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Misunderstood origins: how Buddhism fooled modern scholarship - and itself*

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The way in which modern scholarship used to date early Buddhism in relation to late-Vedic literature has fascinated me for long. Strictly speaking, it did not date early Buddhism in relation to late-Vedic literature, but the other way round: it dated late-Vedic literature in relation to early Buddhism. Scholarship barely needed to date early Buddhism in this manner, for it had independent indications to go by. The Buddha could be dated in relation to certain inscriptions of Emperor Aśoka, and Aśoka could be dated in relation to certain Hellenistic rulers whom he mentions in his inscriptions. Add to this that the Buddhist traditions provided useful information, and it was clear that the Buddha had to be dated somewhere between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE. A detailed inspection of all this evidence convinced most scholars that the date of the Buddha's death was as precisely known as one could ever hope to get.

Late-Vedic literature was a much harder nut to crack. Here there were virtually no independent indications that might help. No wonder that the comfortable chronological situation of Buddhism was invoked for help. One of the crucial arguments ran as follows: Vedic literature is for the most part ignorant of rebirth and karmic retribution; these notions pop up in its most recent portions, viz., the early Upaniṣads; Buddhism knows and accepts these notions; conclusion: Buddhism arose after the notions of rebirth and karmic retribution had been invented in late-Vedic literature.

The logical force of this conclusion is far from compelling. In spite of this, it has had a remarkable appeal. Additional reasons were found to support the claim that Buddhism is more recent than late-Vedic literature, but these additional reasons were no more compelling.

* This is the text of a lecture delivered at Austin, Texas, 18 February 2009. Some of the topics here discussed are taken up and elaborated in my book *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (2011).

In my book *Greater Magadha* I have dealt in great detail with most, if not all, arguments that have been presented in scholarly literature to support these chronological convictions. The outcome was invariably the same: the arguments are not compelling, and often in conflict with the available evidence. I am not going to repeat this analysis, which would make this lecture extremely boring, and which would serve no purpose because you can find it all in my book. In this lecture I intend to discuss another question, not dealt with in my book, viz., why did scholars, believers, and almost everyone else accept so readily that Buddhism arose after the completion of Vedic literature (or most of it)? The arguments that are supposed to justify this conclusion do no such thing. What, then, explains this credulity?

The answer, I propose, lies in the circumstance that everyone involved — scholars, but also Hindus and Buddhists — were *a priori* convinced that Brahmanism, and therefore Vedic literature, constituted the background of early Buddhism. With such a presupposition the argument which I just sketched becomes, all of the sudden, quite convincing. It now runs something like this: Vedic literature is for the most part ignorant of rebirth and karmic retribution; these notions pop up in its most recent portions, the early Upaniṣads, and become part of the Brahmanical background; Buddhism knows and accepts these notions from this Brahmanical background; conclusion: Buddhism arose after the notions of rebirth and karmic retribution had been invented in late-Vedic literature. In this form the argument is solid and convincing.

I believe that my book *Greater Magadha* has sufficiently taken care of the idea that Brahmanism constituted the principal background of early Buddhism. It did not. Brahmanism did not constitute the background in which Buddhism arose. Buddhism arose in a region in which Brahmanism was not the dominant ideology. The region where Brahmanism was predominant was centered on the Doab of the two rivers Ganga and Yamuna. The region where Buddhism arose was situated to the east of the confluence of these two rivers. It had an altogether different culture. This eastern region I call Greater Magadha, and its culture: the culture of Greater Magadha.

A great deal could be said about the culture of Greater Magadha, and some of it has been said in my book. More could no doubt be added, and I hope that future research will actually be able to do so. However, I will not deal with this issue today. As I just said, in this lecture I wish to concentrate on the question why scholars and so many others

were so ready, perhaps even keen, to accept that Buddhism arose out of an anterior Vedic culture, after the completion of the Vedic corpus? In order to find an answer to this question, we first have to consider what happened to Buddhism in India half a millennium after its beginning.

Sometime during the second century CE or earlier, the Buddhists of northwestern India adopted Sanskrit. Regarding the exact time when this happened, the recently discovered so-called Schøyen collection of manuscripts from Bamiyan provides some help. Richard Salomon (2006: 358) says the following about it:

The oldest fragments of that collection, which seem to date from about the late second or early third centuries CE, include manuscripts in both Gāndhārī and Sanskrit. This situation may reflect a transitional period during which the Kharoṣṭhī script and Gāndhārī language were being gradually ... replaced in Greater Gandhāra by Brāhmī and Sanskrit ...

If it is true that Aśvaghoṣa, probably one of the first Buddhist authors to write in Sanskrit, is to be dated in the first century CE,¹ the period of transition must have covered the second century CE plus perhaps some decenniums before and after.

The *adoption* of Sanskrit is to be distinguished from the *sanskritization* of other languages such as Gāndhārī, but the two may be related. About the latter Salomon (2001: 248) makes the following observation:

The new manuscript material indicates a gradual movement toward sanskritization of Gāndhārī whose roots go back to the first century, but which seems to have intensified in the second century, apparently during the reign of Kaniṣka and his Kuṣāṇa successors. This agrees well with the chronology of hybridization as previously deduced for northern India from later Buddhist manuscripts and from inscriptions in Mathurā and surrounding areas. Thus the incipient sanskritization of Buddhist textual and epigraphic languages probably accelerated simultaneously in the two main centers of the Indian empire of the Kuṣāṇas, namely Gandhāra and central northern India, and it is hard to avoid concluding that the bulk of the sanskritization of Buddhist literature took place under the Kuṣāṇas.

The period of sanskritization of Gāndhārī coincides, it appears, with the beginning of the transitional period during which the Buddhists of northwestern India shifted to Sanskrit.²

¹ Hildebeitel, 2006: 233 f. Olivelle (2008: xix f.) argues for the second century CE.

Whatever the precise limits of the period of transition, until that time the Buddhists had used regional languages, perhaps also some literary Middle Indic, but not Sanskrit. And indeed, why should they? Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins, with whom the Buddhists had little in common. Buddhism had survived for centuries using other languages than Sanskrit, had developed a highly technical philosophy, and had lived in kingdoms and empires that had not used Sanskrit either. Why then did they adopt Sanskrit?

One answer that has been suggested is that the effort of these Buddhists to write Sanskrit was, to cite John Brough (1954: 368/147), “to present their doctrine in the language of learning and prestige”. This, however, begs the question. For why should Sanskrit, rather than any of the Middle Indic languages that were in use, be the language of learning and prestige? Sheldon Pollock sees the matter more clearly when he says (2006: 513): “The adoption of Sanskrit by Buddhists after centuries of resistance is often explained by its being ‘the language of learning’ or possessing ‘technical precision’. We are never told why, after five centuries, it suddenly became necessary or desirable for Buddhists to begin to participate in such learning, or indeed why the precision of the local languages of Buddhism (Gandhari, Tocharian, and so on), which had often been vehicles for liturgy, metaphysical doctrine, and moral discourse, had suddenly failed.” This formulates the problem more clearly, but not yet clearly enough. There had not been “centuries of resistance” against Sanskrit on the part of the Buddhists of India, as Pollock suggests, because there had been no pressure that had to be resisted. To state it once again, Sanskrit was the archaic language of a group of people, the Brahmins, whom the Buddhists had no particular reason to imitate or please.

Pollock (2006: 56-57) sums up the situation in the following words, and this time we can more fully agree with him: “What exactly prompted the Buddhists to abandon their hostility to the [Sanskrit] language after half a millennium [...] and finally adopt it for scripture, philosophy, and a wide range of other textual forms, some of which they would help to invent, is a question for which no convincing arguments have yet been

² Fussman (1988: 17) emphasizes that sanskritization was no continuous process: “Le degré de sanskritisation d’un texte ne permet ... pas — à lui seul — de dater celui-ci, même relativement.”

offered.” Pollock further observes that in this process “newly settled immigrants from the northwest seem to participate centrally” (1996: 205-06).³

In order to make headway in answering this question, two issues have to be distinguished. One can easily imagine that Buddhism, which tended to adopt the language of the region in which it found itself, felt the need for a common language of communication. This is what Oskar von Hinüber (1989: 351) described in the following words: “[...] as soon as Buddhism began to spread over a larger area, the development of a language widely understood became imperative. The linguistic medium answering this demand eventually, was a literary Middle Indic language adapted, but hardly invented by the Buddhists themselves. [...] Once the Buddhists began to adopt the literary language current at their times, they started to move away from the spoken language, and ended up almost automatically in a more or less Sanskritized Buddhist Middle Indic [...]”⁴ These remarks explain the adoption of a common Middle Indic language, which is the first issue to be distinguished. The second one is the adoption of Sanskrit, and here von Hinüber’s remarks offer no help. For the Sanskrit adopted is, at least in the case of certain Buddhists, the real Brahmanical Sanskrit, not some language close to it.⁵ To cite once again John Brough (1954: 368/147): “So far as concerns the Sarvāstivādin canon at least, there is no room to doubt that the authors fully intended to write Sanskrit, and they would have been surprised at the suggestion that they were writing in a language essentially Prakritic in nature” The question is, why? Don’t forget that until that time Buddhism had never yet used Sanskrit. Buddhism had moreover flourished and expanded in empires and kingdoms that never used Sanskrit either. The only users of Sanskrit until the great transformation were Brahmins, and the Buddhists had no obvious reason to copy Brahmins.

³ Perhaps the Sarvāstivādins played a key role here. Cp. Brough, 1954: 367 [146]: “in the case of the Sanskrit canon, it is obvious from comparing the Pali version that it is very largely constructed out of older material in some Prakrit dialect; but there seems to be no reason for assuming that it is anything other than a quite definite translation into Sanskrit, done at a specific period, when the Sarvāstivādins decided to adopt Sanskrit as their official language.”

⁴ In another article Hinüber (1983/1994) argues that Buddhist Middle Indic subsequently developed into Pāli and Buddhist [Hybrid] Sanskrit. See pp. 192-93: “Pāli and Buddhist Sanskrit have common roots and develop in the same direction for some time, until Pāli loses contact with the north shortly after the beginning of the Christian era and from that time onwards is disconnected from the further developments in the north of the subcontinent.”

⁵ Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit is different. Edgerton’s (1953: I: 14) characterizes it as “a real language, not a modification or corruption of any other dialect on record, and as individual in its lexicon as it has been shown to be in its grammar.”

Considering the above, the question why the Buddhists adopted Sanskrit presents itself as a mystery. Buddhism (i.e., certain schools of Buddhism) adopted a language which it had no historical, religious, intellectual or ideological reasons to adopt. It seems evident that, in order to solve the mystery, it is necessary to take into consideration that something very similar happened in the political realm. There are no political inscriptions in Sanskrit that precede the middle of the second century CE. Before that date, political inscriptions in northern India had always used Middle Indic languages. Why did this change?

I am aware of Pollock's position in this matter. Pollock rejects the essential role of Brahmins and Brahmanism in the political adoption of Sanskrit. As he puts it (2006: 67): "The radical reinvention of Sanskrit culture seems to have occurred — at least, it is here that we can actually watch it occurring — [...] in a social world where the presuppositions and conventions of *vaidika* culture were weakest: among newly immigrant peoples from the far northwest of the subcontinent (and ultimately from Iran and Central Asia), most importantly the Śakas (the so-called Indo-Scythians), especially a branch of the Śakas known as the Western Kṣatrapas, and the Kuṣāṇas."

In order to evaluate this position we have to be clear what is meant by *vaidika* culture or rather, whether *vaidika* culture has a role to play in this discussion. For all those who are not practicing Brahmins themselves, Brahmanism is not, or not primarily, the religious culture which finds expression in the Vedic texts. Brahmanism, as others have pointed out before me, is for them a vision of a socio-political order.⁶ Rulers can adopt this vision without "converting" to Brahmanism. Strictly speaking, Brahmanism did not make converts, at least not religious converts. It promoted a vision of society, and Brahmanical influence will manifest itself through this vision as much as, if not more than, through specific religious beliefs or practices.

With this in mind, let us look at the first important political Sanskrit inscription, the celebrated inscription of the Kṣatrapa king Rudradāman, dating from shortly after 150 CE. This inscription,⁷ to be brief, mentions a Vaiśya, refers to "all the varṇas", and points out that Rudradāman had undertaken a major work "in order to [benefit]⁸ cows and Brahmins for a thousand of years". There is therefore ample reason to agree with Richard

⁶ de Casparis & Mabbett, 1992: 288.

⁷ Kielhorn, 1906. For a description and depiction of the site, see Falk, 2006: 118 f.

⁸ This is the interpretation suggested by Kielhorn (1906: 49 n. 2).

Salomon where he says (1998: 93): “It appears that the use of Sanskrit for inscriptions was promoted, though not originated, by the Scythian rulers of northern and western India in the first two centuries of the Christian era. Their motivation in promoting Sanskrit was presumably a desire to establish themselves as legitimate Indian or at least Indianized rulers, and *to curry the favor of the educated Brahmanical elite.*”⁹ Indeed, “the shift to using Sanskrit, the Brahmins’ liturgical language, for the business of state was primarily the initiative of foreign rulers — Scythians and Kuṣāṇas — anxious to align themselves with a priestly class firmly rooted in Āryāvarta, the ‘Land of the Āryas’ [...] Once introduced by arrivistes, this policy was fully established as the royal standard by the imperial Guptas.”¹⁰

Note that the Brahmanical vision of society is absent in South Asian inscriptions that are *not* in Sanskrit and whose makers or instigators have *no* association with Brahmanism. This is true, to be sure, of the inscriptions of Aśoka.¹¹ They refer to none of the four *varṇas* except the Brahmins, nor to the system as a whole.¹² It is also true of the early Tamil inscriptions, edited and studied by Iravatham Mahadevan (2003), which concern Jainas but not Brahmins, and depict a society with an “absence of a priestly hierarchy” (p. 162). It appears to be true of other inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī, unless I am mistaken.¹³ An exception has to be made, not surprisingly, for Nāsik Cave Inscription no. 2 of the Sātavāhanas, who are known to have been influenced by the Brahmanical vision of society. This inscription contains the expression *ekabamhaṇa* “one-Brahmin” (the

⁹ Lubin (2005: 94) states: “Perhaps the key detail that might throw light on Rudradāman’s motive in having this inscription composed in Sanskrit is the description of him as ‘having attained wide fame for mastering, remembering, fathoming, and practicing the great sciences of word-and-meaning, music, logic, and so forth’ (*śabdārthagāndharvanyāyādyānām vidyānām mahatīnām pāranadhāraṇavijñānaprayogāvāptavipulakīrtinā* [l. 13]). The notion that expertise in the various branches of *vidyā* was the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya* directly reflects the influence of the Brahmanical doctrine of Sanskrit learning as a criterion of high *varṇa*. The fact that this Indo-Scythian ruler was one of the first to employ Sanskrit in a political forum suggests that this innovation was a calculated effort to demonstrate publicly the legitimacy of his rule by embracing the sacred authority of the brahmins.”

¹⁰ Lubin, 2005: 94.

¹¹ There is a passage in the fifth Rock Edict which has sometimes been interpreted as concerning the four *varṇas*. The important words have the form *bhaṭamayesu bamḥhanibḥhesu*, with variants. The interpretation of these words is far from obvious. Bloch (1950: 104) does not translate these words, but comments in a note (n. 10): “Très obscur. On a tiré *mayesu*, ou plutôt *mayyesu*, de *marya*, ou de *arya* avec un *-m-* euphonique; donc ‘serfs et nobles, brahmanes et bourgeois’: en somme les quatre castes?”

¹² See, e.g. the indexes in Hultzsch, 1924; Schneider, 1978; Andersen, 1990.

¹³ See the index in Konow, 1929, and the index of miscellaneous terms in Lüders, 1912.

precise interpretation of this expression is not certain), it has the term *khatiya*, refers to the four *varṇas* (*cātuvāṇa*), to the twice-born (*dija*), and even to the (Brahmanical) three objects of human activity (*tivaga*).¹⁴ Rudradāman, one of the first to refer, and adhere, to the Brahmanical (di-)vision of society, is also one of the first to use Sanskrit. Is this coincidence? The obvious answer to this question must be: no.

Let us return to the Buddhists of northwestern India. The pressure on them to use Sanskrit must have come through the intermediary of royal courts that had accepted the Brahmanical vision of society, and Sanskrit along with it. This process is in need of further analysis, which cannot be undertaken here. It seems however clear that the pressure to use Sanskrit went hand in hand with the pressure to accept the Brahmanical vision of society, at least in its fundamentals.

This last claim is testable. It raises the question whether Buddhist works composed in Sanskrit are more Brahmanical in their description of society than works composed in Middle Indic. The thesis I wish to present is that this is indeed the case. I have not had occasion to explore this thesis exhaustively, but I can, and will, present some examples that support it.

Consider first Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*, which may belong to the first generation of Buddhist works directly composed in Sanskrit. It describes the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment. The society, and indeed the family, into which the Buddha is born is, according to this text, completely pervaded by Brahmanical ideas and customs. Not only does his royal father receive Brahmins to pronounce on the greatness of his new-born son,¹⁵ he has the birth ceremony (*jātakarman*) carried out, and performs Vedic murmurings (*japa*), oblations (*homa*) and auspicious rites (*maṅgala*) to celebrate the event, all this followed by a gift of a hundred thousand cows to Brahmins.¹⁶ Also later he pours oblations into the fire and gives gold and cows to Brahmins, this time to ensure a long life for his son.¹⁷ He drinks soma as enjoined by the Vedas.¹⁸ He performs sacrifices, even though only such as are without violence.¹⁹ He has a purohita,²⁰ described

¹⁴ Senart, 1906: 60 l. 4-6. Bhandarkar (1938: 33) proposes to understand the term *khatiya* as referring to a tribe in north-western India, but the multitude of Brahmanical terms shows that no doubt members of the second *varṇa* (Kṣatriya) are meant.

¹⁵ Buddhac 1.31 f.

¹⁶ Buddhac 1.82-83

¹⁷ Buddhac 2.36.

¹⁸ Buddhac 2.37.

¹⁹ Buddhac 2.49.

as “in charge of the sacrifices” (*havya...adhikṛta*).²¹ King Śreṇya of Magadha gives friendly advice to the Bodhisattva, counseling him to pursue the triple end of life (*trivarga*), viz., pleasure (*kāma*), wealth (*artha*) and virtue (*dharma*), i.e. the three Brahmanical aims of life. Māra, the Buddha’s arch-enemy who tries to prevent him from attaining liberation, calls upon him to follow his *svadharma*.²² King Śreṇya points out that performing sacrifices is his *kuladharmā* “family obligation”.²³ These and many other examples show, not just that Aśvaghōṣa was familiar with Brahmanism, but that he and his readers situated the Buddha in fully Brahmanized surroundings.

Aśvaghōṣa’s *Saundarananda* paints a similar picture of the Buddha’s father. He here studies the highest Brahman,²⁴ makes the Brahmins press soma²⁵ which he drinks,²⁶ sacrifices with the help of Brahmins,²⁷ and is said to be a follower of the Veda.²⁸ The *Saundarananda* also emphasizes the martial side of King Śuddhodana, a side which easily fits into a Brahmanical world-view, less smoothly into a Buddhist one. We read, for example, that the king “favoured those who submitted to him [and] waged war on the enemies of his race (*kuladvīṣ*)”.²⁹ He “took away from his foes their mighty fame”.³⁰ He “dispersed his foes with his courage”;³¹ “by his holiness he put down the army of internal foes, and by his courage his external foes”.³² “With the heat of his courage he reduced proud foes to ashes”.³³

There are further examples, which confirm the Brahmanization of Buddhism in northern India from, say, the second century CE on. One of these is the *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra, composed in Sanskrit, probably in the fourth century CE.³⁴ The ideal king in the *Jātakamālā* behaves in accordance with Brahmanical principles. This is best illustrated in those stories in which the Bodhisattva himself is king. In this elevated position he carries

²⁰ Buddhac 4.8; 8.82, 87; 9.1 f.

²¹ Buddhac 10.1.

²² Buddhac 13.9.

²³ Buddhac 10.39.

²⁴ Saund 2.12.

²⁵ Saund 2.31.

²⁶ Saund 2.44.

²⁷ Saund 2.35-36.

²⁸ Saund 2.44.

²⁹ Saund 2.10.

³⁰ Saund 2.16.

³¹ Saund 2.29.

³² Saund 2.36.

³³ Saund 2.39.

³⁴ Khoroché, 1989: xi f.

out deeds of great liberality and compassion, which move him forward on his path toward Buddhahood. A king, we learn from these stories, pursues, even if he is an exceptionally good king, the three Brahmanical aims of life, the *trivarga*,³⁵ i.e., virtue (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and desire (*kāma*). In case of adversity, he takes advice from the Brahmin elders headed by his purohita.³⁶ He has mastered the essence of the triple Veda and of Brahmanical philosophy,³⁷ has competence in the Vedas along with its Aṅgas and Upavedas.³⁸ And the result of his perfect rule is that the inhabitants of his kingdom are characterized by love for their own Dharma (*svadharmā*).³⁹ Once again we see that the ideal king, in the *Jātakamālā* as in the *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda*, is basically a Brahmanical king, one who follows Brahmanical norms and customs.⁴⁰

³⁵ Jm(V) p. 7 l. 8; p. 71 l. 1 = Jm(H) p. 10 l. 8; p. 97 l. 5.

³⁶ Jm(V) p. 70 l. 20-21; Jm(H) p. 96 l. 23: *purohitapramukhān brāhmaṇavṛddhān [u]pāyaṃ papraccha*.

³⁷ Jm(V) p. 55 l. 4; Jm(H) p. 75 l. 4: *trayyānvīkṣikyor upalabdhārthatattva*.

³⁸ Jm(V) p. 217 l. 7-8: *sāṅgeṣu sopavedeṣu ca vedeṣu vaicakṣaṇyam*.

³⁹ Jm(V) p. 45 l. 25; p. 55 l. 4 = Jm(H) p. 63 l. 20; p. 75 l. 5.

⁴⁰ It is true that the *Jātakamālā* expresses itself more than once critically with regard to Brahmanical ideas about statecraft, which it calls *nīti*, sometimes *rājanīti*. One passage calls it “that vile thing called *nīti*” (Jm(V) p. 45 l. 21; Jm(H) p. 63 l.15: *dharmas tasya nayo na nītinikṛtiḥ*). In another passage the Bodhisattva who, as king of a group of monkeys, has saved all the members of his group at great risk to himself, admits that it is commonly thought that subjects are there for the king, not vice-versa; he then however comments: “That is indeed *rājanīti*; it seems to me difficult to follow” (Jm(V) p. 186 l. 4: *kāmam evaṃ pravṛttā ... rājanītiḥ / duranuvartyā tu māṃ pratibhāti /*). In another chapter the Bodhisattva is told that untruth is prescribed in the Veda in order to attain certain goals, such as saving one’s life, and that those who are skilled in the *nīti* of kings proclaim that the application of virtue that is in conflict with one’s material interest and desires is bad behavior and an infraction (Jm(V) p. 224 l. 20-22: *apātakaṃ hi svaprāṇaparirakṣānimittaṃ gurujanārthaṃ cānṛtamārgo vedavihīta iti / ... / arthakāmābhyāṃ ca virodhidṛṣṭaṃ dharmasamśrayam anayam iti svasanam iti ca rājñāṃ pracakṣate nītikūśalāḥ /*). The Bodhisattva, of course, expresses his disagreement. Most elaborate perhaps is chapter 31, the *Sutasoma Jātaka*. Here the Bodhisattva, a prince who has initially been liberated by a man-eating monster, delivers himself again into the latter’s power because he had given his word to come back. The monster observes: “You are not skillful in the ways of *nīti*, because you have again come to me even though I had liberated you so that you could rejoin your home which is agreeable all around with the magnificence of kingship.” The Bodhisattva responds that, on the contrary, he *is* skillful in the ways of *nīti*, and that is why he does not wish to apply them. He then utters the following verse: “Those who are clever in the application of the ways of *nīti* generally fall into misfortune after death. Having rejected the ways of *nīti* considering them deceitful, I have come back, respecting truth.” (Jm(V) p. 226 l. 13-25: *mukto mayā nāma sametya geḥaṃ, samantato rājyavibhūtiramyam / yan matsamīpaṃ punarāgatas tvam, na nītimārge kuśalo ‘si tasmāt // bodhisattva uvāca: naitad asti / aham eva tu kuśalo nītimārge yad enaṃ na pratipattum icchāmi / ... / ye nītimārgapratipattidhītāḥ, prāyeṇa te pretya patanty apāyān / apāsya jihmān iti nīti mārgān, satyānurakṣī punar āgato ‘smi //*).

These texts composed in Sanskrit contrast with comparable literature composed in Middle Indic. I must be brief with regard to the Suttas of the Pāli canon. They often refer to Brahmins. But these Brahmins live, like everyone else, in essentially non-Brahmanical surroundings. The situation presented in the works of Aśvaghōṣa and Āryaśūra is different: here everyone, including the Buddhists, lives in surroundings that are largely Brahmanized, in the sense that a number of Brahmanical norms and values with regard to kingship and society are the rule.

Aśvaghōṣa's detailed description of the Buddha's father as an ideal Brahmanical king contrasts sharply with other contemporary biographies of the Buddha. The *Mahāvastu*, for all its length, has very little to say about Śuddhodana's accomplishments as a king. And the *Lalitavistara* presents him as an ideal Buddhist king, without using any Brahmanical terminology.⁴¹ Indeed, it would seem that Aśvaghōṣa has himself invented the elaborate descriptions of the ideal kingship of the Buddha's father, perhaps with the conscious purpose of glorifying Brahmanical notions.

Not all Buddhists at that time shared this admiration for Brahmins. The attitude of the *Mahāvastu* appears to be quite different, for it does not even entrust to Brahmins the ability to interpret the marks on the body of the just-born Buddha-to-be, even though this is a traditional part of the story which already occurs in the ancient canon. The *Mahāvastu* replaces the traditional Brahmins with gods, and adds an uncomplimentary remark about the incompetence of the Brahmins:⁴²

When the child had entered the royal palace, the king bade his Purohita fetch at once the wise men who were skilled in the rules and significance of signs. Learning this, the saintly devas, called Maheśvaras, (came on the scene), lest the unskilled crowd of the twice-born should seek to interpret the signs.

The twice-born are the Brahmins, and they are stated not to be good enough for the task at hand.

The contrast between the works of Aśvaghōṣa on the one hand and the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* on the other has to be seen in the light of the fact that Aśvaghōṣa's works were composed in Sanskrit, while the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* were not. The former of these two has been preserved in a Middle Indic language which is often

⁴¹ Lal(V) p. 17 f.

⁴² Mvu II p. 27; similarly I p. 224. Tr. Jones, modified. Cp. Mvu I p. 150.

referred to as Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, but which is a Middle Indic language none-the-less;⁴³ the latter has been incompletely Sanskritized from Middle Indic.⁴⁴

The most important Theravāda, and therefore Pāli, source for the life of the Buddha is the *Nidānakathā*, which introduces the collection of Jātakas.⁴⁵ Its middle portion, the *Avidūrenidāna*, covers by and large the same material as Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*; it is in its present form no doubt a few centuries younger.⁴⁶ Like the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, it has little to say about the kingly virtues of the Buddha's father. Since this text, at least in its present form, appears to have originated in Sri Lanka, and therefore outside of continental India, it can only play a marginal role in our reflections.⁴⁷

I mention briefly a few more examples in order to show that the Brahmanization of Buddhism that I talk about was a real historical phenomenon, not just the product of my imagination:

-Mātṛceṭa's *Varṇārharvarṇastotra* "Laudation for him whose praise is worthy of praise" is hardly the kind of text in which one expects Brahmanical elements. But already in his introduction to the first chapter, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, its editor and translator, draws attention to the Brahmanical concepts used in it.⁴⁸ More striking use of Brahmanical elements occurs elsewhere in the work. Verse 2.20, for example, calls the Buddha a Brahmin who knows the Veda and the Vedāṅgas (*vedavedāṅgavedine ... brāhmaṇāya*). The second next verse calls him a *snātaka*, "a Brahmin who has performed his ceremony of ablution at the end of his Vedic studies". Chapter 7 (*Brahmānuvāda*) goes further and "translates" a number Brahmanical elements into Buddhist ones.

⁴³ Edgerton's (1953: I: 14) characterizes it as "a real language, not a modification or corruption of any other dialect on record, and as individual in its lexicon as it has been shown to be in its grammar."

⁴⁴ For thoughts about the reason why all forms of Middle Indic used by Buddhist underwent a process of Sanskritization (as distinct from a complete shift to Sanskrit), see Salomon, 2001: 248 f.

⁴⁵ Hinüber, 1996: 55 f.; Reynolds, 1976: 50 f. The English translator calls the *Nidānakathā* "the Ceylon compiler's introduction" (Rhys Davids, 1878: vii).

⁴⁶ Hinüber, 1996: 152.

⁴⁷ Note in this connection the relative prominence of the kingly Purohita in the Jātakas; Fick, 1897: 107 f.

⁴⁸ Hartmann, 1987: 65. Hartmann draws attention to the terms *śruti*, *prakṣālaṇa*, *puṇyātīrtha*, *pavitra* and *aghamarṣaṇa* in particular.

-Interestingly, among the Buddhist works composed in Sanskrit there are some that deal with *nīti*. *Nīti*, and more in particular *rājanīti*, was reviled in the *Jātakamālā*.⁴⁹ This was not surprising, because the kind of advice Brahmins gave to kings was unacceptable to Buddhists. It is therefore all the more noteworthy that at least one of the Buddhist texts on *nīti* contains verses on polity and state-administration. This text, the *Prajñāśataka* (or *Prajñāśataka-nāma-prakaraṇa*), is attributed to a Nāgārjuna, no doubt not the same as the famous one, and has only survived in Tibetan translation. It contains “praise of the Brahmanical order including the practice of *homa* with mantras”. It also “claims that it contains both direct and indirect merits as a source of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*”.⁵⁰ In other words, this text, though Buddhist, has absorbed the Brahmanical vision of society.

-We have seen that Aśvaghōṣa situated the Buddha in Brahmanized surroundings. Kumāralāta’s *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Drṣṭāntapañkti* — whose French translator, Édouard Huber (1908: 10 ff.), still thought that it was Aśvaghōṣa’s *Sūtrālaṅkāra* — does the same, but differently, by claiming that the Brahmanical philosophy of Vaiśeṣika was believed in by foolish people until the time when the Buddha appeared in the world.

Having come this far, you may agree with me that half the title of my lecture is justified: the Buddhists of northern India did fool themselves into believing that their religion had originated in Brahmanical surroundings. My next task is to show that they fooled modern scholarship as well.

We know already that modern scholarship was led to accept this position. The question that remains is: how did this happen? I think that the Buddhist literature composed in Sanskrit played a crucial role in this. This was the literature primarily studied and exploited by one of the pioneers of Buddhist studies in Europe, Eugène Burnouf. Donald Lopez states in a recent book that Burnouf’s *Introduction à l’histoire du bouddhisme indien* is arguably “the single most important work in the history of the academic study of Buddhism” (Lopez, 2008: 170). It laid the basis for Buddhist studies in the West, and through it subsequent European scholars were breast-fed, so to say, on the

⁴⁹ See note 40, above.

⁵⁰ Pathak, 1997: 77; also 1974: 34 f.

“Sanskritic” vision of Buddhism’s past. Burnouf based himself in this regard on the Divyāvadāna⁵¹ and other northern texts, and it is not surprising that he concluded that Buddhism arose in a completely brahmanized society. Burnouf’s *Introduction* and the works he had primarily studied, including Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, remained popular in the nineteenth century; the *Buddhacarita* appeared, for example, twice in the ten volumes devoted to Buddhism in the Sacred Books of the East (Lopez, 2008: 155). By the time earlier Buddhist sources came to be studied in depth, this “Sanskritic” vision of Buddhism’s past had become deeply anchored, far too deeply to be easily modified.

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⁵¹ Burnouf, 1844/1876: 144: “... j’ai cru que je devais exposer les résultats que m’a donnés la lecture attentive des six cent soixante et quatorze pages du Divya avadana. Je ne crois pas trop m’avancer en disant que si l’on n’y doit pas trouver une exposition tout à fait complète du Bouddhisme, on y verra au moins l’histoire fidèle de ses premiers efforts, et comme le tableau exact de son établissement au sein de la société brâhmanique.”

- mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Kastenfrage, vornehmlich auf Grund der Jātaka dargestellt.* Kiel: C. F. Haeseler. Photomechanischer Nachdruck: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1974.
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Abbreviations:

Buddhac	Aśvaghōṣa, <i>Buddhacarita</i> , ed. and transl. E. H. Johnston, Calcutta 1935
Jm(H)	Āryaśūra, <i>Jātakamālā</i> , ed. A. Hanisch, Marburg 2005 (IndTib 43/1)
Jm(V)	Āryaśūra, <i>Jātakamālā</i> , ed. P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga 1959 (BST 21)
Lal(V)	Lalitavistara, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga 1958 (BST 1)
Mvu	Mahāvastu-Avadāna, ed. Émile Senart, 3 vols., Paris 1882-1897
Saund	Aśvaghōṣa, <i>Saundarananda</i> , ed. and transl. E. H. Johnston, Oxford 1928-32