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Borobudur: Appearance of a Universe

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PETER CIRTEK, *Borobudur: Appearance of a Universe*. Hamburg: Monsun Verlag, 2016. X, 119 pp. EUR 26.90 (hc). ISBN 978-3-940429-06-3

At first blush this brief landscape format volume promises to be a nice introduction to the famously mysterious and unique UNESCO World Heritage site. Intended for the general reader, it is richly illustrated, and its table of contents suggests that it covers everything one would expect from such a work: some Indonesian history and geography, some introduction to Buddhism, some historicity of the monument, and of course, some art historical discussion of the monument's rich sculpture. Naturally, a book like this cannot be expected to demonstrate real sophistication with respect to matters of argument, theory or method; nor can it be expected to present anything novel with respect to its object of study and the history of such study. None of this could be held against a book so small or of such scope; however, with its many other shortcomings, it is difficult to recommend the book for the libraries of scholars, universities, or Buddhist communities. The text is problematic in substance, but especially in form; a little of the former and a lot of the latter appears to be due to the fact that the book was translated from German, and that the author himself was largely responsible for the translating and typesetting of the text.

It is terribly disappointing to find that a book of such exceptional physical quality suffers from so many typographical errors—not just spelling mistakes, of which there are several, but of other kinds as well. Perhaps the ugliest occurs on p. 48 where, instead of wrapped text, five lines of text bleed into the illustration on the page. More off-putting, since it occurs throughout the text, is the persistence of German typo-

graphical conventions such as low-9 quotation marks and single left quotation marks for apostrophes. An obvious unfamiliarity with English conventions is further reflected in the fact that the Index is labelled, instead, as “Registry.” Other translation issues (independent of German-to-English) concern consistency: some non-English quotations are untranslated, others are translated in the endnotes, while some others are presented in the text with originals in the notes.

One might be inclined to overlook these cosmetic (though unprofessional) blemishes if the work otherwise proved to be of exceptional worth. However, again, it is only an introduction, and a weak one in several respects.

First, the text includes a primer of Buddhist history and ideas. Rather disjointed as it races across the life of the Buddha, the development of schools, and the spread of Buddhism across Asia, this introduction is relatively long at twelve pages of text (or about ten percent of the entire work). Not only is this a bit disproportionate, but (general) readers might only spot the relevance of this dense material once they are deep into the discussion of the monument.

Second, insofar as the monument has been characterized as both/either a *stūpa* and/or a *maṇḍala*, the sparse explanations of those Buddhist forms (56-57 and 59-60 respectively) are not clearly presented as informing the construction of the monument. Furthermore, the very idea that Borobudur might be understood as either a *stūpa* or a *maṇḍala* is undermined by the author at the end of this passage by the citation of the Indonesian archaeologist, Soekmono, that “not a single explanation enjoys universal acceptance” (60). This is the beginning of an introductory analysis of the monument, and not its veritable conclusion.

Finally, the concluding section, on the panels of Borobudur (taking up about fifteen pages of text plus a couple of dozen illustrations)

consists only of monotonous lists of the episodes from some of the narratives of the 1,460 panels at the site (the life of the Buddha, Avadānas/Jātakas, the pilgrimage of Sudhana, and the vow before Sāmantabhadra). This might be justifiable in some way, save for the fact that the book simply ends here, without any explanation, summation or conclusion.

Thus, unfortunately, I must conclude that this little book really fails to fulfill its natural purposes: it neither provides a clear concise overview of the unique edifice of Borobudur, and issues associated with it; nor does it serve as a particularly useful introduction in advance of further study. Students of every kind with an interest in Borobudur are advised then to begin their investigations elsewhere.