The blurred boundaries of traditions: introducing Śaiva–Buddhist encounters

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The present volume has its origins in the conference *Śaiva–Buddhist Encounters in Early Medieval East India,* held on 13–14 October 2022 at the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo. The focus on East India that we gave to the conference is partly the reason for the uneven distribution of the articles in this book, where more than half of the contributions are dedicated to the area of present-day Bihar and Bengal. At the same time, as this introduction and the papers themselves will make clear, there are strong historical reasons to place particular emphasis on North-East India in a publication that delves into the relationships between Śaiva and Buddhist communities in the medieval period. When the conference became a book project, we decided to extend its scope to include other geographical areas, not with the aim of exhaustiveness but rather to enrich the discussion through a number of additional exemplary cases.

The purpose of the conference and the ensuing book was to advance the study of the interactions between the Śaiva and the Buddhist traditions, a topic that is hardly new but that still has plenty of aspects to uncover. The objective of our exploration was to identify the processes

* Research for this contribution and the *Addendum* was made possible by the ERC-2018-SYG DHARMA Project (GA no. 809994), 'The Domestication of Hindu Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia.'

initiated by their encounter in different geographical areas and through a varied set of sources. The latter were selected from the fields of epigraphy, iconography and textual studies, and were read against the background of the historical developments in the relevant regions. The resulting papers highlight that the cultural encounter between the two traditions, which presupposes their co-existence or their geographical and chronological proximity, is often articulated along very blurred lines, as if they were adapting to a shared language rather than simply confronting or rivalling one another.

The timeframe adopted here, roughly spanning from the sixth to the fourteenth century, is one that sees deep changes in the political and religious landscape of South Asia, where the birth of regional states across the sub-continent is closely intertwined with the growth of organised Śaivism as a public religion. In the past decades, it has become increasingly evident how this process occurred alongside the composition and spread of Śaiva literature, both for the initiated and non-initiated, such as, among others, the Śivadharma texts. Just like Śaivism as a religion, its literary expressions had to confront and integrate existing structures and modes of expression. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of exchange between Buddhism and Śaivism thus also serves the more specific purpose of helping us read traces of this phenomenon in this early Śaiva literature addressing an audience to which it sought to promote a 'Śaiva utopia.'[1]

Since this volume was conceived in the framework of two research projects focussing on the history of religious institutions in medieval South and Southeast Asia and the impact of the Śivadharma on the religious history of South Asia,[2] in the presentation of its articles I will highlight two main dimensions of our research: the dynamics at play in the encounter between Buddhism and Śaivism, including the possible parallels in the strategies adopted across different contexts or types of sources; and whether these reflections can enrich our knowledge of the relationship, if any, between the Śivadharma and earlier Buddhist environments. While the first point on processes and dynamics of exchange emerges quite naturally from a close reading of the book, the latter, whose

[1] This is a nod to Bisschop, Kafle and Lubin 2021.

[2] These are the already-mentioned ERC-2018-SYG DHARMA (GA no. 809994) and the ERC-2018-STG SHIVADHARMA (GA no. 803624).

main considerations are collected in an *addendum* to this introduction, require a bigger effort for a rather modest result—which will nonetheless help us add a new piece to the ever-evolving picture of the history of the Śivadharma.

1. *Coexistence, Assimilation, Inclusion*

The Bengal region provides an important and unique example of the strong presence of Śaivism in an area whose ruling monarchs adopted Buddhist affiliation as a distinctive mark of their public persona. The Pāla kings (eighth–twelfth century) have been known as 'the most liberal patrons of Buddhist institutions in early medieval India' (Sanderson 2009, 108), fostering eminent monasteries that contributed to the flourishing of Tantric Buddhism. As a complement to this aspect of Pāla history, the contribution of **Ryosuke Furui** in this volume assesses the primary epigraphical sources that connect the Pālas to the sponsorship of Śaiva preceptors and institutions. These are five inscriptions whose production extends over a period that ranges from the kingdom of Śūrapāla I (*c.* 861–873 CE) to the reign of Nayapāla (*c.* 1035–1050 CE). The latter marks an important shift in the history of the Śaiva presence in Eastern India. From two documents dated to the rulership of this king we learn that his father, Mahīpāla I (*c.* 987–1035 CE), had donated a monastery in the region to a lineage of Śaivasiddhānta teachers of the Mattamayūra branch from the Golagīmaṭha, and that two of them were Nayapāla's preceptors (Bangarh stone slab inscription). This means that Nayapāla had most likely received Śaiva initiation, though still styling himself in his public documents as a *paramasaugata*.[3] This coexistence of various strands of religious affiliation revealed by the documents of the Pāla kings—before Nayapāla, Nārāyaṇapāla (*c.* 878–932 CE) had granted a Śaiva temple and made donations in favour of the Pāśupata *ācārya*s—brings Furui to define the Pālas' approach as 'multilayered.' He argues for the relevance of each of the three main layers, i.e. Buddhist, Brahmanical and Śaiva, to different yet contiguous domains.

[3] On this, see also Sanderson 2009, 108 and 114.

As shown by Sanderson (2009), Yokochi (2013) and Bakker (2014, 241ff), the site of Bangarh in North Bengal, seat of one of Nayapāla's stone inscriptions and identified with Koṭīvarṣa/Devīkoṭa (and various other names) in textual sources, was indeed connected to Śaivism long before Pāla sponsorship. The *Koṭivarṣamāhātmya* of the early *Skandapurāṇa* (sixth–seventh century), studied by Yokochi, associates the place with the cult of the goddesses, also called Mothers, led by Hetukeśvara, as well as with the composition of goddess-oriented Tantras called Yāmalas (Yokochi 2013, 308–314). One such Tantra, the *Brahmayāmala*, is indeed aware of Koṭīvarṣa as a location, and the hypothesis that the Koṭīvarṣa area might have been its region of composition, albeit one of several possibilities, 'deserves serious consideration' (Hatley 2018, 137). The phenomenon that Pāla inscriptions attest to in the tenth and eleventh century is thus the establishment of a branch of Mantramārga Śaivism, which is a more orthodox, *maṭha*-based Śaivasiddhānta lineage, in a region of North Bengal where both Śāktism and Atimārga Śaivism had been active for some time. On the one hand, the more institutionalised character of this Saiddhāntika branch is what possibly succeeds in attracting royal sponsorship; on the other, the inscriptions of Nayapāla attest that these Saiddhāntikas adapted to the local context and thus adopted the local cult of the goddess Carcā/Carcikā and Hetukeśvara. As Sanderson remarks, this connection with the fearful goddess, which would otherwise be very foreign to the Saiddhāntika tradition, proves in and of itself the strength of Śāktism under the Pālas (Sanderson 2009, 227). Processes of inclusion, adaptation and competition for patronage were constantly at play within the different strands of Śaivism itself.

Eleventh- and twelfth-century East India thus saw an already structured convergence of the Buddhist and the Śaiva worlds and institutions that had by then produced a vast array of texts and images attesting to their ongoing processes of mutual appropriation. **Claudine Bautze-Picron** examines this period from the angle of iconography. In doing so, she focuses on popular devotion, and thus on the study of larger images produced for public display, rather than on the descriptions found in texts and *sādhana*s—the latter being mostly intended for the initiated,. The growth of royal support and popularity for Śaivism after the tenth century, especially in the North of Bengal, translates into a very creative phase in the production of Śaiva images from that area. Bautze-Picron

examines several ways in which Buddhist iconography of the region reacts to this phenomenon, such as the assimilation into Buddhist imagery of motifs that had mostly been developed in a Śaiva context. At the same time, Śaiva imagery from this period assimilates Buddhist themes, among which Bautze-Picron identifies the representation of human beings—mainly devotees and teachers.

This exchange of motifs between the two communities sharing the same territory lies at the core of the contribution by **Pia Brancaccio**, which focuses on the religious history of the Western Deccan. Here the two communities had always lived close enough to compete for patronage in the same territory, while reciprocally providing models on which to forge institutions, scriptures, and imagery. Brancaccio observes that, when at the beginning of the Common Era an impressive rock-cut Buddhist monastery was built at Kanheri, the chosen location was only 7 miles away from an early Śaiva ascetic site, Padaṇa Hill, which was still a major ascetic retreat for Pāśupata ascetics at the time. As in other regions of South Asia, the sixth century marks the waning of patronage to Buddhism and the rise of Śaivism in the religious affiliations of kings. In the Deccan, this happens when the early Śaiva Kalacuri kings extended their sway from the Western Ghats to Southern Gujarat. This new form of Śaiva patronage assimilated pre-existing Buddhist models by adopting the type of rock-cut architecture that the Buddhists had in the meantime made popular in the region; however, as Brancaccio argues elsewhere (Brancaccio 2011), local Buddhist images in turn impacted Śaiva iconography, as is the case of the famous Lakulīśvara of Ellora 29.

As Brancaccio aptly observes, 'whether this interaction was driven by competition, reciprocal adaptation, or fertile exchange is hard to determine.' This is a crucial point in our examination, as it stresses the importance of not interpreting the many shared elements in the artistic, textual and architectural languages of these communities solely as a strategy to compete with one another. Rather, the specific territory in which they developed, and the 'syntax of devotion' that took shape there, made the adoption of similar modes of expression convenient from a practical standpoint. The reuse of the same spaces, imagery, or textual segments may carry an aggressive undertone and suggests that one of the two groups has taken over (or intends to do so). While this has been proven to be true in some cases, one should also consider

how texts, casts, and structures, just like the expertise of local artisans, workers, and chancelleries, simply function as existing building blocks, the basic components of a language understood and appreciated by a particular community of devotees who participated in a given visual and literary culture. These considerations do not rule out all the political and sometimes military underpinnings in the dynamic religious landscape of early and medieval South Asia, but add complexity to its interpretation.

This is also evidenced in the case-study that is the focus of **Lucas den Boer**'s contribution to this volume, investigating the continuity of Śaiva elements in the context of the Buddhist *mahāvihāra*s under the Pālas. His study revolves around the interpretation of two panels representing teaching scenes whose protagonists have been unanimously identified as 'Śaiva' at a structure located in the precincts of Nālandā *mahāvihāra*, in present-day Bihar. While concluding that the Nālandā panels may indeed depict Śaiva teachers, albeit not necessarily Śiva himself as a teacher, den Boer suggests interpreting the presence of these and other Brahmanical images not as signs of sectarian aggression but rather of peaceful coexistence, as also suggested by literary sources that were close to the Nālandā ecosystem. In view of a higher fluidity of boundaries between Buddhist and Hindu monasticism, depictions of non-Buddhist images and gods at a Buddhist site must therefore not necessarily be regarded as signs of a 'foreign' or 'hostile' presence.

The occurrence of Brahmanical iconography at other Buddhist *mahāvihāra*s in Eastern India is remarked upon both by Bautze-Picron and den Boer: Nālandā, Vikramaśīla and Somapura all attest to the presence of non-Buddhist imagery that, in the past, raised the question of the 'religious identity' of these sites—a question often still rooted in old colonial imagination.[4] Regardless of the interpretation we give to this phenomenon in its different contexts, the process of inclusivism of Brahmanical gods into the Buddhist pantheon, not just as threatening or defeated 'enemies' but as a token of their irenic acceptance of Buddhism, is a known phenomenon in the history of early Buddhism, and is often evidenced in art history, too.

[4] On the case of Somapura *mahāvihāra* at Pāhārpur, in connection with a colonial and postcolonial discourse, see Copplestone 2024.

The contrary is also true, namely the acquisition of the Buddha or Buddhist figures in a non-Buddhist pantheon to symbolise their acceptance of the authority of Hindu gods. Out of the many possible examples, it is worth mentioning here the attempts to integrate the Buddha and the Jina into the Śaiva fold made by the *Śivadharmaśāstra* and examined by Bisschop in his study on religious inclusivism (2019). In two key passages, the *Śivadharmaśāstra* depicts a vast array of gods and divine beings—including divinised natural elements—as deriving their divine status from their worship of Śiva. One of these passages is in chapter three, following the narrative of the *liṅgodbhava*,[5] and the other one constitutes the bulk of chapter six, the *Śāntyadhyāya*, a long *mahāśāntimantra* celebrating the centrality of the Śaiva religion. In both cases, Bisschop noticed that some manuscripts inserted stanzas in which the Buddha and the Arhant are added to the list of those who worship Śiva and derive their status from this practice.[6] Both additions occur in a Kashmiri manuscript but have also made their way into the later Nepalese tradition of the text. They are therefore even more valuable as the product of living communities that tried to adjust a given text to their own context of fruition.

In spite of a clear agenda of including gods and divine figures of other religious traditions into their own as an indication of their endorsement of Śaivism, and despite the fact that Buddhism may have been part of the religious horizon of the authors of the Śivadharma, the philological work on Śivadharma literature has yet to discover major cases of ample reuses of Buddhist texts, or of their texts having been readapted into a Buddhist context. This process of inclusion and adaptation of sometimes extended textual materials from other religious traditions, which is the textual equivalent of the dancing Bodhisattvas modelled on dancing Śivas described by Bautze-Picron, is a hallmark of South Asian religious literature, and a popular composition technique in Purāṇas and Purāṇa-like texts. Cases of appropriation of portions of the *Śivadharmaśāstra* and the *Śivadharmottara*, with minimal or major adaptations, and their reuse as re-semantised 'construction blocks' in later scriptures of initiatory

[5] On this narrative in the *Śivadharmaśāstra*, see Kafle 2013 and Bisschop 2020.

[6] See the discussion on this point in the edition of chapter 6 (Bisschop 2018, 34, fn. 76 and 153, fn. 33), as well as in Bisschop 2019, 513–523.

Śaivism, as well as in Vaiṣṇava and Saura literature, are in fact at the very core of our philological work on literature from the 'Śivadharma constellation,' and one of the main reasons that account for the importance of this literature.[7] Probably due to the genre of our texts, a crossroads of Dharmaśāstra and Purāṇas of a highly theistic nature and of non-Mantramārgic inspiration, such extensive literal parallels with Buddhist scriptures are, most likely, not to be expected.[8] This is certainly a strong boundary dividing the two traditions. At the same time, we know that such boundaries were amply crossed in the case of the relationships between the Śaiva scriptures of the Mantramārga and the Buddhist Mantranaya, thanks to Alexis Sanderson's demonstration of a direct, multifarious influence of Śaiva Tantras over Buddhist Tantras, which became increasingly prominent in the later corpus of the Buddhist Yoginī Tantras. Sanderson (2009) observes that the process that culminated in the Yoginī Tantras' full appropriation of the Śaiva tradition was already at play in texts of the *Guhyasamāja* tradition, such as the *Guhyasiddhi* by Padmavajra (probably eighth century), which implied that initiates in this Buddhist Tantra were converted from the Śaiva Mantramārga; or the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga*, where he observes that, for the first time, a text of the Mantranaya completely abandons the stylistic structure of a Mahāyāna Sūtra to become more similar to the *anuṣṭubh*-based Śaiva scriptures. **Judit Törzsök**'s paper in this volume takes as its starting point Sanderson's considerations on the adaptation of Vidyāpīṭha Śaivism to Tantric Buddhism, in particular the case of the *Laghuśaṁvara* (*c.* eighth century), as about two-thirds of its text has parallels in Śākta scriptures such as the *Brahmayāmala*, the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, and the *Jayadrathayāmala*. Drawing on these premises, Törzsök's paper examines

[7] References on this point are abundant and ever-growing, given the in-progress nature of our work. Readers can refer to De Simini 2016 (especially chapters 1, 2, 4 and 6) and 2020, as well as Bisschop 2018 and 2020 for broader considerations and indicative examples of the main reuses of Śivadharma texts in works such as the *Devīpurāṇa*, the *Haracaritacintāmaṇi*, the *Kāmikāgama* and the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. Very relevant are the new discoveries of textual reuses of *Śivadharmaśāstra* chapter ten presented in Bisschop, Kafle and Kiss 2025, accompanied by interpretive considerations in the introduction.

[8] On some shorter textual parallels between the *Śivadharmottara* and early Buddhist sources, in the broader context of shared stylistic and rhetorical strategies, see Piscopo *forth*. 2027.

more parallels between the *Laghuśaṁvara* and the Śākta scriptures, proving how their identification is crucial not just for the reconstruction and interpretation of the Buddhist text, but also for that of its Śaiva sources. Her rigorous examination of parallels between the *Laghuśaṁvara* and its Śākta models highlights both the process of adaptation from the Śaiva to the Buddhist ritual world, and the numerous cases in which an otherwise senseless corruption acquires meaning once the source is identified. Apart from the very close and evident parallels, for which the Śaiva text is demonstrably the source, she also identifies some emblematic cases of 'fossils,' in which expressions that were only explicable in a Śaiva context had survived in the Buddhist texts, often in a corrupt form.

2. *Language, Rhetorics and Debates*

The final set of articles in our volume brings the focus more strongly on language, rhetorics and rhetorical analysis. Collectively, they prove that, just as iconography, language likewise provides users with a shared set of resources that cross the boundaries of traditions. These boundaries can be retrieved only once we merge the study of language and style with that of history.

Annette Schmiedchen examines Buddhist and Śaiva interactions through the lens of Bhauma-Kara copperplates from Odisha, dating approximately to the eighth to the tenth century. Although the Bhauma-Karas shift their public affiliation from Buddhism to Śaivism starting with Śubhākara IV (earliest attestation in the Bhauma-Kara year 145 = *c.* 880 CE), royal grants in medieval Odisha were mostly addressed to Vedic Brahmins, and only five endowments of the Bhauma-Karas are known that were issued to support Buddhist or Śaiva religious institutions. Schmiedchen highlights the absence of a clear link between the king's personal religious affiliation and the institutions he patronises, a point further illustrated by the lack of significant differences between the donative formulas of Śaiva and Buddhist documents. Some of these formulas have been verifiably conceived in Buddhist environments before they became part of a 'stock' epigraphical language and were thus readapted to the Śaiva world, too. This is the case, for instance, of the typically Buddhist '*puṇya* formulas,' in which the donors state their intention of accruing *puṇya* through donation; or of the 'provisions for repair' formula, whose history

in the context of (blurred) religious boundaries we will dissect in greater detail in the *addendum* to this introduction.

Csaba Dezső's contribution in this volume presents a rhetorical study of literary works composed during the Pāla and Sena periods. Using Rājaśekhara's theory of poetic borrowing (*haraṇa*, lit. 'appropriation') as a theoretical compass, he examines cases of textual borrowings and imitation in three major Sanskrit works from medieval eastern India. These are two anthologies—the *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*, attributed to the twelfth-century Buddhist author Vidyākara, and the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta*, composed by Śrīdharadāsa in 1205 CE at the court of Lakṣmaṇasena (*c.* 1179–1206 CE)—and the *Lokeśaśataka*, a Buddhist stotra on Avalokiteśvara from ninth-century Bengal. When it comes to the study of language and the practice of poetic borrowing, boundaries between traditions disappear since, as Dezső proves, the pool of poetic devices was 'in the public domain, of which poets freely availed themselves, regardless of their religious convictions.' On the other hand, an assessment of the Buddhist and Śaiva materials available in the two anthologies reveals some divergence. The *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* is rather balanced, as it devotes separate sections to the Buddha, Lokeśvara, and Mañjughoṣa, but also to Śiva and his family. This inclusive approach seems to suitably reflect the religious landscape of medieval Bengal that, as pointed out by other contributions in this book, saw the coexistence of the two religious traditions both in popular devotion and in public sponsorship. A few decades later, Śrīdharadāsa will devote extensive sections of his anthology to Śiva and his attributes, as well as to his family and retinue, but only a few verses to the Buddha as one of Viṣṇu's *avatāra*s. I suggest that the selection made by the author may echo the markedly different religious policies of the Sena kings (*c.* 1095–1228 CE),[9] who were more visibly aligned with traditional Brahmanism and publicly distanced themselves from Buddhism and other unorthodox forms of Tantrism.[10]

[9] I refer here to the dates suggested by Majumdar 1929.

[10] For inscriptions of the early Senas, i.e. Vijayasena, Ballālasena and Lakṣmaṇasena, attesting to their public affiliation with Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, see Majumdar 1929, 42ff. On the Saura devotion of the Senas, including Lakṣmaṇasena, and the subsumption of the Saura cult into Śaivism, see Sanderson 2009, 54. As for the Senas' attitude towards more heterodox forms of Tantrism, the *locus classicus* on this topic is the introduction to the *Dānasāgara*, a digest on gifting attributed to the king Ballālasena (1095 *c.*–1158 CE).

How deep language reflects history is also the core question of the paper by **Dániel Balogh**, who takes us to the historical region of Āndhradeśa. The object of his study is the specific qualifications of kings and other donors in the inscriptions of the Veṅgī Cālukyas (seventh to eleventh centuries), the Viṣṇukuṇḍis (selected inscriptions from the fifth to sixth centuries) and Śrīmūla (selected inscriptions from the mid-sixth century). Balogh tries to read this growth of public Śaivism in the area through a rhetorical analysis of inscriptions, with the aim of challenging the views of Davidson (2002) and Lang (2008) by questioning the accuracy of their engagement with the primary sources. According to them, Śaivism could offer the medieval military elites, in the public discourse, a rhetoric of eroticism and aggression that Buddhism lacked, and this played a role in their choice of a public religious affiliation. These scholars thus explain the dominance of Śaivism in the region also on account of the stronger link that they establish between the imagery and rhetoric connected to the martial god Śiva and the 'culture of military opportunism' that became prevalent among local overlords in the early Middle Ages. Balogh tries to test this hypothesis by proceeding at an accurate qualitative and quantitative analysis of the inscriptions of the specified corpora, suggesting in conclusion to adopt a more nuanced approach. The level of variation is such that one could never deduce the sectarian orientation of a grant based on the prevalence of certain qualifications—just like, as shown by Dezső's study, we cannot distinguish a Śaiva from a Buddhist poem solely on the basis of style and rhetoric. Thus 'instead of a specific Buddhist/Śaiva dichotomy, a distinction into Buddhist and non-Buddhist or at most Buddhist and Theist may be more appropriate.'

A different type of rhetorical study is the one that closes our selection of articles. Here, **Renato Dávalos** investigates the continuity of the Buddhist presence in medieval Tamil Nadu through an examination of early Caiva Cittāntam polemics. Starting with the seventh century, the

Here the author rejects the use of some sources, such as the *Devīpurāṇa*, because of their engagement with impure rituals, and others such as the *Garuḍapurāṇa* because they deal with eminently Tantric topics such as *dīkṣā* and *pratiṣṭhā*. For a full discussion and translation of this passage, see De Simini 2014, 614ff; for its contextualisation within the broader framework of the relationships between Śaivism and Brahmanism, see Sanderson 2009, 250.

presence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu had significantly waned. While none of the extant Pallava grants ever mention Buddhism and Buddhist institutions, Cōḷa copperplates still reveal sporadic traces of support to Buddhists (and Jains) in the centre of Nāgapaṭṭiṇam. However, Dávalos draws our attention to those Caiva authors who, at a time when the Caiva Cittāntam tradition was prospering, still mention Buddhists as their opponents. Their testimony thus provides an important insight into what was known of Buddhism and how Tamil Caiva intellectuals made sense of Buddhist doctrines. The bulk of the argumentation is built on Aruṇanti's *Civañāṉa Cittiyār*, which contains a refutation of fourteen systems of philosophy outside the Caiva path—four of them Buddhist—and on the *Tiruvātavūrār Purāṇam* (*c.* fifteenth century), the earliest extant hagiography of the nālvar Māṇikkavācakar, which stages the saint's various debates with Buddhist opponents.

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December 2025

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Acknowledgements

We want to express our gratitude to the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca) for having financed both the conference *Śaiva–Buddhist Encounters in Early Medieval East India* (Università di Napoli L'Orientale, 13–14 October 2022), and the production of this book through the SAHA Project (*South Asia History and Archaeology* —'Digital Tools and Language Resources for Writing the History of South Asia'), financed under the "FARE ricerca" scheme (2019–2025). We furthermore acknowledge the contribution of the ERC-2018–STG-SHIVADHARMA (*Translocal Identities. The Śivadharma and the Making of Regional Religious Traditions in Premodern South Asia*, GA no. 803624) for having financed the work of Lucas den Boer, as well as the ERC-2018–SYG–DHARMA (*The domestication of Hindu Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia*, GA no. 809994) for having supported the work of Dániel Balogh, Renato Dávalos, Florinda De Simini, Csaba Dezső and Annette Schmiedchen.

We also express our sincere gratitude to the conference participants—Shaashi Ahlawat, Abhishek Amar, Dániel Balogh, Claudine Bautze-Picron, Ryosuke Furui, Bijoy Kumar Choudhary, Csaba Dezső, Kengo Harimoto, Coline Lefranq, Nicolas Morrissey, Birendra Nath Prasad, Annette Schmiedchen, and Vishi Upadhyay—whose contributions form the basis of this volume. Their research and subsequent revisions have significantly strengthened the collective outcome of the project. We are indebted to the discussants—Orna Almogi, Harunaga Isaacson, Shanshan Jia, and Dorji Wangchuk—for their critical engagement and constructive observations during the meeting.

We also thank all the reviewers—Victor D'Avella, Laxshmi Greaves, Samana Gururaja, Francesco Sferra, Péter-Dániel Szántó and Margherita Trento, and the anonymous reviewers—for their careful reading of the manuscripts and for their valuable suggestions.

We are grateful to Michael Bluett for his attentive and reliable proofreading of the manuscript. His careful eye and steady judgment have contributed substantially to the clarity and consistency of the final text. Our special thanks go to Csaba Kiss for the typesetting of the volume. The care with which he handled the technical and aesthetic aspects of the book has greatly enhanced its final form. Finally, we thank UniorPress for accepting the volume in the series *Studies on the History of Śaivism* and for overseeing its publication.

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