Inscription.jpg.

Sandalwood-Flower Coins from Central Java

The thousands of gold and silver coins found in Central Java in the period from the 9th to the early 10th century bear the inscribed *mā* (for Sanskrit *māṣa*, a unit of measure equivalent to 2.4–2.5 grams) in Siddhamātṛkā script on their obverse side (fig. 12).¹⁰⁷ Unlike the character on the gold coins, that found on the silver alloy coins “degenerated very quickly into an unreadable pattern.” Interestingly, only the coins dating to the early or mid-9th century bear the character in undistorted form, while those dating to the second half of the 9th century

have an open top, and the upper half of the character leans to the left. By the early tenth century, however, the character had already begun to disintegrate into a loop-and-chevron pattern that was no longer recognizable as the *nāgarī* character of the early coins. [...] The speed with which the *nāgarī* character ‘*mā*’ disintegrated during the central Javanese period is probably partly a consequence of the fact that the *nāgarī* character was so different from that for ‘*mā*’ in the local *kawi* script that most people using the coins must have failed to recognize it as anything other than a pattern of loop and line. In addition, it appears that the minting of silver alloy coins was far less strictly

¹⁰⁷Jan Wisseman Christie, “Money and Its Uses in the Javanese States of the Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries A.D.,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39, no. 3 (1996): 243–86, esp. 252–53.

regulated during most of the central Javanese period than was that of gold coinage. Not only did the character on the obverse of these coins change radically within the period of less than a century, but so did the shape of the coin, its weight, and its silver content.¹⁰⁸ The use, in particular, of the same anvil—which bore the obverse character—for striking all denominations of coinage, reinforces the impression that the *nāgarī* ‘*mā*’ appeared to the users purely as an abstract pattern identifying the metal pieces as coins. This rather indiscriminate use of the dies and anvils also suggests that by the mid ninth century the minting of silver alloy coinage—unlike that of the gold coinage—was not carried out under strict supervision of the court. Their minting appears to have escaped into the markets, where these coins were most used.¹⁰⁹

Interesting observations include the fact that the Siddhamātrkā grapheme *mā* was not (or no longer) understood as an actual script by the users, who would have been only familiar with the local Kawi script; that its degeneration into an ornamental pattern of sort happened quickly from the mid-9th-century onwards; and that the minting of silver coins was not strictly supervised by the courts. In my opinion, it is reasonable to associate this sudden change in script and coinage standards from exactly the mid-9th-century with the political changes that occurred in that period, witnessing the abandonment of Siddhamātrkā script and Sanskrit for royal inscriptions and the shift from Buddhism to Śaivism. It seems likely that the prestige borne by the northeastern Indian script in Central Java rapidly dwindled as the result of a new political course, which may have disrupted the Buddhist-oriented links that had existed between Central Java and the Pāla domains.



Figure 12. Silver Sandalwood Coins of the Śailendra Dynasty, Central Java. Note the items on the top-left and bottom-left for the grapheme *mā*. Photo by Scott Semans, World Coins (CoinCoin.com), Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silver_coins_from_the_Shailendra_Dynasty_\(800-950_AD\)_-_Scott_Semans.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silver_coins_from_the_Shailendra_Dynasty_(800-950_AD)_-_Scott_Semans.jpg)).

¹⁰⁸ Christie, “Money and Its Uses in the Javanese States,” 253.

¹⁰⁹ Christie, “Money and Its Uses in the Javanese States,” 254.

Ornamental Signet Rings from Central Java

A corpus of objects that in many respects reflects the aforementioned dynamics—whereby Siddhamātrkā script was copied or created but not understood as an actual script by the makers and users of the inscribed objects—is constituted by gold signet rings showing “imitation” texts (often the word Śrī). These artifacts were discussed by Bosch¹¹⁰ (fig. 13) and, more recently, by Miksic¹¹¹ and Griffiths.¹¹² According to Griffiths, who describes this type of object as “seen quite commonly in collections of ancient Javanese rings,” the “imitated ‘texts’ we see on such rings do not constitute writing and can hence not be defined as inscriptions.”¹¹³ The use of this script suggests, just in the case of the coins discussed above, that it must have held a certain prestige and perhaps even aesthetic value. The fact that the rings are made of gold points to the high social status and financial capacity of the persons who wore them. Whether the imperfect or artificial rendering of the actual script is attributable to a lack of mastery by the engravers or the socio-political dynamics mentioned above, which caused the depletion of an active and quantitatively significant community of users proficient in the script, or both, is still a matter of speculation.

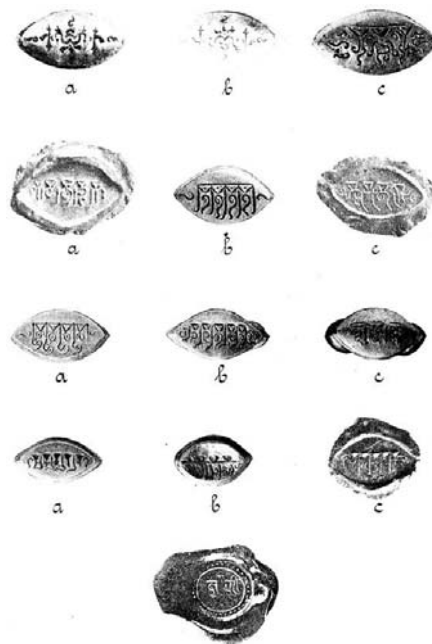


Figure 13. Signet-rings with Siddhamātrkā (ornamental) script, kept at Museum Nasional in Jakarta. Adapted from Bosch, “Gouden vingerringen,” figs. XII–XVI.

¹¹⁰ F.D.K. Bosch, “Gouden vingerringen uit het Hindoe-Javaansche tijdperk” [Hindu-Javanese-era gold finger rings], *Djawa* 7 (1927): 305–20 (esp. 316–20 and figs. XII–XVI).

¹¹¹ John Miksic, *Old Javanese Gold: The Hunter Thompson Collection at the Yale University Art Gallery*. Second revised and expanded edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 153–55.

¹¹² Arlo Griffiths, “The Epigraphical Collection of Museum Ranggawarsita in Semarang (Central Java, Indonesia),” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 168, no. 4 (2012): 472–96 (esp. 489–492, figs. 14–18).

¹¹³ Griffiths, “The Epigraphical Collection of Museum Ranggawarsita,” 489.

Northeastern Indian Scripts in 13th Century East Java: Kṛtanagara's Cosmopolitanism, Religious Innovation, and Transregional Connections

After a hiatus of nearly 400 years, during which “there is no dated or even dateable Nāgarī [and Siddhamāṭṛkā] inscription anywhere in Sri Lanka or South East Asia,”¹¹⁴ inscriptions in northeastern Indian scripts suddenly appeared in East Java in the second half of the 13th century. As far as Java is concerned, this hiatus may perhaps be explained in the light of several factors, namely the virtual obliteration of Central Javanese civilization due to a catastrophic event (or a series of catastrophic events, including one or more volcanic eruptions) and its shift to East Java in the second quarter of the 10th century; and the largely subsidiary role of Buddhism with respect to Śaivism, which became the State religion, from the middle of the 9th century; and the more “local” concerns of royal elites. As far as the whole of Southeast

¹¹⁴De Casparis, “Some Aspects,” 135. This timespan is probably overestimated, and can be reduced to about 350 years if we take into account the 913 CE bi-script, bi-lingual inscription from Sanur in Bali which, given its non-Buddhist character and non-Javanese provenance: see Willem F. Stutterheim, “A Newly Discovered Pre-Nāgarī Inscription on Bali,” *Acta Orientalia* 12 (1934): 126–32. Witness also the late 9th-century inscriptions by Yaśovarman in the Khmer domains (where the king vaunted himself for his prowess in script): Dominic Goodall, “What Information Can be Gleaned from Cambodian Inscriptions about Practices Relating to the Transmission of Sanskrit Literature?,” in *Indic Manuscript Cultures through the Ages: Material, Textual, and Historical Investigations*, eds. Vincenzo Vergiani, Daniele Cuneo, and Camillo A. Formigatti (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 132–60, esp. 146–47; on the official script change that he promoted during his reign, see Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, “Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d’empire et bornes sacrées. Conformité et spécificité des stèles digraphiques khmères de la région de Vat Phu” [The Yaśodharāśramas, markers of empire and sacred milestones. Conformity and specificity of Khmer digraphic stelae from the Vat Phu region], *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 97–98 (2010–2011): 331–55, esp. 341–42. A Pāla sculpture bearing a *ye dharmāḥ* inscription in Siddhamāṭṛkā dateable to the period from the 9th to the 12th century was discovered in Ayutthaya: see George Cœdès, “Note sur une stèle indienne d’époque Pāla découverte à Ayudhyā (Siam)” [Notes on an Indian stela of the Pāla period discovered in Ayudhyā (Siam)], *Artibus Asiae* 22, no. 1–2 (1959), 9–14. A handful of Nāgarī inscriptions from Sumatra, as well as the script Sanskrit inscription from Karimun Besar island, can be tentatively dated to the 13th century (probably the second half: see Arlo Griffiths, “Inscriptions of Sumatra, III: The Padang Lawas Corpus Studied along with Inscriptions from Sorik Merapi (North Sumatra) and Muara Takus (Riau),” in *History of Padang Lawas, North Sumatra. II: Societies of Padang Lawas (9th c.–13th c.)*, ed. Daniel Perret (Paris: Association Archipel, 2014), 211–62, esp. 228–31, 236–37, figs. 7, 8, 16, 17), and are therefore nearly contemporary with the inscriptions found in East Java. It is very likely, however, that Siddhamāṭṛkā was actively used in Sumatra and/or Kedah in the Malay Peninsula at least two centuries before, in the early 11th century, in the Buddhist circles of the great master Suvarṇadvīpīya Dharmakīrti. For instance, according to Iain Sinclair (email dated 19 April 2023), the *Zhu Jiao Jueming Mingyi Lu* 諸教決定名義論 (Taishō 1658), containing a Siddhamāṭṛkā *varṇamālā* as well as Tantric material, was translated in 1002 and its author is credited as *Maitreya 慈氏, which is one of the names used by Suvarṇadvīpīya Dharmakīrti. The importance of this short text on syllables was stressed by the Buddhist monk Dānapāla to the emperor in 1002, at the expenses of the *Guhyasamājatantra*, whose importance the compilers of the catalogue nor Dānapāla seem to have been aware: see Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press), 129. Interestingly, Dānapāla was credited “to have studied various forms of scripts prevalent in the five regions of India, and also learned the scripts of Khotan, Śrīvijaya, and Java,” see Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 122.

Asia is concerned, one may invoke geopolitical upheavals such as the Cōḷa raids in the early 11th century as well as the decline of the Buddhist monasteries-cum-institutions of higher learning in northeastern India due to the Muslim invasions from the 11th century onwards as well as the rise of Islamic states in the region.

While this corpus of inscriptions using northeastern Indian scripts in East Java is very small in comparison to the hundreds of inscriptions in Kawi script found in the region, it is nonetheless important and rather unique in the whole of Southeast Asia, not the least because it tells something about the historical and religious dynamics of the period and especially the aspect of intra-Asian maritime mobility, on which this article focuses. The corpus, spanning inscribed bronze and stone statues as well as stone inscriptions, includes the following artifacts, all bearing inscriptions in Sanskrit (or Sanskrit and Old Javanese) and Nāgarī script (occasionally followed by Kawi, like the Cāmuṇḍī statue) or, like the Candi Jago statues, in a script classifiable as Proto-Bengali-cum-Proto-Maithili:¹¹⁵

1. A group consisting of a colossal Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara and smaller icons of bodhisattvas and female deities from Caṇḍi Jago (now kept in Museum Nasional in Jakarta¹¹⁶ and the British Museum in London¹¹⁷), each bearing in the top left and right sides (next to their halo) a label inscription identifying the deity (Figs. 14a–b, 15, 16a–g). The main group consists of the aforementioned Lokeśvara plus the attendant-deities Sudhanakumāra, Tārā, Hayagrīva, and Bhṛkuṭī, while the subsidiary group consists of Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Māmakī, Locanā, and Pāṇḍuravāsini,¹¹⁸ all dateable to approximately the second half of the 13th century—the period coinciding with the reign of Kṛtanagara. The statues that are not damaged¹¹⁹ bear inscriptions on either side of their aureole containing the word *bharāla* (for male deities) and *bharālī* (for female deities) followed by the name of the deity; the Amoghapāśa has two inscriptions on either side of the headdress, reading, from right to left, *bharāla* and *amitābha*, while on the back slab to either side of the aureole are the words *bharāla āryāmoghapāśa lokeśvara*.
2. Five bronze plaques of Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara and his retinue of twelve deities, measuring ca. 22 cm in height, 14 cm in width, and 4.1 cm in depth, inscribed on the back with the ye dharmāḥ formula followed by a dedication by Kṛtanagara, who is indicated as the donor and

¹¹⁵ See Iain Sinclair, “From Melayu to Thamel and Back: The Transmigration of the Eight-Armed Amoghapāśa,” in *The Creative South: Buddhist and Hindu Art in Mediaeval Maritime Asia*, eds. Andrea Acri and Peter Sharrock (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2002), 9–65, esp. 33. This identification is in contrast with all the previous identifications as Nāgarī.

¹¹⁶ See inv. no. 224a (Akṣobhya), 225a (Ratnasambhava), 248b (Pāṇḍuravāsini), 248a (Locanā), Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta.

¹¹⁷ See no. 1859, 1228.171, British Museum (Māmakī).

¹¹⁸ What may have been the remaining Jinas of the pentad of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala, i.e. Amoghasiddhi and Vairocana, are no longer extant, while Amitābha may have been represented by the figure found in Amoghapāśa’s headdress.

¹¹⁹ No inscription appears on the Tārā, whose outer nimbus has been damaged.

son and successor of Viṣṇuwardhana.¹²⁰ One plaque is now missing, while the other four are in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (TM-2014.517), the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden (RV-2630-1),¹²¹ the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (MIK II 233),¹²² and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2014.517) (figs. 17a–b).¹²³ While the text is identical in all the inscriptions, it was engraved separately in each plaque as the metal was solidifying.¹²⁴

3. A small number of inscriptions from Candi Singhasari, including the famous “dancing Bhairava” (now at the Ethnological Museum in Leiden) with the upper left corner of the back-slab inscribed with the words *cakra cakra* (the upper-right corner being missing due to damage); and two statues representing Mārīci and Tṛṇavindu, two of the Seven Seers, inscribed with the names of the figures (*bhagavān marīcimahārṣiḥ* and *bhagavān tṛṇavindumahārṣiḥ*) (figs. 18a–c). De Casparis notes that the inscriptions “are no doubt contemporary” with those on the Amoghapāśa plaques, yet “the script is somewhat different.”¹²⁵
4. A large statue of Cāmuṇḍī (*śi*), probably also hailing from Candi Singhasari or its surroundings and now kept at the Trowulan Museum in East Java, flanked by a small replica of the “dancing Bhairava” and the Gaṇapati from Singhasari, along with a rare depiction of Matsyendranātha.¹²⁶ On the back it bears a short inscription in Kawi script and Old Javanese, dated 1292 CE (the year of death of Kṛtanagara), opening with the Sanskrit invocation [*om nama*]*ś cāmuṇḍyai* in Nāgarī script¹²⁷ (fig. 19).

¹²⁰ See Krom, *Inleiding*, vol. 2, 131; J.S. Speyer, “Eene buddhistische inscriptie afkomstig van Java” [A Buddhist inscription from Java], *Verlagen en Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen* 4, no. 6 (1904): 138–44, 253–62; Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer and Marijke J. Klokke, eds., *Divine Bronze: Ancient Indonesian Bronzes from AD 600 to 1600* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), Pl. 62; Natasha Reichle, *Violence and Serenity: Late Buddhist Sculpture from Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 100; Ingrid S. Sundström, *The Iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Java. Volume 1: Text & Vol. 2: Catalogue* (PhD Dissertation, Leiden University, 2020), 138, Cat. pls. 200–3.

¹²¹ August J. Bernet Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art* (Amsterdam: van der Peet, 1959), pl. 258.

¹²² Volker Moeller, *Javanische Bronzen* [Javanese bronze] (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1985), 22–23, pl. 8b.

¹²³ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/636158>.

¹²⁴ Sundström, *The Iconography*, 138.

¹²⁵ De Casparis, “Some Aspects,” 135.

¹²⁶ Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, “Skulls, Fangs and Serpents: A New Development in East Javanese Iconography,” in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists Berlin, 31 August–4 September 1998*, ed. Wibke Lobo and Stefanie Reimann (Hull, Berlin: Centre for South-East Asian Studies and Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2000), 189–204, esp. 192.

¹²⁷ Louis-Charles Damais, “VI. Études javanaises: II. Le nom de la déité tantrique de 1214 Śaka” [VI. Javanese studies: II. The name of the Tantric deity of 1214 Śaka], *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 50, no. 2 (1962): 407–16.



Figure 14a (top). Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara, Candi Jago. Photo: Leiden University Library, KITLV 161112, public domain.

Figure 14b (bottom). Detail of the inscriptions on fig. 14a.



Figure 15. Māmakī, Candi Jago (now at the British Museum, London). Photo: British Museum, public domain (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 16a–g (from top to bottom). Details of the inscriptions on Sudhanakumāra (KITLV 161076), Bhṛkuṭī (collage of KITLV 00002a and 00002), Hayagrīva (KITLV 161069), Akṣobhya (KITLV 161085), Ratnasambhava (KITLV 161087), Locanā (OD-00007a), and Pāṇḍuravāsīnī (KITLV 161093), Candi Jago (now at Museum Nasional, Jakarta). Photos: Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library, public domain.



Figure 17a (left). Plaque of the Bodhisattva Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara (2014.517), East Java.
 Figure 17b (right). Detail of the inscription on the back of the statue Fig 17a.
 Photos: MET Museum, New York, public domain.

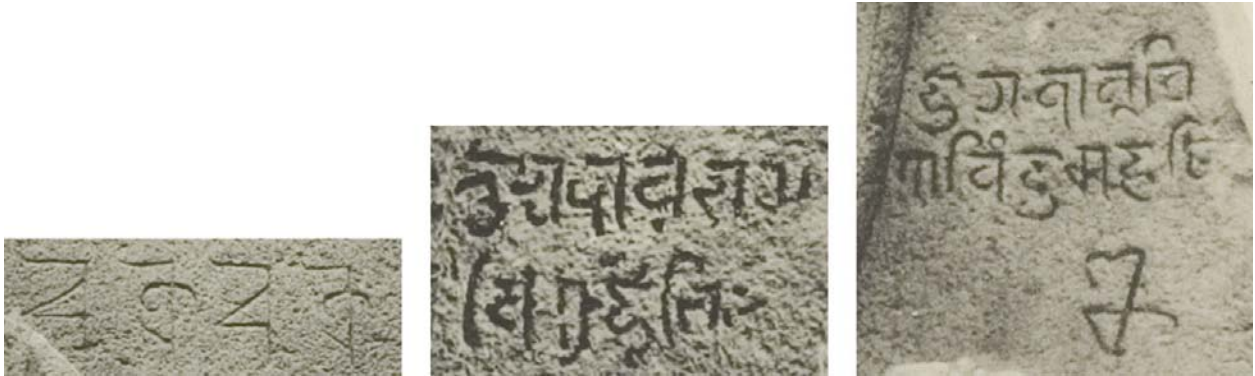


Figure 18a. Detail of the *cakra cakra* inscription on the top-left of the backslab of the Bhairava statue from Candi Singhasari, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, KITLV 37877.

Photo: Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library, public domain.

Figure 18b. Detail of the inscription on the top-right of the backslab of the Marīci statue from Candi Singhasari (KITLV 37933).

Photo: Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library, public domain.

Figure 18c. Detail of the inscription on the top-right of the backslab of the Tṛṇavindu statue from Candi Singhasari (KITLV 37934).

Photo: Digital Collections of the Leiden University Library, public domain.



Figure 19. Detail of the Nāgarī (top) and Kawi (bottom) inscription on the back of the Cāmuṇḍi statue from Singhasari, Museum Trowulan. Photo by Andrea Acri.

Some interesting facts can be mentioned: first, the use of Nāgarī in statues representing Śaiva rather than Buddhist deities, something which did not happen in the earlier Central Javanese statues known to us, and which might perhaps be linked to the eclecticism, or

outright syncretism, of Kṛtanagara.¹²⁸ Second, the use of both Nāgarī/Sanskrit and Kawi script/Old Javanese language in the Cāmuṇḍī inscription, which reserves the most prominent place—the invocation—to Nāgarī and Sanskrit, as if to imply some sort of linguistic hierarchy or “division of labor.” Third, the occurrence of the words *bharāla* (“god”) and *bharālī* (“goddess”) in the Proto-Bengali-cum-Proto-Maithili inscriptions on the Candi Jago statues, which suggests a possible northeastern Indian, and especially Newar, link. These forms are “Prakritisms” derived from the Sanskrit *bhāṭṭāra[-ka]*: compare the probable cognates *bahāla*, *bahāra*, and *bharāḍa*, all attested in Newar sources.¹²⁹ This link is strengthened by the fact that all the artifacts listed above are exquisitely crafted and display northeastern Indian stylistic influences alongside apparently local features, for instance, the ornamentation.¹³⁰ It seems, therefore, likely that the local artistic and iconographical canons were influenced by foreign (i.e., Newar and Eastern Indian) artisans employed by Kṛtanagara, who were also employed with the same function at the court of Kublai Khan (like the famous Arniko/Anige) and, a century earlier, at Angkor, as a result of a diaspora from the Subcontinent to the “peripheries” of the Buddhist world.¹³¹

Besides the palaeographic, linguistic, and art historical evidence mentioned above, there is (more circumstantial) evidence of transfers of texts, ritual systems, and icons from northeastern India as well as the Sino-Tibetan sphere to East Java during Kṛtanagara’s reign. Witness, for instance, the introduction of the “new” iconographic form of the eight-armed Amoghapāśa, which was “forgotten” from the end of the Central Javanese period and suddenly reappeared at Candi Jago during the late phase of Kṛtanagara’s reign. Sinclair has recently demonstrated that the earliest images originated within the former Malayu kingdom and were later introduced to insular Southeast Asia, East Asia, and eventually

¹²⁸ See Andrea Acri and Aleksandra Wenta, “A Buddhist Bhairava? Kṛtanagara’s Tantric Buddhism in Transregional Perspective,” *Entangled Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.13.2022.9653>.

¹²⁹ See Lokesh Chandra, “Remarks on Kuñjarakarna,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde*, no. 139 (1983): 363–65; Hudaya Kandahjaya, *A Study on the Origin and Significance of Borobudur* (PhD dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 2004), 68–69; Arlo Griffiths, “Inscriptions of Sumatra, III,” 242–43. The form *bharāḍa* is also attested in Old Javanese Buddhist texts like the *Saṅ Hyaṅ Kamahāyānikan* (or *Advayasādhana*, probably reflecting post-12th-century East Javanese developments) and *Kalpabuddha*, the 13th century Joko Dolog Sanskrit inscription issued by Kṛtanagara (compare the Old Malay-Sanskrit inscription of Padang Roco), and the 14th-century Buddhist poems *Kuñjarakarna* and *Deśavamaṇa*. Compare the Old Malay *brahala* and modern Malay *berhala*. Although the seal from Gumuk Klinting (East Java) discussed above is difficult to date with any certainty, it might predate the aforementioned attestations. Even so, since one of the bronze molds carrying a similar model was found in Malaysia, it is not impossible that the form *bharāla* never gained a wide currency in Java, and might have been reintroduced to East Java at a later date.

¹³⁰ On the northeastern Indian artistic influence see in particular Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, “The Well-Known Javanese Statue in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, and Its Place in Javanese Sculpture,” *Artibus Asiae* 68, no. 2 (2008): 287–32, esp. 296–98.

¹³¹ See Ulrich von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 1981), 311; Kate O’Brien, “The Tale of Sudhana and Manoharā on Candi Jago: An Interpretation of a Series of Narrative Bas-Reliefs on a 13th-Century East Javanese Monument,” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, ed. Andrea Acri (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 275–320, esp. 317; Jean Filliozat, “Emigration of Indian Buddhists to Indo-China c. A.D. 1200,” in *Studies in Asian History: Proceedings of the Asian History Congress 1961*, ed. Kishori S. Lal (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 45–48, esp. 47.

Nepal, probably at the hands of Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna, while the latest icons were reintroduced from the subcontinent to East Java in the 13th century.¹³² While the *sādhana* composed by Śākyaśrī[bhadra]—who, like Vibhūticandra, reports to have encountered the same form of eight-armed Amoghapāśa at Bodhgaya—was identified as the direct source for the Viṣṇuvardhana memorial Amoghapāśa by Schoterman,¹³³ Sinclair has identified in the Bengali *paṇḍita* Gautamaśrī[bhadra] (fl. 1248–1255 CE) a more likely candidate. Gautamaśrī was active in Tibet, Nepal, and China between the early to mid-13th century, and at least 1279 CE, and is identified in Tibetan lineage texts as an expert in many Tantric texts and practices, including the *Kālacakra*, which he taught to Tibetan disciples and which were adopted by the subsequent Sakyapa tradition. In 1253 CE, a lama of the Sakyapa, Dampa Kundga'grags (*Dan-ba Guoshi*, 1230–1303 CE), who later became Kublai Khan's state preceptor, studied with Gautamaśrī in Tibet. The passage of this Buddhist scholar in the Malay Archipelago is attested by the Rañjana¹³⁴ inscription (formerly identified as Nāgarī) of Pasir Panjang found on the island of Karimun Besar, Riau archipelago in Sumatra (fig. 20).¹³⁵ The inscription, specifying his name, Mahāyāna affiliation, and title, might thus very well constitute an autograph by Gautamaśrī himself, or a member of his retinue.



Figure 20. Inscription of Pasir Panjang, Karimun Besar, Riau Islands, Sumatra. Photo adapted from Ian Caldwell and Ann A. Hazlewood, “The Holy Footprints of the Venerable Gautama: A New Translation of the Pasir Panjang Inscription,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 150, no. 3 (1994): 457–80.

¹³² See Iain Sinclair, “From Melayu to Thamel and Back.”

¹³³ See Jan A. Schoterman, “A Surviving Amoghapāśa *Sādhana*: Its Relation to the Five Main Statues of Candi Jago,” in *Ancient Indonesian Sculpture*, eds. Marijke J. Klokke and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), 154–77.

¹³⁴ For a visual example of this script, see the tables in Anshuman Pandey, “Preliminary proposal to encode Ranjana in Unicode,” *Unicode*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2023/23028-ranjana.pdf>.

¹³⁵ See Iain Sinclair, “New Light on the Karimun Besar Inscription (Prasasti Pasir Panjang) and the Learned Man from Gaur,” *NSC Highlights* 11 (December 2018–February 2019): 16–17.

Analogous examples of the introduction to East Java of new or “forgotten” icons are the Mañjuśrī Arapacana from Candi Jago as well as the colossal Mahākāla of Padang Roco, previously believed to be a “Bhairava” associated with the Javano-Sumatran King Ādityavarman but recently identified as a Mahākāla transferred from East Java by Kṛtanagara, whose prototypes may be found in the Nepalese and Sino-Tibetan tradition.¹³⁶ In the light of the above, De Casparis’ qualification of the inscriptions “unexpectedly” appearing on East Javanese statues traceable to Kṛtanagara’s reign as a “late revival of Nāgarī script in East Java” forming a local continuation of the “early Nāgarī” script used in Central Java up to the 9th century seems speculative and ultimately untenable.¹³⁷ In the light of our knowledge of the historical, geopolitical, and religious landscape of the period in East Java and, indeed, the rest of Buddhist Asia, the use of northeastern Indian scripts outside of their “homeland” strikes one as sudden but not unexpected. Rather, I regard the reintroduction—rather than alleged autochthonous “revival”—of Nāgarī and other northeastern Indian scripts to Java as diagnostic of Kṛtanagara’s remarkably cosmopolitan outlook and his eagerness to revive Buddhism¹³⁸ (alongside Śaivism) and introduce new Tantric Buddhist ritual systems to the court while being personally initiated into them. The iconography of the artistic production of Kṛtanagara’s time reveals a clear affiliation with transgressive Tantric currents and an emphasis on “State protection Buddhism” of the kind that was widespread in that period across Asia and, more importantly, followed by his arch-enemy Kublai Khan who unsuccessfully attempted to invade East Java.¹³⁹ Thus, while the northeastern Indian scripts may have been perceived as “fashionable” by Kṛtanagara and his entourage it is not to be excluded that they were used “by default” by foreign artists who would have considered it natural to write labels in the scripts they mastered.

Who were the vectors of such innovations? I argue that the answer may be sought by investigating the transregional networks of Tantric Buddhist masters who plied the overland and maritime routes connecting the centers of political power and Buddhism in southeastern Asia. Unfavorable socio-political developments—most notably the Turkish invasions and the demise of the Sena dynasty in northeastern India—resulted in the decline of Buddhism and, in particular, of the once flourishing monastic institutions of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla in northeastern India from the 12th century. This triggered an exodus of Buddhist masters, scholars, and artisans, from northeastern India and Nepal to seek sponsorship in Tibetan,

¹³⁶See Acri and Wenta, “A Buddhist Bhairava?” and Iain Sinclair, “Vajramahākāla and the *Śaivasangata* Rulers of Dharmāśraya and Siṅhasāri,” *Entangled Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.13.2022.9678>.

¹³⁷See De Casparis, *Indonesian Palaeography*, 61 (where he describes the script of the Amoghapāśa metal plaque as showing “greater affinity with the script of the Caulukyās [*śi*] of Gujarat of the thirteenth century, such as that of the inscriptions of Bhīmadeva II, from which it differs, however, in some important details;” and 62–63: “As this script cannot apparently be related to that of any contemporary or near-contemporary inscriptions in South Asia one wonders whether it ought not to be regarded as a continuation of the early Nāgarī script in Java. [...] The present writer is well aware that renewed contacts with northern India in this period are reflected in new influences in religion and iconography, but these do not necessarily entail similar influences in writing.”

¹³⁸Note that Candi Jago, built during Kṛtanagara’s reign, is the first large Buddhist monument to have been built in Java since the end of the Central Javanese period.

¹³⁹See Acri and Wenta, “A Buddhist Bhairava?”

Southeast Asian, and East Asian courts, thereby influencing the local religious and artistic canons. Masters like Gautamaśrī would have been prime vectors for the transmission of the Tantric systems adhered to by Kṛtanagara and Kublai Khan. The Karimun inscription mentioned above was found in a region removed from both East Java, northeastern India, and China but which was strategic for maritime traffic and constituted an almost obligatory passage for travelers—like Gautamaśrī—on the way to (or back from) China; and it seems hardly possible that Gautamaśrī himself, or at least some members of his retinue, did not get the opportunity to spend some time in East Java, which by his time constituted a major political and religious powerhouse under Kṛtanagara’s dominion.

Conclusion

While much ink has been spilled on instances of the use of northeastern Indian scripts in epigraphic documents from Southeast Asia, the investigation of these vestiges as reflecting a transregional and coherent phenomenon shaped by religious as well as political and diplomatic dynamics, especially from the point of view of maritime connectivity, has seldom if ever been undertaken. This article has sought to fit together into a coherent narrative the disparate epigraphic material that has survived to the present from the island of Java, contextualizing it against a wider historical—both local and trans-local—background and discussing the interrelationship between languages, scripts, religions, and politics in Java and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis and the Buddhist world from ca. the 8th to the 13th century CE. In so doing, it has tried to answer, albeit in a preliminary manner, questions concerning foreign vis-à-vis local agency and audience as well as transregional connectivity.

Asking whether the use of northeastern Indian scripts can tell us something about the circulation of Sanskritic Buddhism via maritime networks, the article has argued that the quick spread of varieties of Mahāyāna Buddhist Tantra from the Subcontinent to Java and East Asia during a “first wave” from the 8th to the 9th century appears to have occurred in parallel with the diffusion of Siddhamātṛkā script in those locales; and that a “second wave” of Tantric Buddhism linking the Indo-Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist world is associated with Nāgarī and Proto-Bengali/Gauḍī script in East Java. While the “first wave” was anchored to the Nālandā-driven Sanskritic Buddhist tradition that circulated through monastic agents linking northeastern India, Sri Lanka, Java, and China, the “second wave” was characterized by a diaspora of masters as well as artisans abandoning the declining northeastern Indian centers of Buddhism to seek fortunes in Tibet, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. Prominent masters of their time were employed as ritual specialists at the court of Kublai Khan and, arguably, Kṛtanagara too—the two rulers being arch-enemies whose expansionistic and imperialistic agendas clashed shortly before their demise at the end of the 13th century.

A consideration that could be made in association with both “waves” or periods in which northeastern Indian scripts were used in Java is that only a minority of individuals may have utilized these scripts and their comprehension among the local populace (who,

on the other hand, may have grasped the Kawi script) most likely was not extensive, as also suggested by the “degeneration” of the Siddhamātrkā script or its transformation into an ornamental motif on coins and rings. Many people may have been unable to even distinguish whether an inscription was a dedicatory text or a *dhāraṇī*. This raises questions about the status of Buddhism as a religion associated with the political elites, which, unlike Śaivism, may not have garnered extensive support among the populace.

For reasons of space as well as thematic focus regarding the agenda of the conference and the special issue stemming from it, the question of paleography has been set aside here (see fig. 21 for a table drawn by Damais containing examples of letters from Central and East Javanese inscriptions). A deeper and more comprehensive study must necessarily take into account a quantitatively greater and qualitatively better—in terms of reproductions and access to original artifacts whenever possible—range of material as well as a chronologically and geographically wider corpus of sources. This desideratum might perhaps one day be fulfilled by a dedicated digital humanities project that will allow us to visualize relevant geotagged artifacts and the networks linking them across vast geographical distances.

E. SIDDHAMĀTRKĀ

ta pa ma ra sa

JAWA Kalasan 778	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮
" Kēlurak 782	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮
" Bronze c. VIII ^{cs}	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	-
" " c. VIII ^{cs}	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	-
" " c. VIII ^{cs}	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	-
" " c. VIII ^{cs}	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	-
BALI Samur 914	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮
JAWA Kṛtanagara c. 1290	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮
" Kṛtanagara c. 1290	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮
" Čandi Jago c. XIII ^{cs}	𑀓	𑀣	𑀭	𑀲	𑀮

Figure 21. Table with different letters in northeastern Indian scripts drawn by Damais from stone inscriptions, stone statues, and bronze statues. Photo adapted from Louis-Charles Damais, “Les écritures d’origine indienne en Indonésie et dans le Sud-Est Asiatique continental” [Indian scripts in Indonesia and continental Southeast Asia], *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises* 30, no. 4 (1955): 365–82, fig. 15.

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