

## RECENSIONI

Richard F. Gombrich, *Il pensiero del Buddha*. Traduzione di Roberto Donatoni, Milano, Adelphi Edizioni, 2012, pp. 283, euro 30.

Richard F. Gombrich ha insegnato per quasi trent'anni sanscrito all'Università di Oxford e ora ricopre la carica di presidente dell'Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. Questo libro raccoglie dieci conferenze (le *Numata lectures*) da lui tenute nel 2006 alla School of Oriental and African Studies della London University sul tema *L'origine e la grandezza delle idee del Buddha*. Il testo delle conferenze è stato in parte rielaborato e pubblicato in un volume nel 2009; ora viene tradotto in italiano dalla casa editrice Adelphi. L'ottima traduzione è una delle ultime fatiche del compianto Roberto Donatoni, recentemente scomparso.

Nel corso della sua attività accademica, il Gombrich si è occupato principalmente di buddhismo del Theravāda, ha compiuto lunghi soggiorni di studio a Śrī Laṅkā e ha pubblicato alcuni saggi di fondamentale importanza, fra cui *Precept and Practice* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), *How Buddhism began* (London, Athlone Press, 1996) e *Theravāda Buddhism: a Social History* (London-New York, Routledge, 2006). Il presente volume fa il punto sulla situazione degli studi buddhologici nel campo del buddhismo antico e in particolare sull'approccio critico alla figura del Buddha e del Canone in pāli.

Fin dal XIX secolo, quando fu fondata in Inghilterra la Pali Text Society che gradualmente pubblicò il testo del Canone in caratteri latini, si levarono voci critiche sull'attendibilità delle opere in pāli e sulla loro presunta genesi. Già Hermann Oldenberg, che aveva pubblicato il testo in pāli del *Vinaya Piṭaka* nel 1879 (London, Williams and Norgate), scrisse nella sua introduzione che «The histories [of the *Mahāvagga* and *Cullavagga*], as a whole, are as undoubtedly pure inventions as those in the *Vibhaṅga*»<sup>1</sup>. Ci si chiese quindi che cosa avesse veramente detto il Buddha, come fossero state trasmesse le sue parole e quale fosse la natura della lingua pāli in cui era stato composto il più antico Canone esistente. A queste domande si aggiunsero via via numerosi altri quesiti sul rapporto interno fra i testi canonici, che avevano molte parti in comune, e sulla loro datazione relativa. L'unico dato relativamente certo era che il Canone era stato messo per iscritto in Śrī Laṅkā nel I sec. a.C. e che era stato quasi interamente commentato nel V sec. d.C. da qualcuno che si era firmato Buddhaghosa, sempre in Śrī Laṅkā.

Nel tempo i dubbi non hanno fatto che aumentare. Oggi la critica accademica mette in dubbio che sia storicamente esistito un personaggio chiamato Buddha (si preferisce metterlo fra virgolette e chiamarlo “Buddha”). Se anche è esistito, non è per niente certo che siano le sue parole a essere conservate nel Canone: potrebbero essere discorsi dei suoi discepoli, dei loro successori o dei monaci singalesi del I sec. a.C. La stessa lingua pāli non può neppure definirsi una lingua, perché possiede caratteristiche che possono provenire da varie zone dell'India antica; è una specie di idioma artificiale in cui è difficile riconoscere l'autentico dialetto del “Buddha”. Peraltro il Canone è organizzato in modo diverso da quello presumibilmente originario: inizialmente si costituì, sul modello del Canone jaina, in una

<sup>1</sup> Si veda Hermann Oldenberg, *Introduction*, in *The Vinaya Piṭakam*, edited by Hermann Oldenberg, Vol. I, *The Mahāvagga*, Pali Text Society, London 1969, reprint, p. XXIII.

serie di *aṅga* (“membra”), in cui i testi erano ordinati per tipologia (discorsi del Buddha o *sutta*, indici o *niddesa*, ecc.)<sup>2</sup>; successivamente fu completamente rimaneggiato e diviso nelle tre sezioni denominate *Piṭaka* (“Canestri”) che oggi conosciamo. Inoltre vi furono inseriti molti testi che non possono risalire all’epoca del primo Concilio (tenuto subito dopo la morte del Buddha). Infatti vi si narra per esempio la vicenda del secondo Concilio, che a detta della tradizione si svolse molti anni dopo il primo.

È inoltre opinione di molti studiosi che, se anche si ammettesse che l’esistenza di un “Buddha” e della sussistenza di tracce della sua predicazione nei Canonici oggi esistenti, questi fattori avrebbero dato origine a fenomeni filosofico-religiosi così divergenti nei vari paesi in cui si sono diffusi che non avrebbe alcun senso parlare di “buddhismo”, ma soltanto di “buddhismi”, perché le scuole che affermano di seguire il “Buddha” sono in apparenza troppo eterogenee per accettare la loro pretesa di discendere da un’unica fonte. Un analogo decostruzionismo investe i commenti e il loro presunto autore Buddhaghosa, che non può aver composto tutte le opere che gli sono attribuite. E così via di questo passo.

Il libro di Richard Gombrich è stato scritto in risposta a questa moda accademica decostruzionista. L’Autore non teme di essere tacciato di ingenuità, di eccentricità o di estremo conservatorismo, ma afferma a chiare lettere di ritenere che sia esistito un individuo chiamato Buddha il quale «fu uno dei pensatori più brillanti e originali di ogni tempo». Tale convinzione non è una presa di posizione aprioristica, ma si fonda sull’attenta analisi del contesto in cui il Buddha operò e del confronto fra i testi vedici e jaina e i discorsi del Buddha stesso. Il linguaggio usato dal Buddha è infatti molto simile a quello di alcune parti del *Ṛgveda* e della *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*. Il Buddha tuttavia usa le parole vediche in un senso opposto a quello originale: talvolta polemizza con i suoi oppositori, talaltra li schernisce sottilmente. Per chi conosca bene la cultura vedica, l’effetto è alquanto sorprendente. La parola *karman*, che nei Veda designa l’atto del sacrificio o il rito, per il Buddha diventa l’intenzione etica. Il fuoco, che nella letteratura vedica è un simbolo positivo, perché veicolo del sacrificio, agli occhi del Buddha è l’immagine della sofferenza che scotta l’essere vivente. Il Gombrich fornisce molti esempi di questo rovesciamento concettuale operato dal Buddha per scuotere i suoi contemporanei dalle loro convinzioni superficiali, approfondendo in particolare l’uso dei termini *brahman* e *Brahmā* (in sanscrito vedico), *brahmacariya* e *brahmavihāra* (in pāli); se se ne acquista contezza, risulta meno strana l’esclamazione frequente in chi riceveva l’insegnamento del Buddha intuendone il significato: «È come se ciò che era capovolto fosse stato rimesso dritto...»<sup>3</sup>.

Anche dal confronto fra i discorsi del Buddha e la letteratura jaina emergono elementi di grande interesse: la scuola del fondatore Mahāvira, contemporaneo del Buddha, fornì costantemente un punto di riferimento da imitare o da cui differenziarsi per ciò che riguardava l’eccesso di ascetismo di alcune pratiche o l’organizzazione dell’ordine monastico. Molti monaci e monache provenienti dalla comunità jaina si convertirono al buddhismo e forse portarono con sé anche particolari consuetudini linguistiche. È possibile che il Buddha abbia adottato alcuni termini fondamentali per la sua dottrina traendoli dal vocabolario dei jaina: per esempio, *pāṭimokkha* (letteralmente “purgante”, la regola monastica e la sua recitazione), *āsava* (“influsso impuro”), *ñānadassana* (“conoscenza e visione”) (pp. 85-87).

Altrettanto logica e condivisibile di queste parti è l’analisi del senso che dava il Buddha alla teoria del non sé (*anatta*), insegnamento che oggi è spesso frainteso. Il Buddha non intendeva negare in assoluto una continuità fra gli stati di coscienza passati, presenti e futuri, ma soltanto confutare chi affermava l’esistenza di un’entità immutabile che perdurasse nell’individuo. Per farsi capire, adottò un linguaggio che fosse comprensibile a chi lo ascoltava. Oltre a smentire la reificazione e la fissità della coscienza, così come era descritta nelle *Upaniṣad*, sottolineò il rapporto di causa ed effetto fra i vari momenti coscienti e li descrisse come una funzione in continuo divenire: il “conoscere”, qualcosa che può essere espresso meglio da un verbo che da un nome<sup>4</sup>. Questa sua formulazione acquista più significato se vista in un contesto brahmanico quale quello del suo tempo, dove la realtà ultima era definita «essere, coscienza, beatitudine».

<sup>2</sup> Si veda Mario Piantelli, *Il buddhismo indiano*, in *Buddhismo*, a cura di Giovanni Filoramo, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1996, 2001<sup>2</sup>, pp. 82 sgg.

<sup>3</sup> Per esempio *Vinaya-piṭaka*, I, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Questo aspetto risulta a mio parere più comprensibile nell’Abhidhamma (cfr. Nina van Gorkom, *L’Abhidhamma nella vita quotidiana*, a cura di Antonella Serena Comba, Lulu, Raleigh 2012).

Infine è di grande interesse il capitolo sesto del volume, in cui il Gombrich analizza i valori positivi del Buddha, cioè l'amore e la compassione. Questi stati salutari sono descritti nei testi canonici come *brahmavihāra* («dimore di Brahmā»). Nei commenti sono visti come pratiche utili a generare la concentrazione (*samādhi*), mentre il Buddha li chiama *cetovimutti*, «liberazione della mente». È dunque possibile che per il Buddha fossero realmente vie dirette all'attingimento del *nibbāna*, mentre i posteri non furono in grado di apprezzarne pienamente le qualità salvifiche<sup>5</sup>. Forse in questo giocò un ruolo anche la generale tendenza all'apofatismo del buddhismo antico: spesso si designava un concetto in modo negativo, per evitare la fissazione su di esso. Talvolta l'amore è chiamato «non odio», ma i commenti dicono che bisogna interpretare certi concetti negativi in un senso positivo. Per esempio, riguardo all'*akusala*, l'*Aṭṭhasālinī* osserva che «*A-kusala* significa 'non *kusala*'. Come i nemici (*amitta*) sono l'opposto degli amici (*mitta*), come la generosità (*alobha*) ecc. è l'opposto della cupidigia (*lobha*) ecc., così il non salutare (*akusala*) è l'opposto del salutare (*kusala*)»<sup>6</sup>. Anche in questo caso l'attenta lettura dei testi in pāli e dei loro commenti ridà ampiezza e profondità alla comprensione dei significati.

Nell'insieme l'opera del Gombrich risulta di grande interesse, perché traccia un metodo efficace e mostra quali possano essere i risultati nel seguirlo: ritrovare il Buddha come personaggio storico realmente esistito, rivalutare la pāli come lingua vicina al suo dialetto, leggere il Canone (almeno in parte) come documento di un messaggio pregnante. Un lettore superficiale potrebbe pensare che il libro del Gombrich non contiene grandi novità, ma non è così. Qui si mostra con acume quali siano i limiti della decostruzione. Per esempio, se il Buddha esercitò la sua satira sottile con giochi di parole ed elaborate metafore, e se i suoi successori, a distanza di tempo, non furono più in grado di cogliere l'aspetto figurato del suo linguaggio, ma lo interpretarono alla lettera, come si può pensare che qualcun altro abbia scritto in tempi più recenti i testi a lui attribuiti?

Ovviamente il discorso sul metodo che fa il Gombrich è fondamentale per apprezzare le sue tesi (cap. VII, pp. 131-153). Dal suo punto di vista, non esiste una disciplina chiamata «metodologia» che possa rivelare una volta per tutte qual è il metodo appropriato a una determinata ricerca: la conoscenza avanza grazie a quelle che Karl Popper chiamava «congetture e confutazioni». Ci sono in campo umanistico studiosi che pretendono di accumulare «dati» relativi a «testi» senza dedurre alcunché dai «fatti»; ma in realtà anche quelli che sono «fatti» o «dati» sono in realtà teorie, interpretazioni della natura dei testi e dei loro significati, che come tali possono essere a loro volta confutate. Ecco perché quello che il Gombrich chiama «scetticismo facilone» non è in grado a sua volta di produrre prove definitive a sostegno delle sue tesi e in ultima analisi si rivela un boomerang per chi lo adotta, perché può essere demolito in base alle sue stesse premesse. Certo, non è assolutamente facile sforzarsi di capire testi che datano più di due millenni; è più agevole vederli con sospetto e rifiutarne a priori il messaggio (ed è per questo che Alexander Wynne ha parlato di «ermeneutica della pigrizia»).

Per concludere, benché la valutazione complessiva del volume del Gombrich sia estremamente positiva, alcuni suoi giudizi possono suscitare perplessità: per esempio la scarsa simpatia per l'*abhidhamma*, che è visto come una sistematizzazione analitica scolastica posteriore al Buddha e in qualche modo «riduzionista» (pp. 205 e 221) rispetto al suo insegnamento, forse non genuina perché «le scuole antiche, mentre hanno in comune i testi principali dei primi due *piṭaka*, differiscono per l'*abhidhamma*» (p. 17). Posso convenire sul fatto che, da un punto di vista estetico, l'*abhidhamma* sia meno attraente dei *sutta*, tuttavia lo considero un corollario essenziale per capire alcuni aspetti della dottrina del Buddha, in particolare la relazione fra il *kamma* e gli stati di coscienza (*citta*), la loro causalità e valenza salutare o non salutare: se ogni *citta* è classificato come causa, effetto o né causa né effetto, il discorso della centralità del *kamma* nel Dhamma diventa molto più chiaro.

In secondo luogo i commentatori non sono sempre tenuti in gran conto, neppure dove il loro aiuto può essere dirimente. Per esempio, il Gombrich manifesta perplessità dinanzi al ben noto percorso mentale compiuto dal Buddha subito prima del suo trapasso e, secondo il dettato canonico, descritto da Anuruddha grazie alla sua chiarezza: il Buddha passò attraverso i quattro *jhāna* e salì fino al quarto *ārūpa*, poi entrò nella cessazione della sensazione e della percezione, tornò indietro fino al primo *jhāna*, risalì nuovamente fino al quarto *jhāna* e da lì trapassò. Ora, ci si potrebbe chiedere: come

<sup>5</sup> Si veda tuttavia il passo di Buddhaghosa citato dal Gombrich a p. 127 (*Visuddhimagga*, IX, § 124).

<sup>6</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Aṭṭhasālinī*, 39.

mai il Buddha non trapassò dalla cessazione anziché dal quarto *jhāna*? Secondo il Gombrich, occorre ravvisare in questo testo «una combinazione di due versioni della morte del Buddha» oppure bisogna ammettere che il Buddha abbia cambiato idea (p. 150). Se invece si legge la dettagliata descrizione che Buddhaghosa fa degli stati di assorbimento concentrativo nel *Visuddhimagga*, si capisce che la base della liberazione è il quarto *jhāna*, perché in tale stato, grazie all’equanimità, la consapevolezza acquista la massima purezza possibile<sup>7</sup>. Quindi il Buddha rese di proposito la sua mente estremamente calma salendo fino alla cessazione, poi tornò indietro e saltò nel *nibbāna* dal quarto *jhāna*. Anche perché non si può cambiare idea quando si è nei *jhāna*, ma bisogna formulare mentalmente un *adhiṭṭhāna* (fermo proposito) prima di farvi ingresso<sup>8</sup>. Dunque la tradizione fa del trapasso del Buddha una descrizione esemplare di come bisognerebbe morire per raggiungere la liberazione definitiva dal *saṃsāra*. Almeno, questa è l’ipotesi che formulo e che può essere liberamente confutata.

(Antonella Comba)

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Michael S. Dodson, (ed.), *Banaras. Urban Forms and Cultural Histories*, Routledge, New Delhi and Abingdon, 2012, pp. 251, 50 plates, ISBN: 978-0-415-69377-6, Rs. 995, £ 70.00 (disponibile in Italia a € 76)

Banāras, officially known today as Vārāṇasī, is presumably one of the most renowned city of Indian sacred geography. Situated in the northern region of Uttar Pradesh, in fact, the city is widely believed to be the holy centre of the Hindūs. Eulogistic literature from medieval times and modern accounts on the city have indeed highlighted its mythical qualities and the sacred practices connected with the territory; the mutual influence of traditional texts and colonial perception of the city has contributed to produce a specific image of Banāras as *the* sacred city of Hinduism, whose intense qualities are today part of the captivating ingredients of the tourist campaigns for North India. The focus on the city’s religious life is even spread in the academic production, which have also contributed to visualize the city through the lenses of a timeless and abstract aura. The tendency to perceive Banāras as an ancient and changeless entity often led to darken the historical reality of the city, making it more and more difficult to approach it as a complex urban place and to confront with its multilayered times, spaces and histories. *Banaras. Urban Forms and Cultural Histories* is, therefore, a welcome attempt directed to re-view and re-approach the city from multiple perspectives, in order to give back to Banāras its historical and composite character. The work focuses on the modern city and its historical evolution from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a period of deep transformation and resettlement of the city’s architecture, practices and representations (literal and visual). The main interest of this collection is therefore to analyze Banāras not as an antique and eternal sacred centre, but as a tangible city, whose contemporary character has mainly developed from the interactions of the British colonial State and different local actors and communities.

In the *Introduction* (pp. 1-13), the editor M.S. Dodson, who is Associate Professor of South Asia History at the Indiana University of Bloomington and author of *Orientalism, Empire and National Culture: India 1770-1880* (New York 2007, New Delhi 2010), explicates the purpose of this work. The eight essays collected in the book “*seek to produce alternative series of glimpses of Banaras*”, which have to be perceived as an historically constructed urban context. According to this approach, then, the editor clearly explains that this historical process, which produced the city, has its fundamental engine in the British empire and in the influences and consequences of the colonial action on the local dynamics of urbanization. The editor also reflects on how writing in this moment, and being trained by post-colonial discourses,

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<sup>7</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 167-168.

<sup>8</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 154 e 368.

should lead the authors of this book, and potentially all the scholars writing on South Asian cities, critically self-aware about academic and political burdens, which have been forged by the actions and representations of the colonial period and will influence the future of all these urban contexts. Dodson highlights how the intent to look at the historical and multi-facet constructions of urban realities is also an attempt to understand the human nature and its evolution in the urban sphere, in order to outline and inspire future amelioration of this conditions. The path suggested here has already been undertaken for the big cities of India, such as Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata; those cities have, in fact, been used as lenses through which reflect on the colonial State and its implications for the modern urban realities and imaginations. As Dodson highlights, however, Banāras, although its importance for the British and its central role in the revivalist and national movements, have not yet been analyzed with this “*post-colonial urban historical*” method; the present work is, therefore, conceived as an effort to access this path.

As underlined by the editor, in fact, the city is much in need of a rethought, even if some work has already been done in this sense: for example, Dodson mentions Sandra Freitag’s notable collection, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800-1980*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989 and the works of the anthropologist Nita Kumar on the city’s low castes and on the Muslim communities. Some other important contributions for the study of Banāras as an historical and complex urban reality, just to mention a few, are Vasuda Dalmia’s work, *The Nationalisation of Hindū Traditions. Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-Century’s Banāras*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, centered on the deconstruction of the mythical image of Banāras and the role and change of literature in the interaction with the colonial mind and society. Moreover, attention on the social evolution of Indian society and the northern city during the modern period, have been given by the eminent scholars Christopher Alan Bayly in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of the British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983 and by Bernard S. Cohn in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1987.

These contributions, even if fundamental, date back to decades ago; consequently, as Dodson underlines in his introduction pages, the need to proceed with new methods and awareness led to the production of the present volume. The collection, indeed, wants to add pieces to the understanding of the historical city and aims at releasing Banāras from its renowned stereotypes, which depict it as an “eternal city”, as to say abstract, a-historical and unchanged sacred entity.

Part of Dodson’s *Introduction* describes Banāras as a key-city for the British: in fact, it was the centre of production of textiles and also a station for regional and trans-regional trade (from Bengal to the Marāṭhā territories). The preponderance of banking families helped developing commerce and pilgrimage in the city, and thanks to Banāras strategic position in the region, the British made it a political centre, as well. Apart from these material and economical factors, Dodson introduces the expression of the “idea of Banāras” (p. 7), which means the conception of the city as a religious, mythical and eternal space; the editor shows how this idea was even more productive for the colonial State, than the city’s tangible qualities. This idea, in fact, was largely produced by the administrators and by European travelers, artists and historians, who emphasized, for example, the *Hinduness* of the city and its ancient/unchanged heritage. Being it considered as the example of “pure” Hindūs community and tradition, the city was identified as the fountainhead from which social, cultural and political change would expand to other part of the Empire; consequently, Banāras was a sort of stronghold to “conquer” and, in a way, a laboratory for the colonial project. The need to reflect on the formation process and the varied uses of the “idea of Banāras”, from the colonial State’s affairs to the indigenous re-appropriations, is crucial; in fact, this very idea is the starting point for much contemporary academic works, as Dodson highlights, and, of course, for fiction and travel literature on the city. The central aim of the present work is the inquiry on the “idea of Banāras” and, especially, on the way in which it affects political changes in the modern urban context, which have, for example, a substantial Muslim population and which attracts numerous visitors and researchers.

The essays collected in the volume seek to analyze and report some details and histories, of less-known sections of the city, in order to put it back into its place, at the centre of the wider national and global forces, which are at work on its reality. *Banaras. Urban Forms and Cultural Histories* has been projected with the certainty that facing and questioning the heritage of the “idea of Banāras”, and

enriching the understanding of unknown details and trajectories of the city, is the necessary path for “*imagining and helping to forge a better urban future for it*” (p.10). The collection has four sections and each of them comprehends two essays/chapters. The constant dialogue with the constructive patterns which have inscribed the city since colonial times is the central focus of all contributors of the volume, whose essays often offer new analysis of seldom used archival or ethnographical data. We can, moreover, identify a few aims or key lines pursued by the authors: to give new interpretations of well-known historical events of the city, to give light to the self-understandings of previously dumb inhabitants, or to bring evidence of some unknown peripheral areas and actors of the urban context.

The first part, *Constructing Historical Identities for the City* (pp.15-75), is focused on the historical processes of construction of the Hindū community in the city; the main aim is to show how the city’s built and artificial character as an exclusively Hindū place, has functioned as the starting point for the production of imagined histories for the city. The first contribution is Madhuri Desai’s “City of Negotiations: Urban Space and Narrative in Banaras”, which examines the urban character of the city, and its architectural manifestations, as a product of multiple patronage and discourses. The inquiry on the Kāśī Tīrtha Sudhar Trust, an association for the improvement of the city as a sacred centre, which was active during the 1930s, and the narrative style of the Trust’s literary production, allows the author to analyze and show the different “ingredients” of the city’s urban constructed character, such as the picturesque imagination, the colonial perception of the city’s ancient and “pure” tradition (with Muslim conceived as foreigners, invaders, contaminating) and the nationalist imagination. Desai shows how the architecture and the narrative production have acted together in the creation of the pilgrimage landscape of the city, which was indeed greatly constructed during the modern period. This contribution points out the steps of the materialization of Banāras sacred territory and helps to understand this very space as the result of the need to provide a tangible reality to the mythological history of the city. The second essay is also addressed to the construction of history; however, Sudeshna Guha’s “Material Truths and Religious Identities: The Archaeological and Photographic Making of Banaras” deals more with the compiling of the “official” history. Guha focuses on the role played by archaeological excavations and knowledge in the making of borders between religious traditions and phases in the Banāras region; by exploring the different means, which contributed to the visual making of the city’s landscape as an ancient and sacred area, the author highlights the intention to promote an “official” history with material proofs for the city’s presumed antiquity. In this perspective, the archaeological campaigns at the neighbouring Sārnāth, conducted in the 1830s, and those occurred in Banāras in the 1860s, aimed at producing “scientific” and “objective” evidence to supply to what was the relative lack of signs of the city’s antiquity, as also underlined in the previous essay. The discovery of a Buddhist past, which also served to confirm the historical phases fixed by colonial historians of the Asiatic Society for the subcontinent, where a Buddhist period preceded the Hindū one, was central to the depiction of the area around Banāras as a sacred and ancient zone. Guha shows how the construction of Sārnāth as a Buddhist centre, which entailed a filtering process of a multilayered religious and cultural reality, reveals the intentions of the first archaeologists who worked in that area, such as Mackenzie and Cunningham, who launched the excavations on the influence of some intuitions and guesses of Jonathan Duncan (p. 57-58). The author’s reflections also highlight how the more recent excavations at Rājghāṭ, recorded by A.K. Narain and T.N. Roy, have also been undertaken with the aim of add tangible evidence to the rich literal material; their records, however, show how the real results of the excavations are poor and tenuous, compared to textual evidence. The presence of early historical texts, which random mention Kāśī, the ancient name of the city (such as *Jātakas*, which often mention the city’s name, mostly without giving other information) served to darken the poverty of archaeological data, transforming it in indisputable evidence to prove the city’s eternal character. Guha’s essay brings to light the inquiry of how a field science, such as archaeology, creates and chooses its “*evidentiary frames*” (p. 43) and how, in this way, it forges specific aspects of the past religious practices, often through analogies from the present. On the other hand, the author stresses the possibility of using archaeology not to invigorate textual or historical conjectures, as it was in the case of the making of Banāras, but instead to make light and recover the multiplicity and varied connotations of Indian religious past time and space.

The second part of the book, *Histories Lost and Recovered* (pp.77-139), collects two essays dedicated to “hidden” histories of the city. William Pinch’s “Hiding in Plain Sight. Gosains on the Ghats, 1809”, is focused on a well-known event of Banāras history, which have also influenced the process of crystallization of religious communities in the North of India. The essay, in fact, is about the riots between Muslims and Hindūs in October 1809; the event have been interpreted as the first episode of communal violence in the city and as the prototype and origin of the following riots. Although the 1809’s riots have already received much attention from scholars (for example, the episode has been treated by Sandra Freitag, Gyanendra Pandey and Christian Bayly), the intent of Pinch’s essay is to make light on a “hidden” specific social group, which according the author’s analysis was crucial in this episode. Pinch explores the attitude and the physical presence and distribution of the Gosains (from the sanskrit word *gosvāmin*- literally the “lord of cows”), a group of “mendicant warriors”, in the city’s geography; therefore, the author shows to the reader the role of this specific religious group in the move of the riots from the periphery of the city, to the very centre. The presence of groups of armed ascetics in the fortress-palace at Lalitā Ghāṭ, near the cremation ground and not far from the Viśvanāth temple and the Gyān Vāpī mosque, where the riots moved and increased, is a simple evidence that have remained unnoticed in contemporaneous police reports, as well as in more recent reconstructions of the facts. The geography of Gosains in the city is, instead, identified by Pinch as the main cause of the facts’ pace, which also brought to the characterization of that zone of the city as a contested place. The second essay of this section is that of Malavika Kasturi; “The Lost and Small Histories of the City of Patronage. Poor Mughal Pensioners in Colonial Banaras” is about the city’s architectural landscape and its patrons. As the author explains, scholars have pointed to the significant role of local or visiting patrons in the projection and maintenance of Banāras urban geography and also of its popular and cultural celebrations; the major groups involved in the patronage of the city have been identified in the merchants, the local princes and, more in the role of advisors, the brahmans’ élite; these last were, especially at the beginning of the colonial period, essential to shape the “traditional” identity of the city. Kasturi’s analysis is, instead, focused on those political pensioners of the Mughal empire, which are called “élites-in exile”, who were encouraged by the British to settle in town, far from the intrigues and the affairs of power and politic. These Mughal pensioners were forced to settle in Banāras from the 18<sup>th</sup> century; in fact, the city was seen by the colonial State as a palatable place of residence for the “retired” members of the previous empire, because of its wealth, cosmopolitan population and also because it was not perceived as a political centre. The essay highlights the role and agency of these “invisible” Banārsīs by exploring the case-study of Shahzādā Jahāndār Shāh (1749-88), the son of the Mughal emperor Shāh Ālam II, and his family, whose descendents lived in the city till recent times. The family was stationed at Śivalā Ghāṭ and the surrounding area, as well, was mainly inhabited by Mughal families and lineages, who have maintained, during the early colonial period, great importance in the city; Banāras was, in fact, characterized by a vivid Indo-Persian culture, which have been gradually rejected. Moreover, the author highlights the patterns of patronage of other royal families from throughout the Subcontinent, who settled, or were settled, in the city. Kasturi analyzes the interaction of this past Mughal élites with the emerging colonial power and traces then the decline of the pensioners’ status and role in the city, in an attempt to make light on this hidden inhabitants and their histories.

The third part of the collection is called *Architecture and Fragments of the Modern City* (pp.143-194) and aims at analyzing the British presence in the city and the construction of the colonial modernity through architectural and intellectual institutions. Michael S. Dodson, editor of the book, is also the author of the first essay of this section; “The Shadows of Modernity in Banaras” first presents an overview on the popular British accounts on Banāras and highlights the colonial distinctions between modern and non-modern space in the city. The author, then, suggests that the colonial building projection and construction were influenced by this dichotomy and aimed at promoting the relation of colonial power and role with modernity through architecture. On the other hand, British buildings, apart from being a symbol of the State own representation, were and are certainly perceived, consumed and rethought by local communities for their own use as public spaces. The second essay of this section is called “A Hindu Temple of Learning. The Hybridization of Religion and Architecture” by Leah Renold. It is dedicated to the process of cultural interchange between British institutions and intellectual personalities and the local brahmanic élite involved in the foundation of the Banāras Hindū University. The author explores

how the British government accepted and contributed to the promotion of the religious institution; the Banāras Hindū University is analyzed as a space of meeting between the western re-interpretation of Hinduism and the local efforts to constitute a national and religious centre where to educate a new Indian élite. The essay shows how Hinduism, or better the particular form of this religion compiled by Annie Besant and Bhagvān Dās in their *Sanātana Dharma* collections, was proposed here as a compulsory subject in the interest of both the colonial administration and the Hindū nationalist promoters, such as Paṇḍiṭ Mālavīya, the father of the University. Moreover, Renold aims at highlighting how not only the educational program, but the architectural projection of the Banāras Hindū University were concrete attempts of merging British and Indian minds. The hybrid style adopted for the buildings of the University complex is the so called Indo-Saracenic, which was the result of the fusion of British architects and Indian (Indo-Muslim) elements; this particular mixture, which was perceived by the British as *traditionally Indian*, was employed in order to distinguish the new University from the other British institutions in the Subcontinent. The author retraces the transformation of a western institution, such as a University, firstly promoted also to teach loyalty to the colonial State, into a “Hindū temple of learning”, which was the cradle of the cause of independence. This process is significantly identified by the author as cultural hybridization, which merged the heterogeneous causes and agencies for the birth and development of this peculiar space.

The final part of the collection is *Literature and Urban Identity* (pp. 195-233); this section is addressed to the literary representations of Banāras from two different perspectives. The first essay is “Literary Modernity in the Holy City” by Vasudha Dalmia; the author reports on the works and lives of three city’s eminent modern writers: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra, Jay Śaṅkar Prasād and Premchand. The analysis highlights both the common traits and, especially, the differences between the three personalities, and outlines how those writers were inevitably linked to their specific time and milieu. The essay also reflects on the role of the city as the core of Hindī literary sphere and social activism and tries to free the name of Banāras from its partial definition as (only) a sacred city. The last essay belongs to Christopher R. Lee and is called “The Alleyways of Banaras” and “The Ka’aba of Hindustan”. Varanasi through Banarsi Muslim Poetry” and it is the only essay dedicated to the contemporary city. Through an overview on the works of two poets, Nazīr Banārsī (1909-1996) and Raśīd Banārsī (1926-), belonging to the city’s large Muslim community, the author introduces the reader into new characterizations of the urban space and of belonging. Apart from the literary interest of this essay, Lee’s contribution is a strong call for the need of exploring the vivid and intense lives and roles of the Muslims of Banāras; the city, as the author remembers, has more than 1400 Muslim shrines and mosques and the cultural and economic role of this community has been crucial to its development; however, most works on the city’s history and culture, without considering the partial touristic rhetoric of the exclusively Hindū city, only mention the Muslims as destroyers of sacred places. The need is now felt for a new understanding of this community as an important part of the contemporary city and Lee’s work has just started to introduce us into the representation and images produced about the city by Urdu poetry. Through his analysis of the two poets’ works and attitudes, the author shows how rich, varied and multiple are the voices of the Muslim community: in fact, for example, Raśīd Banārsī, whose poetry seems to be much more appreciated today, is near to the Muslim Salafist movement and rejects what is seen as the “accretions” of South-Asian Islām, such as visiting saint’s shrines; although his Banāras is imbued with Hindū images of gods, the inhabitants of the city he describes seem to be identified and separate by their religion. On the other hand, Nazīr Banārsī, whose fame has expanded also outside the city, was not linked to any particular subset of Islām; his poetry looks at Banāras through local lenses and enhances what is felt and experienced in the city, as a place where its inhabitants are all sharing a way of life, no matter what is their religious belonging.

The volume as a whole is a comprehensive portrait of modern Banāras, depicted from peripheral and less-known corners of its space, practices and inhabitants; the urban forms and cultural histories inquired by the authors draw from different and updated methodologies and definitely give an important signal to proceed in this direction, which finally has as main objective the revaluation and re-approach to the city, in order to enrich our understanding of such a complex reality; hopefully, the work presented here may suggest other contributions on this, or other Indian cities. Each essay of the volume is equipped with a few illustrations’ plates, around 5-8 per essay, of which a *List of Plates* is given



at the beginning of the book, after the *Contents*. Through illustrations, which include the reproduction of maps, lithographs, paintings and contemporary photographs of the city's buildings and public space, the reader is given a multiple perspective to visualize the subject place of the collection. The general *Bibliography* (pp. 234-244) is a thorough and up-to-date instrument to obtain both theoretical and methodological references for the study of post-colonial urban history and fundamental contributions on Banāras different aspects.

The need of a renewed historical and post-colonial approach to the city, explained by the editor in his *Intruduction*, seems to be related to the necessity of leaving behind the study of the religious themes, which have often been inevitably connected to Banāras. Dodson seems, in fact, to associate the city's religious character with something which is invariably perceived and reported as "essentially ahistorical" (p. 1). However, it would be desirable if religious subjects, such as rituals, spatial practices, such as *darśan* in the various temples and pilgrimages, and even textual traditions connected to the city, would be approached with the help of the new theoretical frame outlined in the present volume; therefore, the religious themes should be reconsidered through the lenses of history and the support of ethnographical data, in order to highlight the steps of the construction of a ritual, for example, and its transformation in the modern society and under the colonial influence. The extension of interest to the religious life and traditions of the city, together with and following the work started in the volume reviewed here, which fully accomplishes a new acquisition of "hidden" sections and histories of Banāras, would be even more a challenge and a further step to enrich the understanding of Banāras, and suggest new paths of research for other contemporary cities of South Asia.

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