

**No Literature without Patronage:
Weak Royal Patronage and its Effect on the Constitution
of the Jaina Canon under the Kuṣāṇas**

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According to the evidence provided by Jaina literature itself, the Jaina canon was given its definite shape many centuries after the death of Mahāvīra. Śvetāmbara sources mention a date in the fifth century CE.¹ The Digambaras are even more pessimistic: according to them the early texts of the Jaina tradition have not survived at all. An inspection of the Śvetāmbara canon itself confirms that many of its texts are far more recent than the time of Mahāvīra, and may have been composed at a date not much before the fifth century CE. Even the presumably oldest texts of the Śvetāmbara canon raise serious questions as to their date of origin. A text like the *Sūyagaḍa* (*Sūtrakṛtāṅga*), counted among the “Seniors of the Jaina canon” (Schubring), betrays the influence of Abhidharma Buddhism of the Sarvāstivāda kind.² As far as we can tell, this form of Abhidharma did not come about before the second century BCE,³ so that (this part of) the *Sūyagaḍa* has to be more recent than that. In other words, even the oldest texts of the Śvetāmbara canon may have been composed several centuries after the death of Mahāvīra.

The situation is similar, but far less extreme, in the case of the Buddhist canon. Without entering into details, it seems certain that many texts of the early Buddhist canon — whether the one in Pāli, or the portions that have survived in Chinese translation or as fragments in Sanskrit or Middle-Indic — go back to a much earlier time and have been preserved in a far more reliable form. This inevitably raises the question why it is like this. Let us not forget that Buddhism and Jainism have much in common. Both were ascetic religions that arose in the same region of India, roughly during the same period. Both were concerned with the same problem, viz., how one can put an end to a potentially endless number of rebirths. Both, it appears, built stūpas (at least for some time in the case of Jainism) to preserve the mortal remains of their founders. The two also interacted quite extensively. I had

¹ Jaini 1979: 51-52; Schubring 2000: 77-78; Dundas 2002: 62.

² Bronkhorst 2000.

³ On this date for Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma (preceding the grammarian Patañjali), see Bronkhorst 2016: § III.3.2.

occasion to mention the influence of Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma on the *Sūyagaḍa* and more recent Jainism. The influence of Jainism on Buddhism during its formative period is recognizable in the presence of Jaina practices that found their way into the Buddhist Sūtras. So what allowed the Buddhists to preserve their canonical texts so much better than the Jainas? And why did the Jainas, unlike the Buddhists, fail to succeed in constituting and preserving a literary canon at that time?

The short answer to these questions, I propose, is: patronage. At a crucial period in time, Buddhists received and accepted royal patronage, whereas Jainas at that same period did not accept, and therefore did not receive royal patronage.⁴

The period I am referring to is the realm of the Kuṣāṇas. The Kuṣāṇas, it may be noted, ruled in Northern India during the early centuries of the Common Era, i.e., before the constitution of the Śvetāmbara canon.

Archaeological evidence from Mathurā, one of the capitals of the Kuṣāṇa Empire, informs us about the state of Buddhism and Jainism at that time. According to Suzuko Ohira (1994: 481 n. 33), 159 inscriptions remain from the time of the Kuṣāṇa rulers Kaniṣka and Vāsudeva; from among these, 87 belong to the Jainas, 55 to the Buddhists, and 17 to the non-sectarians. Jainism was clearly popular at that time in that region.

However, the following observation by Smita Sahgal merits attention (1994: 205-206; my emphasis): “[In North India, Jainism] not only ... existed in the period [from 200 BCE to 300 CE], it actually flourished. It failed to catch the attention of the historians because unlike [Brahmanism and Buddhism] *it did not receive state patronage* (at least in north India), and hence is not mentioned in those sources connected with royal life.” Indeed, “none of the inscriptions found so far refer to donative land grants at this point of time. Unlike the Buddhists, the Jainas still did not acquire any land base. Jaina monks basically remained wanderers.” (p. 226). Sharma (2001: 147) draws attention to the same when he says: “There is no evidence that Jainism enjoyed the patronage of the Kuṣāṇa rulers. The credit for the popularity of Jainism at Mathurā during the Kuṣāṇa period goes to ... the religious zeal and fervour of its adherents.” Chanchreek & Jain (2005: 281) express themselves similarly: “There is nothing to show that Śāka or Kuṣāṇa

⁴ Salomon (2015: 981) states about the Buddhists during the Satavahana and Ikshvaku period (1st-3rd Cents. CE): “Here we begin to see a shift away from patronage of stūpa sites by local monastic and nonelite lay followers making small individual contributions toward large-scale sponsorship by royalty and nobility.”

kings themselves had any particular weakness for this religion.” Robert Bracey (2012) goes further and points out that the rulers themselves were drawn neither to Jainism nor to Buddhism: Buddhism, unlike Jainism, received patronage from officials. Here are his words (p. 215): “The idea that the Kushans reflected the diverse nature of their empire in their practice must ... be rejected. Not only did the Kushans omit the practices represented in popular religion at Mathura (Naga cults, Jainism) entirely, while royal patronage and coins give only scant attention to Buddhism, which dominates the patronage of officials of the Empire.” This does not mean that Jainism did not receive patronage, which came primarily from lay donors. Interestingly, among the donors at this period we find many women.⁵

Sahgal refers in this context to the *Vyavahārasūtra*, according to which “the Jaina monks should not cultivate links with king or people close to him and at the same time do nothing to incur his displeasure”.⁶ Dundas (2002: 118) insists that “[t]he ancient texts which legislate for ascetic behaviour are adamant that it is improper for monks to take alms from a king”, and refers in this connection to Vaṭṭakera’s *Mūlācāra* and to Haribhadra on the *Āvaśyakaniryukti*. Dundas (2006) calls Jainism during its first eight centuries or so a “non-imperial religion”, and supports this with the observation that it seems to have been given only sporadic royal sponsorship (p. 385). Elsewhere in the same publication he states (p. 391): “[E]arly evidence of regular Jain patronage by royal houses, while not non-existent, is sketchy. Revealingly, there are no depictions of *tīrthankaras* on royal coinage, even that of the religiously highly pluralistic Kushanas, and no substantial evidence of royal land grants to the Jain community ... Early Jain images ... lack royal insignia, such as the parasol, which occur only at a later date ...”

Jainism under the Kuṣāṇas, then, appears to have refused royal patronage. It also had no permanent residences for its monks and nuns. We have no information about Jaina monasteries from that period. Adelheid Mette (2010: 214-215) is no doubt right when she says: “Anders als die Buddhisten entwickelten die Jaina bis in die jüngste Zeit keine klösterlichen Einrichtungen (*vihāra*), sondern sie blieben umherziehende Wandermönche (*vihārin*, entsprechend der eigentlichen Bedeutung des Wortes).”

We may contrast this with the situation of Buddhism at that time. Eltschinger (2014: 77-78), with a reference to Nattier (1991), speaks of “the worries aroused in a disciplinary conservative fraction of northwestern

⁵ Chatterjee 2012.

⁶ Reference to S. B. Deo, *History of Jaina Monachism*, p. 234, not accessible to me.

Buddhist communities by the *saṅgha*'s laxity under Kuṣāṇa rule". He continues: "Indeed, the Kuṣāṇa period coincides with major institutional and economic breaks within Buddhist communities (among them, the 'emergence in India of a new type of social institution with considerable clout: the fully institutionalized, permanently housed, landed monastery'⁷). Put in other words, the early centuries CE lay the foundations of what Gregory Schopen has termed 'Mainstream Buddhism', and inaugurate the 'Middle Period' of Indian Buddhism."

Without monasteries the Jaina monks and nuns could not look after their stūpas. There are good reasons to think that Jainism once did have its stūpas.⁸ This is confirmed by both literary references and archaeological evidence. A Jaina stūpa has been identified in Mathurā (Smith 1900). Paul Dundas (2002: 291 n. 4) recalls that stūpas were regularly built to honour eminent deceased Jaina monks during the late medieval period. John Irwin (1979: 799) draws attention to a story in which the Buddhist king Kaniṣka venerates by mistake a Jaina stūpa. A passage in the early Buddhist canon (*Dīgha et Majjhima Nikāya*) mentions a *thūpa* (Skt. *stūpa*) in connection with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the 'founder' (or better, most recent Jina) of Jainism.⁹

In Buddhism, looking after stūpas became an important concern of monks and nuns. Indeed, Buddhist monasteries were built next to stūpas. (Certain Vinaya texts point out that the stūpa must be built before the monastery; Bareau 1962: 234.) The constant presence of monastics guaranteed the maintenance of the stūpas; these monastics could supervise and derive an income from devotional practices around the stūpas. In Jainism, there was no monastic presence at the stūpas, which predictably fell into disrepair in due time. This, I have suggested elsewhere, is the reason why Jainism abandoned the worship of stūpas, and inserted a passage in a text stating that the bodily remains of Mahāvīra (and all other tīrthaṅkaras for that matter) had been taken away from this earth and transported to heaven by the gods.¹⁰

There is one more characteristic of Jainism under the Kuṣāṇas that has to retain our attention. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism did not adopt Sanskrit at

⁷ Reference to Schopen 2004: 81.

⁸ Bronkhorst 2011: 132 ff., 225 ff., with references to further literature; see also Jain 1984: 258 f., 281, 390 f.; Flügel 2012.

⁹ Schopen 1996: 568 f. = 2004: 334 f.

¹⁰ Bronkhorst 2011: 225-230.

that time.¹¹ This, I believe, is more than coincidence. Buddhism adopted Sanskrit at around that time precisely because it had become dependent on the largesse of the royal court. Most particularly, Buddhism had to build and maintain monasteries and all that came along with it, and for this it could not do without gifts from the rulers. But we know that political rulers at around that time had begun to adopt Sanskrit, showing the growing Brahmanical influence at the court. Jainism was not affected by this, and carried on as before, without using Sanskrit.

I hope that the points I have raised so far jointly give a general impression of what Jainism looked like at the time of the Kuṣāṇas. Jainism did not receive, and probably refused, royal patronage. It could do without such patronage because Jaina monastics at that time did not live in monasteries (not even part of the time). The absence of monasteries also seems to account for the fact that Jainism could not continue the cult of stūpas. The absence of royal patronage, finally, freed Jainism from the obligation to turn to Sanskrit.

So far we discern four absences: absence of royal patronage, absence of monasteries, absence of Sanskrit, and increasing absence of stūpa worship. The suggestion I wish to make is, of course, that these four absences are organically related, even if the causal relationship between the four has to remain tentative: absence of monasteries allowed the Jaina community to exist without, or even refuse, royal patronage, and to abstain from shifting to Sanskrit; it also accounts for the relative neglect, and subsequent abandonment, of stūpa worship. I now wish to add a fifth absence: absence of an established canon. In order to establish and preserve a canon, especially an oral canon, one needs established community life, preferably in and around fixed abodes. It is therefore reasonable, I propose, to include the absence of an established and well-preserved canon in the set of absences mentioned earlier. This absence of an established and well-preserved canon may not be the direct result of the absence of royal patronage, but I would claim that the two were part of one and the same set of circumstances.



¹¹ Dundas 1996: esp. p. 145 ff.

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