

THE IDEA OF THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA*

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The idea of the historical Buddha is one of the most basic and familiar in the field of Buddhist studies, but also one of the most confusing and problematic. On one hand, the Buddha is universally agreed to have lived; but, on the other, more than two centuries of scholarship have failed to establish anything about him. We are thus left with the rather strange proposition that Buddhism was founded by a historical figure who has not been linked to any historical facts, an idea that would seem decidedly unempirical, and only dubiously coherent. Stuck in this awkward situation, scholars have rarely been able to avoid the temptation to offer some suggestion as to what was likely, or ‘must’ have been, true about him. By the time they get done, we end up with a flesh and blood person – widely considered to be one of the greatest human beings ever to have lived – conjured up from little more than fancy. Here I would like to try to shed some light on this problem by reviewing the scholarship that introduced and sustained the idea of the historical Buddha. Though several valuable studies of this work have already appeared, they generally depict the process as one of progressive, ultimately successful, discovery. What I will try to suggest is that, if we pay close attention, it turns out that no discovery was actually made, and that no basis for treating the Buddha as a historical figure has yet been identified.

Although the Western encounter with Buddhism goes back centuries, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, hardly anything was actually known, and the question of Buddhism’s origin remained completely open. Many authors felt comfortable treating the Buddha as historical, but opinions varied widely. The idea that the Buddha was from Africa, proposed by Engelbert Kaempfer in the early eighteenth century, retained sufficient currency that Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, the leading French

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authority, devoted an article to refuting it in 1819.¹ In 1823, Julius Klaproth argued against the still popular identification of the Buddha and the Norse god Odin, which had been proposed by William Jones in 1788.² In 1825, Horace Hayman Wilson, arguably the leading British authority, proposed a version of the so-called two-Buddha theory, according to which there was an elder Buddha who lived between the tenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E., and a younger one who lived in the sixth or seventh. He also suggested that Buddhism may have been brought to India from Central Asia.³ At the highest level of scholarship, the Buddha's historicity was regarded as something that remained to be established. Rémusat, though sympathetic to the idea that the Buddha was historical, suggested in his 1819 article that it was necessary to avoid "prejudging the question one could raise on the reality of the historical existence of the figure called Buddha."⁴ In his 1819 Sanskrit dictionary, Wilson defined Śākyamuni as "the real or supposed founder of the *Baud'dha* [i.e., Buddhist] religion" (s.v.). In 1827 Henry Colebrooke, the other leading British authority, similarly referred to the Buddha noncommittally as the "reputed author of the *sūtras*" (558).

The development that began to focus scholarly inquiry was Brian Houghton Hodgson's discovery of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal in 1822, which he first discussed in print in 1828.⁵ Recent scholarship has focused mainly on the fact that Hodgson sent shipments of these manuscripts to Eugène Burnouf, who used them as the basis for his *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, published in 1844, which some have considered the main publication that established the Buddha

¹ Kaempfer 1727: 1.35–39, Rémusat 1819; cf. Jones 1788: 352–353, Lopez 2013: 133–139, 151–157.

² Klaproth 1823: 144 (this passage occurs in the "Leben des Budd'a" chapter appended to the end of the text, paginated separately), Jones 1788: 350; cf. Lopez 2013: 151–152, 179.

³ Wilson 1825a: 83–84, 1825b: 106–110. For the identification of Wilson as the author of 1825b, published anonymously, see Wilson 1856: 247. Eugène Burnouf (1827) translated this article into French for the *Journal Asiatique*. See also Crawford (1830: 2.81–85), where the author transcribes notes he received from Wilson on this issue. Cf. Lopez 2013: 216. On the two-Buddha theory in general, see App 2009: 56–58, Lopez 2013: 143–152.

⁴ Rémusat 1819: 629; see also 631.

⁵ Hodgson 1828. Hodgson states that his 1828 paper was initially written in 1825 (1841: preface). For 1822 as the date of Hodgson's discovery, see Burnouf 1844: 578.

as a historical figure. As we shall see, however, the actual argument Burnouf makes is not based on anything he found in Hodgson's texts, but on two facts that Hodgson himself reported in 1828, which occupied scholarly discussion through the 1830s: first, that Nepalese texts report that Buddhism was revealed consecutively, over a period of aeons, by seven Buddhas: Vipaśyin, Śikhin, Viśvabhū, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, and Śākyamuni; and, second, that these texts claim to preserve the teachings of Śākyamuni, but not those of any of the earlier Buddhas.⁶

Versions of the tradition of former Buddhas had already been reported by several authors, going back to at least the seventeenth century, but the fact that it was found in Hodgson's Sanskrit texts, which were presumed to be significantly older and more authentic than anything previously available, pushed it to the fore as the central piece of evidence on Buddhism's origin. Hodgson tentatively treated the tradition as historical, writing that "it has not occurred to me at present to doubt the historical existence of Sākya's six predecessors"; "Sākya is the *last* of the seven *genuine Buddhas*." Trying to make sense of why Buddhist scriptures depict Śākyamuni, but not any of the other Buddhas, as their speaker, he suggested that Śākyamuni was "to Buddhism what Vyāsa [was] to Brahmanism," in that he "collected and secured ... the doctrines taught by his predecessors, and himself."⁷ Wilson, maintaining the suspicion he expressed in his Sanskrit dictionary, and evidently having given up his two-Buddha theory, was more skeptical, suggesting in an article published in the same issue of the same journal, of which he was the editor,

⁶ Hodgson 1828: 422, 443–445, 447. I have normalized the spelling of the Buddhas' names.

⁷ Hodgson 1828: 422, 445, his emphasis. Hodgson's views changed over the years in response to the work of other scholars. In a revised version of his 1828 article published in 1841, he changed his statement that "it has not occurred to me at present to doubt the historical existence of Sākya's six predecessors" to "it has frequently occurred to me to doubt the historical existence of Sākya's six predecessors" (1841: 46). He also parenthetically adds "if not also the first and only" to his assertion that Śākyamuni was the last of the seven Buddhas (1841: 17). In an 1874 version of the article, he states, "I think it may be safely asserted that all of the so-called mortal Buddhas save the last are mythological shadows," and that "Sākya Sinha ... must be concluded to be the founder of this creed" (1874: 12, 32).

that it is “very questionable” “how many of these Buddhas are real personages” and that “Śākya, as identifiable with Gautama, was, possibly, the founder of the *Bauddha* system as it now exists” (1828: 455–456). Addressing the specific question of Gautama Buddha in an 1832 article, he again suggested that he could be either “historical or fictitious” (1832b: 256).

Having apparently moved past the doubts expressed in his 1819 article, Rémusat had suggested in 1821 that the *Wakan sansai zue*, an early eighteenth-century Japanese encyclopedia that provided dates for each of the so-called Chan patriarchs going back to the Buddha, could make it possible to date Śākyamuni’s death to 950 B.C.E. (9). When Hodgson’s initial notices appeared, Rémusat took a strong interest in the former Buddhas and addressed the issue in several publications before his untimely death in 1832. In one, he suggests that there may have been a “few men who preceded [the Buddha] in the career of deification” and in another he simply repeats Hodgson’s suggestion that the Buddha was the last of the seven human Buddhas and that he was like Buddhism’s Vyāsa.⁸ In his translation of Faxian’s *Fo guo ji*, published posthumously in 1836, he shifts perspective and suggests that Śākyamuni was “the sole real type after whom, according to general belief, these imaginary personages [i.e., the previous Buddhas] were created by an afterthought, and referred to mythological times.”⁹

In his *First Twenty Chapters of the Mahawanso*, George Turnour, the leading British scholar in what is now Sri Lanka, argued that a basic distinction could be drawn between Gautama and the Buddhas who preceded him. Pointing out that, according to Buddhist belief, before a Buddha arises in the world, “not only does the religion of each preceding [Buddha] become extinct, but the recollection and record of all preceding events are also lost,” he suggested that “by this fortunate fiction, a limitation has been made to the mystification in which the buddhistical creed has involved all the historical data, contained in its literature, *anterior to*

⁸ Rémusat 1831c: 264, 1843b: 153.

⁹ Rémusat et al. 1836: 187, n. 35, trans. in Laidlay 1848: 179, n. 35; cf. Rémusat et al. 1836: 194–197, n. 8, Laidlay 1848: 185–187, n. 4. Rémusat also addresses the seven Buddhas, e.g., in 1831a, 1831b: 522–523, and 1843a: 389–390.

the advent of Gótomo.” Buddhist traditions about the first six Buddhas “are based on *his* revelation,” and can thus be ignored as likely mythical, but traditions concerning Gautama himself, qua revealer, can be treated as historical. Though the stories of Gautama and his disciples possess “glaring absurdities and gross superstitions,” Turnour argued, “these defects ... in no degree prejudice” the data they contain “in as far as they subserve the ... ends of history.”¹⁰ Although this was an elegant solution, Turnour continued to have doubts. In his “Páli Buddhistical Annals,” published serially in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1837 and 1838, he suggested that it might be possible to decide the important question of whether or not Kāśyapa Buddha, and perhaps some of the other Buddhas before him, were historical with evidence from non-Buddhist texts (1838: 687). In 1836, Turnour’s associate, Jonathan Forbes, contributed an article to the same journal in which he tried to establish dates for each of the last four Buddhas, suggesting 3101 B.C.E. for the death of Krakucchanda, 2099 for Kanakamuni, 1014 for Kāśyapa, and 543 for Gautama.¹¹ In an essay written in the mid-thirties and published as an appendix to Forbes’s 1840 *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, Turnour commented that “in the course of his inquiries into the portion of the history of Ceylon ... connected with the Budhas of this [*kalpa*], who preceded Gautama (which I left wholly untouched), [Forbes] has ascertained that many satisfactory data ... may yet be gleaned from the native annals.”¹²

While Burnouf’s 1844 *Introduction* has received significant attention in recent years, with renewed interest resulting from Donald Lopez’s studies and co-translation, with Katia Buffetrille, of the text into English,

¹⁰ Turnour 1836: 1–lii, his emphasis. Turnour states that as far as he is aware this “important point” has “not been noticed by any other writer” (1836: 1). On the importance of Turnour’s insight, see also Laidlay 1848: 187–188.

¹¹ See also Forbes 1840: 2.195–196, 203, where the author presents the same dates.

¹² Turnour 1840: 325. Belief, or at least interest, in the previous Buddhas persisted for some time among British scholars in Sri Lanka. See, e.g., Knighton 1845: 66–67, Gogerly 1847: 264–265, Hardy 1853: 86–88, 1863: 140–142, 1866: 198–201. See also note 27. Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and Isaak Jacob Schmidt also addressed the previous Buddhas, though they do not seem to have made a significant contribution to the discussion. See, e.g., Schmidt 1830: 1.105–110, 2.242–243 and 1833 and Csoma de Kőrös 1838: 143, 1839: 414–415. For Csoma’s views, see also Csoma de Kőrös 1834.

so far as I am aware no one has yet discussed the actual argument he makes for the Buddha's historicity. Because it is so closely bound up with the question of the previous Buddhas, it has perhaps been easy to overlook:

I have attributed the origin of these books to Śākyamuni, that is to say, to the last of the seven human buddhas whose memory the tradition has preserved. On this point I have only reproduced the opinion of the Nepalese, who attribute the composition or the redaction of their sacred books to the last of the buddhas they recognize. The date of these books is thus placed in historical time and is shielded from all uncertainties and all doubts that could arise if the tradition had linked it to the existence of this or that of the ancient buddhas who, if they ever existed, will escape the grasp of the historical critic for a long time to come... It is ... an advantage to be spared from having to examine ... the question of knowing when the six buddhas who, so to speak, preceded Śākyamuni existed, or from having to demonstrate, as capable critics think, that these buddhas owe their existence to the desire that the last one would have had to ensure for his doctrine the merit of a tradition consecrated by a long series of ancient sages... I do not wish to say by this that we have to reject ... everything that the Buddhist books recount about these buddhas previous to Śākya... I wish solely to establish that the question of the origin of the Buddhist books must remain separate from that of the ancient buddhas; and I wish to record, in the name of the critic, the testimony of the Nepalese, which does not permit tracing back beyond the last buddha any of the works that have preserved the Buddhist doctrines for us.¹³

Rather than presenting a new discovery or argument based on his study of Hodgson's texts, Burnouf continues the speculation on the seven Buddhas that had occupied scholars for the past decade and a half. Indeed, the great scholar seems to have little to add to the discussion. The idea that the tradition of the previous Buddhas represents an attempt to project Buddhist tradition into mythical antiquity had already been suggested by

¹³ Burnouf 1844: 43–44, trans. in Buffetrille and Lopez 2010: 91–92. Burnouf had already addressed the question of the historical Buddha or Buddhas in previous publications. In his *Essai sur le Pali*, co-authored with Christian Lassen, he argued in support of a version of the two-Buddha theory. Following Rémusat 1821, he accepted a date of 950 for the death of Śākyamuni, but suggested that the Buddha known to Pali sources was a different figure who died in 543 (Burnouf and Lassen 1826: 49–52; cf. Burnouf 1827: 143–144, n. 1). He abandoned this theory, and Rémusat's date of 950, in later publications (1833–1834: 2.22–23, 3.202–203; 1837: 2.356). See also the following note.

Rémusat.¹⁴ The idea that Buddhist texts' identification of Śākyamuni or Gautama, rather than any of the previous Buddhas, as their speaker separates the question of his historicity from theirs would seem to be borrowed from Turnour. In defense of the central point of treating Śākyamuni as historical, which Rémusat and Turnour glossed over, Burnouf states somewhat anticlimactically that he has merely "reproduced the opinion of the Nepalese," presenting traditional belief as historical fact. On the basis of the materials he had, Burnouf could equally well have opined that the Buddha was ahistorical, or that the matter remained undecided. His depiction of the Buddha as a historical figure represented no more than his preferred opinion.

In the years following Burnouf's work, concern for the previous Buddhas faded into the background and scholarly focus shifted to the final Buddha. Burnouf's presentation of Indian Buddhism so far eclipsed everything that had appeared before it that some were willing to accept the Buddha's historicity on his authority. Wilson, however, famously remained unconvinced. In his "On Buddha and Buddhism," delivered in 1854 and published in 1856, he lauded Burnouf's accomplishments but expressed serious reservations about the Buddha's historicity.¹⁵ He suggested that while "it does not seem improbable that an individual ...

¹⁴ Burnouf presented this idea already in his review of Edward Upham's *The Mahāvansi* (1833–1834: 3.202–203; but cf. 2.22), which was published prior to Rémusat's translation of the *Fo guo ji*. He was in contact with Rémusat until the time of his death, however, and almost surely saw Rémusat's translation before it was published, mentioning its progress in personal letters in 1827 and 1834 (Burnouf 1891: 55, 183). As we have seen, Burnouf attributes the idea to "capable critics." Since Rémusat similarly attributes the idea to "general belief," however, there is some mystery as to who first advocated it.

¹⁵ Wilson and Burnouf knew and greatly admired each other. Burnouf met and visited Wilson at his home in 1835. In letters to his wife, he describes Wilson in very lofty terms, going so far as to describe himself as being "visibly moved" when he first entered Wilson's study to meet him (Burnouf 1891: 197). In an 1850 letter to Wilson, he twice addresses him as "illustre maître," and writes that no one in Europe can "pronounce the name of India without having consulted you" (Burnouf 1891: 417). For Burnouf's description of a rather disastrous dinner at Wilson's house in Oxford, however, see Burnouf 1891: 204–208. Of Burnouf, Wilson writes that he "accomplished more than any other scholar, more than it would seem possible for any human ability and industry to have achieved, [and] it is to be deeply and for ever regretted that his life was not spared to have effected all he had intended" (Wilson 1856: 229).

should have set up a school of his own in opposition to the Brahmanical monopoly ... about six centuries before Christ” it is nevertheless “very problematical whether any such person as Sákya Sinha, or Sákya Muni, or Sramana Gautama, ever actually existed.” He also suggested that “it seems not impossible, after all, that Sákya Muni is an unreal being, and that all that is related of him is as much a fiction as is that of his preceding migrations, and the miracles that attended his birth, his life, and his departure” (Wilson 1856: 247–248). While Wilson’s perspective is now generally treated as an example of extreme skepticism, no one had yet brought anything to light to assuage the doubts he had been expressing for almost the past forty years. Wilson’s own, somewhat more prosaic, suggestion was that the emergence of Buddhism could be attributed to “a person, or what is more likely, persons of various castes,” about whom we know little or nothing (248).

In the first volume of his *Die Religion des Buddha*, published in 1857, Carl Friedrich Koeppen explicitly rejected Wilson’s doubts and made a novel attempt to establish the Buddha’s existence by an a priori route, suggesting that evidence was not necessary. Presenting an early version of what would become one of the main arguments for the Buddha’s historicity, he argued that “the emergence of an order, a sect, a church without a founder is inconceivable, and it is almost as inconceivable that the memory of this founder could ever go completely out in the circle of his followers and adherents” (1857: 73). Robert Spence Hardy, who in 1850 and 1853 published two of the day’s most influential monographs advocating the idea of the historical Buddha, took Wilson’s criticisms to heart. In his 1866 *Legends and Theories of the Buddhists*, he quotes Wilson’s article at length and softens his own stance considerably, suggesting that “neither the age, nor even the individual existence, of Buddha, is established beyond all controversy.”¹⁶ In his *Christianity and Buddhism Compared*, published posthumously in 1874, he seems to give up the notion of the historical Buddha almost completely, suggesting that the Buddha is “a creature of the imagination alone, though formed, it may be, from the glimmerings of true tradition ... a phantom formed

¹⁶ Hardy 1866: xiii, 71–73; cf. 1863: 50–52.

from the brain of ascetics ... who note down dreams and attaching to them names, call their records history.”¹⁷

In his 1857 *Buddhism and Buddhist Pilgrims*, Max Müller treats Wilson’s doubts as legitimate, writing that “we know little ... of [Buddhism’s] first origin and spreading, because the canonical works on which we must chiefly rely for information belong to a much later period, and are strongly tinged with a legendary character. The very existence of such a being as Buddha ... has been doubted. But what can never be doubted is ... that Buddhism ... had its origin in India” (1857: 4–5). In his article “Buddhism,” published in 1862, two years after Wilson’s death, however, he discusses and dismisses Wilson’s concerns, and claims, without citing any evidence or reason, that “we may be satisfied that Buddhism ... had a real founder” and that “we have only to look at the works on ancient philosophy and religion published some thirty years ago, in order to perceive the immense progress that has been made in establishing the true historical character of the founder of Buddhism” (Müller [1862] 1867: 217–219, 222). Émile Senart famously argued in his *Essai sur la légende du Buddha*, published serially between 1873 and 1875, that the legend of the Buddha was a solar myth, and Hendrik Kern presented a similar theory in his monumental *Geschiedenis van het Budhisme in Indië*, published between 1882 and 1884.¹⁸

Overall, leading scholars in the decades following the publication of Burnouf’s work remained profoundly vexed by the question of the Buddha’s existence. The idea of the historical Buddha seemed realistic and made it possible to depict Buddhism in an interesting way, but many, perhaps most, leading scholars felt restrained by the lack of evidence. Over the preceding decades, scholars had penetrated the mists of time, traced the origin of Buddhism to India, located Buddhist scriptures, and discovered that they claimed to have been taught by an omniscient, or nearly omniscient, supernatural human, or semi-human, being. But this was the end of the road. Committing to a euhemerist interpretation of this

¹⁷ Hardy 1874: 35–36; cf. Harris 2006: 68.

¹⁸ For Senart’s views, see also Senart 1882, 1907. Jonathan Silk suggests that Kern’s *Geschiedenis* was originally published in 1881 and 1883 (2012: 126 and n. 3). For an interesting, more recent attempt to read the legend of the Buddha as myth, see Obeyesekere 1997.

supernatural Buddha, the only sort of Buddha known to even the earliest texts, required scholars to make a resolute leap beyond the point where the facts could take them. Defending his treatment of the Buddha as historical in his 1853 *Manual of Buddhism*, Hardy quotes Barthold Niebuhr as stating that “unless a boldness of divination, liable as it is to abuse, be permitted, all researches into the earlier history of nations must be abandoned” (139). Some scholars were willing to take part in this bold divination; others were not.

The two main scholars who established the Buddha’s historicity in scholarship were T.W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg. Both focused on Pali texts, which had come to be generally accepted as older than Hodgson’s Sanskrit texts, and used them to work up exciting depictions of the Buddha’s life and teaching. Rather than using their texts to justify treating the Buddha as historical, however, they took the Buddha’s historicity as a premise and used it as the basis for interpreting their texts as historical records. Though many found their presentations compelling, this approach left both scholars unable to respond to doubts about the Buddha’s historicity in more than somewhat embarrassing ways. In his influential 1878 *Encyclopædia Britannica* article “Buddhism,” Rhys Davids comments:

As late as the year 1854 the late Professor Wilson of Oxford read a paper before the Royal Asiatic Society of London in which he maintained that the supposed life of Buddha was a myth, and “Buddha himself merely an imaginary being.” No one, however, would now support this view; and it is admitted that, under the mass of miraculous tales which have been handed down regarding him, there is a basis of truth already sufficiently clear to render possible an intelligible history.¹⁹

Two things are noteworthy here. First, Rhys Davids, the day’s leading advocate of the idea of the historical Buddha, presents nothing more robust than an *ad populum* argument: We know that the Buddha lived because people accept that he did. Second, however, his claim that scholars agreed that the legends preserve a “basis of truth ... sufficiently clear to render possible an intelligible history” was not true. Though Wilson and Hardy had died, the latter’s *Christianity and Buddhism Compared*

¹⁹ Rhys Davids 1878: 425; cf. 1877: 16–17.

and Senart's *Essai sur la légende du Buddha* had just been published, and Kern would publish his *Geschiedenis*, where, like Senart, he would depict the Buddha as a myth, a few years later.²⁰

Though Oldenberg presents an in-depth discussion of the details of the legend of the Buddha, on the central question of his historical existence, in the first edition of his seminal *Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, published in 1881, when he was only twenty-six years old, he does no more than reiterate Koeppen's claim that evidence is unnecessary, stating that "Buddhism must have had a founder" and that the Buddha's "reality ... is a logical necessity [ein logisches Postulat], inasmuch as we see the reality of the Church founded by him."²¹ Though such reasoning may seem strange today, Oldenberg wrote during the heyday of the Great Man theory, which envisioned individual, heroic men as being responsible for all of the main developments in history. We see an amplified version of the same idea in Monier Monier-Williams' *Buddhism*, published at the end of the decade:

Buddhism is nothing without Buddha... No religion or religious system which has not emanated from some one heroic central personality, or in other words, which has not had a founder whose strongly marked personal character constituted the very life and soul of his teaching and the chief factor in its effectiveness, has ever had any chance of achieving world-wide acceptance, or ever spread far beyond the place of its origin (1889: 18).

In the second and third editions of his great work, apparently finding Rhys Davids' strategy preferable, Oldenberg omits his claim about the logical necessity of the Buddha's existence and instead asserts merely that it "currently seems generally accepted" that stories of the Buddha's life contain historical records (1890: 74, 1897: 82). In the three subsequent

²⁰ In a 1902 article, Rhys Davids treats the Pali *Mahāparinibbānasutta* as somehow constituting evidence for the Buddha's historicity and writes, "But this book had become unknown in India ... The few contemptuous references to the great reformer, found by the discoveries of Sanskrit literature in the medieval writings of the priests, are so vague that the eminent Sanskritist Horace Hayman Wilson believed him to be nothing more real than a sun-myth" (1902: 837). Rhys Davids would thus seem to endorse the view that the Buddha's historicity had not yet been discovered at the time Wilson wrote in the 1850s. Wilson in fact never suggested that the Buddha was a sun-myth; Rhys Davids conflates his view with those of Senart and Kern.

²¹ Oldenberg 1881: 73, 75, trans. in Hoey 1882: 72, 74.

editions published during his life, and the seventh, published posthumously, but containing an appendix with his final revisions, Oldenberg does not present any explicit argument for the Buddha's historicity, perhaps having concluded that it was no longer necessary.²²

Such is the work that established the Buddha's historical existence. From roughly this time, the Buddha's historicity has been regarded as settled fact, and scholarship on the Buddha has primarily involved attempts to determine what the available sources might be able to tell us about his life, teaching, and date. Despite the often impressive erudition that has gone into this work, however, it has not done anything to strengthen the initial presupposition of the Buddha's existence. If one presupposes that Agamemnon was historical, one can spend one's life sifting through the legends for potential evidence about him; if one does not, the effort is meaningless. In rare cases in which leading scholars have returned to the root question, they have continued to rely on versions of the nineteenth-century arguments we have already considered. We see this, for instance, in the work of arguably the three most influential twentieth-century advocates of the idea of historical Buddha in Western scholarship: E.J. Thomas, Étienne Lamotte, and André Bareau.

In his 1927 *Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, Thomas presented the most in-depth analysis of the legends of the Buddha's life published to that date. Though he believed firmly in the historical Buddha, he doubted whether any historical data could be located in the sources, and suggested that "historical criticism" is insufficient to "extract the thread of a credible story" (227). Addressing the question of the Buddha's historicity, he quotes Wilson's old suggestion that the Buddha may have been an "unreal being" and writes:

In the following pages an attempt will be made to distinguish the earliest accounts, but this does not touch the fundamental question. Is there a historical basis at all? It must be remembered that some recognised scholars have denied and still deny that the story of Buddha contains any record of historical events. We further have the undoubted fact that various

²² Oldenberg 1903, 1906, 1914, 1920. On the revision history of Oldenberg's text, see Edgerton 1959: 81, von Glasenapp 1959: 457–458.

well-known characters once accepted as historical are now consigned to legendary fiction, such as Dido of Carthage, Prester John, Pope Joan, and Sir John Mandeville. The reply to those who would treat Buddha in the same way is not to offer a series of syllogisms, and say, *therefore* the historical character is proved. The opponents must be challenged to produce a theory more credible... An indolent scepticism which will not take the trouble to offer some hypothesis more credible than the view which it discards does not come within the range of serious discussion (Thomas 1927: xvii–xviii).

For Thomas, rather than something that has been or can be proved, the existence of the historical Buddha is simply a realistic hypothesis. Though he suggests that we must accept this hypothesis unless we can provide a better one, a third option would simply be to acknowledge that we do not know how Buddhism originated. Later in the text, Thomas addresses the views of R. Otto Franke, perhaps the last noteworthy defender of Wilson's views, quoting his assertion that "naturally somebody (or somebodies) has (or have) created it, otherwise it would not be there. But who this somebody was, and whether there were not rather several somebodies, we have no knowledge." Thomas replies simply that "this however is not the generally accepted view, and for it to be accepted it would be necessary to go on and show that the theory that the records are all inventions ... is the more credible view."²³ Restating Rhys Davids' old *ad populum* argument, he adds only the somewhat strange suggestion that the Buddha's historicity is somehow supported by "the records," when in his own analysis he does not identify anything that he considers a record of historical fact.

Lamotte and Bareau's extensive studies, published a few decades later, represented a significant advance on Thomas' work and remain standard today. Though Lamotte insisted strongly on the Buddha's historicity, he concluded that isolating a core of historical fact from the various texts was impossible and that any attempt to do so would be "useless, and harmful to research" (1947: 48). Having found nothing that he thought could be presented as evidence, he ended up relying on a strong version

²³ Thomas 1927: 233–234, trans. of Franke 1915–1917: 1.455. For other publications on this issue by Franke, see the references in Thomas 1927: 234–235, n. 4 and also Franke 1914, 1915/1916.

of the old Great Man theory of Koeppen, Oldenberg, and Monier-Williams. In his 1958 *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, he writes that “Buddhism could not be explained unless we accept that it has its origin in the strong personality of its founder” and that it “could not be explained if it were not based on a personality powerful enough to give it the necessary impetus and to have marked it with its essential features which will persist throughout all history.”²⁴ What Lamotte means by “will persist throughout all history” seems to be clarified somewhat in his 1949 “La critique d’interprétation dans le bouddhisme,” where he rejects the notion that later Buddhist doctrine diverged from the teaching of the Buddha and states that he is “of the opinion that the Buddhist Doctrine evolved along the lines which its discoverer had unconsciously traced [inconsciemment tracée] for it.”²⁵ For Lamotte, the relationship between the Buddha and Buddhism is fundamentally metaphysical in nature, with the mind and personality of the former serving as a mirror of the entire history of the latter. Lamotte’s assertion of this relationship seems to have been his only justification for presenting the Buddha as historical.

Although André Bareau was an equally strong believer in the Buddha’s historicity, he also failed to add anything to the old arguments. In his 1966 “Le Bouddhisme indien,” he notes the views of Oldenberg, Wilson, Senart, and Kern, and states merely that “nowadays, however, the most widespread opinion, founded on a greater knowledge of philological and archaeological sources, admits that there really was a man to whom one must attribute the founding of Buddhism, a man the principal features of whose life and personality can be found through a thorough criticism of the data” (17). We thus again see Rhys Davids’ old *ad populum* argument. Though Bareau states that current opinion is based on “a greater knowledge of the philological and archaeological sources,” in his own voluminous work on the matter he himself suggests that only a few minor details, such as the name Gautama, the names of a few of the Buddha’s disciples, and the Buddha’s death at

²⁴ Lamotte 1958: 16, 707, trans. in Webb-Boin 1988: 15, 639.

²⁵ Lamotte 1949: 361, trans. in Boin-Webb 1985: 20.

Kuśinagara are most likely historical, though he concludes that even these are not certain.²⁶

There is little in all of this to inspire confidence in the historian. To summarize the process as it played out in Western scholarship: Despite travelers' and missionary reports that had been coming in for centuries, in the early nineteenth century very little was known, and leading scholars regarded the Buddha's historicity as an open question. Sustained academic engagement with the question of Buddhism's origin began in the late 1820s with Hodgson's announcement that Nepalese Sanskrit texts trace the origin of Buddhism to a lineage of seven Buddhas and claim to preserve the teachings of the final Buddha, Śākyamuni. Over the next several decades, scholars struggled to make historical sense of these basic facts. They spent the first two decades ruminating over the problem of the previous Buddhas, never so much solving it as giving it up in frustration.²⁷ Following the publication of Burnouf's *Introduction*, they shifted their focus to the final Buddha and spent roughly four more decades proposing one answer or the other on the question of whether or not he was historical. Though the historical faction won out, the scholars involved never cited any relevant facts, or made any significant argument in support of their views. Burnouf cited no more than pious Nepali belief. Hardy cited nothing, and eventually abandoned the idea. Max Müller treated Wilson's doubts as legitimate until he later rejected them without any explicit justification. Koeppen, early Oldenberg, and Lamotte relied on versions of the Great Man theory, according to which it is inconceivable that Buddhism could have arisen without a powerful founder. Rhys Davids, later Oldenberg, and Bareau relied on *ad popule*m arguments, which are inherently fallacious. Though it is often thought that evidence for the Buddha's historicity was found in Hodgson and Burnouf's

²⁶ For Bareau's conclusions, see primarily 1963–1995: 1.379–385, 1974, 1979.

²⁷ Perhaps the most insightful comment on the matter is Kern's: "It is a common opinion among European *savans* that the Buddhas preceding Śākyamuni are mythical, the latter alone being historical. That theory, whether true or false, is entirely opposed to the fixed dogma of *historical* Buddhism. Of course, we may surmise that in original Buddhism the matter stood otherwise. Such a supposition is allowable, provided we do not confound an hypothesis of our own making with the facts of sober history" (1896: 64, his emphasis).

Sanskrit or Rhys Davids and Oldenberg's Pali texts, this is not the case. None of these scholars made arguments from evidence. Although Thomas, Lamotte, and Bareau were all strong advocates of the idea of the historical Buddha, they each concluded that no evidence could be identified.²⁸ In the decades since Lamotte and Bareau, scholars of early Buddhism have continued to presume the Buddha's historicity, without adding anything to the old attempts to establish it.

Some, no doubt, will wish to say that it is unreasonable to ask for proof beyond the testimony of Buddhist tradition. Erich Frauwallner once stated exasperatedly that "those who refuse to give credence to the tradition until a diary kept by Ananda has been found, duly authenticated by the authorities of Rājagṛha and Vaiśālī, will have long to wait" (1957: 310). The problem here is that it is not clear that the tradition itself envisioned the Buddha as an actual person. Early Buddhist authors make little effort to associate the Buddha with any specific human identity. Familiar narratives of the Buddha's life may seem to tell the story of a specific person, but these are only found in late, non-canonical texts. Early texts, such as the *suttas* of the Pali canon, say hardly anything about the Buddha's life, and identify him in only vague terms. Rather than a

²⁸ For more recent comments on the lack of factual evidence for the Buddha, see, e.g., Silk 1994: 183, Walters 1998: 23–24, Williams (2000) 2002: 25, Christian Wedemeyer quoted in Gombrich 2009: 193–194, App 2010: 136. Some have suggested that recent archaeological discoveries may be relevant to the question of the historical Buddha. Coningham et al. present evidence of what seems to have been a tree shrine, dating to some time between the ninth and sixth centuries, found beneath the Aśokan layer at Lumbinī. Presuming that the Buddha must have lived before the creation of the shrine, the authors suggest that it may represent "the first archaeological evidence for the date of the Buddha" (2013: 1108–1109, 1119). As several scholars have pointed out in online forums, however, there seems to be nothing to connect the pre-Aśokan shrine to Buddhism. It thus seems more likely that Buddhists appropriated an originally non-Buddhist shrine for the site of the Buddha's birth. Skilling and von Hinüber (2013) and Salomon and Marino (2014) present two recently discovered pillar inscriptions from Madhya Pradesh, apparently dating to the second century B.C.E., that record monastic lineages going back to the Buddha. As Salomon and Marino point out, however, there is no way to know the extent to which these lineages may have been fabricated (2014: 33). Because they represent assertions of legitimacy and prestige, unsubstantiated lineage claims cannot be treated as historical evidence, as has clearly been shown, e.g., by studies of early Chan lineages. Though Richard Gombrich scornfully rejects skepticism about the Buddha's historicity in his *What the Buddha Thought*, surely the boldest recent publication on the matter, he does not present any clear argument to defend it (2009: 194).

specific human teacher, he appears primarily as a generic, omniscient, supra-divine figure characterized primarily in terms of supernatural qualities. Indeed, although this fact is almost invariably obscured in scholarship, early texts fail to provide us with a proper name. Though we often hear that the Buddha was Siddhārtha Gautama of the Śākya clan, the name Siddhārtha (and its variants, Sarvārthasiddha, etc.) is not attested in any early source. We do not, for example, find it used as a name for the Buddha anywhere in the Pali canon. Linking the Buddha to the Śākyas certainly seems to provide realistic historical texture, but as Wilson pointed out long ago, the Śākyas are not mentioned in any early non-Buddhist source (1832a: 7–8, 1856: 247). Further, according to ancient tradition, the Śākyas were annihilated prior to the Buddha's death, suggesting that Buddhist authors themselves may have been unaware of their existence. The entire clan could easily be entirely mythical.²⁹ This leaves only Gautama, which is not so much a name as an epithet identifying the Buddha as being associated with the Gautama *gotra*, one of eight ancient *gotras*, or lineages, recognized by Brahmanical tradition that are said to have descended from eight mythical *ṛṣis*. Though it is often presented as the Buddha's surname, the term has a broader application than Śākya. All the Śākyas in Buddhist texts are Gautamas, and many others besides. Central figures in other Indian traditions, including the Upaniṣadic sage Yājñavalkya; Indrabhūti, said to have been Mahāvīra's chief disciple; and the traditional founder of the Nyāya *darśana*, are also identified as Gautamas.³⁰

Many, I suspect, have felt that it is unlikely that a religious tradition would claim to have a single founder – or re-establisher – contrary to

²⁹ On this story, see mainly Bareau 1974: 268–69 and 1981. See also Lamotte 1944–1980: 1.508–509, n. 1.5° for a list of references to traditional accounts.

³⁰ On Gautama as a *gotra* name, see, e.g., Burnouf 1844: 155, Oldenberg 1881: 420–421, Thomas 1927: 22–23, Brough 1953: 5–6 and 5, n. 3. Oskar von Hinüber has also suggested that Māyā, the traditional name for the Buddha's mother, was derived from what was originally simply the word *mātā*, “mother.” He also points out that “the designation of his stepmother *mahāpajāpati*, i.e. *mahāpajāvati*, Gotami can hardly be considered to be an individual name” (1991: 187). Paul Dundas points out that the Jain *Isibhāsiyāim* depicts Śāriputra and Mahākāśyapa as authoritative teachers, which suggests that they may have been recognized figures before being incorporated into Buddhist texts as disciples of the Buddha ([1992] 2002: 17–19).

fact, but religious traditions often do so, among other reasons, to be able to specify a coherent source for authority or revelation. Indeed, many, perhaps most, religious traditions that claim to have a single founder did not actually have one. Scholars tell us, for instance, that Bodhidharma was an actual person, but that he had no direct connection to the Chan tradition as we now know it; that the Confucian and Hasidic traditions had already come into existence before Confucius and the Baal Shem Tov; and that figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Laozi (Lao-tzu) simply never lived. Much as Wilson suggested was the case for Buddhism, the traditions associated with each of these figures were founded by multiple people whose roles were later either obscured or effaced. Most religious traditions with premodern origins do not preserve an actual memory of their initial formation. Since the actual processes tend to be complex, difficult to remember, and not particularly edifying, they tend to be overwritten with simpler, mythical accounts.

Focusing specifically on India, the Vedas, *Mahābhārata*, and Purāṇas are said to have been composed or compiled by Vyāsa and the Rāmāyana is attributed to Vālmīki, neither of whom is regarded as historical. The early Upaniṣads, like Buddhist *sūtras*, take the form of realistic dialogues with great teachers, and in fact provide significantly more biographical information for several of them than the vastly larger corpus of Buddhist *sūtras* provides for the Buddha. In a recent monograph, however, Brian Black suggests that the main figures, such as Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya, first appeared in the Brāhmaṇas “merely as names that add authority to particular teachings,” and were later developed in the Upaniṣads into complex figures with distinct backgrounds, families, ideas, and personalities:

One of the striking features of the characters is that they are all portrayed as true-to-life individuals. This is not to say that the narratives are historically accurate, but rather that the characters are presented as human and that their actions take place in the human world. In this way, there is a realistic thrust to the narrative. The characters are mere mortals who do things that are quite ordinary, such as discuss and debate, exchange greetings and offer hospitality... In contrast to many of the tales in the Brāhmaṇas that take place on a mythic time scale and record the actions of gods (*devas*) and celestial beings (*gandharvas*), the Upanishadic narratives are firmly rooted in everyday life (Black 2007: 20–21).

Contributing to the overall effect, the early Upaniṣads also seem clearly to be set in a time very close to the one in which they were composed. Rather than actual fact, the realistic dialogical scenarios found in Buddhist *sūtras* may reflect no more than that these texts represent a similar genre. In ancient India, attributing the origin of family lineages, religious traditions, and texts to mythical figures was not only the norm, but the rule, with very few known exceptions predating the Common Era.

Although the idea that the Buddha cannot be considered a historical figure may seem radical, my argument is really a minor one. Though there has long been an industry devoted to the production of sensational claims about the Buddha, nothing about him has ever been established as fact, and the standard position in scholarship has long been that he is a figure about whom we know nothing. My only real suggestion is that we make the small shift from speaking of an unknown, contentless Buddha to accepting that we do not have grounds for speaking of a historical Buddha at all. Of course, it is possible that there was some single, actual person behind the nebulous “śramaṇa Gautama” of the early texts, but this is very far from necessarily the case, and even if such a person did exist, we have no idea who he was. There may similarly have been an actual person behind the mythical Agamemnon, Homer, or King Arthur; Vyāsa, Vālmīki, Kṛṣṇa, or Rāma, but this does not make it possible to identify them as historical. If we wish to present early Buddhism in a manner that accords with the standards of scientific, empirical inquiry, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Buddha belongs to this group.

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and reevaluates the idea of the historical Buddha. Focusing on a survey of nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship, it argues that the Buddha's historicity was never actually established and that he cannot properly be regarded as a historical figure.