“Making Land Sacred: Inscriptional Evidence for Buddhist Kings and Brahmin Priests in Medieval Bengal”¹ (forthcoming in Numen).

Benjamin J. Fleming
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In South Asian religions, concern for sacred space abounds. Literary, artistic, and archaeological evidence points to an intensive interest in temples, pilgrimage sites, and natural formations (e.g., rivers, mountains) already in ancient and medieval times. Scholarly considerations of literary references to the sanctity and sanctification of space have been similarly plentiful and have focused on traditional Sanskrit genres such as Purāṇas and Māhātmyas, exploring how these texts map the landscapes of the Indian subcontinent as sacred to various deities (e.g., Kane 1953; Eck 1981, 1998; Bakker 1996; Granoff 1998; Bisschop 2006; Fleming 2009). Art-historical studies have explored the significance of sacred space in premodern South Asia with reference to temples and stūpas alike (e.g., Kramrisch 1976; Meister 1990; Levy 1997; Brown 2009).

By contrast, less attention has been paid to the inscriptional data. In this article, I would like to suggest that land-grant inscriptions may provide an overlooked source of evidence for ideas about sacred space within and between South Asian religions. In particular, I hope to open up questions about medieval conceptualizations of the sanctification of space through the lens of copperplate inscriptions recording the granting of land by Buddhist kings to Brahmin priests in the Bengal region. I explore the possibility that these inscriptions—by marking out specific boundaries, both physically and conceptually—served to sign-post the sacred, functioning to telegraph or project the sacred, and thereby transforming the landscape. In the process, I bring sociological discussions about exchanges of religious prestige and royal power (esp., Bourdieu 1972, 1977, 1989, 1997) to bear on the evidence of land-grant inscriptions and related legal traditions from medieval South Asia (cf. Mauss 1923–1924; Heim 2004; Ohnuma 2005, 2007; Brick 2009).

In research on premodern South Asia, land-grant inscriptions have typically been mined for historical and geographical information. It is not unusual in epigraphical catalogues, for example, to see the presentation of the orthography, dynastic lineages, locales, and dates of an inscription listed and described in great detail, with little regard to the context in which a given inscription arose, or to its rhetoric, function, or poetics. While the information gathered in such studies is invaluable for our understanding of the past, there arguably needs to be more of an interpretive apparatus introduced into the process of analysis. Otherwise, one may run the risk of limiting or potentially restricting our interpretation of these documentary data to some kind of “magical window” onto the historical past; such a level of interpretation is not only one-dimensional but may miss something of the discursive and performative aspects of the inscriptions themselves.

¹ Versions and parts of this paper have been presented at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, Sacred Space in Asia Group, Chicago 2008; the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion annual meeting, Vancouver 2008; the Oriental Club of Philadelphia 2008; the Penn Humanities Forum on Change, University of Pennsylvania, 2009; and History and Material Culture in Asian Religions, conference at University of Pennsylvania, 2010. I would like to thank Justin McDaniel, Jinan Kim, Annette Yoshiko Reed, and the various anonymous reviewers who have commented on drafts of this paper.
Historians of South Asia have recently begun to reevaluate inscriptive materials with an eye to their literary and rhetorical features, as well as their limits as direct records of historical realities. Thus, for instance, Daud Ali (2000: 216) rereads Cola inscriptions as “dialogical utterances of royal courts” rather than as “static monological documents passively expressive of some political (or social reality)”; he thus highlights their deployment of the royal eulogy (praśasti) as an extension of eulogistic court poetry (kāvya), forming part of a broader continuum about the past that extends beyond the plates themselves. Making a similar argument for legal materials, Donald R. Davis, Jr. (2005: 113-14) calls for the reconsideration of inscriptive evidence as part of a continuum of discourse with Dharmaśāstra literature. “Epigraphists have, with good reason, been critical of the heavy reliance by historians on texts like the SC [Smṛticandrika] and other Dharmaśāstras,” Davis (2005: 113–14) notes. But he also argues against scholarly approaches that treat inscriptions as a more direct window onto lived realities (cf. Arnold 2000; Orr 2001): “while epigraphists have helped to demonstrate the limitations of using śāstra texts for historical research, some fail to apply the same level of critical scrutiny to the nature of epigraphical sources” (Davis 2005: 114).²

The present article applies Ali’s and Davis’s insights to a set of copperplate land-grant inscriptions from tenth- and eleventh-century Bengal, issued by the Buddhist kings of the Candra dynasty.³ It seeks to situate the inscriptions in relation to a broader body of ritual and legal literature and, in doing so, to illuminate the ritual character and effects of the acts of exchange between Brahmans and Buddhist kings, as recorded on and embodied by the copperplates. I argue for an integrative approach to questions of sacred space, akin to what is modeled by Ali and Davis with respect to courtly and legal discourses; here too, it is misleading to privilege any one type of data over another. Such an approach—I suggest—helps us to draw out some of the broader ritual and “religious” implications of what is typically treated as an “economic” transaction—namely, the transfer of land from royal to priestly control, which forms the heart of the copperplate’s function and formation.

In exploring these connections, my broader goal is to open new ways of considering our inscriptive data for the religious history of South Asia, beyond the view that these materials are simply fodder for the reconstruction of political and geographical details. This will be achieved by honing in on the literary, oral, ritual, and performative elements of Candra copperplate land-grant inscriptions in relation to the spatial boundaries delineated through acts of royal giving and priestly reciprocity. As we shall see, the Candra copperplates record how specific Brahmical groups received royal donations of land, apparently in exchange for ritual services. Accordingly, the inscriptions can be analyzed with reference to legal and ritual traditions preserved in ancient and medieval Sanskrit literature, but also with ideas about gift-giving and the economy of the sacred in both “Hinduism” and “Buddhism.” Attention to such connections also reveals interesting connections between the parties described in these inscriptions, namely, Buddhist kings and Brahmin ritual experts in medieval Bengal.

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² Davis (2005: 113) here points to the poignant statement about the unreliability of dates on pre-Islamic inscriptions in Salomon (1998: 226).
1. Sacred Space and the Sanctification of Land
To be sure, the creation and conceptualization of sacred space is a complex issue in many religious and cultural contexts, and perhaps particularly in South Asia. On the one hand, the cross-cultural and trans-historical application of ideas about sacred space can run the risk of conflating the specificities of diverse traditions into an arguably limited category. One must be wary of the universalizing assumptions about “religion” that such categories can evoke. On the other hand, the notion of sacred space can be a helpful heuristic tool. When explored through the specifics of the case at hand, it can offer up a hermeneutical lens that helps us to illuminate, clarify, and speculate on the manner in which premodern cultures conceptualized divisions of land, especially in terms of private and public purposes. Such premodern concepts, for instance, may be contrasted, at least to some extent, with modern attitudes towards land as “property.”

To my knowledge, medieval land-grant inscriptions have not yet been considered in this context. It is well-known that the naming of a place in a Sanskrit literary text—together with its continued recitation in the context of māhāmyas, stotras (hymns), and other poetic works—was enough to raise its status and to ensure its continued visitation by pilgrims. The practice of eulogizing and listing pilgrimage sites in such texts is important for the sanctification of the landscape in medieval South Asian religions. What I would like to suggest is that land-grant inscriptions may have functioned in similar ways.

A focus on the sanctification of space draws our attention, not just to the literary and rhetorical features of the corpus of Candra land-grant inscriptions, but also to their oral, ritual, and performative components—what one might call their para-literary features. As we shall see, the Candra inscriptions evoke a ceremonial complex of land-granting, and sometimes include self-referential comments about their own creation. By focusing on questions of sacred space, we are challenged to approach the insessional corpus of the Candra dynasty as a

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4 For discussions of this category in the field of Religious Studies, the work of Mircea Eliade (esp. 1959) and the critiques by Jonathan Z. Smith (esp. 1987, 1993) have been central. Here, my treatment of “sacred space” takes for granted Smith’s (1987: 105) core insight that “[r]itual is not an expression of or a response to ‘the Sacred’; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual.” For a recent reassessments of approaches to space, place, the sacred, etc., by both Eliade and Smith, see Grimes 2006: 101–16, as well as the 2008 Journal of the American Academy of Religion “Review Forum” reassessing Smith 1987; most relevant for themes considered below are Weitzman 2008; Thomas 2008.

5 Gerardus van der Leeuw (1986: 52–53) was one of the first scholars to discuss the politics of property with respect to sacred space in the premodern world; cf. Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 6–8. For an examination of related political manipulation of ritual as documented in temple inscriptions in South India, e.g., see Heitzman 1991.

6 The scholarly literature on pilgrimage is massive and need not be rehearsed here. See Granoff 1998, however, for a theoretical model for considering the conceptual space between temples and the land around them with respect to the South Asian category of the sacred.

7 In the Kāśi-khaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa tradition, for instance, the celebration of twelve sites called ādiyās ends with the assertion that hearing (śrutvā) the names of these sites can avert disaster (Uttara-khaṇḍa 51.118). Similarly, many stotras (i.e., hymns) end with praises that emphasize the importance of hearing about a given site and the power associated with this act; in some cases, it would seem that the hearer need not even visit the site and may gain the benefit from the oral performance of a hymn or text alone.

8 In other words, my suggestion here is that the inscriptions can be read as literary documents within a particular genre, but they can also stand in for, and attest, an entire complex of thought and action. See further below on the self-referentiality of some of the Candra inscriptions.
premodern example of literature activated through performance and ritual, for the specific
aim of sanctifying land. When we consider how the literary formation of such inscriptions
interacts with the oral and ritual components of granting land, moreover, we are pushed also
to think broadly about the reception of texts and writing in pre-modern South Asia. By
expanding our understanding of “text” beyond literary works—in a manner that encompasses
the acts of writing recorded on and physically embodied by inscriptional artifacts—we may be
able to glimpse some of the connections that existed (at least in the minds of certain court
functionaries) between text, ritual, and landscape.

A focus on space may also help us highlight some “religious” elements of land transfer,
gifting, and exchange overlooked by some “economic” models. In this, we may profit by
attending to the correlation between body, gesture, status, and socially-constructed space by
as to read the Candra land-grant inscriptions in terms of a ceremonial complex of ritual
elements, brought together for the purpose of delineating space and gifting land. Bourdieu’s
discussions of cultural capital and exchange may be similarly useful for pointing us to the
correlation between ritual performance and its social and political dimensions in the donative
delineation of sacred space in medieval Bengal.9

2. Royal Land-giving in Candra Copperplate Inscriptions
There are approximately thirteen known copperplate land-grant inscriptions issued by kings
of the Candra dynasty, eight of which are from the reign of Śrīcandra, a Buddhist king who
ruled in the Bengali region between 930 and 975 CE.10 All of the Candra copperplates were
written in Sanskrit and record the royal granting of lands to Brahmins. Accordingly, these
inscriptions shed light on interactions between Buddhist and Brahmanical communities in the
tenth and eleventh centuries, pointing to the fluidity between medieval Bengali religious
communities and state structures.

Each plate begins with a praśasti section that includes a generic homage to the king
issuing the grant, an invocation to Buddhist principles, and a mytho-historical description
of the lineage of the king. Typically, the Candra copperplates begin with appeals to the three
jewels, namely, the Buddha himself (sometimes referred to here as “Jina” or “Victor”), the
dharma, and the saṅga (i.e., the community of monks). These opening points signal the
affiliation with Buddhism (Sanderson 2009: 83; Fleming 2010: 227; Bronkhorst 2011: 162), which
is also underlined in the description of the Candra royal lineage, which includes allusions
to the Buddhist affiliation of Suvarnacandra and his heirs and, in the case of the plates associated
with king Śrīcandra, appeals to the Buddha’s “hare-birth story” (śāsaka jātaka).11 The second
portion of each plate consists of a single long prose sentence, which often comprises more

9 For a brief discussion of Bourdieu’s theories in relation to sacred space and its political resonances in
10 An overview and assessment of the known Śrīcandra plates can be found in Fleming 2010: 223-44.
Additionally, there are four known copperplate land-grant inscriptions issued by Śrīcandra’s descendants, for
which see Dani 1961, 1966; Mills 1993: 85-86. For other inscriptions of this dynasty see Huntington 1984: 61-64,
242-244, Plates 64-67.
11 On praśasti as a genre see, e.g., Ali 2000: 169-75; Sircar 1966: 257. The reference to Suvarnacandra’s
Buddhist affiliation is clear, even if the possible reference to his conversion remains debatable (Sanderson 2009:
83 n. 141; cf. Majumdar, 1983: 201).
than half of the entire text of the inscription. This portion conveys the details of the land to be
donated (e.g., size, description, location), gives a list of courtly and other dignitaries said to be
present at the land-granting ceremony, and provides details about the Brahmins who receive
the land (e.g., name, Vedic school, ritual specialty, region of origin). The third and final portion
consists of a series of standard blessings and curses.\footnote{See further below.}

Most relevant, for our purposes, is the second portion of the inscription, which pertains
to the land itself. By way of example, I quote at length from my recent translation of the Bogra
plate (Fleming 2010: 236-7):

With regard to this (one) \textit{pātaka} of land, (in the town of) Vyāghravoraka, belonging to the
district of Śrīnagara, in the region of Samataṭa, in the middle of the great province of Paumḍra,
he (i.e., Śrīcandra) appropriately honours, addresses, inscribes, and commands all who have
gathered together: the queen, noblemen, princes, king’s ministers, regional rulers, military
planners, ministers of foreign affairs, generals, record keepers, administrators, head of the
king’s doors, minister of forts, those who catch dangerous robbers, those who remove thieves,
officiators over the fleets, elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes, goats, and sheep, etc.,
commanders of troops, tax inspectors, junior police, sergeants, and police chiefs, governors of
districts, and the like, as well as other servants of the king: those said to work as inspectors and
those who were not announced here: members of the communities of Cāṭas and Bhaṭas,
citizens, farmers, and leading Brahmins. It must be understood by all of you (present) that this
land, as inscribed (in this plate) above, which is limited by its own boundaries, is flanked on all
sides pastures of \textit{pāṭī}-grass, with its low-lying and elevated land, along with its mango,
breadfruit, betel-nut, and cocoa-nut trees, with salt (derived from sea water), with (fresh)
water and dry land, with its salt-rich soils and caves, with the (removal of) the ten faults, with
the eradication of robbers, with all sorts of impositions removed, it is without interference
from (the communities of) Cāṭaś and Bhaṭas, free from taxation which is associated with levies
of gold on all royal subsidies (is granted by us), having first performed the water ceremony
according to the rules, (I grant this land) to the one who officiates the Koṭihoma ritual, the
blessed Śrīkaradatta Śarman, who is the son of Varadatta, grandson of Varadatta, great-
grandson of Bhaṭtaputra\textit{v}oḍhadat\textit{a}śarman, and a protector of Brahmans, who hails from the
village of Hastipada in the Śrāvasti region.

It is in this section that we find, not just the “raw data” of names and places, but also
references to what may be reconstructed, in this and other Candra land-grant inscriptions, as
the broader ritual context for the treatment and transformation of the exchange of land.

I would like to suggest that these land-grant inscriptions can be read as attesting a
broader ceremonial complex for marking out space within a sacred economy of royal and
priestly reciprocity. This and other Candra inscriptions claim to record actions done in
historical time—whether they are records of actual events or simply intended to convey this
impression for the sake of evoking the ideal royal actions that might accompany the transfer
of land.\footnote{The ceremonies attached to the exchange of land, moreover, are well-known in medieval South Asia. Inscriptional evidence, for instance, attests rituals performed during gift-granting ceremonies, which include...} Although the ritual context is largely tacit and taken for granted, rather than
explicitly outlined, there are important traces of a public ritual act of exchange of land from king to priest, involving courtly, priestly, and other witnesses, and achieved through the orchestration and arrangement of various actions. This exchange, moreover, forms part of a broader ceremonial complex that encompasses two components of an implied sacred economy: [1] the sanctification of the land by the Buddhist king who invites Brahmins from other areas to migrate and newly settle in his territories and [2] the performance of specific rituals (many of which we know from other contexts, e.g., attributed to the Atharvaveda Purohitas) by the Brahmanical donees, as reciprocity for the gift of the land and for the sake of its purification and protection.14

The various royal actions described include the water ceremony performed by the king, the oral proclamation of the king of the intention to grant the land to the donees, and the writing of the inscription itself on the king’s behalf. Also invoked is the presence, witness, and memory of courtly and other dignitaries. Even though the actual transfer of land is not explicitly named on the inscriptions, it forms the context and horizon for all of the listed actions, which—in turn—are depicted as elements of the exchange. The transfer of land is central to the arrangement of the rest of the details and at the heart of their orchestration. Read from this perspective, moreover, the description of the donees at the end of this section, identifying the geographical origins and ritual specialization of the Brahmin, individuals or communities who receive the gift of land, point to what is offered to the king in return: ritual services by the donees. In the case of the Bogra plate, for instances, the donee is described first as “the one who officiates the Koṭihoma ritual,” then by name, lineage, and place of origin.

We will return below to consider other evidence for the ritual practices and expertise of the Brahmins depicted in the Candra inscriptions as recipients of royally-granted land. First, however, it is useful to consider the actions attributed to the king and others. Most explicitly ceremonial in character is the specific water rite, udakapūrva, that the king performs right before granting the land. The larger ceremonial complex of which the water rite forms a part, however, is evoked by a series of transitional verbs, found on most of the complete Candra copperplates,15 after the specific details of the land (location, size, etc.),16 and right before the stock list of the dignitaries, etc., said to be the audience and witness of the royal speech.17 The verbs in this series evoke two general meanings. First is the conveyance, on the part of the

land-granting. Kane notes, for instance, that king Laksmanaśeṇa of Bengal (r. 1178-1206 CE) performed a mahādāna ritual called the Hemāśvaratha; and Dantidurga of Ujjain (r. 733-56 CE) is said to have performed a Hiranyagarbha Mahādāna ritual (History of Dharmasastra, 2.869-71).

14 For a discussion of purohita, see Bronkhorst 2011: 37-8, 77-8, 240; he designates two kinds of landgrants one to Bramhmins, including purohitas, the second to ascetics (77-8).

15 The Kedarpur plate is incomplete, for example, and does not contain this transitional verse, since it bears only the praśasti portion discussed above. The Idilpur plate is damaged, now lost, and remains unpublished (Bhattasali 1923-4: 189); thus, such details it may contain are unknown. The transitional verse and its set of verbs are, in any case, not unique to the Candra plates, and variations are found in other dynastic examples which name royal dignitaries.

16 For details about the land distribution of the Candras, the names of their various provinces, etc., see Sircar 1971: 132-6, 149-58; Morrison 1970: 115-25; Fleming 2010: 225-7.

17 The list of dignitaries varies only slightly on the various Candra copperplates, which mostly list figures of the royal house, the government, and a variety of other officials such as those in charge of the military and police forces. Many of the functionaries are not identifiable with any certainty, and some scholars (e.g., Sircar 1968: 294) thus choose to leave much of the list un-translated.
king to the dignitaries, of the information that the inscription contains about the specifics of the gifted land. Second is the presentation of the dignitaries themselves—in the sense of their being proclaimed as present to witness to the gifting of the land; the names of the dignitaries, in effect, are preserved and inscribed as a permanent record of the witness to the exchange between the king and the particular Brahmin donee.

These two meanings are typically conveyed by three verbs in succession. In what might be understood as the stock phrase, as it appears in the majority of Candra copperplate land-grant inscriptions, the successive verbs are mānayati (lit. “he causes to honour”), bodhayati (lit. “he causes to announce”), and samādiśati (“he commands”). The stock phrase reads in full:

[H]e appropriately honours, addresses, inscribes, and commands all who have gathered together.

yathārham mānayati bodhayati likhati samādiśati ca | matam astu bhavatām |

This formula, with slight variations is found consistently on Candra copperplate inscriptions, as well as those of other medieval rulers in the same region (e.g., Pāla dynasty). It represents the heart of the actions of the king to whom the praśasti portion of the inscription is dedicated. It also points forward to the list of witnesses immediately followed, as indicated by bhavatām—a formal address suggesting, in its plural form, “all,” “everyone present,” or “all who have gathered”; it is these dignitaries who serve as witnesses to the event. Of particular note in this regard is the verb bodhayati, which may be read either as “he announces” or “he addresses”; the implication is either that the king “announces” the names of the witnesses or that he “addresses” them with regard to the details of the granting of land. Both senses are possible, and a double meaning may well be intended.

In addition to the most commonly found verbs cited above, some versions of the formula on the Candra copperplates include variations, such as samājñāpayati, ādiśati, vadati, and likhati. The terms samājñāpayati and ādiśati are alternates to samādiśati; both also can be rendered, in this context, as “he commands.” Interesting additions to the standard three verbs are vadati and likhati. While the other verbs express a sense of the king’s authority and control over his subjects, vadati (like bodhayati) expresses the act of announcing or proclaiming. The two verbs are found together on a single plate (i.e., the Madanpur Plate) and, taken together, suggest nuanced, if distinct, meanings with regards to the list of dignitaries. The shift from causative (bodhayati) to active indicative (vadati), for example, may indicate a shift from the image of the king as reciting or announcing the names of the dignitaries to the image of him speaking directly to them. The term likhati (lit. “he writes” or “he inscribes”) is found on the Bogra plate. It may be a telling addition to the sequence of stock verbs that appear on most of

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18 For variations of this stock phrase in Pāla dynasty plates see, for example, lines 48-49 of the Khālīmpur plate (775-812 CE), line 33 of the Nālandā plate (812-850 CE), and lines 37-38 of the Bhāgalpur plate (855-910 CE) in Sircar 1983: 2.68, 75, 84. The Nālandā plate has a particularly interesting variation: “as is known, his command extends even to the lowliest outcast, all who are present” (caṇḍālaparyantān samājñāpayati viditam astu bhavatāṃ; Sircar 1983: 2.68).

19 Most of the editors of Candra plates have rendered bodhayati as “[he] informs”; so, e.g., Basak, 1913-4: 141; Majumdar 1929: 8; Mills 1993: 82. Sircar (1968: 294) translates the verb as “[he] exhorted.”

20 The relevant verse in the Bogra plate reads yathārham mānayati bodhayati likhati samādiśati ca, matam
the Candra copperplates in that it is self-referential—that is, describing the act of inscribing the copperplate itself. In conjunction with the other verbs evoking the king's acts of naming, informing, and commanding the list of dignitaries, likhati brings the creation of the plate itself explicitly into the land-granting ceremony.

This verb, when added to the stock sequence of verbs, also reinforces the reference to the act of inscribing (likhita), which appears in the compound phrase immediately following. This phrase is found on most of the Candra copperplates: yathoparilikhitabhūmir iyam (“this land, as inscribed above...”), and it refers to the details of the land (e.g., location, size) mentioned just before the list of dignitaries, which are unique to each land grant and, hence, important with regards to the specifics of a given land-granting ceremony and the self-referential nature of the phrase. Both likhati and likhita function to emphasize the act of inscribing and thereby introduce the activity of writing as part of the larger ceremonial complex, as well as a record of it. Furthermore, as found together on the Bogra plate, the vocabulary of inscribing helps to highlight the fluidity between the oral and written components of the complex; the text of the inscription, in other words, is not just a record of the ceremony, but also an element and product of it.

5. Ritual Reciprocity between Candra Kings and Brahmins

From the details about the donees recorded in the second portion of the Candra copperplate land-grant inscriptions, it seems that Śrīcandra and the other Buddhist Candra kings made ample efforts to bring Brahmins from other regions to settle in Bengal. The Paschimbhag plate, for example, records a royal gift of land to more than 6,000 Brahmins and the creation of new Brahmanical settlements in the area under Śrīcandra’s rule (Niyogi 1967: 49; Witzel 1993: 267). The newly-published Bogra plate similarly suggests that Brahmins migrated from the Assam region and were granted asylum by Śrīcandra in one of the districts that he controlled in Bengal. Such examples attest Śrīcandra’s seemingly sharp concern to attract Brahmins to his kingdom—an area in which Brahmins were not necessarily prominent in earlier periods (Fleming 2010: 229).

One of the primary reasons for the royally-sponsored settlement of Brahmins in the Candras’ provinces and districts was to have the migrating priests perform protective rituals. Various copperplates name different kinds of sacrifices or homa rituals (e.g. referred to, in these inscriptions, as the koṭihoma as well as the adbhutasānti of the homacatuṣṭaya or four-fold homa) that are said to have been performed by the leading Brahmin named in the plates. One such rite, connected to the Atharvaveda Parisiṣṭas, is the adbhutasānti, which is said to avert astu bhavat; see further Fleming 2010: 233.

21 Aside from the incomplete and damaged Candra copperplates (i.e., Kedarpur and Idilpur plates), the Paschimbhag plate does not contain the phrase. The Madanpur and Mainamati no. 2 plates contain variations on the phrase. The Mainamati no. 2 plate employs grāma (“town”) in place of bhūmi (“land”); see Sircar 1970. The Madanpur plate refers to bhūmir iyam (“this land”), but has no self-referential reference compounded to it (e.g., yathoparilikita; “as inscribed above”); see Basak 1949-50: 57.

22 In some of the Candra copperplate inscriptions (e.g., Bengal Museum and Paschimbhag plates), the reference to the performance of any kind of homa ritual is entirely removed and replaced with references to the movement of the sun into different constellations.
This rite is dedicated to several Vedic gods, a number of whom bear the epithet of *vimuktopātaḍaśa* (“remover of evil omens”; an epithet attributed, e.g., to the gods Indra, Varuṇa, and Vāyu in *Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa* 67:1.8, 2.5, 7.5). Similarly, the *koṭihoma* sacrifice is typically performed for the sake of the Vedic god Rudra—a deity well-attested in Vedic and later literature as one who is both associated with impurities and uniquely able to absorb and remove them.²⁴

What the Brahmin priests appear to offer in return for the land, then, is their Vedic ritual expertise. Reference is made to their ability to draw from, perform, and perpetuate sets of practices thought to derive from late-Vedic (ca. 2nd c. BCE) *pariśiṣṭa* rites, especially those connected to the *Atharvaveda*. In their Vedic context, these rites function to proclaim the bounty and prosperity associated with Vedic gods, and they equally proclaim these gods as protective agents (e.g., “the remover of evil omens”). Not only do the Vedic rites bring a kind of ritual prestige to the royal ceremony and land, but the themes of the particular *pariśiṣṭa* rites are echoed in a number of the inscriptions’ details. For instance, the inscriptions proclaim the bounty of the land and describe it as full of various fruit trees, precious minerals, and other profitable and valuable resources in the manner that the Vedic rites proclaim the bounty of the gods. Reflecting the Vedic god’s renown for removing omen’s and obstacles, the inscriptions warn about the potential dangers that lurk in and around the land, which is said to be bordered by undesirables such as thieves, rogues, and other dangers. Accordingly, the inscriptions signal the power of the act of inscribing, and the power of the copperplate itself, by proclaiming the gifted land as free of such dangers. Seen from this perspective, the *pariśiṣṭa* rituals associated with the Brahmin donees are framed as acts of promised renewal, to maintain the sanctity of the land and its resultant prosperity.

If this interpretation is correct, then the conditional act of giving land and its counter-gift, the Vedic rites, may be seen as a way to ensure that the gifted land never descended into something “profane” or uncultivated. The Brahmin ritual specialists, in this sense, are needed by the Candra kings in order to continually rescue the landscape from the encroaching peripheral elements and to maintain the upkeep of the “sacred.” Accordingly, it may be significant that references to the Brahmanical donee and the ritual he performs punctuate the description of the land, its bounty, and the pervasive threats to it.

While the Vedic ritual formulas in the inscriptions are not directly reiterated—and, indeed, form but a single element in the ceremonial complex of land-granting—the reference to them serves to provide a kind of narrative transition to the final portion of the inscriptions. As if reifying what the ritualists are themselves performing as well as sealing the contract, the final portion of the Candra land-grant inscriptions proclaims both a blessing and a curse. The blessings may state, for example, that both receiver and donor of the land gift produce merit

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²³ The *homacatuṣṭaya* (lit. “four-fold *homa*”) is connected to a rite called *adbhutaśanti*, which can be defined broadly as “a ceremony to avert evil” (Sircar, 1966: 5). See also *Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa* 31 and 67; Gonda 1980: 286. The *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭas* contain both of the *koṭihoma* and the *adbhutaśanti* rites. Cf. Bisschop and Griffith 2003: 315-348.

²⁴ Here, we may see something of the interconnected categories of sacrifice and gift-giving—and the tensions between them—evinced in the legal and literary discourse about the gift in medieval South Asia, as discussed above. After all, these plates provide evidence of the continued performance, in medieval times, of different kinds of late Vedic sacrifices (e.g., the *pariśiṣṭas*) at the same time that they give details of the now-prestigious gift of land.
(puniyakarmāna) and obtain heaven (svargaṁina) — a kind of reciprocal soteriology, while the curses warn of the misfortunes that will occur to anyone who robs or plunders the granted land (Fleming 2010: 238 n. 73). Accordingly, this helps to solidify the ritual reciprocity of king and priest: both parties are engaged in the ritualized process of ownership and transfer of land as well as its sanctification. The royal curse helps keep evil in check and away from the land in question, in a manner much like the Vedic ritual performed. Thus, as a product of ritual and as an object housed at the site itself, the land-grant inscription can serve as a powerful perpetrator of ritual bounty and as an active apotropaic agent, together with the migrant community of priests who are among its ultimate beneficiaries.

Traditionally, scholars have held that the land in such inscriptions is granted in accordance with the legal principle of bhūmicchidra-nyāya, commonly translated as “the rent-free enjoyment of land by one who brings it under cultivation for the first time.” By this interpretation, the Candra copperplates would contrast “sacred” and “profane” by distinguishing between cultivated and uncultivated land — what is wild and what is civilized. Our brief analysis of the Parisīsta rituals above suggested that something else is going on. Interestingly, our characterization of the sense of the land in the Candra plates is more consistent with more recent considerations of bhūmicchidra-nyāya. The above translation of bhūmicchidra-nyāya has been put under scrutiny by Oskar von Hinüber (2005), who shows that it may be better understood as meaning, simply, “according to the laws of land-division.” Accordingly, we might question whether the categories of “sacred” and “profane” are actually reified through these rituals. More plausible, to my mind, is that these inscriptions reflect a view of sacred space predicated on the need for the continued renewal or maintenance of the sanctity and protection of the land. Both before and after the land-granting ceremony, the categories of “sacred” and “profane” seem to be shifting, rather than entirely fixed, such that sanctification requires the continued presence of the Brahmanical priestly communities upon the donated land.

4. Reciprocity, exchange, and cultural capital
But what — we might ask — is the result of this land granting-ceremony? In what sense do the Brahmanical priestly communities possess the land they are being granted? Do the Candra inscriptions record and enact a transaction akin to modern practices related to the transfer of property-rights or land-ownership? Further to uncover the “religious” implications of what might appear, at first sight, as a straightforward “economic” transaction, it may prove helpful

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25 The explicit stress on the mutual benefit of doner and donee brings to mind Trautmann’s (1981: 286) emphasis on the soteriological nature of the gift for writers of the śāstras such as the Manu; see also Brick 2009: 10-15, on the soteriological nature of the gift in Nibandha literature.

26 It is not known where the copperplate inscriptions were housed in relationship to the land they describe. The plates are commonly named after their modern find-spots, which do not typically correspond to the location inscribed on the plates themselves. Often the find-spot will be in a farmer’s field or the like; it varies from plate to plate. We may consider, however, that some land-grants were written on large blocks of stone and were placed on the boundaries of a given plot to serve as proclamations and warnings to visitors/trespassers (personal communication from Daud Ali). With this in mind it seems reasonable to speculate that the copperplate land-grant inscriptions would have been visible or accessible in some way to those living on the land in order to demonstrate to outsiders their rights and privileges with respect to the land. It should be noted though that in some cases it appears that the inscriptions were portable and transported via migrant communities; see further Salomon 1998: 228-29.
to extend our discussion of sacred space with a concern for the component of reciprocal exchange that forms the heart of the Candra land-granting ceremonies and the inscriptions that record them.

Since Marcel Mauss (1923–1924) first brought scholarly attention to gift-giving, and Brahmanical ideas about gift-giving in particular, much has been written on the gift (dāna) in South Asian religions.27 Most of the discussion has centered on what Maria Heim (2004) has called the “ideal dāna,” namely, South Asian theories of the gift as represented in Dharmaśāstra, Nibandha, and other literature, while less attention has been paid to land-grant or other donative inscriptions (cf. Heitzman 1991, 1997; Talbot 2001; Orr 2000). Heim herself (2004: 30) stresses that “the study of archeological and inscriptive evidence offers a slice of the past that Dharmaśāstra and Jain and Buddhist doctrinal discourses do not deliver.” As with the courtly and legal examples cited by Ali and Davis and noted above, different types of data might give different perspectives on the gift in South Asia.

Much of the scholarly discussion of the gift (dāna) in South Asia has centered on questions about reciprocity, particularly in relation to critiques of Mauss (1923–1924), on the basis of the ideal that “dāna, as a rule, must never be reciprocated” (Ohnuma 2007: 143, also 1998; 2005; Heim 2004, 2007; Brick 2009). This ideal is expressed in much Dharmaśāstra, Nibandha, and other literature. I suggest, however, that one may get a different picture when one looks to inscriptive evidence such as the Candra copper-plates, which attest a reciprocal relationship—as we have seen—between the donor and donee. The differences between the “ideal dāna” of legal discourse and the inscriptive evidence may reflect what Bourdieu (1997: 229) has called the gift’s “dual truth”:

D’un côté, le don se vit (ou se veut) comme refus de l’intérêt, du calcul égoïste, et exaltation de la générosité gratuite et sans retour; de l’autre, Il n’exclut jamais complètement la conscience de la logique de l’échange, ni même l’aveu des pulsions refoulées et, par éclairs, la dénunciation d’une autre vérité, déniée, de l’échange généreux, son caractère contraignant et coûteux. D’où surgit la question, central, de la double vérité du don et des conditions sociales qui rendent possible ce qui peut être décrit (de manière assez inadequate) come un mensonge à soi-même, individual et collectif.

Looking briefly to some of the treatment of the “ideal dāna” within Dharmaśāstra traditions,

27 See, e.g., Trautmann 1981; Heim 2004; Ohnuma 2007; Brick 2009; and, earlier, Parry 1986. Indeed, Mauss 1923–1924 is still the starting-point of discussions on gift-giving in South Asia – typically by way of critique, and with his views on reciprocity sometimes treated in isolation from the larger goals of his ideas about the gift as “total social fact.” Particular critical attention has been given to the gap between the famous Maussian notion of reciprocity and the theorization of the ideal gift within South Asian law and literature; indeed, Mauss himself (1923–1924: 144 n. 1; cf. Ohnuma 2007: 143; Brick 2009: 10) pointed to this discrepancy: “Il faut convener que, sur le sujet principal de notre demonstration, l’obligation de render, nous avons trouvé peu de faits dans le droit hindou, sauf peut-être Manu, VIII, 213. Même le plus clair consiste dans la règle qui l’interdit.” To Mauss’s reference, we might also add Manusmṛti 1.87–91; 2.158; and 4.226–36—all of which may be interpreted as speaking to a greater or lesser extent to his notion of “le système des prestations totales” (Mauss 1923–1924: 139–40), whereby gifts are situated within a broad system of exchange and benefits, not necessarily limited to quid-pro-quo transactions. For a judicious reappraisal of how Mauss’ theories related to South Asian (esp. Buddhist) examples, see now Ohnuma 2007: 140–66. For an extension of Mauss’ ideas with a concern for the gaps between the theory and practice of gift-giving, see Bourdieu 1997: 229–240.
thus, may help us to bring into sharper relief, through comparison, the character of the transactions conveyed on and by the Candra copperplates.

The composers of early Sanskrit law-codes, for instance, suggest an idealized distinction between the gift (dāna) and sacrifice (yajña).\(^{28}\) The Law Code of Manu (Manusmṛti) contains a discussion of which ritual and religious pursuits are appropriate for each of the four different universal ages (i.e., the four yugas, which occur in successive stages of decline):

\[
\text{Ascetic toil, they say, is supreme in the Krta Age; knowledge in the Treta;}
\text{sacrifice in Dvāpara; and gift-giving alone in Kali.}
\]

\[
tapah \text{ param kṛtyuge tretāyām jñānam ucyate} | \\
dvāpare yajñam evāhur dānam ekam kalau yuge ||^{29}\]

Here, sacrifice (yajñam) is deemed appropriate only for the third age called Dvāpara, while “gift-giving alone” (āhur dānam ekam) is appropriate in the fourth, present, and degraded age called Kali. The passage suggests a preference towards ascetic practice (tapas) and knowledge (jñāna), over Vedic sacrifice and devotional worship, as often expressed through offerings to the divine. Indeed, the text was written at a time when older Vedic models of worship were in the process of being absorbed and reformulated alongside of newly-emerging religious and intellectual pursuits (i.e., sometime before the second century CE; Olivelle 2004: xli-xliv). The older Vedic models were focused on family and society, while the newer models arose, at least initially, either in seclusion or on the outskirts of society (Olivelle 2001: 272).

The negative view of the gift in the Manusmṛti thus reflects the values of both the authors/redactors of this particular text and, to some extent, attitudes current in an early, transitional period of South Asian religious history. This characterization of sacrifice and gift-giving as degraded, however, attests attitudes more than 800 years prior to our corpus of Candra inscriptions. During the intervening period, attitudes towards gift-giving seem to have evolved and complexified, with gifts becoming more stigmatized, if yet more highly valued. This evolution coincides with the rise of temples and image-worship, which were not part of the earliest forms of institutionalized religion in South Asia. A range of different kinds of medieval literary and legal sources, such as the Purāṇas and Nibandha literature (i.e., legal compendia), an extension from the Dharmāśastra genre, speak to this broad phenomenon of a rise in concern for an economy of the sacred.

These medieval materials also give us an ample supply of legal statements about gifts to compare with the representation of exchange in the Candra copperplate land-grant inscriptions. A particularly apt parallel from a legal text is found in the Dāyabhāga of Jīmuṭavāhana, a twelfth-century treatise that—like the Candra inscriptions—was formed in the Bengal region. In 6.1.42 (Rocher, 2002: 145), in the context of dealing with laws of inheritance, Jīmuṭavāhana states:

One sees it happen all the time in real life that property is being drawn on in order to gratify


the person from whom one expects to receive a donation, by giving him complimentary presents and the like. Besides, in the Kali age property received as a Brahman’s entitlement is tantamount to paying for service. That is why a Text says: “In the Kali age gifts are made as a quid pro quo.”

dāpakānatayarthamupahārapradānadinā dhanopaghātasya loke bahulamupalambhāt | kalau ca pratigrahadhanasya sevādhanasamānātvaḥ | ata eva kalau tvanugamānvita iti smaranti |

The author here makes reference to Agni Purāṇa 209.55 and its hierarchical identification of gift-types with different yugas. Unlike the passage from the Manusmṛti cited above, gifts are here given a place in every cosmic age; gift-giving is not imagined to be a recent degradation of practice, but rather as a constant of life in every age. Gifts are not only identified with past ages, but they are given a special characterization in the present—namely, as quid pro quo (tvanugamānvite).

That the legal discourse about gifts stood in some continuity with the practices of land-granting is suggested by parallels found in our inscriptional materials. One relevant passage, typical of a number of the Candra plates, explicitly discusses the nature of the gift (dāna). The passage is found near the end of the long prose sentence that constitutes the second portion of the Candra land-grant inscriptions (see above):

So it is to be approved by you all. Future kings, too, are to empathize with and maintain this gift, through respect for the reward that ensues from a gift of land and fear of the fall into hell that lies in plundering it. The inhabitants and cultivators [of the land] , obedient to command, must meet the payments of the correct dues.

ato bhavadbhīḥ sarvair anumantavyaṃ bhāvibhir api bhūpatibhīḥ bhūmer dānaphalagaurāvadh apaharaṇe mahānarakapātabhayāc ca || dānam idam anumodyānupālanīyaṃ | nivāsibhīḥ kṣetarakariś ca ājīnāśraṇaḥvidheyibhāya | yathocitapratyāyopanayah kārya iti | 30

We see, for example, that “this gift” (dānam idam), the subject of the passage, here comes with certain strings attached: it “must meet the payments of the correct dues.” As in the passages from the Dāyabhāga and the Agni Purāṇa discussed above, an element of reciprocity (i.e., quid pro quo = tvanugamānvite) is arguably reflected in the act and record of the royal granting of land from the Candra king to the Brahmanical donees.

Such parallels raise the possibility that the inscriptional corpus holds a special place in the medieval South Asian discourse about gifts—not least due to their materiality and physical involvement in the ritual complex of the economic transaction itself; for, as we have seen, the land-grant inscriptions were themselves incorporated into the ceremonial complex of Candra land-granting. In turn, such parallels draw our attention to questions about the nature of the reciprocity involved in this particular act of giving, as well as their place within the broader economy of exchange between Buddhist kings and Brahmin priests in medieval Bengal. By placing the protective function of migrant community of priests into the context of medieval South Asian ideas about gift-giving and reciprocity “on the ground,” we are impelled

30 Quoted from the Bengal Museum plate, following Mills 1993: 82.
to reevaluate these concepts as directly related to “religious” practices but also as trans-religious in practice. These plates show, for instance, how Buddhist and Brahmanical communities mutually benefited from the royal land-granting process. The land is bountiful and, hence, a worthy gift. Yet, it is also in need of maintenance and renewal by the ritual specialists to whom it is given. This suggests, to my mind, that Candra kings were not so much giving up the land to Brahmins as much as allowing them to settle there, so the kings and their subjects could be the beneficiaries of their priestly presence. We should consider, then, that our modern concepts of “ownership” and “property” are not necessarily appropriate for the types of exchanges that took place and are recorded on these medieval copperplate inscriptions.

The mutual exchange reflected and embodied by the Candra land-grant inscriptions, thus, may be better understood in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital as having significant value within a total economic system. One cannot simply reduce the king’s gift of land to either a quid-pro-quo exchange or a “free gift” given apart from any expectation of return. To do so is to remove the element of time, even despite the explicit evocation of the longue durée in the inscriptions itself (esp. in the blessings and curses). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that some forms of counter-gift are not “material” by modern standards. Prestige and honor may also come into play within elements of a total economic system. Thus Bourdieu (1972: 238) suggests:

Mais les deux formes de capital sont si inextricablement mêlées que l’exhibition de la force matérielle et symbolique représentée par des allies prestigieux est de nature à apporter par soi des profits matériels, dans une économie de la bonne foi où une bonne renommée constitue la meilleure sinon la seule garantie économique.

By this reading, the ritual services offered to the king in the Candra inscriptions can serve as a counter-gift to the grant of land and serve as part of the symbolic capital that helps to establish value on the part of the donee within the total system of the ceremonial complex of land-granting. Something similar, as Davis (2005) shows, is concretized within the Dharmaśāstras. When describing the relationship of South Asian legal writing to inscriptive materials, he cites extensively from the twelfth-century Smṛticandrikā of Devaṇṇaḥabhaṭṭa to suggest that Brahmins were obliged to offer ritual services upon receipt of various material support from a king (Davis 2005: 101).

7. Conclusion
The corpus of Candra copperplate land-grant inscriptions adds to our understanding of both Buddhist and Hindu approaches to land-sanctification and gift-giving. Not only do these inscriptions evoke a royal and legal authority presiding over a sacred landscape, but they preserve traces of evidence for a ceremonial complex of land-granting in medieval Bengal; the ritual elements include, but are not limited to, the act of inscribing the plate, the recitation of text, and the performance of royal and Vedic rituals. Embodying the intersection of multiple performative elements—ritual, recitation, proclamation, writing—the Candra land-grant inscriptions arguably transform the landscape, not just in demographic terms, but also by elevating the status of the granted land.

Moreover, as we have seen, the royal gift of land as well as the priestly counter-gift of Vedic rites point to the interdependence of the Buddhist king and the Brahmanical priestly community in medieval Bengal. The reciprocity of the royal and Vedic rituals thus betray the fluidly “bipartisan” attitude of religious practitioners in the Bengal region during this period: a
ritual performed by a Brahmin following traditions typically identified with “Hinduism” is still a ritual that holds a power recognized—and patronized—by Buddhist kings.

It is perhaps not inconsequential, by way of comparison, that the movement of Brahmins and the ritual protection that they offered to the Candra kings recalls the migration of South Asian priestly communities into Central, Southeast and East Asia, and evokes, in particular, the rituals performed by Buddhist priests in their quest for land and places to settle after leaving the Indian subcontinent. To cite one well known example: the Golden Light Sutra (Suvarnaprabhashottama Sutra), presents a ritual complex to protect kings and their land, as transmitted throughout East Asia and as helping to secure territory for Buddhist communities entering foreign lands.31 Indeed, a number of Buddhist texts attest to Buddhist priestly communities helping to benefit and protect the polity of lands to which they migrated (e.g., in Central and East Asia). In the Candra plates, we see something similar, Brahmins were migrating to Bengal from “distant” lands and offered the protection of their rituals to Buddhist kings and their polity. While any suggestion of a kind of synthetic, far-reaching model on the basis of the Candra copperplate inscriptions needs to be cautiously asserted, the general economic pattern of land-acquisition within a religious community is certainly echoed in East Asian as well as Bengali examples.

It is clear that South Asia, as a region, was not politically or religiously homogenized at this time. In the case of the Candra copperplates, Brahmins are shown to have entered into these specific regions of Bengal for the first time even as late as the tenth century CE. This becomes even more notable when we consider how the Candra land-grants themselves, in the final blessing and curse section referred to above, can appeal variously to the Buddhist “Dharma,” to “Manu,” or to “Vyāsa” as textual authorities. The evocation of such authorities interweaves doctrinal categories that are typically compartmentalized, by modern scholars, as either “Buddhist” or “Hindu.” As such, it is perhaps not surprising that categories like the “sacred” seem to be understood, within the Candra land-grants, in a manner both ecumenical and trans-religious.

In a broader sense, the evidence of the land-grant inscriptions of the Candra dynasty helps to highlight the different ways in which sacred landscapes were conceptualized and understood in medieval South Asia. They show, in particular, how land-grant inscriptions can serve as a kind of alchemical ground of transformation, shaping views of land, language, and royal and religious authority. Inasmuch as the Candra copperplates stand in a continuum with the inscriptive traditions that preceded and succeeded them, this corpus of inscriptions may preserve, in a microcosm, something of the manner in which sacred spaces were perceived, constructed, and maintained in medieval South Asia, both through ritual and exchange.

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