



The Senior Buddhist Manuscripts: a collection of ancient Gandhara birch bark scrolls

The last decade has seen the discovery of several important collections of very old Buddhist manuscripts from historical Gandhara, an area that corresponds to parts of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. These birch bark scrolls, dating from approximately the 1st to 3rd centuries AD, contain Buddhist texts written in the Gandhara language. One of these collections, the Senior manuscripts, is the subject of my current research.

The Senior manuscripts were originally found in a clay pot which had apparently been buried inside a stupa. The inscription on the pot indicates that these texts were commissioned for ritual burial as a pious act. The texts comprising the collection generally can be described as falling into three broad categories. The majority are canonical sutras whose parallels are mostly found in the Pali and/or Chinese texts. Several other Senior texts are biographical accounts, containing episodes from the Buddha's life that, for the most part, have parallels in the various Vinayapitakas. Two other scrolls in the Senior collection apparently contain a list of the texts on the other scrolls, rather than texts of the previously mentioned genres.

In this paper I will present an overview of the texts in the collection and address the issue of their classification. The relationship between the index scrolls and the main texts, the possible reasons for grouping these particular texts together, and the likely motives for compiling and subsequently burying such a collection will also be discussed.

Biography: Mark Allon is an ARC Australian Research Fellow at the University of Sydney working on several collections of newly discovered Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan (ancient Gandhara). He previously held research and teaching positions at the University of London and University of Washington, Seattle. His specialized interest is in early Buddhist literature.