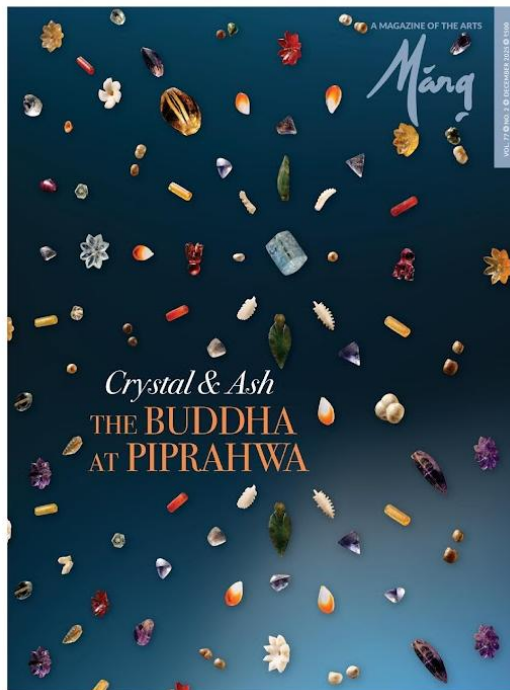


## Review: Crystal and Ash - *The Buddha at Piprahwa* (Marg Magazine Issue - September-December 2025, Vol. 77, No. 2)



Reviewed by

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*Crystal and Ash: The Buddha at Piprahwa*, edited by Jyotsna Nambiar & Naman P. Ahuja, is a well-curated and engaging special issue of *Marg* that examines one of the most compelling archaeological and cultural developments in recent years: the rediscovery and repatriation of the Buddha's relics from Piprahwa in Uttar Pradesh. Excavated in 1898 and removed from India for over a century, these relics have long been shrouded in controversy—ranging from disputes over authenticity to competing claims of ownership and even attempts to auction them. Their recent return gives the volume both urgency and significance. The publication brings together a series of deeply researched essays that situate the Piprahwa relics within broader historical, religious, and political contexts. Rather than treating the relics as isolated artefacts, the contributors collectively explore their layered meanings—tracing their journeys across continents, their role in Buddhist devotional practices, and their entanglement in colonial and postcolonial histories. The volume also raises important ethical questions about the display and custodianship of sacred objects, particularly in secular museum contexts, while introducing the concept of “relic diplomacy,” whereby sacred remains become instruments of cultural and geopolitical exchange—a practice with roots in the Mauryan emperor Ashoka's policies.

A recurring strength of the issue is its ability to contextualise Piprahwa within the wider sacred geography of early Buddhism. Although often overshadowed by nearby Lumbini, widely recognised as the Buddha's birthplace, Piprahwa emerges as a site of considerable archaeological and historical importance. Essays highlight its proximity to Kapilavastu and its connection to the Shakya clan, thereby reinforcing its relevance to the narrative of the Buddha's life and afterlife. Naman P. Ahuja's opening essay offers a compelling historiography of the Piprahwa relics, tracing their discovery by William Claxton Peppé and the subsequent dispersal of their contents. The detailed account of the relic assemblage—comprising bone fragments, petrified rice, jewels, and reliquaries—underscores both their archaeological value and their ritual significance. Ahuja also critiques Western museological practices, arguing that secular frameworks often fail to adequately engage with the sacred dimensions of such objects.

John S. Strong's contribution further expands on the materiality and movement of relics, particularly the associated gems and ornaments. His essay shows how these objects travelled across Buddhist networks—from Siam and Sri Lanka to Japan and even San Francisco—illustrating the global circulation of sacred materials and the complex interplay among devotion, politics, and colonial administration. Himanshu Prabha Ray's essay offers a critical examination of the 19th-century archaeological quest for the historical Buddha. She highlights how early excavations were often driven by untrained enthusiasts and shaped by colonial agendas, yielding both significant discoveries and enduring controversies. Her analysis of later, more systematic excavations at

Piprahwa (1971–1976) offers valuable insights into the site’s architectural development and monastic landscape.

The question of authenticity, long central to debates about Piprahwa, is addressed in detail by Ingo Strauch. Situating the discovery within the “gold rush” era of Buddhist archaeology, Strauch revisits earlier doubts—particularly those concerning forged inscriptions—and presents recent scholarship affirming the genuineness of the reliquaries. His argument that the assemblage may date to the Mauryan period, possibly even to Ashoka’s reign, adds a compelling dimension to the discussion, positioning Piprahwa as a key site in the early history of Buddhist relic distribution. Jack Ogden’s material analysis of the beads and ornaments further reinforces the assemblage’s exceptional quality and probable antiquity, suggesting elite patronage and sophisticated craftsmanship. Meanwhile, Peter Skilling’s essay offers a broader theoretical framework for understanding Buddhist relic culture, drawing on textual traditions such as the Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra and emphasizing the enduring spiritual and cultural significance of relics across millennia.

The volume also extends its scope beyond South Asia. Bill M. Mak’s exploration of relic worship in East Asian Buddhism shows how these practices were adapted and transformed in new cultural contexts, highlighting both continuity with and divergence from Indian traditions. This comparative perspective enriches the reader’s understanding of relics as dynamic, evolving symbols within global Buddhism. Equally thought-provoking is Saloni Mathur’s essay on postcolonial restitution, which interrogates the fraught histories of museum collections and the enduring legacies of colonialism. By framing the return of the Piprahwa relics as a “parable of postcolonial return,” she raises difficult questions about ownership, belonging, and the possibility—or impossibility—of restoring objects to an original “home.” The concluding essays, including Johannes Beltz’s account of the display of the Piprahwa relics in European museums and the narrative of their transfer to Siam, further underscore the complex biographies of these objects. They reveal how relics accrue multiple meanings across time and space—simultaneously sacred, political, and aesthetic—depending on the contexts in which they are encountered.

Overall, the issue on the Piprahwa relics is an exemplary interdisciplinary volume that successfully bridges archaeology, history, religious studies, and museology. Its greatest achievement is showing that relics are not merely remnants of the past but active agents in shaping cultural memory, religious practice, and political discourse. By tracing the long and contested journeys of the Piprahwa relics, the volume invites readers to reconsider the relationships between material culture, belief, and power across historical and contemporary contexts.