Our journey begins with a story—and I use the terms “narrative,” “story,” and “tale” more or less interchangeably, along with other words such as “account,” rather than employing them as strict technical terms of folkloristics or literary studies. The story at the core of this experiment is one of a man who has sex with his mother and kills his father. For some—to cite Hillel entirely out of context—all the rest is commentary. Psychoanalytically minded readers may find my interest in historical detail both overwhelming and ultimately irrelevant in light of the deeper psychological truths in play here. My own interests, however, lie more in the Buddhist traditions of India than they do in the abstractions of human psychology (if on a deep level these two can actually be fully separated). Hence, how and why Buddhist authors told their stories I see as questions not merely of Freudian import, but also as opening windows to Buddhist self-understandings. I will argue that Buddhist authors intentionally took up and deployed the story of an Oedipal antihero to prosecute a particular agenda of sectarian polemical propaganda. In order to understand what they did, why they might have done it, and how their tactic appears to have been received, I attempt to reconstruct ancient Indian—and particularly Buddhist—attitudes toward incest. In doing so I hope to visualize the environment within which the core story would have been received; further discussions of the wider significance of Indian attitudes may be reliably engaged in only upon this basis.

An introduction to the structure of the book will help to make clear its overall intentions. I have divided the work into twenty chapters, the first of which is dedicated to setting out the basic problematics with which the remainder attempts to come to terms. In Chapter 1 I introduce the core narrative of the man called Mahādeva, who has a love affair with his mother and kills his father. I then explore how and why this story provides a good point of departure for asking questions about the development of sectarian Buddhism in India on the one hand and the putative universality of social or psychological norms with respect to incest on the other.

Chapter 2 introduces the historical situation of early Indian Buddhist sectarianism and the explicit polemical context within which the story of Mahādeva is related in an important scholastic text, the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhaṣā*, while Chapter 3 offers a somewhat more detailed look at the story itself and its narration. Chapter 4 briefly discusses indigenous Indian Buddhist thinking about the stock set of crimes of which Mahādeva is accused, in which, interestingly, no
great stress is put on his incest, the focus being rather on his murders (for having murdered his father, he goes on to kill a Buddhist saint and his mother as well). The overwhelmingly positive nature of Buddhist ethics is highlighted in this context by the fact that commission of even the worst imaginable crimes does not lead to eternal damnation, that idea playing essentially no role in Buddhist thought or mythology.

Chapter 5 investigates what other traditional Buddhist sources relate about the story of Mahādeva, and looks at how his story is told in East Asian and Tibetan Buddhist sources as well. Although these later traditions may represent developments of Indian thinking, rather than strictly reflecting Indian ideas or interpretations, as a sort of native commentary authored by those from within the tradition they serve as valuable resources for our understanding.

Since the story of Mahādeva is presented as a justification or rationale for the creation of the initial schism that split the previously unified monastic community, it is important to survey the ways this schism is portrayed in traditional sources. This is the task of Chapter 6, which introduces the accounts of Buddhist doxographies. Here, too, some attempt is made to understand why the character of Mahādeva may have been chosen for the role of instigator of the schism, with particular attention to the significance of his name.

Where did the authors or editors of the story of Mahādeva find their material? Is it a historical account or something else? Chapter 7 presents what I believe must represent the source of the story in the tale of Dharmaruci, as found in the Divyāvadāna, a collection of Buddhist stories transmitted separately from their original homes, but which are mostly traceable to the literature of monastic rules (Vinaya). In the story of Dharmaruci we find the same basic narrative of an Oedipal criminal, yet no connection with any sectarian or schismatic concerns. This sets the stage for my contention that the compilers of the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā intentionally borrowed the story of Dharmaruci, fitting it to their own needs.

Chapter 8 explores the portrayal of the protagonist Mahādeva/Dharmaruci, and through an examination of the manner in which his moral culpability is presented begins to support the argument that the Dharmaruci story was intentionally and self-consciously adapted and transformed into the calumnious story of Mahādeva. In this context, issues related to sexual assault and psychological conditioning are considered and the applicability of modern discussions of these problems to ancient Indian society debated.

Chapter 9 briefly introduces a trope Indian Buddhist sources share with literatures from the classical Greek and Roman world to China—that of the “perverse Persians” for whom, it is alleged, incest was a religious obligation. The purpose of this survey is to establish that the ancient Indians, like their neighbors,
strongly disapproved of incest, notwithstanding the fact that the explicit objections to Mahâdeva's behavior all center on his murders and demonstrate no overt concern with his incest. Part of my overall argument is that although Indian Buddhists may not discuss it in the context of the Mahâdeva story, they certainly were concerned with incest, which they did find objectionable, although not unimaginable. Buddhist treatments of incest nevertheless appear to stand in contrast to those of ancient Indian Hindu sources, an issue considered in Chapters 15, 16, and 17.

Chapter 10 explores the motif of the bedtrick, the literary device in which sexual partners are portrayed as unaware of their mutual identities or where one partner is unaware of the identity of the other. Here I argue, once again, that a crucial transformation took place when the story of Dharmaruci was altered into that of Mahâdeva, a reorientation in which the protagonist was intentionally made culpable.

Chapter 11 introduces a second Indian telling of the story of Dharmaruci, that of the eleventh-century Kashmiri poet Kṣemendra. Kṣemendra’s presentation, which is directly based on that in the Divyāvadāna, gives us a rare opportunity to see how a traditional reader understood and retold the story of Dharmaruci.

In Chapter 12 we turn to other presentations of the same basic plot, in many of which the central character is differently named. This survey allows us to gauge the popularity of the story in surviving Buddhist literature and to further the argument that a pre-existing story was taken over by the compilers of the *Abhidharma Mahâvibhâṣā* with self-conscious intent. Chapter 13 widens the scope by taking cognizance of a range of incest stories in Indian Buddhist literature, with the goal of gaining some appreciation for the extent of this motif in Indian Buddhist culture. We find, somewhat surprisingly, that the motif exists here and there in Indian Buddhist texts, a presence the important further implications of which are explored later. Chapter 14 focuses on a lengthy tale of a woman named Utpalavarȋ, later to become a famous nun, and the multiple instances of incest that punctuate her life story. This is followed in Chapter 15 by a broader look at the Oedipal in ancient Indian society in general framed by an examination of the ideas of A. K. Ramanujan and Robert Goldman concerning what Ramanujan has called the “Indian Oedipus.” Here we enter a more theoretical realm, one dealing with cross-cultural patterns of thought and the nature of the human psyche.

The Buddhist evidence uncovered in the earlier chapters, I argue, may challenge the hypotheses of Ramanujan and Goldman, but additional evidence may also be found in other sources. Some of this evidence forms the focus of Chapter 16, which studies the motif of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, stories of a mother-figure’s attempts to seduce a son-figure. Examples of both Buddhist and
non-Buddhist stories demonstrate that the motif of mother-son incest, one crucial leg of the Oedipal tripod, is relatively widely found in classical Indian literature, albeit in slightly displaced fashion. Further evidence for the presence of the Oedipal in ancient India, overlooked by Ramanujan and Goldman, may be discovered even in several Purânas, scriptures highly valued by Hindu traditions. Two instances are studied in Chapter 17, which explores their differences from and similarities to Buddhist presentations of the same theme.

Chapter 18 is devoted to a contrastive case from medieval Europe, in which we find in the tale of the Oedipal Judas a presentation structurally remarkably similar to, but ultimately conceptually quite different from, that of the Indian Buddhist Mahādeva. The starkest contrast comes from the work the respective tales were made or expected to do: the Judas tale was a more or less popular recounting one clear purpose of which was antisemitic incitement, while the Mahādeva story was always focused internally, on intra-Buddhist sectarian concerns and quarrels.

In Chapter 19 I turn to the basic question of what may have inspired its authors to deploy the Oedipal tale of Mahādeva. Here I investigate the hold that incest has on human mentality and try to trace the social and biological bases of that fascination. Modern scientific thinking sees the roots of incest abhorrence in both biological and psychological causes, and I suggest that an understanding of these factors helps us see how ancient Indian attitudes, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, fit into larger human concerns.

The final chapter, “Forging Mahādeva,” argues that the authors of the Mahādeva story self-consciously utilized a pre-existing story of an Oedipal criminal, the story we now know as the tale of Dharmaruci, in order to promote their own sectarian agendas and demonize their opponents. This story and others we have encountered not only challenge the picture Ramanujan and Goldman have painted of an Indian Oedipus, a picture based solely on non-Buddhist sources, but they also illuminate the diversity of ancient Indian worlds of thought. This in turn raises questions with regard to some of the ways ancient Indian evidence has been used in comparativist universal and theoretical discussions of the Oedipal. Finally, my “essay” ends—for here perhaps “concludes” is not the best word—with an appreciation of the position in which the ancient Indian Buddhist historians found themselves as they tried to understand Mahādeva’s history, both in the sense of a chronicle of what happened and as a lesson for how to understand and appropriate the past. In this sense, I suggest, our job as modern historians does not fundamentally differ from that of the historians of old.