## What happened to Mahāvīra's body?<sup>1</sup>

(published: *Jaina Scriptures and Philosophy*. Ed. Peter Flügel & Olle Qvarnström. London and New York: Routledge. [Routledge Advances in Jaina Studies, 4.] 2015. ISBN: 978-1-138-83989-2. Pp. 43-48.)

Jainism has its stūpas, but their role is mysterious. Did they contain relics, of Mahāvīra or other saints? About relics in Jainism, Dundas states the following (2002: 219):

The origin of Jain holy places did not stem from the worship of relics, as seems to have been partly the case with early Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The remains of the Buddha's body were, after cremation, supposedly distributed throughout the Ganges basin, whereas the traditional accounts of Mahāvīra's funeral describe how his bone relics were collected together by Indra and taken to heaven where they were worshipped by the gods ...

Dundas refers in this connection to Hemacandra's *Yogaśāstra* (1.8.67 = vol. I p. 40), a text composed some fifteen centuries after the event.<sup>2</sup> We learn from Schubring (2000: 26-27) — who refers in this connection to the canonical *Jambuddīvapannatti*, an Upāṅga text — that the cremation of the corpse of a *tīrthaṅkara*, any *tīrthaṅkara*, is performed by all godly princes under Sakka's, i.e. Indra's, leadership.<sup>3</sup> Schubring refers to the *Viyāhapannatti* (p. 502b) to add that the relics of *tīrthaṅkara*s enjoy adoration in the heavenly sphere. Elsewhere in his book (p. 49-50) he states:

In the course of its most detailed description of a godly residence [the] Rāyap[aseṇaijja] refers to 4 sitting Jina figures ... of natural size surrounding a stūpa towards which they turn their faces, adding that a special building ... contains 108 [effigies of the Jinas] j[iṇa]-paḍimā. Their cult on the part of the god equals that of to-day consisting in the attendance of the figures by uttering devotional formulae. In the large hall  $(sabh\bar{a})$ , however, there are spherical boxes (gola-vaṭṭa-samugga) containing the sacred remains  $(j[iṇa]-sakah\bar{a}...)$  and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This article has profited from the kindness of Dr. Peter Flügel who, when told that I was planning to write a paper on the post-mortem fate of Mahāvīra's body, put at my disposal part of the work he had been doing on this topic. Dr. Bansidhar Bhatt was subsequently kind enough to make further suggestions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Flügel draws attention to the most famous depiction of Jaina relic-worship in the first book of Hemacandra's *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacaritra* (I.6.459-643) which, he points out, is largely based on earlier canonical accounts in the *Jambuddīvapannatti*, the *Jīvājīvābhigama*, and the *Āvassaya Nijjutti*, and their commentaries. It may be significant that Hemacandra uses the term *ratnastūpa* (v. 562) where the *Jambuddīvapannatti* has *stūpa* (*thūbha*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Schubring refers here to p. 156b of the edition used by him, which is not accessible to me. See however below.

hanging on hooks ( $n\bar{a}gadanta$ ) by means of cords (sikkaga). The whole description most certainly follows earthly examples.

What should we conclude from all this? Did the early Jainas worship relics, among these relics of Mahāvīra, or did they not? W. J. Johnson (2003: 224) thinks they did:

Although later Jaina tradition suggests that Mahāvīra's relics were whisked away by the gods, ... it is difficult to imagine that Jain stūpas were viewed simply as memorials, devoid of relics.

Early Jaina literature frequently mentions stūpas, and archaeology has revealed an ancient stūpa in Mathurā which is identified as Jaina.<sup>4</sup> Dundas, who decried the role of relics in Jainism in the passage considered above, is slightly embarrassed by the stūpa in Mathurā (2002: 291 n. 4):

The function of the stūpa at Mathurā has not been adequately explained, since relic worship has never been a significant component of Jainism, as it has in Buddhism. Nonetheless, it does seem that this early stūpa was in some way involved in commemoration of the dead.

A recent article by Peter Flügel (2008) sheds additional light on the tradition of stūpas and relic-worship in Jainism. Flügel states here (p. 18):

[R]esearch in 2000-2001 produced the first documentation of two modern Jain bone relic *stūpas*, a *samādhi-mandira* and a *smāraka*, constructed by the Terāpanth Śvetāmbara Jains. Subsequent fieldwork demonstrated that relic *stūpas* are not only a feature of the aniconic Jain traditions ..., but also of Mūrtipūjaka ... and Digambara traditions. Hence, the initial hypothesis that the contemporary Jain cult of bone relics functions either as substitute or as a prototype for imageworship had to be amended.

This recent discovery does not solve the problem of the secondary role which stūpas and relic-worship play in Jainism; in a way it only deepens it. The inescapable question is: if stūpas played any role at all in Jainism, why then did stūpa and relic worship not develop here the way they did in Buddhism? In Buddhism, we all know, the tradition preserved in great detail the memory of what happened to the body of the Buddha, whereas in Jainism

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Smith, 1900.

we only find late stories about the worship of the Jina's mortal remains by gods, preferably in heaven. Why this difference?

Until recently I might have given up at this point, recalling that our textual sources do not contain sufficient material to come up with a plausible answer. If, in spite of this, I now venture further ahead, this is because I have occupied myself with the Buddhist accounts of what happened to the body of the Buddha. Much to my initial surprise, I discovered that it is far from certain that the standard account is reliable as historical evidence. Numerous inconsistencies, alternative versions, as well as considerations about the place of Buddhism in the Indian traditions at large, led to the hypothesis that the corpse of the Buddha may not have been incinerated and divided, that the corpse may rather have been put, non-incinerated and non-divided, into one single stūpa built for the occasion. This possibility, which I arrived at on the basis of circumstantial evidence, is actually expressed in so many words in a version of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, as I subsequently discovered. It must of course be admitted that this possibility is a hypothesis, but it is only fair to add that it is a hypothesis that is not less plausible than the alternative and widely accepted hypothesis according to which the body of the Buddha was incinerated and subsequently divided.

This is not the occasion to present the evidence in support of this view as to what happened to the dead body of the Buddha. This evidence is presented in an article that has recently come out (2009). Here it is important to emphasize that the presumed incineration and division of the Buddha's body constitute the necessary background for the cult of relics in stūpas that came to characterize Buddhism in all of its forms. In other words, if the story about what happened to the Buddha's body is indeed historically unreliable, it is clear why it had to be invented. Without wide-spread relics, there can be no wide-spread relic-worship.

Let us now turn to the oldest and paradigmatic account of the disposal of the body of the *tīrthaṅkara* Rṣabhadeva in the *Jambuddīvapannatti* (2.89-120; pp. 390-394). It is presumably applicable to all *tīrthaṅkara*s, including therefore Mahāvīra. It tells us that soon after his demise, Śakra and many other gods carried out a number of deeds, among them the following:

To begin with three funeral pyres ( $ciyag\bar{a}$ ) are built out of fragrant sandal wood: one for the  $t\bar{\iota}rtha\dot{n}kara$ , one for the ganadharas, one for other houseless monks ( $anag\bar{a}ra$ ). (It is to be noted that these ganadharas and houseless monks had died through  $sallekhan\bar{a}$  at the occasion of the death of the  $t\bar{\iota}rtha\dot{n}kara$ .) (2.95-96)

- Milk-water ( $kh\bar{\imath}rodaga$ ) is collected from the Milk-water Ocean and used to bathe the dead body of the  $t\bar{\imath}rthankara$ , which is subsequently anointed, wrapped in cloth, and adorned with all manner of ornements. The same happens to the dead bodies of the ganadharas and houseless monks. (2.97-100)
- 3) A palanquin is constructed, the dead body of the *tīrthaṅkara* is lifted onto it, and the palanquin is put onto the funeral pyre. Two further palanquins are constructed, one for the *gaṇadhara*s and one for the houseless monks. (2.101-104)
- 4) Fire and wind are then made to do their job. The fire is subsequently extinguished. For each constituent event the *tīrthaṅkara*, the *gaṇadhara*s and the houseless monks are mentioned, altogether eight times. (2.105-112)
- 5) Different parts of the body of the *tīrthaṅkara* are taken by various gods, to begin with Śakra. No mention is made of *gaṇadhara*s and houseless monks. (2.113)
- Three stūpas ( $ceiyath\bar{u}bha = cetiyast\bar{u}pa$ ) are built: one for the  $t\bar{t}rthankara$ , one for the ganadharas, one for the houseless monks. (2.114-115)
- 7) Having performed various festivals (*mahima*), the gods return home. Once back, they put the bones of the jina in round boxes (*golavaṭṭasamugga*), which they then worship. No *gaṇadharas* and houseless monks are mentioned. (2.116-120)

What strikes the eye is that all but two of these seven episodes deal with one  $t\bar{t}rthankara$ , and several ganadharas and houseless monks who have taken their lives by way of  $sallekhan\bar{a}$ . Two of the episodes do not include these ganadharas and houseless monks; these two, nos. 5 and 7, deal with bodily relics of the  $t\bar{t}rthankara$ . This suggests that these two episodes were inserted in a text that did not deal with bodily relics of the  $t\bar{t}rthankara$ . In other words, there may have been an account in which the  $t\bar{t}rthankara$  and his companions were cremated and put into stupas, and no bodily relics were taken, neither by the gods nor by anyone else.

This impression is strengthened by the fact that the episodes that deal with all three types of saints end with the construction of stūpas for all of them: one for the *tīrthankara*, one for the *gaṇadharas*, one for the houseless monks. What these stūpas

were good for is not stated, and indeed, the presumably inserted episode reporting the disappearance of the bodily relics of the *tīrthaṅkara* to heavenly realms would make us think that these stūpas — or at any rate the stūpa built for the *tīrthaṅkara* — served no purpose whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> The plausible conclusion to be drawn is that there was an earlier account in which the bodily remains of the *tīrthaṅkara* were all put in a stūpa, one stūpa, those of the *gaṇadhara*s in another, and those of the other liberated houseless monks in a third one. However, this original account was modified by the substitution of two episodes claiming that the bodily relics of the jina had been taken to heaven.

Independent evidence that further strengthens this conclusion is constituted by the fact, pointed out by Flügel, that most Digambara accounts of Rṣabha's funeral differ from the *Jambuddīvapannatti* in that they do not mention bone relics, and omit the episode of the removal of the relics by the gods. Flügel refers in this connection to the Jaina *Harivamśa Purāna* (12.82) and *Ādi Purāna* (47.343-354).

The reason for the rather clumsy modification of the passage in the *Jambuddīvapannatti* is easy to see, and is the mirror image of the reason that presumably led the Buddhists to modify their story of the post-mortem destiny of the Buddha's body. In the case of Buddhism, the story of the large-scale distribution of relics from the Buddha's body justified the wide-spread stūpa worship that characterizes that religion. In the case of Jainism, the disappearance of the bodily relics of the Jina justifies the absence of their worship. In both cases we may guess that the whereabouts of the original relics were unknown to the later tradition. If so, both traditions were confronted with a similar problem. The way they resolved it was however quite different. Buddhism invented a story which allowed its followers to believe that there were authentic bodily relics in most if not all Buddhist stūpas. Jainism presented a story which convinced its followers that there were no authentic bodily relics of *tīrthaṅkara*s to be found on earth, because they had all be taken to heaven.<sup>6</sup>

One more question has to be dealt with. Even the "authentic" part of the story in the *Jambuddīvapannatti* maintains that the body of the Jina was cremated. In the case of

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Calling them commemorative stūpas is of course only a trick to avoid the issue.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The bones of Jinas (*jiṇa-sakahā*), kept in globular diamond reliquaries (*gola-vaṭṭa-samugga*) in a stūpa (*ceiya-khambha*) in heaven (or more precisely, in the residence of the god Camara) are also mentioned in the *Viyāhapannatti*; see Deleu, 1970: 171.

Buddhism, we had been led to consider that the body of the Buddha had *not* been cremated, but had been put in a stūpa without undergoing this treatment. Should we not expect the same in the case of a Jina? Perhaps we should. It is therefore appropriate to remember that the *Jambuddīvapannatti* is not a very early text; Flügel dates it between the first and fifth century CE, and Bansidhar Bhatt, in a private communication, informs me that in his opinion it cannot be put earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. What is more, Flügel argues on the basis of the *Kappa Sutta* and the *Vavahāra Sutta* in particular, that "the practice of cremating the discarded bodies of ascetics, which is only performed by laity or the general public, was either introduced not long after the composition of the early Cheya Suttas or, though less likely, always existed side by side with the monastic custom of abandoning the body". In other words, it is possible that the body of the Jina was not cremated. Perhaps we should add that it may have been discarded the way the bodies of other Jaina ascetics were apparently discarded in the early Jaina tradition.

Returning now to the *Jambuddīvapannatti*, I would argue that it allows us to think of three succeeding periods:

- 1) We know nothing about what happened to the dead body of the Jina, except that it was probably not cremated; given that building stūpas and stūpa-like structures for at least certain dead people was a custom in Mahāvīra's region which is already attested in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, it is possible that his corpse was put into a stūpa, but we cannot exclude that it was abandoned in nature.
- 2) For reasons that we do not know for certain but that we may plausibly guess (considerations of purity, newly acquired cultural propriety) the claim was made that the corpse of the Jina had been cremated before being put into a stūpa. This is recounted in the story of the Jambuddīvapannatti, minus its insertions.
- Additions were made to this story, claiming that the relics had been taken away by the gods. This left an incoherent story and an empty stūpa, but presumably suited the tastes of those who made the changes. The practical consequence of these changes was that the worship of Mahāvīra's relics (or of the relics of any other *tīrthankara* for that matter), though theoretically still respectable, was banished from the tradition.

## References:

*Ādi Purāṇa* of Jinasena. Part II. Edited, with Hindi translation, introduction and appendices, by Dr. Pannalal Jain. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith. Tenth edition, 2005.

- Bronkhorst, Johannes (2009): "Hendrik Kern and the body of the Buddha" *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 63(1), 7-27.
- Deleu, Jozef (1970): *Viyāhapannatti (Bhagavaī): The Fifth Anga of the Jaina Canon.* Introduction, critical analysis, commentary & indexes. Reprint: Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1996. (Lala Sundar Lal Jain Research Series, 10.)
- Dundas, Paul (2002): The Jains. Second edition. London & New York: Routledge.
- Flügel, Peter (2008): "Jaina relic stūpas." *Jaina Studies*. Newsletter of the Centre of Jaina Studies, SOAS, University of London. Issue 3, March 2008, pp. 18-23.
- Harivaṃśa Purāṇa of Jinasena. Edited, with Hindi translation, introduction & appendices, by Pt. Panna Lal Jain. Kashi: Bhāratīya Jñānapītha. 1962. (Jñānapītha Mūrtidevī Jaina Granthamālā, Sanskrit Granth No. 27.)
- Hemacandra: Yogaśāstra. Ed. Jambuvijaya. 3 vols. Bombay, 1977-1986.
- Hemacandra: *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacaritamahākāvya*. Part 1. Ed. Śrīcaraṇavijaya. Ahmedabad. 1990.
- Jambuddīvapaṇṇattī. In: Uvaṅga Suttāṇi IV (Part II). Ed. Yuvācārya Mahāprajña. Ladnun: Jain Vishva Bharati. 1989. Pp. 357-588.
- Johnson, W. J. (2003): "The 'Jina experience': a different approach to Jaina image worship." *Jainism and Early Buddhism*. Essays in Honor of Padmanabh S. Jaini. Part I. Ed. Olle Qvarnström. Fremont, California: Asian Humanities Press. Pp. 217-230.
- Schubring, Walther (2000): *The Doctrine of the Jainas Described after the Old Sources*.

  Translated from the revised German edition by Wolfgang Beurlen. With three indices enlarged and added by Willem Bollée and Jayandra Soni. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. (Lala Sundarlal Jain Research Series, 15.)
- Smith, Vincent A. (1900): *The Jain Stûpa and Other Antiquities of Mathurâ*. Reprint: Indological Book House, Varanasi & Delhi, 1969.