

# Copper, Parchment, and Stone



# Copper, Parchment, and Stone

Studies in the sources for landholding  
and lordship in early medieval Bengal  
and medieval Scotland

*edited by*

John Reuben Davies  
&  
Swapna Bhattacharya

University of Glasgow  
*Ionad Eòlas na h-Alba is na Ceiltis/  
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Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies, University of Glasgow,  
1 University Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8QQ

## Contributors

Swapna Bhattacharya

*Professor, Department of South and South East Asian History,  
University of Calcutta*

Dauvit Broun

*Professor of Scottish History, School of Humanities, University  
of Glasgow*

John Reuben Davies

*Research Fellow in Scottish History, School of Humanities,  
University of Glasgow*

Suchandra Ghosh

*Professor, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture,  
University of Calcutta*

Sayantani Pal

*Assistant Professor, Department of Ancient Indian History and  
Culture, University of Calcutta*

Rajat Sanyal

*Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of  
Calcutta*

Joanna Tucker

*AHRC Doctoral Student in Scottish History, School of  
Humanities, University of Glasgow*



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## Foreword

Records of the gift of land are the major sources for the history of early India and medieval Scotland. Unlike other countries, this type of record – in copper, parchment, or stone – is central to debates about emerging regional configurations, the growth of royal authority, the development of government and its relation to people on the land.

In these records it is the concept of gift which is at the heart of property-transfer, whether in Europe or India, Scotland or Bengal. For Scotland between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, charters are the largest category of historical source, and Bengal's early medieval history relies heavily on its copper-plate 'charters' too. Both regions have in addition epigraphic, genealogical, and panegyric evidence.

The Asiatic Society in Calcutta holds many of the copper-plate donative inscriptions of early medieval Bengal. The museum of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta was also where John Reuben Davies, after viewing a number of the copper-plate inscriptions in 2011, had the first inspiration for the project – funded by the British Academy – which gave rise to this book.<sup>1</sup> It was in this same Asiatic Society that the notion of an Indo-European family of languages was fostered and promoted; and it is the Indo-European linguistic theory which also illustrates the theme of this book. In Sanskrit the word for 'gift' is *dana* – with the verb *danam* meaning 'give' – and in Latin, the same Indo-European root provides the noun *donum*, 'gift'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> British Academy, International Partnership Mobility scheme, grant of £9968 awarded for the period September 2014–August 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Sir William Jones, *Discourses*; see also John Keay, *India Discovered* (London: Harper Collins, 1988; first published as *India Discovered: The Achievement of the British Raj*, Leicester: Windward, 1981); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003; first published New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

In a lecture at Delhi in 2013, Susan Reynolds delivered ‘a plea’ for ‘historians of early medieval India to make comparisons with early medieval Europe’.<sup>3</sup> The comparison of medieval European charters (Latin written on parchment) and contemporaneous records of property-transfer from early medieval India (Sanskrit inscribed on copper or stone), as we have already mentioned, reveals significant similarities of form and content. Recognition of these parallels in inscriptions from Pala Bengal (8th–12th cent.) led to foundational work in the 1980s by Swapna Bhattacharya, the only historian to have published a comparative study of the diplomatic of the Latin and Sanskrit records based on analysis of the original texts.<sup>4</sup> The British Academy project began by revisiting Bhattacharya’s earlier initiative as a model for comparing inscriptions from Bengal with charters and inscribed stones from Scotland.

The Scottish kingdom from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries (the later Indian early middle ages) is an especially apt comparator because it has charters and (later on) panegyric poetry (albeit surviving in different contexts) to compare with the

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Reynolds, ‘Early medieval law in India and Europe: a plea for comparisons’, *The Medieval History Journal* 16:1 (April 2013), 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> Swapna Bhattacharya, ‘A comparative analysis of land grant documents from early medieval Bengal and Germany’, in *Proceedings of All India Oriental Conference* (Pune, 1982), 343–50; *eadem*, *Landschenkungen and Staatliche Entwicklung in Fruhmittelalterlichen Bengalen 5–13 Jh. n. chr. (Land Grants and State Formation in Early Medieval Bengal from 5th to 13th c. A.D.)* Beitrage zur Suedasienforschung 99 (Wiesbaden, 1985); *eadem*, ‘Landschenkungen and Politische Entwicklung unter den Palas in Bengalen und Bihar c.750–1152 n. Chr.’, in *Ancient Indian History Philosophy and Culture: Essays in memory of Professor Radha Govinda Basak Vidya-Vacaspati*, ed. Pratap Bandyopadhyay and Manabendu Banerjee (Calcutta, 1987), 107–23. John Critchley had made some important points of comparison, based on the secondary literature, in his monograph, *Feudalism* (London, 1978).

records of land-transfer and their integral prashastis (praise-poems, often with a genealogical element) from early medieval Bengal. Wales and Ireland would be the only other places to offer something similar; but in Scotland alone do we have a well-developed charter tradition, and that is our chief point of interest and comparison. As well as offering new ways of thinking about the relationship between charters, panegyric and genealogy, the copper-plate inscriptions of Bengal have the potential to add a fresh understanding of parchment charters as artefacts. Epigraphy – a significant source for Bengal – is also important in a Scottish context, with a large corpus of early medieval inscribed stones, including potential evidence for property-transfer, and genealogy directly associated with land.

Because land-transfer in both regions was closely related to royal prerogative, understanding the records leads to questions about evolution of royal authority and formation of kingdoms. Our aim in the long run is to advance new approaches to records of property-transfer in South Asia by viewing the sources as legal, political, and literary texts, in a field once dominated by Marxist models of feudalism.<sup>5</sup> Historians of Scotland wish to learn about interplay of dynastic propaganda and written instruments of government – panegyric is always separate from charters in Scotland, but the two are combined in the Bengal context. The role of fragile parchment as a permanent record of property-transfer compared with the durable copper-plates and epigraphy of Bengal is another point of potentially informative contrast. In this way we can take the copper-plate inscriptions of Bengal as a way of bringing together things that are in Scotland chronologically and culturally disparate. In both cases we are aiming to understand the rights and powers a ruler had over a subject's lands, and how possession of land related to administration of the law.

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<sup>5</sup> The most influential work in this school is R. S. Sharma, *Indian feudalism, c.300–1200* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965).

Researchers with a combined knowledge of Sanskrit, Latin, and a developed understanding of diplomatic are scarce, so we decided to merge specialist knowledge. Swapna Bhattacharya with Suchandra Ghosh, Sayantani Pal and Rajat Sanyal at the University of Calcutta worked with John Reuben Davies, Dauvit Broun, Katherine Forsyth, Sim Innes and Joanna Tucker from the University of Glasgow's Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies in the School of Humanities. Through two colloquia, one in Glasgow (September 2014) the other in Calcutta (April 2015), we discussed papers comparing our respective sources and methods. The following studies represent the initial results of our collaboration.