Known History of the Middle Length Discourse Collection
(based on “short chronology” for computing Buddha’s year of death)

Before the Common Era

c. 480-400  Teachings by the Buddha and his disciples. Within MN suttas these texts are referred to as pariyaya and vibhanga, not suttas or suttantas.

c. 400  First Council; assumed to have occurred though it is unknown when the Vinaya account of the council was written or how accurate it is. It is unknown which suttas were collected at this council and how they were organized. Within the MN the Buddha’s teachings are listed as falling into three and nine categories (MN 122.20 and 22.10, respectively).

The Vinaya account of the council says that Ananda recited the Brahmajala Sutta and the Samannaphala sutta (DN 1 and 2)

The Vinaya account mentions an arhat with a following of 500 monks who ignored results of the first council wishing to remember teachings as he had heard them directly from the Buddha. This suggests some suttas where transmitted outside of those collected by the First Council.

c.400-360  Buddha’s disciples give additional teachings after Buddha’s death which are later included in canon.

c. 300  Later Theravada tradition claims second council added to the canon teachings given after the first council. Still no evidence of how the suttas were organized

c. 250  Earliest archeological evidence of the Buddha’s scriptures found on King Ashoka’s stone edicts. Includes first dateable mention of a sutta now found in MN (MN 61):

“Allow me to tell you what I believe contributes to the long survival of the the Buddha’s Dhamma: These sermons on Dhamma – The Excellence of the Discipline, The Lineage of the Noble Ones, the Questions of Upatissa, and The Admonition spoken by the Lord Buddha to Rahula on the Subject of False Speech – these sermons I desire that many monks and nuns should hear frequently and meditate upon, and likewise laymen and laywomen.”

c. 250  Beginning of sectarian schisms.

250-150  First extant reference to tipitaka (three baskets) inscribed on stupas of Sanchi and Bharhut. Still no evidence for how suttas were organized.
c. 200 B.C. to 100 C.E.  Earliest extant mention of Middle Length Discourse (found in Sri Lankan cave inscriptions referring to reciters of the Middle Length Discourses)

29-17  The Sri Lankan chronicle, Dipavamsa (end of 4th Century) states that in the reign of the Sri Lankan King Vattagamini, “In former times the wise monks handed down the three pitakas and the commentaries orally, but seeing that the people were falling away (from religion) the bhikkhus came together, and in order that the true doctrine might endure, they wrote them down in books.”

Common Era:

147-168  Parallels to MN 2 and 141 translated into Chinese by An Shigao

230-250  Parallels to MN 14, 82, 91 translated into Chinese by Zhi Qian.

398  Madhyama Agama (Sarvastavadin version of MN) translated into Chinese by Gautama Sanghadeva. Contains 222 suttas, 98 of which also occur in Pali MN.

430  Buddhaghosa’s commentary on MN is first confirmation of existence of MN in its current 152 sutta form. Buddhaghosa writes that the account of the distribution of the Buddha’s relics was compiled by Third Council and added to the Mahaparinibbana Sutta by monks in Sri Lanka.

1600  Date of oldest extant MN manuscripts. (Found in Northern Thailand.)


1890’s  Publication of Thai edition of MN. (Contains Sanskrit elements not found in older extant Thai suttas.)

1954  I.B. Horner’s translation published by Pali Text Society


2002  Thanissaro Bhikkhu publishes English translations of 37 suttas from Thai version of MN. An additional 19 suttas were published in 2007.