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## The Magas

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According to certain Purāṇas, the Magas are Brahmins who came from another continent, the one called Śākadvīpa, and settled in India. A number of terminological similarities with Iranian words have convinced modern scholars that these Magas were originally Magi from Persia, or from a region in which Persian culture had been established; they had moved into India and succeeded in being recognized as Brahmins.<sup>1</sup>

As a general rule, Brahmanical texts are critical about foreigners. The fact, if it is one, that certain foreigners succeeded in attaining Brahmanical status without hiding their foreign origins is therefore remarkable and invites suspicion. Let us therefore look somewhat more closely into the matter.

Presumably the earliest surviving text providing us with information about the arrival of the Magas is the *Sāmba Purāṇa*. It links the arrival of these Brahmins to the introduction of images in sun-worship.<sup>2</sup> It is the first sun-image that is presented as speaking the following words:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the history of this research, see Rocher 1986: 217 ff., with notes; cp. Stietencron 1966: 13 f., Humbach 1978. Francis Wilford (1809) was perhaps the first to state that these Brahmins had entered India from the northwest; see Leask 2000, esp. p. 214. Thapar (1971: 434 f.) speaks of “the gradual evolution in status” of the Maga Brahmins, who were “at first looked down upon and not admitted to all the *śrāddha* ceremonies”; however, “gradually their position improved”. It is not clear on what evidence this is based.

<sup>2</sup> They were presumably first active in the sun-temple in Multān, in Sind; see Maclean 1989: 18-20. Jettmar (1997) finds evidence in the form of petroglyphs for a solar cult in the upper Indus valley, which he associates with the sun worship in Multan.

<sup>3</sup> *na yogyaḥ paricaryāyāṃ jambūdvīpe mamānagha/ mama pūjākarān gatvā śākadvīpād ihānaya// 27 // lavaṇodāt pare pāre kṣīrodena samāvṛtaḥ/ jambūdvīpāt paras tasmāc chākadvīpa iti śrutāḥ// 28 // tatra puṇyā janapadās cāturvarṇyasamāśritāḥ/ magās ca maśakās caiva mānasā maṇḍagās tathā// 29 // magā brāhmaṇabhūyiṣṭhā maśakāḥ kṣatriyāḥ smṛtāḥ/ vaiśyās tu mānasā jñeyāḥ śūdrās teṣāṃ tu maṇḍagāḥ// 30 // na teṣāṃ saṃkaraḥ kaścid varṇāśramakṛtaḥ kvacit/ dharmasyāvvyabhicāritvād ekāntasukhitāḥ prajāḥ// 31 //* *Sāmba Purāṇa* 26.27-31, as constituted in Stietencron 1966: 46. The names of the four populations in this constitution of the text have been influenced by a

There is no one in Jambūdīvīpa who is suitable to serve me. Go and bring worshippers for me from Śākadvīpa. It lies at the other shore of the salt-ocean and is surrounded by the milk-ocean. It lies beyond Jambūdīvīpa and is therefore known as Śākadvīpa.<sup>4</sup> In that [continent] there are the following populations, holding on to the hierarchy of the four classes (*varṇa*): the Magas, the Maśakas, the Mānasas and the Mandagas. The Magas are primarily Brahmins, the Maśakas are said to be Kṣatriyas, the Mānasas are to be thought of as Vaiśyas, the Mandagas among them are Śūdras. Among them there is no commingling of classes or episodes of life (*āśrama*) whatsoever. The inhabitants, because they do not deviate from Dharma, are completely happy.

Details of the manner in which a number of Maga Brahmins travelled from Śākadvīpa to Jambūdīvīpa do not concern us here. For our purposes it suffices to note that this journey needed divine help: these Magas travelled on the back of the divine bird Garuḍa. We are more interested in the circumstance that these Magas were already Brahmins in their original continent, and that this was a recognized fact, also in India.

As stated earlier, most modern scholars believe that the myth of the Magas who came from Śākadvīpa corresponds to a historical reality in which Magi came from Iran or from a region strongly influenced by Persian religion.<sup>5</sup> To quote Stietencron (1966: 13):<sup>6</sup>

Was an dieser Legende so bedeutsam schien, war der Name der Sonnenpriester, welcher sogleich an die medischen Magier, die Magoi Herodots erinnerte, sowie vor allem drei weitere Worte iranischen Ursprungs, die mit dem Bericht über diese Priester verbunden sind. Das erste, *avyāṅga*, bezeichnet den Gürtel der Sonnenpriester und kann mit av. *aiwyāṅhana* gleichgesetzt werden. Das zweite, *patidāna*, entspricht av.

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*Mahābhārata* passage to be considered below. Hazra (1958: 41 n. 22) enumerates the different forms these names have in different textual traditions.

<sup>4</sup> This can hardly be an etymological explanation of the name Śākadvīpa, and is rather an attempt to emphasize that Śākadvīpa is a different continent (*dvīpa*) from Jambūdīvīpa.

<sup>5</sup> Not all! Éric Pirart writes to me (7.10.2011): “Le fait que les quatre castes du Śākadvīpa portent toutes un nom commençant par *ma-* attire mon attention et me fait douter de l’origine *magu-* de *maga-*: le hasard aurait-il trop bien fait les choses? En effet, ne faudrait-il pas reconnaître dans *ma+* le préfixe iranien ancien *hma+* (= védique *smat+*) et donner par exemple au nom de *maśaka-* que reçoivent les kshatriya du Śākadvīpa le sens de ‘dotés de force’ (*\*hma+saka-* *\*smat+śaka-*)? Autrement dit: une origine iranienne, oui; une étymologie de *maga-* par l’iranien *magu-*, non.”

<sup>6</sup> See also Scheftelowitz 1933.

*paiti.dāna*, dem Mundtuch der Zarathustrier und das dritte, *varśman*, ist av. *barəsmān*, das kultische Zweigbündel.

It is not the aim of this article to discuss the different views that have been presented as to the time and region of origin of the migrating Magi; according to certain scholars there may have been several migrations, at more than one time and from more than one region of origin.<sup>7</sup> Other sources beside the *Sāmba Purāṇa* confirm that there were (and are) in India Brahmins who claimed to have come from Śākadvīpa and who were known by the names Magas, sometimes Bhojakas, or just Śākadvīpīya Brahmins.

In this paper, then, we take it for established that there were at some point of time, and presumably still are, in India Brahmins of foreign origin, whose ancestors had migrated to India from a region in which Iranian religious notions prevailed. We also assume that the story in the *Sāmba Purāṇa* — and in the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, which borrowed this passage from the *Sāmba Purāṇa*<sup>8</sup> — refers back to this event (or these events), though in a heavily reworked manner. Our question is now: Why should immigrants from the northwest be accepted as Brahmins?

Recall at this point that Brahmanical literature, and Indian literature in general, has not the slightest tendency to believe that the Brahmanical order of society prevailed outside India, least of all in the regions to its northwest. Al-Biruni, a visitor from Persia, and therefore from a region to which the Magas may conceivably have once belonged, said in around 1000 CE the following about the Indians:<sup>9</sup>

all their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them — against all foreigners. They call them *mleccha*, i.e. impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating, and drinking with them, because

<sup>7</sup> See Stietencron 1966: 235 ff.; Humbach 1969; Srivastava 1988; Panaino 1996. Some reject foreign influence and claim an Indian origin for the sun-worship of the Magas; so e.g. Pandey 1971: 177 ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Hazra 1952. A list of all the verses and chapters of the *Sāmba Purāṇa* that also occur in the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* can be found in Hazra 1958: 57-59. For a comparative study of the relevant portions of the two texts, see Stietencron 1966: 29 ff. Also the *Brahma Purāṇa* refers to these events; Srivastava 1972: 241 n. 265.

<sup>9</sup> Sachau 1888: I: 19-20.

thereby, they think, they would be polluted. They consider as impure anything which touches the fire and the water of a foreigner; and no household can exist without these two elements. Besides, they never desire that a thing which once has been polluted should be purified and thus recovered, as, under ordinary circumstances, if anybody or anything has become unclean, he or it would strive to regain the state of purity. They are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he wished it, or was inclined to their religion.

Mlecchas are often referred to in the most disagreeable terms.<sup>10</sup> The *Mahābhārata*, for example, states:<sup>11</sup> “The Mlecchas are the dirt of mankind.” For good measure the same passage adds that the Bāhlikas, i.e. the inhabitants of Bactria, are the dirt of the earth.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere the *Mahābhārata* explains that Mlecchas are lower even than the Śūdras, in a passage summed up by Brockington (1998: 208) as follows:

originally Brahmā created just Brahmins but those who were short-tempered and violent left their *varṇa*, turned red and became *kṣatriyas*, those who took to cattle-rearing and agriculture turned yellow and became *vaiśyas*, and those who in their delusion took to injury and untruth turned black and became *śūdras* ...; those who diverged still further from the proper norms and did not recognise them became Piśācas, Rākṣasas, Pretas and various sorts of Mlecchas.<sup>13</sup>

Other passages specify which foreigners are meant. In the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, for example, we find the following:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See in general Parasher 1991. According to the *Vaiṣṇava Dharmaśāstra* (84.4), in the lands of the Mlecchas the four *varṇas* do not exist (*cāturvarṇyavyavasthānaṃ yasmin deśe na vidyate/ taṃ mlecchadeśaṃ jānīyād āryāvartam ataḥ param//*). Occasionally Sanskrit literature contains also less negative, even positive, remarks about Mlecchas, as in Śabara’s *Mīmāṃsābhāṣya* on MīS 1.3.10: “Mlecchas are more skilled [than Brahmins] in rearing and catching birds.”

<sup>11</sup> Mhbh 8.30.70: *mānuṣāṇāṃ malaṃ mlecchā[h]*.

<sup>12</sup> Mhbh 8.30.68: *malaṃ pṛthivyā bāhlikāḥ*.

<sup>13</sup> Mhbh 12.181.10-18. This passage is remarkable in that it attributes the existence of the classes (*varṇa*) to the effects of karma; it begins with the observation that there is, at bottom, no difference between the classes (*na viśeṣo ’sti varṇānāṃ sarvaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ idaṃ jagat/ brahmaṇā pūrvasṛṣṭaṃ hi karmabhir varṇatāṃ gatam//*). Contrast this with Bronkhorst 2011: 49.

<sup>14</sup> Mhbh 13.33.19-21: *śakā yavanakāambojās tās tāḥ kṣatriyajātayah/ vṛṣalatvaṃ parigatā brāhmaṇānām adarśanāt// dramīlās ca kaliṅgās ca pulindās cāpy uśīnarāḥ/ kaulāḥ sarpā māhiṣakās tās tāḥ kṣatriyajātayah/ vṛṣalatvaṃ parigatā brāhmaṇānām adarśanāt//*. Similarly Mhbh 13.35.17-18: *mekalā dramīdāḥ kāsāḥ paundrāḥ kollagirās tathā/ śauṇḍikā daradā darvās caurāḥ śabarabarbarāḥ// kirātā yavanās caiva tās tāḥ kṣatriyajātayah/ vṛṣalatvaṃ anuprāptā brāhmaṇānām adarśanāt//*.

Those various men of Kṣatriya birth — Śakas, Yavanas, and Kāmbojas — have reached the level of Śūdras because no Brahmins are seen among them. Those various men of Kṣatriya birth — Dramiḷas, Kaliṅgas, Pulindas, Uśīnaras, Kaulas, Sarpas, and Māhiṣakas — have reached the level of Śūdras because no Brahmins are seen among them.

A similar passage occurs in the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*:<sup>15</sup>

By neglecting rites and because no Brahmins are seen among them, these men of Kṣatriya birth have gradually reached in the world the level of Śūdras — Puṇḍrakas, Coḍas, Draviḍas, Kāmbojas, Yavanas, Śakas, Pāradas, Pahlavas, Cīnas, Kirātas, and Daradas.

Several of the populations enumerated in these two passages can be identified, and some of these were situated in the northwest or further to the west: the Śakas, Yavanas (= Greeks) and Kāmbojas lived in the north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent during the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era. The Pahlavas and Pāradas were Persians. According to these passages, there were no Brahmins among them.

The *Assalāyana Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN II p. 149) makes a similar observation, stating that the four caste-classes (*varṇa*) do not exist among the Yonas (= Yavanas, Greeks) and the Kāmbojas. Aśoka's thirteenth Rock Edict claims that there are no Brahmins and Śramaṇas among the Yonas.<sup>16</sup>

Some relatively early Buddhist texts speak explicitly and specifically about the Magas. One of these is the *Mahā-Vibhāṣā*, a Buddhist compendium from Kaśmīra that presumably dates from the second century CE.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, it speaks of barbarians (*mleccha*) in the West who are called Magas.<sup>18</sup> It does *not* call them Brahmins, and ascribes to them the view that “there is absolutely no sin in behaving lustily with one's mother, daughter, elder or younger sister, daughter-in-law, or the like”, hardly a view Indian Brahmins would like to be identified

<sup>15</sup> Manu 10.43-44: *śanakais tu kriyālopād imāḥ kṣatriyajātayah/ vṛṣalatvaṃ gatā loke brāhmaṇadarśanena ca// puṇḍrakās coḍadraviḍāḥ kāmbojā yavanāḥ śakāḥ/ pāradāḥ pahvalās cīnāḥ kirātā daradās tathā//*; tr. Olivelle, modified.

<sup>16</sup> On the interpretation of this claim, see further below.

<sup>17</sup> It refers to the “former king, Kaniṣka, of Gandhāra” (Willemen, Dessein & Cox 1998: 232; Dessein 2009: 44); Kaniṣka may have started his realm in 127 CE (Falk 2001; Golzio 2008)

<sup>18</sup> Silk 2008: 438; 2009: 85.

with.<sup>19</sup> Bhavya's more recent *Tarkajvālā*, too, refers to the Magas, in the following words:<sup>20</sup> "Magas and so on are the followers of a perverted belief (*vrata*), i.e. Persians and others who live in the land of barbarians (*mleccha*). ... The doctrines of the Magas ... have many points fairly common to the teachings of the Vedas. ... The Vedas are not a proper means for knowing the Dharma. As they teach the illicit sexual relation (*agamyā-gamana*), they are like the books of the Nāstikas and of the Persians." Here the teachings of the Magas are compared with those of the Veda, but the comparison itself shows the difference: the Magas are not Brahmins, and their texts are not the Vedas.

Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* does not mention the Magas by name, but ascribes the same immoral custom to Persians; it does *not* suggest that these Persians are Brahmins.<sup>21</sup> The same can be said about Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*.<sup>22</sup> References to the Persians of this kind do not stop here. Silk (2009: 85 f.) observes: "Similar references are repeated in later Buddhist philosophical literature as examples of archetypical immoral behavior. Parallel references also appear in Xuanzang's seventh-century record of his travels to India, *Datang Xiyuji* (Great Tang Records of the Western Regions), and in the *Wang Och'ōnjuguk chōn* (Account of Travels to the Five Countries of India) by the eighth-century Korean Buddhist monk-traveler Hyech'o, both of whom refer to the Persians as those who practice incestuous marriages between mothers and sons. Nearly identical references occur in classical (Greek and Roman), non-Buddhist Indian, Arabic, and Chinese sources, all of which view Persians as those who engage in such immoral unions. The Indian Buddhist sources thus share in a judgment widespread among Persia's neighbors across the ancient world."<sup>23</sup> None of these texts identify those Persians with Brahmins.

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<sup>19</sup> An exception has to be made for the *godharma* or *govrata*; see Acharya 2013. Perhaps this explains the critical remarks of the *Tarkajvālā*. As Acharya (2013: 118-119) points out, Bhavya is aware of the immoral behavior of the Pāśupatas.

<sup>20</sup> Tr. Kawasaki 1975: 1103 ff. Cp. Lindtner 1988, esp. p. 439.

<sup>21</sup> *Abhidh-k-bh(P)* p. 241 l. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Eltschinger 2007: 312 (with note 377); Krasser 2012: 538 f.; Eltschinger, Krasser & Taber 2012: 53.

<sup>23</sup> For further details, see Silk 2008. For the situation in Persia, see Macuch 1991; Herrenschildt 1994.

There is one exception. The *Karmaprajñapti*, an early Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma text, ascribes this same immoral behaviour to what it calls Maga-Brahmins, who live in the West.<sup>24</sup> This might suggest that the Magas of Persia were looked upon as Brahmins, at least by the author of the *Karmaprajñapti* and presumably by some of his contemporaries. In view of the evidence considered so far, this is hard to believe. The most probable explanation for this strange characterization of the Magas as Maga-Brahmins is as follows. The *Karmaprajñapti* has only been preserved in a late (8-9<sup>th</sup> cent. CE) Tibetan translation,<sup>25</sup> and it is conceivable that the Tibetan translators added the word Brahmin on the basis of their “knowledge” that Magas are Brahmins, which they were at that time in India.<sup>26</sup> The expression *maga-brāhmaṇa* may be late: it appears for the first time in an inscription in 861 CE.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, it should not be forgotten that the *Karmaprajñapti* is a Buddhist text, and that the Buddhists had a tendency to compare Magas and Brahmins, both of whom indulged, in their opinion, in immoral practices; this we know from the *Tarkajvālā* passage considered above. But whatever the correct explanation of the expression Maga-Brahmin in the surviving translation of the *Karmaprajñapti*, it seems clear that the Buddhist texts considered inform us about Magas who lived in the West (and not therefore in India) and who were not considered Brahmins.

In view of what precedes it is safe to conclude that no Brahmin would believe that the Brahmanical order of society prevailed in Iran.<sup>28</sup> And the foreign priests who had settled in India could not possibly base their demand to be accepted as

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<sup>24</sup> Silk 2008: 436; 2009: 84: “In the West there are those called Maga-Brahmins”.

<sup>25</sup> Cp. Willems, Dessein & Cox 1998: 189 ff.; Dietz 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Silk (2008: 436 n. 6) dedicates a footnote to the Tibetan term *bram ze mchu skyes*, which stands for Maga-Brahmin.

<sup>27</sup> Cp. Chenet 1993: 385: “De ces résistances auxquelles se heurtèrent les Magas témoigne sans doute le fait qu’il faille attendre relativement tard pour voir mentionner pour la première fois *expressis verbis* un *Maga brāhmaṇa* du nom de Mātṛavi dans une inscription de Ghaṭiyāl de Kakkarka au Rājputana datant de 861 de notre ère.”

<sup>28</sup> Gail’s (1978: 343) remark to the extent that “die Inder die sozialen Schichtungen anderer Völker nur von ihrer eigenen Klassifizierung her zu verstehen vermochten” should not be interpreted to mean that priests elsewhere were automatically promoted to Brahmanical status.

Brahmins on the claim that they came from a region in the northwest that had adopted this order of society.

Well, they didn't. Modern scholars may be tempted to identify Śākadvīpa with the territory of the Śakas, who ruled in India's northwest and had adopted many features of Iranian culture, or with Iran proper including greater Iran,<sup>29</sup> but there is no Indian text I know of that does so. Śākadvīpa is a continent far away, separated from Jambūdvīpa by an ocean, and it is totally unwarranted to believe that any of the classical authors who wrote about it would have had the slightest sympathy for these modern ideas.<sup>30</sup>

This modifies our question to a considerable extent. No longer do we need to find out why Indian Brahmins, contrary to their habits, were willing to accept in their midst immigrants from a neighbouring country in the northwest. The fact is that they did not do so, or if they did, not knowingly. They did not accept as Brahmins immigrants from a neighbouring country in the northwest, but immigrants from a remote continent, not reachable by ordinary travel. And these immigrants had always been Brahmins, for unlike the countries in the northwest, society in the remote continent of Śākadvīpa was organized according to Brahmanical principles.

But why should immigrants from Śākadvīpa be granted privileges that were not granted to visitors from neighbouring countries? The answer is simple and straightforward: Because quite independently of the arrival of the Magas, and

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<sup>29</sup> So Arora 1971: 54; 1972: 30 f. Arora refers to different tentative identifications in modern scholarly literature. See further Gail 1978: 342 f.; Shrava 1981: 5 f.; Srivastava 1969: 253-254. Vassilkov (1998: 143) is more careful when he calls Śākadvīpa “a mythical place-name which disguised the name of historical Saka/Śaka people, the Scythians or north-eastern Iranians”. It is of course not impossible that the *name* Śākadvīpa was once inspired by the Śakas (Bailey 1970: 69), but this tells us nothing about the position of this continent in mythical geography.

<sup>30</sup> Cp. Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyabhāṣya* on sūtra 2.1.52: *svargaḥ apsarasaḥ uttarāḥ kuravaḥ sapta dvīpāḥ samudro lokasaṁniveśa ity evamāder apratyakṣasyārthasya na śabdamaṅtrāt pratyayaḥ, kiṁ tarhi? āptair ayam uktaḥ śabda ity ataḥ saṁpratyayaḥ, viparyayeṇa saṁpratyayābhāvāt* / “It is not because of words on their own that one believes in the existence of imperceptible objects such as ‘heaven’, ‘the Apsaras’, ‘the Northern Kurus’, ‘the seven continents’, ‘the ocean’, or ‘the shape of the world’; rather, one believes [in their existence] because they have been spoken of by trustworthy people. Otherwise one would not believe in them.” Note further that in Śākadvīpa, according to *Matsya Purāṇa* 122.40, the Tretāyuga is permanent. (According to various Purāṇas, the four yugas only occur in Bhāratavarṣa; see Kirfel 1931: 24, 29, 49, 62-63.)

presumably already before this event, there was a Brahmanical tradition that maintained that the remote continent of Śākadvīpa was inhabited by people who followed the Brahmanical order of society. This is clear from a passage in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, which says a great deal about Śākadvīpa and its inhabitants, but nothing whatsoever about migrating Magas. Here it is:<sup>31</sup>

In that [continent] there are four meritorious countries, esteemed by the people: Maga, Maśaka, Mānasa and Mandaga. Maga is mainly inhabited by Brahmins who love their tasks. In Maśaka there are virtuous Kṣatriyas who are generous in accordance with the wishes of all. In Mānasa the Vaiśyas survive by their tasks; they are brave, devoted to the wishes of all, bent on *dharma* and *artha*. The Śūdras in Mandaga, for their part, are men constantly pious. There is there neither king nor punishment, whether big or small. The [people] preserve *dharma* with regard to each other by [sticking to] their own *dharma*. This much can be said about that continent. This much you should hear about Śākadvīpa, full of splendor.

The author of this passage clearly thought of the continent of Śākadvīpa as exemplifying the Brahmanical social order, in the sense that its inhabitants included Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras, and presumably no others.<sup>32</sup> It also seems clear that the *Sāmba Purāṇa* has either directly undergone the influence of this passage, or of a similar passage that also influenced the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>33</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* itself does not identify Śākadvīpa with Persia or with any other region near India, nor do other ancient Indian texts that I know of.

<sup>31</sup> Mhbh 6.12.33-37: *tatra puṇyā janapadās catvāro lokasaṃmatāḥ/ magās ca maśakās caiva mānasā mandagās tathā// 33 // magā brāhmaṇabhūviṣṭhāḥ svakarmaniratā nṛpa/ maśakeṣu tu rājanyā dhārmikāḥ sarvakāmadāḥ// 34 // mānaseṣu mahārāja vaiśyāḥ karmopajīvināḥ/ sarvakāmasamāyuktāḥ śūrā dharmārthaniścītāḥ/ śūdrās tu mandage nityaṃ puruṣā dharmasīlinaḥ// 35 // na tatra rājā rājendra na daṇḍo na ca daṇḍikā/ svadharmeṇaiva dharmam ca te rakṣanti parasparam// 36 // etāvad eva śakyaṃ tu tasmin dvīpe prabhāṣitum/ etāvad eva śrotavyaṃ śākadvīpe mahaujasi// 37 //* Note that in this passage the four names Maga, Maśaka, Mānasa and Mandaga designate countries — usually through the plural (cf. Renou 1984: 275: “Le pluriel s’emploie dans diverses catégories de noms à valeur collective, ... noms de pays désignés par le peuple qui l’occupe (*aṅgāḥ*)”), once through the singular (*mandage*, v. 35) —, not social classes. In other words, in this passage the Magas are not all Brahmins, the Maśakas not all Kṣatriyas, etc. See in this connection Pirart’s observation in note 5, above.

<sup>32</sup> This passage does *not* justify Scheftelowitz’s following remark (1933: 316): “Zur Zeit der Entstehung des Mahābh. hatten die Indoskythen unter Einfluss der brahmanischen Kultur die Form des indischen Kastenwesens schon längst übernommen ...”

<sup>33</sup> For further similar Purāṇic passages, see Kirfel 1920: 119 ff.; 122 f.; 126 f.; Hilgenberg 1934: XLIII.

Śākadvīpa is a remote continent. Earlier in the same chapter, the *Bhīṣmaparvan* tells us that Śākadvīpa is twice as large as Jambūdvīpa and is on all sides surrounded by a sea of milk.<sup>34</sup>

Of particular interest in the present discussion is that the *Bhīṣmaparvan* says nothing about a possible link of the Magas of Śākadvīpa with sun-worship.<sup>35</sup> In the *Sāmba Purāṇa* it is the sun who provides information about Śākadvīpa, and who adds that he has created the inhabitants of that continent and given them the four Vedas.<sup>36</sup> This confirms our impression that an independent mythico-geographical notion that found expression in the *Mahābhārata* was subsequently put to use in a context to which it originally did not belong.

Theoretically one might consider that the original account of Śākadvīpa included already an account of Maga Brahmins settling in Jambūdvīpa, but there is no evidence to support this. The position that the Purāṇic account is older than the one found in the *Mahābhārata* has been defended by Hilgenberg (1934: XLIV) but was subsequently rejected in a detailed rejoinder by Belvalkar (1939). This position has indeed little to recommend itself. And the view that Śākadvīpa has been provided with a brahmanically organized society for no other reason than to justify the Brahmanical claim of certain sun-priests in India seems implausible.

Our reflections appear to justify the following picture. For some reason so far unknown there was a belief in Brahmanical circles according to which there was a remote continent called Śākadvīpa whose population consisted of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras. Independently of this tradition, and presumably at

<sup>34</sup> Mhbh 6.12.8-9: *śākadvīpaṃ ca vakṣyāmi yathāvad iha pārthiva/ śṛṇu me tvam yathānyāyaṃ bruvataḥ kurunandana// 8 // jambūdvīpapramāṇena dviguṇaḥ sa narādhipa/ viṣkambheṇa mahārāja sāgaro 'pi vibhāgaśaḥ/ kṣīrodo bharataśreṣṭha yena samparivāritaḥ// 9 //*. The last line does not state “that the Kshīroda Sāgara or the Caspian Sea was encircled in parts by the Śākadvīpa”, as claimed by Shrava (1981: 7). Parasher (1991: 248), basing herself on Shrava, claims that the epics and Purāṇas “inform us that among the Śakas, the Magas were the *brāhmaṇas*, the Māgadhas were the *kṣatriyas*, the Mānasas were the *vaiśyas* and the Mandagas were the *śūdras*”; this is of course incorrect.

<sup>35</sup> Cp. Srivastava 1972: 242.

<sup>36</sup> *Sāmba Purāṇa* 26.32-33 (Stietencron 1966: 47): *tejasaś ca madīyasya nirmītā vai purā mayā// tebhyo vedāś ca catvāraḥ sarahasyā mayeritāḥ/ vedoktair vividhaiḥ stotraiḥ parair guhyair mayā kṛtaiḥ//*

some later date, sun-priests from Persia settled in India. In order to be recognized as Brahmins in their new surroundings, they or their descendents made the claim that *they* were the Magas of Śākadvīpa, who had been called hither.

It is not impossible that the myth of Śākadvīpa and its Magas had originally been created under the influence of bits of information that had reached India from Persia. In that sense it may be maintained that the claim of the immigrant Magas was correct, but only in this artificial sense. The Magas of India did not base their claim to social status on history in our sense of the term, but on mythology. Had they based their claim on the fact that their ancestors had arrived from Persia (a fact probably unknown to them), they would not have been accepted as Brahmins in India. Had they known that their ancestors had come from Persia, there would have been ways to say so, and say it clearly. But the Magas said no such thing: they did not claim to come from Persia, they claimed to come from Śākadvīpa. And Śākadvīpa was not situated to the west or northwest of India: it was a continent very far removed from the continent called Jambūdvīpa in which India had its place.

Inscriptional and textual evidence indicates that there were indeed priests called Magas in India associated with the sun-cult. Varāhamihira's *Br̥hatsaṃhitā* (59.19 (ed. Tripāṭhī), 60.19 (ed. Bhat)) mentions them, and indeed, Varāhamihira himself may have been a Maga.<sup>37</sup> "There is an Inscription at Govindapur in the Gayā District dated Śaka 1059, corresponding to 1137-38 A.D., in the opening

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<sup>37</sup> Biswas 1949. In spite of this, "Varāhamihira ignores the fabulous continents (*dvīpa*) lying outside of Bhāratavarṣa ... And the margins remain realms of teratology, inhabited by 'Dog-Faced', 'Horse-Faced', and 'Tiger-Faced' peoples." (Pollock 2006: 196). "[T]he Dog-heads ... clearly belong to Northwest India." (Karttunen 1989: 185). According to *Br̥hatsaṃhitā* 14.24-25, Dog-Faced (*śvamukha*) and Horse-Faced (*turagānana*) peoples belong to the north, and according to verse 14.5, the Tigre-Faced (*vyāghramukha*) people belongs to the east.

It is tempting to think that Sphujidhvaja's *Yavanaajāta* was composed by a Maga: its author attained a "vision of truth [that] came from the grace of the Sun", and if Mak's recent study can be trusted, the text was originally written in a language different from Sanskrit, but also different from Greek (Mak 2013: 12 f.). Indeed, "It appears that the *Yavanaajāta* is an original amalgamation of Greek and Indian astral sciences" (p. 13); "the text Sphujidhvaja composed appears to be original, based on an indigenous tradition where elements of Greek and Indian astral sciences were thoroughly amalgamated" (p. 16).

stanza of which the Magas, who sprang from the sun, are represented to have been brought into the country by Sāmba.<sup>38</sup> ... There are traces of Magas elsewhere, and there are Brāhmaṇas of that name in Rajputana and some other provinces or Northern India.”<sup>39</sup> Al-Biruni said the following about them:<sup>40</sup>

Another circumstance which increased the already existing antagonism between Hindus and foreigners is that the so-called Shamaniyya (Buddhists), though they cordially hate the Brahmans, still are nearer akin to them than to others. In former times, Khurâsân, Persis, ‘Irak, Mosul, the country up to the frontier of Syria, was Buddhistic, but then Zarathustra went forth from Adharbajân and preached Magism in Balkh (Baktra). His doctrine came into favour with King Gudhtasp, and his son Isfendiyâd spread the new faith both in east and west, both by force and by treatises. He founded fire-temples through his whole empire, from the frontiers of China to those of the Greek empire. The succeeding kings made their religion (i.e. Zoroastrianism) the obligatory state-religion for Persis and ‘Irâk. In consequence, the Buddhists were banished from those countries, and had to emigrate to the countries east of Balkh. There are some Magians up to the present time in India, where they are called *Maga*. From that time dates their aversion towards the countries of Khurâsân.

The *Brhaddharma Purāṇa* (3.13.52) has a “reference to [a] *devala*, who was brought from Śākadvīpī by Suparṇa (Garuḍa) and called *śākadvīpī vipra* (brāhmaṇa)” (Furui 2013: 205). It reminds us that these Brahmins, being temple priests (*devala(ka)*), commanded less respect than other Brahmins.

Among the earliest references to the Magas in India we must count the *Brakhmanai Magoi* in Ptolemy’s *Geography* (ca. 150 CE).<sup>41</sup> This agrees with the hypothesis that these priests and their sun-cult may have found their way into the subcontinent at the time of the Kuṣāṇas or slightly before them, under the Śakas.

<sup>38</sup> See Kielhorn 1894: 333/338: “Hail to that gem of the three worlds, the divine Aruṇa, whose presence sanctifies the milk-ocean-encircled Śākadvīpa where the Brahmins are named Magas! There a race of twice-born [sprang] from the sun’s own body, grazed by the lathe, whom Śāmba himself brought hither.”

<sup>39</sup> R. D. Bhandarkar 1913/1982: 219. An inscription from Ghaṭiyālā, twenty-two miles west-north-west of Jôdhpur, dated samvat 918, was written by a Maga (D. R. Bhandarkar 1907-08: 279, 281). There are also Śākadvīpīya Brahmins in modern India; see, e.g., Risley 1891: 159 f.; Mitra 1953: 238 (“Sakadvipi”).

<sup>40</sup> Sachau 1888: I: 21.

<sup>41</sup> Gail 1978: 344; MacCrindle 1884: 167, 170.

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### Abbreviations:

- Abhidh-k-bh(P) Vasubandhu, Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, ed. P. Pradhan, rev. 2nd ed. Aruna Halder, Patna 1975 (Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, 8)
- Manu Mānava Dharmaśāstra, ed. Olivelle

- Mhbh Mahābhārata, crit. ed. V.S. Sukthankar u.a., Poona 1933-66 (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona)
- MīS 1) Mīmāṃsā Sūtra. Edited, with Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's Tantravārttika and Śābara's Bhāṣya, by Pt. Gaṇeśaśāstrī Jośī. Pādas 1.2 - 2.1. Poona: Ānandāśrama. 1981. 2) Śābara-Bhāṣya. Translated into English by Ganganatha Jha. Vol. I. Baroda: Oriental Institute. 1973.
- MN Majjhima-Nikāya, ed. V. Trenckner, R. Chalmers, 3 vols., London 1888-1899 (PTS)
- ZDMG Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Leipzig, later Wiesbaden