Introduction

In its 1967 entry on Marshall McLuhan, *Current Biography* notes the criticism that has been directed toward the father of media theory for often taking his ideas too far; it cites as an example his notion that the outcome of the 1960 presidential election was influenced by the simple fact that most people accessed the Kennedy-Nixon debates through the new medium of television rather than radio. In time, this, like many other of McLuhan’s pronouncements, became conventional wisdom, and the insight at the core of his thought—that human culture and technology arise in tandem and are bound by an intimate and mutually affective relationship—has animated many recent studies in a variety of disciplines. Central to these studies has been the idea that we can improve our understanding of a culture by being sensitive to the distinctive ways that it has adopted and adapted to the various technologies with which it has had contact. While McLuhan and his school have many detractors, key themes that they promoted have made their way onto the general scholarly palette. For example, most scholars, McLuhanite or not, would find it curious if an exploration of the rise of values such as democracy and individualism in Asia did not at least touch on the contributions of such things as electricity, automobiles, radio, and telephones to this process.

As modern life is greatly impacted by ever-changing technologies, so the lives of Theravāda Buddhist monks in premodern northern Thailand were affected by the technologies of their day. The key decisions they took regarding technology—how and when to use it, who could use it, what status to assign it—brought a variety of forces into play that shaped the experience and practice of Buddhism, as well as the success of their orders and the very identity of the region. Historically, for monastic groups in Thailand, communications technology has been essential, for the religion could not have flourished without the successful transmission through diverse media of the canonical texts known in the Pali language as the Tipitaka, as
well as commentaries, translations, and ancillary literature. When I speak here of “technology,” I refer to the application of human knowledge to fashion a system that solves a particular problem. It need not require advanced scientific knowledge, so both writing and mnemonic systems are no less technologies than is the Internet.

Most scholars currently believe that the texts of the Pali Tipitaka were transmitted orally for about four hundred years, from the time of their genesis until the first century BCE, when Buddhist chronicles tell us they were written down. The oral transmission of the Pali texts was aided by mnemonic features such as repetition, formulae, meter, and numbered lists, and was entrusted to specially trained monks called bhānakas (reciters). The bhānakas were divided into several groups, each of which was responsible for the retention of a different part of the canon. Like the scholarly pandita tradition in India, there was a division of labor among the various branches of bhānakas, and again as in the case of the panditas, the oral tradition continued to be an important force even once the texts were committed to writing. Although no version of the Tipitaka was printed until 1893 CE, when the project was executed under the sponsorship of the Thai king Chulalongkorn, in recent years monks, scholars, and patrons have busied themselves making up for lost time with numerous dissemination projects that have led to the mass availability of Tipitaka texts for free on CD-ROM and through the Internet. This book focuses on one part of the story of the transmission of the Tipitaka and related Pali texts, namely, the development of writing and its complex relationship to the oral tradition in the kingdom of Lan Na in northern Thailand.

BRIEF HISTORY OF LAN NA

The inhabitants of historical Lan Na consisted largely of people descended from the early Mon of the region, from aboriginal Austronesian tribes, and from Tai-speaking people speaking a language known as Yuan. The Tai Yuan, who soon became the culturally and linguistically dominant group, had spread from their ancestral homeland in southeastern China, probably in the area of the Red River delta, towards the end of the first millennium. Their language was and is very similar to that of the Tai in the central region of Sukhodaya, as well as the Tai Yai and the Tai Khün. It is not far, in fact, from what is the standard Thai of modern Thailand. The main differences are phonological, with only moderate lexical variations. There are
fewer words of Khmer origin in Yuan than in standard Thai, and Sanskrit-derived words have generally been replaced by Pali terms, reflecting the strong Theravāda influence that permeated Lan Na.

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Tai ruler Mangrai began to bring various warring areas of northern Thailand under his control, and in 1292 CE he established a major political and religious center in the newly built city of Chiang Mai. At this point the kingdom of Lan Na, meaning “a million rice paddies,” began to assume the form that it would more or less retain for several centuries. In the late 1360s the Lan Na king Ku Na invited the monk Sumana from the central Thai capital of Sukhodaya to bring a Sinhalese forest-dwelling monastic lineage to Lan Na. Sumana did arrive shortly thereafter, and this event laid the seeds for the flourishing of the Mahāvihāra interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism in the kingdom. This order soon became known as the flower-garden order (pupphārāmavāsī), because their chief monastery was the Flower Garden Monastery (Wat Suan Dok) just outside of Chiang Mai. The Sinhalese form of Buddhism was strengthened during the reign of Sam Fang Kæn (1401–1441 CE), when a group of twenty-five monks from Lan Na went to Sri Lanka to be reordained and brought yet another forest-dwelling lineage (araññavāsī) back to Thailand. This lineage became based at the Red Forest Monastery (Wat Pa Dæng), another monastery somewhat farther from the city of Chiang Mai than Wat Suan Dok.

Lan Na experienced a Golden Age in the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries, during which political power expanded and solidified, and Buddhist cultural production reached its apex. The Golden Age, presided over by Sam Fang Kæn, Tilaka (1441–1487), Yot Chang Rai (1487–1495), and Muang Kæo (1495–1526), witnessed the composition of dozens of original Pali works, including pseudocanonical, cosmological, and commentarial works, but the fortunes of Chiang Mai and Lan Na waned quickly. After the assassination of Ket Chettharat in 1545 CE, there was no clear heir to the throne, and a prince from the Lao center of Luang Prabang came to power on the basis that his mother was related to the royal line of Chiang Mai. After his short reign, a Shan ruler was installed, but he was unable to ward off the Burmese, who conquered Chiang Mai in 1558 CE. The rest of Lan Na gradually came under Burmese control over the next few decades.

The following years did witness some rebellions and brief periods of Burmese retreat, but the Burmese never failed to reassert their suzerainty until the late 1770s, when much of Lan Na was freed from their yoke by Kawila, a warrior who had the backing of the central Thai (Siamese) powers. By 1804 CE, Kawila had taken Chiang Mai, Chiang Sæn, and other north-
ern cities and began to repopulate them—a necessary project since the people had been decimated from decades of war and conscription by the Burmese. He initiated a massive reconstruction and ruled as a vassal of the Chakri king in Bangkok, as did his successors until 1933, when Lan Na was divided into a number of provinces of Siam.

The dissemination of Pali texts played a large role in the cultural development of Lan Na both before and after the Burmese conquest. The monks and the rulers wished to accompany the expansion of their influence with the extension of Buddhist institutions and practices, and these were supported by canonical and commentarial texts. While the texts were at first primarily transmitted orally, residing in the heads of monks who had gone to outlying areas, they were later transmitted in manuscript form. In time, the characteristic Lan Na Dhamma script became so strongly identified with the region itself that we can now virtually delineate the borders of Lan Na based on where manuscripts employing this script have been found.

### MEDIA THEORY AND ITS APPLICATIONS IN THE BUDDHIST CONTEXT

While the past few decades have seen growing interest in the ways that different communications technologies affect both the texts that are transmitted and the way they are received, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the forms taken by Buddhist texts in premodern Asia, let alone Lan Na. We know that the texts were initially spread orally and then in written form, but even when texts were written, it must be emphasized that the people of Lan Na, like all premodern Buddhists, did not engage them in anything remotely resembling the critically edited, printed books now available. This book will look at the forms in which they actually encountered these texts and will ask how these experiences might have affected the way they construed and practiced their religion. This will entail an examination of the role that Pali texts in oral and written form played in different communities in Lan Na—the social life of texts, as Justin McDaniel has called it in his work on Thai and Laotian manuscripts (McDaniel 2003, 88). Another objective will be to assess the attitudes that different sectors of society held regarding orality and writing during the periods under study. These attitudes were determined by social, political, and psychological factors, as well as practical considerations pertaining to the physical features of different media. Often a particular medium was central to one's social position, such
as orality in the case of the bhûnakas. The attitudes of these monks towards writing would certainly have been affected by the degree to which they saw writing as a threat to their position. Likewise, monks belonging to traditions more amenable to the written word would have naturally had other opinions. Rulers also had different perspectives on orality and writing that depended at least in part on their view of the utility of these technologies for stabilizing their rule. As in the adoption of any technology, opaque personal preferences doubtless played an important role as well. Regardless of their etiology, such attitudes tell us a lot about the ways that particular groups may have approached and interpreted the texts.

When looking at the “roles” that manuscripts in particular have played, it is essential to realize that manuscripts can fit into the lived practice of religious communities in a variety of ways beyond their obvious function as supports for the words of texts. It is important not to obscure the unintended consequences that arise once the key functional advantage of writing—the materialization and hence preservation of ephemeral sounds—has been addressed. For example, when the word enters the physical world, it becomes something that can be bought, sold, and owned, and thereby feeds the fires of possessiveness while at the same time opening up unwanted possibilities such as defilement, which would happen if an animal left droppings on the pages or a human used the leaves to make a mattress.

In order to focus my account of the world of writing, I would like to highlight two main categories of manuscript usage—cultic and discursive—that frame much of what I will say. Cultic usage of a manuscript may be divided into two modalities, seen and unseen, in which the manuscript itself occupies a substantially different place. An example of seen cultic usage is the offering of flowers to a manuscript in the context of pûjã or the procession of a manuscript through the kingdom on the back of an elephant. In both of these situations, an actual manuscript, preferably one that has aesthetic value, is required. However, there are also cases where an unseen manuscript is honored, most notably in the event of its being installed within a stûpa. As in the case of the Buddha’s relics, which are often similarly treated, the manuscript—since it will never be seen—may not actually possess the characteristics that are attributed to it; in fact, it may not even exist.

Under the rubric of what I call discursive usage there are also a number of possible modalities. The main feature that distinguishes the discursive from the cultic category is that in the discursive, the words of the text are actually read, whereas in the cultic, the manuscript as a whole is treated iconically, generally as a physical embodiment of the teachings of the Buddha.
Following Paul Griffiths (1999), I divide discursive usage into three modes: composition, display, and storage. The first mode indicates the way in which written or, more properly, writeable surfaces may be used for composing a work. Generally one will write one’s ideas down, and then rewrite them, alter them, and rethink them in the turbulent process of composition. This is generally, although not always, a private or at least narrowcast usage of writing that awaits completion before being displayed. In the use of writing to display a work—to make it accessible to those wishing to gain knowledge of its linguistic contents—two distinct modes can be distinguished: the work may be read silently or read out loud. Note that when a text is read aloud, those present will, strictly speaking, be accessing the text through the oral medium. This is a secondary orality, and must not be confounded, as has often been done, especially by modern graphocentric scholars, with a more general literacy. Even if most of the texts are stored in writing, if only a few literate people read these to the vast majority who are illiterate, then one should not assume that the texts, although actually written, enter into society and are engaged as written texts. A second aspect of the discursive display of texts pertinent here is whether they are read in a bounded ritual/liturgical context, or whether they are studied, discussed, and commented upon in a scholastic environment. The role of a manuscript at a Paritta ceremony, where it is used as a support for the recitation of protective verses, is quite different from that of the well-worn palm leaves of a copy of a doctrinal compendium, such as the Visuddhimagga, that generations of scholarly monks have studied and debated.

The final mode mentioned by Griffiths is storage, which of course is what gives a work that has been composed and displayed the ability to be redisplayed and thus transmitted over time. In Lan Na, those responsible for the production of manuscripts were quite conscious of their importance for storing texts. As we will see, many of the manuscripts possess colophons stating explicitly that they were made in order to preserve the teachings of the Buddha for 5,000 years.

There are important reasons for wanting to establish just which roles were being fulfilled by the media available in Lan Na. An intimate symbiotic relationship exists between the word and the medium through which it is communicated, for the one cannot exist without the other. This is certainly the case with Pali texts. The English word “text” in its most basic meaning, like the Pali words sutta and ganthi, refers to a series of items strung together, but it has come to be used primarily to denote a series of words put together to form a linguistic work. The word “text” may be used to refer not only
to the discursive or semantic contents of a work, but also to its physical receptacle—what we might call the “book.” Scholarship about South and Southeast Asian textuality, however, has focused largely on only one aspect, semantic content. The nature of the vessel has been largely ignored. This is unfortunate, because the medium is deeply involved with how the text is assimilated. A textual encounter that is mediated through the written word has qualities that differ from the encounter that occurs through speech; the physical presence of an unchanging written document has an effect on the interpretive strategies available to the reader that is qualitatively unlike the effect engendered through hearing a text.

Many scholars have argued that there are strong theoretical reasons, beyond the quest for mere historical particularities, for wanting to know precisely what methods of communication have been used in various instances. McLuhan has argued that the medium greatly affects—in fact, is—the message of a text. There can be little doubt today, even among those who are not media savvy, that certain media are more appropriate for certain forms of communication. Hence the joke behind the 1971 record album *The Best of Marcel Marceau:* each side of this recording of the great French mime consists of twenty minutes of silence followed by a minute of thunderous applause. But many scholars have made far-reaching claims about the effects of various media that go beyond any such casual observations. Walter Ong holds that writing actually restructures consciousness in fundamental ways, and Jack Goody believes that written texts funnel thought into a more linear mode, nourishing logical processes and individualism along the way, whereas hearing allows for more open, participatory patterns of thought. They are joined by a host of other scholars from disparate fields, such as classics (Havelock 1963), medieval studies (Stock 1983), international relations (Deibert 1997), and psychology (Olson 1994), to name just a few, who all adhere broadly to the belief that the transformation of basic information into knowledge is not a disembodied process. It is powerfully influenced by the manner of its material expression. In other words, the medium is never neutral. How we organize and transmit our perceptions and knowledge about the world strongly affects the nature of those perceptions and the way we come to know the world. (Paul Heyer, quoted in Deibert 1997, 3)

The main difficulty with this theory is that, like all materialist theories, it often rears its head in a strong version that leads inevitably to technological determinism. Such theoretical zealotry sees all social and historical
transformations as products of changes in the modes of communication only. On this view the Renaissance would be understood as a necessary, linear result of the invention of the printing press, and globalization as the child of television and the Internet. In response to this, I would argue that communication technology is but one in a complicated nexus of factors that shape a society at any given time, but one that is, however, particularly important in the context of religious communities that arrive at many of their beliefs and practices through the guidance of texts. Of course, it was not approaches to writing or the oral tradition alone that differentiated one monastic group from another and that preoccupied the minds of kings. I am only using communication technology as one of many possible lenses through which to view the Buddhist world of northern Thailand.

Besides totalizing tendencies, another problem that has hounded media theory is that it has often been deployed deductively to make predictions about the facts regardless of their fit. For instance, it has been surmised, based on his particular use of scientific and analytic principles, that the fifth-century BCE systematic grammarian Pāṇini must have used writing to produce his comprehensive Sanskrit grammar, the Aṣṭādhāyī—despite hardly a shred of empirical evidence to support the claim (Goody 1980, 12). Regardless of whether certain theories concerning communication are tenable, one cannot even begin to address them in a Buddhist context until the forms in which the texts were communicated are known. What is called for at this juncture in the study of the communication and transmission of Buddhist texts in Thailand, and Southeast Asia generally, is to get the historical record straight. Our understanding of the contents of these texts should be supplemented with more thorough knowledge of the actual forms in which the contents were delivered. My aim, then, is to help cultivate this knowledge with particular attention to the use of writing and manuscripts and how they related to the oral tradition.

My second objective is to supplement our understanding of the role of manuscripts in the region under study by looking at the attitudes that were held towards this new technology. While it may be difficult in today’s dizzying digital landscape to think of dusty old manuscripts as new technology, it nevertheless remains the case that in fifteenth-century northern Thailand the writing of religious texts was a new enterprise that was welcomed by some but viewed with apprehension by others. In this, at least, it is no different from what is seen today. It will become clear that the introduction of writing to transmit Pali texts was not a seamless process, but was an arena of contestation, elaboration, and consolidation.
Evidence for attitudes towards writing is of a somewhat different nature than evidence for the actual existence of writing and its permeation into various arenas. Evidence for the attitudes must be abstracted from such things as the tone in which writing is described, the frequency and centrality of references to it, and the veneration accorded written items. This task must often be fixed within a comparative framework, where attitudes towards other entities vying for similar positions are also evident. For example, that relics possess wondrous powers is a common feature in both Pali and vernacular chronicles. However, I have never come across any such powers being attributed in Lan Na to a manuscript or book of any sort. This, then, I read as evidence that writing was not exalted as relics were, even though both could be interpreted as representations of the Dhamma of the Buddha. Many such examples will be presented in this book.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Little research has been done regarding communication and the transfer of information in premodern South or Southeast Asia. As Richard Gombrich states regarding the oral tradition, "somehow scholars have not given much thought to the mechanics of how [monks] would have remembered what to preach" (1990, 25). The actual techniques of memorization and oral transmission of the Pali tradition have been little studied, and there are few occasions where we are told exactly how the bhûnakas went about their trade. Nevertheless, Steven Collins has managed to bring to our attention a commentarial work that discusses how to memorize the text of a meditation subject. This apparently includes the recitation of parts of the body in forward and backward order. Because oral traditions leave no direct records, evidence attesting to methods of oral transmission of the early texts can best be gleaned from the traces left behind in the style and format of the texts after they were written down. I would add that scholars have also not given much thought to the chirographic production of written texts, to their storage, or to the accompanying reading practices.

It is important to keep in mind that the existence of written copies of the canon since the first century BCE does not necessarily mean that the texts were thereafter always engaged as written documents. Indeed, individual reading of the texts was the exception rather than the rule for many centuries for a variety of reasons. It may have been difficult, for example, to gain access to manuscripts in some regions, or the culture itself may have respected a
long-standing tradition to focus more on memorized texts than on written
documents. Seemingly unrelated things such as diet may have affected lit-
erate culture by causing poor ocular health; even today, about one quarter of
all adults over forty worldwide cannot read without glasses, a technology
that was unavailable to the societies in question.

Ruth Finnegan discusses the problems involved in the definition of
“oral” and “written” literatures in a way that illuminates the often spurious
distinction between the two. She adeptly demonstrates how the categories
flow into each other, especially through the three modes of composition,
transmission, and performance. She provides examples of orally composed
texts subsequently being transmitted in writing, written texts being per-
formed orally, and other similar cases that blur the definition of what “oral”
and “written” mean (1977, 16–24). The realm of Theravāda Buddhism pro-
vides examples of these points. Subsequent to the writing down of the
Tipiṭaka in the first century BCE, there is little mention of written scriptures
in the historiographical literature from Sri Lanka, where the writing of the
scriptures took place, until the reign of the seventh-century Sri Lankan king
Kassaṇa II (MV 1925, 45.3). The one notable exception is the interesting ac-
count of Buddhaghosa’s writing of the commentaries (MV 1925, 37.215ff),
which will be discussed in Chapter One. Indeed, the oral tradition, although
not institutionalized as it once was, is today still alive in the Buddhist world.

The Guinness Book of World Records has the following entry:

Human memory: Bhandanta Vicitsara recited 16,000 pages of Buddhist
canonical texts in Rangoon, Burma in May 1974. Rare instances of eidetic
memory, the ability to project and hence recall material, are known to
science. (McWhirter 1986, 22)

William Graham (1987) has written about the loss of a consciousness of
the oral aspects of sacred texts that has permeated much scholarship about
religious “scripture.” He argues that the most useful conception of scripture
must include its oral and aural aspects. Even the meaning of the text must
embody not only a raw knowledge of its discursive contents, but also the
way it is used in oral frameworks, how it enters into language itself, and
how it sounds when chanted or read. These aspects he calls the sensual or
aesthetic meaning. This must be kept in mind when trying to understand
the popularity of the oral tradition—it captures some aspect of the text
which cannot be conveyed in writing. It calls the listener into its world
more thoroughly than can written texts. As I will demonstrate, the hearing
and memorization of texts was a prominent feature of Theravādin historiographical literature even into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

THE SOURCES

The Theravāda monks were the most energetic and prolific historiographers in all of South and Southeast Asia. Beginning with the Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa (MV) they chronicled the religious, political, and textual history of Buddhism. These chronicles are ordinarily centered around one of three themes: the history of Buddhism in general, the history of specific Buddha images, and the history of religious sites such as monasteries and reliquaries. While the chronicles are often based solely and uncritically on earlier records, and may thus be secondary or even tertiary sources, they nevertheless constitute the best literary sources available for learning about the region’s past, as I will discuss below. Pali texts such as the Sāsanavaṃsa (SV), Saddhammasaṅgaha (Law 1963), Gandhavaṃsa (Kumar 1992), Cāmadevīvaṃsa (CDV), and the Jinakālamālīpikaraṇaṃ (JKM) purport to relate the transmission of the teachings of the Buddha to Burma, Thailand, and other countries. These last two texts were produced in Lan Na during the Golden Age and will be used extensively in this book.

The CDV and the JKM were composed by monks from different orders in Lan Na who lived about one hundred years and forty kilometers apart. The CDV was composed at Haripuñjaya in the first part of the fifteenth century, probably around 1410 CE (CDVe, xxvi), by Bodhiramsi Mahāthera, who was also the author of a Pali chronicle about one of the most important Buddha images in Thailand, the Sīha Buddha (otherwise known as Phra Buddha Singh). The JKM, on the other hand, is the work of the araṅṇavāsī Ratanapañña Mahāthera, who composed it at Wat Pa Dāeng in Chiang Mai between 1516 and 1528 CE. The JKM is based on various sources, some from Sri Lanka and others from Thailand, most likely including the MV, CDV, and the Tamnan Mūlasāsanā from Wat Suan Dōk (MS).

In addition to the Pali chronicles mentioned above, information garnered from vernacular Thai chronicles known as tamnan and phongsawadan adds color to the picture of the textual world of Lan Na. The tamnans commence with an account of the Buddha himself and seek to connect him to the place or object that is the main subject of the text; the phongsawadans, while similar, tend to focus on dynastic history. The works of this type I have considered include the MS, the Chiang Mai Chronicle (TCM), the Nan Chronicle
(Nan), the Wat Pã Dæng Chronicle (TPD), The Crystal Sands: The Chronicles of Nagara Śrî Dharmarrãja (Wyatt 1975), and the Phongsawadan Yonok (Nottōn 1926). There are numerous tamnan that narrate the history of an individual image or relic, but there are no known works of this genre that deal with the history of a specific important or magically powerful manuscript.

One cannot simply open traditional chronicles and read them as history. Some people have considered it inappropriate to use them as anything but the most rudimentary of guides to the main events that constitute the history in question. Beginning with Alberuni and continuing through Hegel and Weber to the modern period of western scholarship, there has been a tendency to divide the world into a historically conscious West and an East blissfully unaware of the very passing of time, let alone historical development. This position can still be heard even in the face of countless inscriptions throughout the region that date and mark for posterity specific historical events and an entire genre of literature, called itihãsa, which claims to tell of the past. In the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, as I have said, there is a particularly strong historiographical tradition. However, these texts, in contradistinction to western ones, have often been seen as “uncritical” and ideologically driven, whereas “proper” history, executed by western scholars, is thought to provide a clearer picture of the past. This viewpoint predisposes one to focus on the mythical aspects of many of these texts and to claim on the strength of these that the texts are not to be valued as history (Wyatt 1994b, 3).

In the realm with which I am presently concerned—the media through which Buddhist texts were transmitted—the serious chronicles provide a general sense of development from a strictly oral framework of transmission in the distant past, to one which is increasingly more literate as time progresses. People from different eras are depicted using the communications technologies appropriate to their times. Thus we never hear of kings sponsoring the copying of Dhamma texts until well after the fourth council, when all the chronicles agree they were first written down. This is significant, given that an understanding of the diachronical progression of technological innovation is often not evident even in early modern artistic works of European provenance. For example, in Raphael’s 1506 Holy Family, depicting Jesus in Jerusalem, gothic churches with crosses can clearly be seen in the background; in Rembrandt’s Holy Family with Angels, from 1645, contemporary tools hang from the walls of Joseph’s carpentry shop, and the Holy Mother is reading a book even though the codex format was unknown until at least two centuries after Christ. To this list could be added the famously
anachronistic clock strike in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (2.1.190), as well as countless other examples culled from the western canon. One might therefore expect to encounter anachronisms in Pali chronicles that betray historical accuracy in the service of certain ideological goals. It would surely be no great surprise to come across a passage in which the paradigmatic third-century BCE king Asoka sponsors a royal copy of the Tipitaka. Such a story could serve to demonstrate that a ruler, in sponsoring a canonical copying project, is emulating the glorious, model deeds of Asoka. This kind of strategy is commonly deployed in other contexts in the Theravādin world, as Kevin Trainor (1997) highlights in his study of the relic cults. In the MV, for example, the Sri Lankan king Duṭṭagāmaṇī enshrines relics of the Buddha in the Mahāthūpa at Anurādhapura in a process similar to what was done earlier in the chronicle by the first Lankan Buddhist king Devānampiyatissa as well as by Asoka even earlier.

The early chronicles’ depiction of these exemplary kings provided models for later rulers whose own actions on behalf of the *sāsana* could be seen as congruent with the ideals of Buddhist kingship. In this respect, the king’s enshrinement of relics in *stūpas*, his maintenance and restoration of those *stūpas*, and his celebration of great festivals to honor the relics of the Buddha all served to demonstrate his fidelity to the Theravāda ideal of righteous rule. . . . By acting in conformity with this model, Sri Lankan kings no doubt reinforced their standing both in the eyes of the saṅgha members and among the populace at large. (Trainor 1997, 100)

In the realm of manuscript production, it would have been easier to inspire the scribes themselves to undertake the laborious, painstaking, and time-consuming process of making a manuscript if they could have been made to feel that they were thereby following the example of great and revered figures. Nevertheless, Pali or Thai historical narratives of important early Buddhist figures copying canonical texts are never found in the scholarly chronicles and are rare indeed in the more fanciful tales, even though their actions would have had an almost injunctive force which could easily have been translated into great support for such an endeavor.

I must also distinguish between two types of historical claim that I am making, which call upon different aspects of my sources. As I have stated already, I wish to create as accurate a chronology as possible of the development and expansion of written religious culture in the region, but I also hope to paint a picture of what that culture entailed. In pursuit of this, the
sociocultural aspects of the chronicles may be separated from their description of specific events. The overall sense of the textual forms and media that were being used when these chronicles were written can be distilled irrespective of the accuracy of certain dates. For example, if a text claims that a letter was sent from one ruler to another at some time in the past, one can safely say that, regardless of whether that particular instance of communication was actually effected through writing, written missives were used for interregnal communication at least by the time the account was written, otherwise the author would not have thought of it.

Whenever a chronicle focuses on the gilding of Buddha images rather than on the making of palm-leaf manuscripts, or on the building of vihāras but not on libraries, this can be interpreted in both event-historical and cultural or social-historical terms. In terms of the first, there are claims being made about how many of these items were actually produced, by whom, and when, which may or may not conform to reality. The veracity of the statement can be evaluated in light of other evidence in many cases, helping gradually to clear the haze surrounding the world under examination. However, even in the absence of any other evidence, we can still harvest valuable information from such accounts about the attitudes the author of the text held towards books, libraries, or images. And we can use this to help answer some crucial questions about a culture: What are the symbols around which its members coalesce? What practices does it marginalize, and why? How are social relations mediated through the institutions and practices that form around key technologies? Far from hindering my investigation, the ideological viewpoints of the authors are instead rich mines for information about the views that various social groups held about what position the growing technology of writing ought to have.

Northern Thai manuscripts, and especially their scribal colophons, constitute another major source for the study of textual transmission in the Lan Na kingdom. I have chosen to focus on palm-leaf manuscripts from Lan Na because they are among the oldest Pali documents available; a few date from the fifteenth century and scores from as early as the first half of the sixteenth century. Outside of these, the bulk of traditional chirographic Pali texts in the Theravādin world exist in nineteenth-century manuscripts. The oldest Pali manuscript yet found dates back to the sixth century and is from Śrī Kṣetra, once a major Pyu center in Burma; it consists of a selection of passages written on gold plates fashioned to look like palm leaves. Some stone wheels from seventh- or eighth-century Dvāravatī with brief extracts from Pali texts and a few isolated, short inscriptions have also been found in
Southeast Asia (Skilling 1997b). The earliest extant manuscript from Sri Lanka is of the Saṃyuttanikāya from 1411 CE, and the oldest Pali manuscript from Lan Na is part of a Jātaka from 1471 CE (von Hinüber 1985, 1).

Thousands of manuscripts from northern Thailand, of which some ten to fifteen percent are in Pali, have been microfilmed and cataloged by the Social Research Institute (SRI) at Chiang Mai University. The SRI has published its own catalog with the colophons of eighty-nine manuscripts (SRIcat), and several German scholars have also published useful information about these manuscripts. The Siam Society in Bangkok maintains a library of several dozen northern Thai manuscripts, as do the Royal Danish Library and the Otani University Library in Japan. These manuscripts and their colophons can provide valuable information, not just about the provenance of the work, but also about the circumstances under which it was made, how it was intended to be used, and how it was valued. The fact that the colophons are in the vernacular in itself opens up a range of questions about the knowledge of the scribes, the intended users of texts, and the interplay between Pali and other languages. I will address some of these issues in what follows.

I will supplement the literary-historiographical sources and the manuscripts with epigraphical and archaeological evidence. There are numerous inscriptions which provide information about such things as royal sponsorship of libraries and manuscripts, lay donations of lecterns for books, learned monks who know the Tipiṭaka by heart, and other matters pertaining to the transmission of Pali texts.

With few exceptions, Lan Na inscriptions from the earliest times until well into the twentieth century are to be found in one of two scripts, the Fak Kham or the Tham script. The Fak Kham script (named after its similarity to the shape of tamarind pods) was used from at least 1411 CE in official inscriptions, important letters, and other documents (Penth 1992, 52). It looks similar to the classical Sukhodaya script and, like it, probably developed out of a proto-Thai script that was based upon the scripts of the Mon as well as Tamil and Andhra grantha scripts. The Tham or Dhamma script, also known as Tua Müang (local letters), is far more rounded and, as its name suggests, was used mainly for religious texts in Pali, but was also adapted for the vernacular. Almost all palm-leaf manuscripts from the region employ this script, as well as many inscribed Buddha images and about 10 percent of lithic inscriptions. The Tua Müang script also developed out of the proto-Thai script but was apparently more heavily influenced by the Mon in use more recently at Haripuñjaya.24

While consideration may be given to historical information found in
these inscriptions, it is important to avoid the temptation to see them as providing a clear window onto the past that trumps the chronicles or other literary sources. Their agreement or disagreement with other texts should be taken neither as confirmation nor repudiation of the points under examination. The inscriptions may be based on the same source material as the more ephemeral historiographies, on hearsay, on the imagination of the author, or on the ruler’s desire to make history as he wishes it to have been.

One of the most difficult questions to answer in connection with inscriptions is that of their purpose. Should they be approached in the same way as any other textual form? Is their main function to convey some body of knowledge to a reader through a discursive engagement with the text, or are they more properly to be considered as physical representations of their text, perhaps embodying some numinous power, regardless of whether it is read or not? Petrucci, grappling with this issue in the context of Lombard inscriptions, emphasizes the “special solemnity of lapidary writing” (1995, 50) that comes through because of its monumental nature. He asserts that epigraphy, while conveying a verbal message to those who can read it, also imparts a figural message to the illiterate or semiliterate populations, who have only the slightest notion of what the text is about or who put it there. In a similar vein, Bierman (1998) in her study of what she terms the Fatimid public text, focuses on the context, placement, and appearance of Arabic text in both public and private spheres in Fatimid Egypt, arguing that these can offer up information about both the authors and the intended recipients. The historian should bear in mind that “meaning as understood here is not completely contained in the writing itself but, rather, grows in the web of contextual relationships woven between the official writing, the patrons, the range of beholders, and the established contexts in which that writing was placed (Bierman 1998, 15).

Does the efficacy of inscriptions lie mostly in the act of inscribing and installing the inscriptions themselves, what, following Bierman, we might term their territorial aspect, as opposed to their ability to be read many years in the future—their referential dimension? The idea of actually reading an old inscription to garner information from the text that it bears seems to be rather a modern phenomenon. Perhaps the utility of monumental writing differs according to the nature of the text; the intended uses of a commemorative epigraph marking the establishment of a new monastery might differ from those of an inscription of the Four Noble Truths. There are some instances where the inscription is clearly not intended for discursive engagement, because it has been sealed inside a reliquary or positioned
high atop a pillar or in a hard-to-reach cave. And, most importantly for the purposes of this study, what does all this say about the position of writing in the society that is home to such inscriptions?

KEY TERMS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Since much of the evidence that I present from literary and epigraphical sources is terminological, certain key words must be carefully considered. When dealing with Pali sources, I have looked for such words as likhita (written), patthaka (book), pāṭhā (reading), vāceti (literally: to cause to speak—and thus by extension to read aloud), as well as words connected with the oral tradition, such as ḍhā (said), vuttam (said), and uggabeta (grasped/taken up [in the mind]). I am fully aware, however, that one should be careful about what some words mean. The word vuttam, for instance, does not necessarily mean only “said,” but can be taken to mean “written” as well. For example, one finds the following: “Rājavanaṁ paṇcabh bhikkhusatehi ṛgamāṁ ti vuttam. Silālokhanapana viśattisabhassatethi bhikkbhūṁ ti vuttam” (SV, 37). This quote states that in one text, the Rājavansa, it is said (vuttam) that the Buddha traveled with 500 hundred monks, but in an inscription it is said (vuttam) that it was 20,000 monks. An inscription is by definition written, so the term vuttam must have a semantic field extending to a number of possible forms of communication. Because the tropes that are used in this literature derive from the primarily oral milieu of ancient India, the meanings of the words connected to orality extend into the realm of writing, and not vice versa. Thus the term “to say” in Pali texts may refer to writing as well, because oral discourse is taken to be primary, whereas the term “to write” (likh) would not refer to a spoken text, as it can in English (for example, “Paul McCartney wrote ‘Blackbird’ on his favorite guitar”).

Key Thai terms that have guided my research, such as nang sūa (letter/book), an (read), and khian (write), are somewhat less ambiguous than their Pali counterparts and help to clarify the question of what communications media were used in a number of instances. In the case of both Pali and Thai terms, context must always play a highly important role in determining the best meaning. This basic hermeneutic principle has not been deployed as often as might be desired in many Buddhological works, which is why I have mentioned it here. For example, a Pali or Thai statement that one might find in a chronicle to the effect that an individual “brought the Tipiṭaka” with him or “came with the Tipiṭaka” no more insists that a corpus of physical
books was delivered than does the English statement “he brought the Gospel into his house.” Only a full consideration of the particular environment in which such transmissions would have occurred can complete the picture of what transpired.

The picture of textual transmission that emerges using the methodology I have outlined is one painted in small strokes that are suggestive, rather than sharply defining. But when one stands back and looks at that picture, a clear image does take shape, like an impressionist painting. In the case of Lan Na, I will show that the general canvas is one of an oral society, on which the literate aspects stand out like dashes of color.

Before turning to that society, I would like to discuss one more term salient to this study: Tipiṭaka. Literally, it means “three baskets,” which refers to the three main divisions of Pali scriptures: the Vinaya (the monastic code); the Sutta (the discourses of and stories about the Buddha and his disciples); and the Abhidhamma (the psychophilosophical analyses of Buddhist doctrine and ontology). The word Tipiṭaka is often translated as “the Pali Canon,” and since within the ocean of Thai literature I am really looking at how this Pali Canon reached various shores, it is fitting that I explore just what it is that is the subject of this transmission.

The problems start with the name itself. If these texts were maintained orally for centuries, why would they have been associated with the word for “basket”? As Steven Collins has noted, “it is intriguing to speculate on what could be the metaphor underlying its use to mean ‘tradition’ given that one cannot literally put oral ‘texts’ in baskets” (1990, 92).

It has been suggested that the metaphor may be that the tradition is passed on in baskets just as earth or water is so passed by laborers in a chain, or perhaps the idea is simply that baskets contain things and knowledge can metaphorically be one of those things. The question for us, however, is what exactly were the contents of these three baskets and how do they map on to the notion of a “canon.” Perhaps I should go even further back and discuss the term “Pali” in the expression “Pali Canon.” The term pāli, like the term Tipiṭaka, is not found in the core canonical texts themselves but rather becomes current around the first century CE in commentarial and ancillary literature, where it is used to refer to text upon which the commentaries (aṭṭhakathā) offer their insights. When the term pāli-bhāsa is found in the commentarial literature, therefore, it means “the language of the root text,” as opposed to what is found in the other layers of commentary. The word Pāli, then, strictly speaking refers to the core collection of canonical texts around which the commentarial tradition developed, and it is in this sense
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The word “canon” denotes a list of texts regarded as having particular authority within a tradition, but that list may be “open” or “closed.” Mahāyāna Buddhism has an open canon, to which texts have been added through the ages using various strategies, all of which claim for such texts agreement with the message of the Buddha. Theravāda Buddhism, on the other hand, developed a closed canon like Judaism and Islam, to which texts cannot normally be added. New ideas and stories can be introduced through the commentarial literature and receive wide dissemination and traditional authority in that manner, but strictly speaking they cannot become a formal part of the Tipiṭaka. This closed canon, though, was developed; it did not appear as a complete corpus all at once, like a bird bursting forth from its shell, but was collected and edited in the centuries following the death of the Buddha. It is impossible to say precisely which texts were recited at the councils held periodically after the death of the Buddha, but the Tipiṭaka surely includes significant portions that are very similar to many of the texts there recited, even though it should not be entirely identified with the body of literature produced through these councils as the tradition would have us believe. Collins has pointed out that Theravāda Buddhism did not arise around the Tipiṭaka but rather produced it (1990, 89). But once this process was complete, at the latest by the time the commentaries were set in the fifth century, acceptance of this particular canon became a defining feature of the Theravāda school. Defining though it may have been, the actual contents of this body of literature were not known by most Buddhists, or even by most monks. Certain parts would, for practical no less than philosophical reasons, have been studied and preached more commonly than others, and conversely, noncanonical texts such as the Paññāsā Jātaka (Jaini 1983) and Mālayyadevattheratthu (Collins 1993), which will be discussed in later chapters, were and are both widely known and highly influential.

Again I turn to Collins, who observes that “the evidence suggests that both in so-called ‘popular’ practice and in the monastic world, even among virtuosos, only parts of the Canonical collection have ever been in wide currency, and that other texts have been known and used, sometimes very much more widely” (1990, 103).

Collins suggests that we can refer to a “ritual canon” that is the collection of texts from the Tipiṭaka as well as other sources deemed to be authoritative for any particular community of Buddhists that are actually in use in the cultic and scholastic life of the faithful. This kind of corpus is so common
that when the historical and other texts that have been used as the sources for the present study speak of the transmission of the Tipiṭaka, we must assume that this term is being used to stand for the canon, but does not necessarily mean that in each instance the entire body of literature so defined was actually transmitted. Indeed, it is extremely rare to find a complete copy of the Tipitaka in monasteries today in any medium, and its existence in palm-leaf manuscript form in any of the older collections in monastic libraries in Thailand is, in fact, unknown. When the texts that will be examined in this book speak of the transmission of the Tipitaka, we might best take this to connote that all three parts of the canon (as opposed to, say, only the Vinaya texts) were well represented, but not necessarily that they were complete. We can see evidence for this contention in a text called Pitok Tang Sam, which purports to be a summary of the three sections of the canon (tang sam means "all three") but actually focuses only on a few portions (Coedès 1966, 70). When tracing the transmission of the Tipitaka, one should keep in mind François Bizot’s statement that the Tipitaka is an ideological concept rather than a specific collection of texts (1976, 21).

There is no doubt that Louis Renou’s assertions about the Vedas can be applied at least in part to the Tipitaka as it appears in the chronicles and inscriptions that will form the fabric of this study. In Laurie Patton’s words, "Renou asserts that over time the Vedic canon became a kind of empty icon, signifying various kinds of prestige and power, but little else. According to Renou, in the classical and modern religious traditions of India, only the ‘outside’ of the Veda has survived" (Patton 1994, 1).

As found in the sources used for this study, the “outside” of the Tipitaka is far more important than its contents. It achieves iconic status and symbolizes for those who have the resources to produce it the power and authority of the Buddha, depending on the context within which it is produced. It has syntactic value within the constellation of objects, ideas, and practices that constitute the world of Buddhism, but little semantic value that can be deduced from the sources I have used. Perhaps nothing could endorse this notion better than the fact that throughout Southeast Asia, copies of canonical texts are repeatedly found with their leaves gilded together.