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Reflections on the fate of northwestern Brahmins*

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0. In this presentation I will first discuss what, as I see it, happened to the Brahmins of the extreme north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent during the three centuries separating Alexander of Macedonia's incursions (326-325 BCE) from the beginning of the Common Era. After that, I will consider a form of ritual practice that was apparently in use in the northwest at the time of Alexander, and the way it finds expression in surviving Vedic and para-Vedic literature.

1. There were Brahmins in the northwestern regions from an early date onward. Many Vedic texts, including most notably the *R̥gveda*, were composed in the region more or less overlapping with modern Panjab and surroundings, including eastern Afghanistan.¹ More interesting for our present purposes is that the famous Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini lived in Gandhāra.² What is more, Michael Witzel has recently argued (2011) that Gandhāra played a central role in the formation of the Vedic canon.

Regarding Pāṇini's date, the commentator Patañjali appears to have believed that he lived and worked under the Mauryas.³ This possibility cannot be discarded, but he may also have lived earlier, though most probably after 350 BCE.⁴ Pāṇini, therefore, may have been a contemporary of Alexander, or he lived just before or just after the latter's conquests. One thing is sure: Pāṇini lived and worked in a brahmanical milieu.

A strong brahmanical presence in the northwestern part of the subcontinent is confirmed by the Alexander historians. Brahmins are mentioned (sometimes mistakenly as if they constituted tribes),⁵ and they

* I thank François Voegeli for constructive criticism.

¹ See Witzel 1987; 1995: 210 f.

² Grammatical tradition gives Śālātura (north of the Kabul river (*kubhā*) and west of the Indus) as his place of residence, and the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang records that there was a statue of Pāṇini there. An analysis of Pāṇini's grammar itself confirms his northwestern residence; see Thieme 1935: 76 f.; Scharfe 2009: 28 f.

³ Falk 1994: 326-327.

⁴ Hinüber 1990: 34; Falk 1993: 304.

⁵ See the General Index of McCrindle 1893 under "Kathaia", "Kathaians" (Skt. Kaṭha) and "Kambisthol(o)i" (Skt. Kapiṣṭhala); further Witzel (1997: 304) about the Kaṭha

appear to have exerted much political influence in those parts of the subcontinent. In fact, Brahmins aroused Alexander's ire in Sindh, with the result that many of them were slaughtered.⁶

Soon after Alexander's departure, northwestern India became part of the Maurya empire, initially it seems with help of (Kaṭha) Brahmins.⁷ Subsequently, the central rulers in Pāṭaliputra appear to have had difficulty maintaining control in this part of the subcontinent, and it is only fair to assume that Brahmins may once again have played a role in the revolt that took place. In fact, the *Aśokāvadāna* mentions two revolts in Taxila. During the first, the Maurya emperor, Bindusāra, sent his son Aśoka to deal with it. During the second, the then emperor Aśoka sent his son Kuṇāla.⁸ Both times, the *Aśokāvadāna* specifies that evil ministers had inspired the revolt. If we assume that the political situation in Taxila was then more or less the same as when Alexander visited the region, it seems likely that the evil ministers were brahmanical counsellors. Recalling the vast numbers of people Aśoka killed and enslaved when conquering Kalinga later on, it seems safe to assume that his suppression of the revolt in Taxila was catastrophic for the local Brahmins. Buddhism, though much beholden to Aśoka, preserved the memory of this ruler as being particularly vicious and cruel, at any rate before his conversion to Buddhism.⁹

There is no textual evidence to prove that the northwestern Brahmins in particular suffered under the Mauryas. And their fate may have improved once Aśoka had come to regret his earlier blood-filled campaigns. Indeed, his subsequent inscriptions often insist that Brahmins, along with others, most notably Śramaṇas, deserve respect. But even in this later part of his life Aśoka did not approve of animal sacrifice, thus depriving the Brahmins of an essential part of their livelihood.¹⁰ What is more, the structure of the Maurya Empire may have deprived them of political support, and therefore of the financial means to carry out their big rituals. We may yet tentatively assume that the northwestern Brahmins could live more or less in peace during the final years of the Maurya Empire.

This changed again after its collapse. Invading Greeks and Scythians (Śaka) made their life miserable (if they were lucky enough to get away with it). This time we have direct testimony of their suffering. A text — the *Yuga Purāṇa*

"tribe": "The Greek writers quite obviously identified the name of the local Brahmins with that of the inhabitants of the area."

⁶ Bosworth (1998: 200) speaks of "the greatest repression the Brahman community had probably suffered at any time".

⁷ McCrindle 1893: 406. This initial support may have crystallized out in the legend of Cāṇakya, Candragupta's brahmanical minister.

⁸ Strong 1989: 208 ff.; 271.

⁹ Strong 1989: 210 f.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Lubin 2013.

— describes the brahmanical misfortunes, and lays the blame with the Greeks and the Scythians in particular. The author(s) of this text thought that these misfortunes were an indication that the end of the world was near.¹¹

This brief sketch suggests that the northwestern Brahmins may have had a rough time from Alexander onward, interrupted perhaps by one or two short periods of respite. Details are hard to get, but the end result can to at least some extent be verified. The region of Gandhāra, as we saw, was a centre of brahmanical culture when Alexander arrived. More recent texts suggest that this was no longer the case just a few centuries later. Consider the following passages, some of which may be more pertinent than others:¹²

The *Assalāyana Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN II p. 149), to begin with, states that the four *varṇas* do not exist among the Yonas and the Kāmbojas, and an inscription of Aśoka claims that there are no Brahmins and Śramaṇas among the Yonas. The *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* add that no Brahmins are seen among the Śakas and the Kāmbojas. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (9.3.1.24) speaks in very negative terms about the inhabitants of the region of the seven rivers that flow westward, i.e. the Panjab. The *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* enumerates the names of regions that a good Brahmin should not visit, among them the Āraṭṭas and the Gāndhāras in the northwest. It is not clear where exactly the Āraṭṭas lived; the Gāndhāras, on the other hand, were the inhabitants of Gandhāra, a region that by this testimony was situated outside the realm where orthodox Brahmins were supposed to live at that time. It seems indeed that Brahmanism at the time of Patañjali and perhaps already before him spread mainly toward the east and south, starting from the “land of the Āryas”. This impression is confirmed by recent research about Vedic schools. These schools migrated toward the east and the south, or even the north (Kashmir, Nepal), but it seems they did not return to the northwest. Several late-Vedic texts know Gandhāra as a more or less remote region, and none of the Vedic schools appear to be found there. The regions to the west of those inhabited by Vedic Brahmins are home to the despised Bāhīkas, literally, outsiders. The term *bāhīka* is often confused with *bāhīka* or *bāhīka*, which designates the inhabitants of Bactria. The inhabitants of Gandhāra are depicted in the *Mahābhārata* as being beyond the system of *varṇas*, like fishermen.

It would seem, then, that the brahmanical heartland had shifted toward the east, primarily into the western parts of the Ganges valley.¹³

¹¹ Bronkhorst forthcoming.

¹² For details, see Bronkhorst 2011a: 203 ff.; forthcoming a.

¹³ As Deshpande (1993: 97) points out: "Patanjali's *śiṣṭas* are restricted to the region of Āryāvarta, which interestingly does not extend to cover even Pānini's birthplace of Śālatura, or even his Udīcyā region."

2. In what follows I will start from the assumption that the region of Gandhāra was no longer brahmanized territory two or three centuries after Alexander's conquests. At the time of those conquests the situation had been different. It was in Gandhāra, near the city of Taxila (Takṣaśilā), that Alexander met a number of naked ascetics, one of whom — Calanus (Kalanos) — subsequently accompanied him back into Persia.

Given the strong brahmanical presence in the region of Taxila, it is a priori plausible that these ascetics were brahmanical ascetics. Let us therefore briefly recall what the surviving Indian sources tell us about brahmanical asceticism.¹⁴ Brahmanism developed a form of asceticism that was connected with its sacrificial rites. Big sacrifices required the sacrificer to be consecrated (*dīkṣita*), and this involved various forms of abstinence. Some householders took it upon themselves to live a consecrated life for long periods of time, sometimes even until the end of their days. This tendency crystallized into the *vānaprastha* (forest-dweller); some Vedic and para-Vedic texts depict this way of life as belonging to householders (who are then called *śālīna*, *yāyāvāra*, or *cakracara*), not as yet as constituting a separate *āśrama*.

We know that beside *vānaprasthas*, brahmanical literature knows another type of ascetic, variously called *parivrāj*, *parivrājaka*, *saṃnyāsin* etc. Unlike the *vānaprastha*, the *parivrājaka* abandons his sacrificial fire, and thus renounces his sacrificial life. Historically, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ the *parivrājaka* is not a Vedic ascetic at all: his way of life was borrowed from the eastern region that I call Greater Magadha, and this ascetic pursued no goal that was in any way connected with the Vedic sacrificial tradition, which rather centred around the sacrificial fire. The juxtaposition of these two kinds of brahmanical ascetics was the result of interaction between the two cultural regions concerned: Brahmanism in the northwestern parts of the Ganges valley, and the various religious currents aiming at liberation from karmic retribution in its eastern parts.

Alexander only visited the northwestern parts of the subcontinent, and never reached the Ganges. He visited these northwestern parts at an early date, less than a century and perhaps barely more than fifty years after the death of the Buddha. To the best of our knowledge, the spread of Buddhism seriously started under the Mauryas, that is, *after* Alexander. The same can probably be said about Jainism. It is therefore highly unlikely that there were Buddhists and Jainas in the regions visited by Alexander.

And yet, Alexander met ascetics, near Taxila.¹⁶ The naked sages he met have become a topos in classical Western literature, so much so that it is

¹⁴ See Bronkhorst 1998.

¹⁵ Bronkhorst 2007: 85 ff.

¹⁶ Herodotus (*Histories* 3.100), writing c. 430-425 BCE and therefore a hundred years before Alexander, describes an Indian tribe in the following terms: "they will not take

probably impossible to derive much useful historical information about their views from this literature. However, one thing appears to be beyond reasonable doubt. One of the Indian ascetics, Calanus (Kalanos), accompanied Alexander's army back into Iran. Having fallen ill, he then decided to take his own life by voluntarily entering into fire. This event was witnessed by numerous soldiers from Alexander's army, and recorded by several Alexander historians.

Scholars have puzzled about this voluntary suicide, and wondered what light it might shed on Calanus's sectarian affiliation. Religious suicide is well known and accepted in Jainism, and there are cases known in Buddhism. But, as I pointed out already, Buddhism and Jainism do not enter into the picture in the region of Taxila. Some scholars exclude Brahmanism, too, arguing that suicide in fire is not part of Brahmanism. They end up inventing otherwise unknown ascetic groups to explain the riddle.

I think it is worth our while to have a closer look at Brahmanism. After all, Brahmanism was deeply preoccupied with the Vedic sacrificial fire, whose victim was often looked upon as a substitute for the sacrificer. "Le seul sacrifice authentique serait le suicide", Sylvain Lévi observed already in 1898 (p. 133). And Heesterman (1993: 173; with a reference to Heesterman 1987) stated: "self-sacrifice is an all-but-ubiquitous theme in the ritual *brāhmaṇa* texts, the victim as well as other offerings being regularly equated with the sacrificer". Biardeau (Biardeau - Malamoud 1976: 38) adds that "la crémation [of the body of the deceased sacrificer] elle-même est conçue comme un

life in any form; they sow no seed, and have no houses and live on a vegetable diet" (Karttunen 1997a, citing the translation of A. de Sélincourt, revised by A. R. Burn). Witzel (2009: 302-303) concludes from this: "[Herodotus'] relatively early date presupposes a lively culture of ascetics, wandering all over northern India, before c. 430 BCE, and this agrees with the early experiences of the Buddha at age 30 (c. 430 BCE), when he joined other Eastern ascetics and with uncertain Jaina traditions about Pārśva, the supposed predecessor of Mahāvīra, at c. 750 BCE." Karttunen (1997a: 118) is of an altogether different opinion, considering "any link [of Herodotus' description] with Indian ascetics, be they Brahmans, Śaivas, or Jainas, ... to be so thin that it hardly deserves serious consideration." Karttunen then continues: "A further ground for the rejection of this claim is that the description closely parallels the Herodotean description of other distant and primitive peoples." Witzel's statement also overlooks the fact that different kinds of ascetics existed, presumably living in different regions of India, who pursued altogether different purposes, so that any generalizing remark about "a lively culture of ascetics" one hundred years before Alexander runs the risk of seriously misrepresenting the historical situation; he justifies this by "leav[ing] aside the development of religious thought and philosophy, as such data are treacherous" (p. 303).

sacrifice où le *yajamāna* est devenu la victime".¹⁷ In other words, the sacrificer is or can be the victim in his own sacrifice, with the proviso that most often he is replaced by a substitute; he is himself sacrificed in his fire after his physical death. Clearly there is here, at least in theory, place for sacrificers who decide to forego substitutes or who refuse to wait until they die naturally for other reasons.¹⁸ Moreover, Hellenistic and Roman westerners had no difficulty believing that Indians had the custom of incineration themselves. Karttunen (1997: 64-65) draws attention to Zarmarus or Zarmanochegas, who was a member of the Indian embassy to Augustus at the end of the first century BCE and committed suicide by fire in Athens, and to the Greek Cynic philosopher Peregrinus who imitated the Indian custom by ascending a pyre at Olympia in 167 CE. Karttunen himself remains unconvinced, stating (p. 65): "We need not make too much of those authors who claim that this kind of suicide was the rule among Indian philosophers. The case of Calanus soon became famous and was used as a literary topos. This was therefore not necessarily genuine information about an Indian custom, but merely abstracted from the tragic end of Calanus. Megasthenes knew better, though his criticism was probably excessive."¹⁹ However, Megasthenes does not constitute a valid counter-argument, for he lived in and primarily described a part of India that was far from Taxila, where Brahmanism was not the dominant ideology.²⁰ To know whether self-immolation in fire existed as a recognized option in the area of Taxila, we should not listen to Megasthenes, or to the Buddhist and Jaina Scriptures, but to Vedic and para-Vedic literature. The following points deserve consideration:

- (i) Karttunen, following Hillebrandt (1917) and others, draws attention to a passage from the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (29.4) that states that one reaches the world of Brahma by entering the fire (*agnipraveśād brahmalokaḥ*).
- (ii) Self-immolation in the sacrificial fire may have been part of the early Sattra sacrifice. This is the opinion of Harry Falk (1986: 36 ff.), who adds that this topic was as much as possible avoided by those who brought order in the classical sacrifice, by introducing all manner of substitutes. The following passage from the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (7.4.9) illustrates this:

¹⁷ Further p. 38: "Les funérailles ont donc bien un rapport essentiel à l'activité sacrificielle préalable du mort, en même temps qu'elles en sont le dernier sacrifice, le seul où la victime ne soit plus son substitut."

¹⁸ For an analysis of the sacrifice, in which the victim represents (or is) either the sacrificer or his enemy, see Bronkhorst 2012; further 2012a, 2012b, 2013.

¹⁹ Similarly Sedlar 1980: 70: "Modern scholarship tends to agree with Megasthenes that suicide was never a recommended form of death for Brahmins."

²⁰ See Bronkhorst 2007.

Those who perform a Sattrā go to the heavenly world. With the sacrificial gifts they put fire to themselves, with the Upasād ceremonies they bake themselves, with two [days of the Sattrā] they cut their hair, with two their skin, with two their blood, with two their flesh, with two their bones, with two the marrow. In the Sattrā one is oneself the sacrificial gift. Presenting themselves as sacrificial gift, they go to the heavenly world.

The self-immolation is here described in symbolic terms, but the symbolism may be no more than a thin disguise to cover the fact that real self-immolation sometimes took place, or had taken place.²¹

(iii) An analysis of several Saṃnyāsa-Upaniṣads leads Olivelle (1978: § 12.1) to the conclusion that there existed such a thing as *ātura-saṃnyāsa*, renunciation for the sick, undertaken by people with the intention of taking their own life, by way of fire or some other means. Olivelle adds however that at the time when most of the texts he studies were completed "[s]uicide at the conclusion of the rite of renunciation had become obsolete, a practice referred to in the older texts but no longer in vogue" (p. 223).

(iv) There is, furthermore, a Vedic sacrifice, called Śunaskarṇa, in which the sacrificer takes his own life by throwing himself into the fire. This, at any rate, is the opinion of Śabara, the author of the classical commentary (*Mīmāṃsābhāṣya*) on Vedic interpretation, the brahmanical school of thought that remained closed to the Vedic Scriptures. According to Śabara, the Śunaskarṇa sacrifice is prescribed by the injunction: "Desiring one's own death one should perform this sacrifice, if he wishes that he should reach the Heavenly Region without any disease" (*maraṇakāmo hy etena yajeta, yaḥ kāmayetānāmayaḥ svargaṃ lokam iyām iti*). The crucial part of this sacrifice — the self-immolation of the sacrificer — is, again according to Śabara, also prescribed by an injunction: "Then again, there is the text — 'When the Ārbhava has begun, the Sacrificer, having covered the Udumbara post with a borderless piece of cloth, says — O Brāhmaṇas, please complete this Sacrifice for me, — and enters the Fire'" (*api cedam āmnāyate, ārbhave prastūyamāna audumbarīṃ parito 'daśena²² vāsasā pariveṣṭya brāhmaṇāḥ parisamāpayata me yajñam iti sampreṣyāgniṃ viśatī*).²³

Śabara is an author who lived long after the Vedic period, and perhaps some eight centuries after Alexander's visit to India. What is worse, the Vedic

²¹ Heesterman (1993: 176) accepts self-sacrifice in this case, but adds that "self-sacrifice is not the ultimate aim but a last resort".

²² The edition has *sadaśena* for *parito 'daśena*.

²³ Śabara, *Mīmāṃsābhāṣya* ad sūtras 10.2.57 and 58; tr. Ganganatha Jha, p. 1721.

and para-Vedic texts that deal with this sacrifice (the *Pañcaviṃśa* and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇas*, and the Śrautasūtras of Āpastamba, Baudhāyana, Hiranyakeśin, Kātyāyana and Lāṭyāyana; see the Appendix) never state explicitly (as does the text cited by Śabara) that the sacrificer enters the fire. It can yet be argued that Śabara preserves an old tradition. Consider the following:

All these Vedic and para-Vedic texts share the peculiarity that the sacrificer dies during the recitation of a certain Vedic verse. None explains how he dies, and how he manages to die at the right moment. Most of the texts leave us with the impression that the sacrificer's death is not altogether natural, but there is no indication whatsoever how it is brought about.²⁴ One, and only one, text (the *Lāṭyāyana Śrautasūtra*) adds that, according to a named authority, the dead body of the sacrificer is subsequently put into the sacrificial fire.

The textual situation is confusing to say the least. One way to make sense of it is that Śabara preserves in explicit terms a tradition that most Vedic and para-Vedic texts avoid being explicit about, perhaps for reasons of changed attitudes with regard to self-immolation. With this possibility in mind, let us return to Calanus.

About the manner of Calanus's death, the Greek sources contain two variants, which Bosworth (1998: 176-177) describes as follows: "In Arrian Calanus reclines on the pyre and remains immobile in the flames. This is part of the material extracted from Nearchus, and no variant is adduced from Arrian's other sources. It is Strabo who comments on the lack of agreement in the matter. He cites one tradition, essentially the same as Arrian's, according to which Calanus lies on a golden couch, covers himself and is burned. That is contrasted with another version, presented somewhat elliptically, in which the pyre is built upon 'a wooden house, filled with leaves' and Calanus flings himself ... to be consumed like a beam of timber along with the house. There are obscurities in the story, but it seems clear that it portrayed Calanus *throwing* himself into the flames, not waiting calmly to be consumed." Throwing oneself into the fire is close to Śabara's entering the fire, closer at any rate than patiently waiting to be consumed by fire.

(v) The different sources describing the Śunaskarṇa sacrifice suggest that Vedic and especially para-Vedic literature may sometimes present us with a bowdlerized version of sacrificial practice. With this in mind, look at *Mānava*

²⁴ See however Heesterman 1987: 94: "the position of the sacrificer lying down on the place of the sacrifice between his fires with his head to the south and completely covered over strongly suggests the cremation ritual, which is, generally speaking, the sacrificer's last sacrifice". François Voegeli suggests, in a private communication, that the Śunaskarṇa sacrifice could be meant for a sacrificer who is terminally ill.

Śrautasūtra (MŚS 8.25),²⁵ and especially at the following passage: "After having addressed his relatives, he makes the fires rise up in himself. 'For the fire is a comrade, an observer of joy and pain', thus it is said. With the verse: 'This is thy due place of birth, etc.' he shall set fire to himself in the three sacrificial fires." (*sakulyān āmantryātmany agnīn samāropayet sakhā hy agnir vai sākṣī sukṛtasya duṣkṛtasyety ayam arthaḥ/ ayam te yonir ṛtviya ity āhavanīye gārhapatyē dakṣiṇāgnau cātmānaṃ pratāpayet/* MŚS 8.25.6-7). This passage would appear to be about a sacrificer who takes his own life through self-incineration. The only reason to think otherwise is the following context, in which the sacrificer is depicted as still alive.

(vi) Consider next the following passage from the *Kaṭhaśruti* (p. 31 l. 7 - p. 32 l. 3; cited in Bronkhorst 1998: 25):²⁶

Having made the sacrificial priests place all the sacrificial utensils on the limbs of the sacrificer (i.e., of his own), he should place (his five breaths, viz.) *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*, that are in (the five sacrificial fires, viz.) *āhavanīya*, *gārhapatya*, *anvāhāryapacana*, *sabhya* and *āvasathya*, all [five of them], in all [of the five sacrificial fires].

Once again, the only reason for believing that this passage does not describe a real sacrifice — the self-immolation of the sacrificer — is the following context, in which, here too, the sacrificer is depicted as being still alive.

Finally a word about the nakedness of Calanus and his fellow-ascetics. Bosworth (1998: 188 n. 70) makes the following observation: "Neither Calanus nor Dandamis can have been enjoining complete nakedness, for even the ascetics themselves retained a loin-cloth to preserve their modesty (cf. Chakraborti [1973] 113-15, 121-2)." The reference to Chakraborti's *Asceticism in Ancient India* is misleading, for this book points out that brahmanical ascetics *could* be completely naked, as is clear from the following passage (p. 113-114):

[*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*] (II.9.21.11-12) ordains that the ascetic "shall wear clothes thrown away by others as useless". He says again that "some declare that he shall go naked".²⁷ Bodhāyana [*Dharmasūtra*]

²⁵ This passage has been studied by J. F. Sprockhoff (1987); see further Bronkhorst 1998: 23-24.

²⁶ *Kaṭhaśruti* p. 31 l. 7 - p. 32 l. 3: *yajamānasyāṅgān ṛtvijaḥ sarvaiḥ pātraiḥ samāropya yad āhavanīye gārhapatyē 'nvāhāryapacane sabhyāvasathyayoś ca prāṇāpānavyānodānasamānān sarvān sarveṣu samāropayet*. Cf. Sprockhoff 1989: 147-148; Olivelle 1992: 129-130.

²⁷ Olivelle 2000: 104: *tasya muktam ācchādanaṃ vihitam/ sarvataḥ parimokṣam eke/*

(II.6.11.19 - 21) says that the ascetic "shall wear a cloth to cover his nakedness"²⁸ ... Vasiṣṭha [Dharmasūtra X.9-11] says that the ascetic should cover his body with one piece of cloth or deer-skin or grass cut by cows.²⁹ ... *It is interesting to note that Āpastamba's hint at nudity of ascetics indicates the possibility of its practice in some circle in his period even in the Brahmanical fold.* (emphasis added)

I do not know whether we can be sure that the sages met by Alexander were completely naked, but even if they were, this cannot be used as an argument against their brahmanical status.

Returning now to the self-incineration of Calanus, it seems safe to conclude that the classical sacrifice as we find it described in various Vedic and para-Vedic texts may be, to at least some extent, a "cover-up" of sacrificial practices that occurred or had occurred.³⁰ Indeed, it makes sense that the para-Vedic literature on sacrifice, like the literature on Dharma that arose along with it and continued until long after, was primarily a scholastic enterprise.³¹ There is no reason to exaggerate this observation, but it does seem to apply to sacrificial self-immolation in fire. This appears to have been a more or less widespread, or at any rate tolerated, practice during some period of Vedic religion. There is no need to push this practice back to the earliest Vedic period, for the history of Alexander provides us with a very precise date, 325 BCE, at which it still occurred. The examples collected by Hillebrandt and others, and the testimony of Śabara, suggest that the practice continued well into the classical period.³²

3. Let me conclude with some speculations based on the different elements that have come up in this paper. The centre of brahmanical culture moved from the northwestern edge of the Indian subcontinent into the Ganges valley after Alexander, and perhaps partly as a result of his military conquests, followed by various military mishaps (Aśoka (?), Greeks, Scythians, others?). This move encouraged and sped up the codification of traditional sacrificial practices. This codification was no innocent affair. Certain practices found less favour in their new surroundings (or among the codifiers), and texts that

²⁸ Olivelle 2000: 280: *kaupīnācchādanaḥ/ .../ kāṣāyavāsāḥ/*.

²⁹ Olivelle 2000: 386: *ekaśāṭīparihitaḥ/ ajinena vā/ gopralūnais tṛṇair avastrṭsaśarīraḥ* .../Olivelle translates the last part "cut for the cows".

³⁰ Interestingly, suicide is not altogether rejected in classical brahmanical literature, but fire is almost completely absent from the methods proposed; see Olivelle 1978.

³¹ This is Rocher's central insight, emphasized in Davis 2012: 18-19; see also Lubin forthcoming.

³² I learn from the doctoral dissertation (in preparation; University of Lausanne) of Marc Tiefenauer that according to the *Brahmapurāṇa* (214.118) those who have perished in fire (*agnau vipannā[ḥ]*) receive favorable treatment after death.

covered them were modified accordingly. Fortunately, the modifications changed as little as possible, presumably out of respect for tradition, thus giving modern philologists a chance to recognize some of them.

Appendix: Vedic and para-Vedic texts on the Śunaskarṇa sacrifice

The *Pañcaviṃśa* (or *Tāṇḍya Mahā*) *Brāhmaṇa* contains the following passage (17.12.1 - 5-6):

*trivṛd agniṣṭomaḥ sa sarvasvāro yaḥ kāmayetā 'nāmayatā 'muḥ lokam
iyām iti sa etena yajeta (1)*

...

*ārbhavapavamāne stūyamāna audumbaryā dakṣiṇā prāvṛto nipadyate
tad eva saṃgacchate (5)*

*sa eṣa śunaskarṇastoma etena vai śunaskarṇo bāṣkiho 'yajata tasmāc
chunaskarṇastoma ity ākhyāyate (6)*

Caland (1931) translates this as follows:

A nine-versed agniṣṭoma; this is throughout circumflected. He who wishes: 'May I go to yonder world not through any disease',³³ should perform this (rite). (1)

...

Whilst the ārbhava-pavamāna(-laud) is being chanted, he (the Sacrificer) lies down, he head being covered by his uppergarment, to the south of the pillar of udumbara-wood. Then, he meets (his end). (5)
This is the stoma of Śunaskarṇa. This sacrifice was performed by Śunaskarṇa, the son of Baskika; hence it is called Śunaskarṇa's stoma. (6)

The crucial part is section 5. Does it tell us that the sacrificer enters the fire? The formulation of section 5 is too ambiguous to draw a conclusion, but it is hard to imagine that the death of the sacrificer can be scheduled in so precisely without some way to speed it up.

The *Hiraṇyakeśi Śrautasūtra* (17.3.18-23) has the following:

trivṛto 'gniṣṭomaḥ/ (18)

śunaskarṇastomaḥ/ sarvasvārah/ (19)

³³ Caland adds in a note: "Sāyaṇa supplies to *anāyamatā* (should no doubt be *anāmayatā*, JB) the noun *dehena*: 'With a not sick body.'"

maraṇakāmo yajeta yaḥ kāmayetānāmayatāṃ svargaṃ lokam iyām iti vijñāyate/ (20)

yāmyaḥ paśuḥ śukaharita upālabhyaḥ/ (21)

ḥṛtānnaṃ dakṣiṇā/ (22)

ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbarīm ahatena vāsasā pattodaśena prāvṛtya dakṣiṇāśirāḥ saṃviśati brāhmaṇāḥ samāpayatam etaṃ yajñam iti/ yajñasaṃsthām anu saṃtiṣṭhate/ (23)

The *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* does not mention the name Śunaskarṇa, but the following passage clearly deals with the same sacrifice (22.6.1-6):

maraṇakāmasya sarvasvārah/ (1)

ḥṛtānnadakṣiṇaḥ/ (2)

dīkṣādy avajighraty eva bhakṣān/ (3)

apsv avaharaṇam asomānām/ (4)

ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbarīm kṣṇājine saṃviśati

dakṣiṇāśirāḥ prāvṛtaḥ/ (5)

tad eva mriyate/ (6)

Ranade (1978: 570) translates:

The Sarvasvāra Soma sacrifice (which is the fourth of the four Trivṛt sacrifices) is meant for one who is desirous of having a (successful) end to his life. (1)

Food cooked properly is the priestly fee for the Sarvasvāra sacrifice. (2)

From the Dīkṣaṇīyā iṣṭi onwards the Sacrificer consumes his iḍā-portion (just) by smelling. (3)

The iḍā-portions of the Sacrificer excepting those of the Soma-juice are then to be thrown away into the water. (4)

The Sacrificer lies down on a black-antelope skin to the south covered with a cloth while the Ārbhava-pavamāna sāman is chanted (in the evening session). (5)³⁴

(And) he dies at that time. (6).

Both the *Hiraṇyakeśi* and the *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* use the word *saṃviśati*, similar to Śabara's *viśati*; both these words can mean 'enter'. But whereas Śabara's *viśati* has an object (*agniṃ viśati*; "he enters the fire"), the two Śrautasūtras don't, so that here the other possible translation for *saṃviśati* ("he lies down") may have to be preferred.

³⁴ This translation omits *audumbarīm* ("to the south of the pillar of Udumbara wood") and *dakṣiṇāśirāḥ* ("with the head pointing to the south").

The *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* describes the sacrifice as follows (22.7.20-25):

caturthaḥ sarvasāraḥ śunaskarṇastomaḥ/ (20)

maraṇakāmo yajeta yaḥ kāmayetānāmayatā svargaṃ lokam iyām iti/ (21)

yāmyaḥ paśuḥ śukaharita upālabhyaḥ/ (22)

kṛtānnaṃ dakṣiṇā/ (23)

ārbhave stūyamāne dakṣiṇenaudumbarīm pattodaśenāhatena vāsasā dakṣiṇāśirāḥ prāvṛ[t]aḥ samviśann āha brāhmaṇ[ā]ḥ samāpayata me yajñam iti/ (24)

tadaiva samtiṣṭhate/ (25)

Thite (2004: 1314-1315) translates:

The fourth (nine-versed Ekāha) is the Śunaskarṇastoma in which all the Sāmans are circumflexed at the end (*sarvasvāra*). (20)

A sacrificer desirous of death and one who desires "May I go to heaven without having any disease" should perform (this sacrifice). (21)

In addition to the Savanīya he-goat a yellowish parrot is to be seized as a victim. (22)

Cooked rice (forms) the sacrificial gift. (23)

When the Ārbhava-pavamāna (stotra) is being sung, (the sacrificer) lying down to the south of the Audumbarī (post) with his head to the south and being covered with a new garment the fringes of which should be towards the feet, says: "O Brahmins! Complete the sacrifice for me". (24)

At that moment only, the sacrifice stands completely established (i.e. concluded). (25)

Caland (1928: 320-321) translates as follows:

Der vierte Ekāha mit neunversigen Stotras ist der Stoma des Śunaskarṇa, in welchem alle Sāmans am Ende zirkumflektiert sind. (20)

Diesen Ekāha verrichte ein zu sterben Wünschender, der den Wunsch hat: "Möchte ich ohne Krankheit zum Himmelraume eingehen." (21)

Nach dem Savanaopferbock ist dem Yama ein zweiter zu opfern, welcher gelb wie ein Papagei (so!) sein soll. (22)

Der Opferlohn besteht aus zubereitetem Reis. (23)

Während das R̥bhulob (das erste des Nachmittagsdienstes) abgehalten wird, legt sich der Opferherr südlich von dem feigenhölzern Pfeiler mit dem Haupte nach Süden gekehrt, und durch ein neues Gewand, dessen Fransen über seinen Füßen liegen, gänzlich verhüllt, hin und

redet: "Ihr Brahmanen, bringet mir das Opfer zu Ende". In demselben Augenblick wird das Opfer abgeschlossen.

The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (2.267) mentions the Śunaskarṇa, but provides few details:

athaiṣa śunaskarṇastomaḥ/ śunaskarṇo ha vai vārṣṇyakaḥ (v.l. vāṣkyahaḥ) puṇyakṛd apāpakṛd āsa/ sa ha cakame — puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam gaccheyam iti/ sa etaṃ yajñam apaśyat/ tam āharat/ tenāyajata/ tato vai sa puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam agacchat/ sa yaḥ puṇyakṛt kāmayeta puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam gaccheyam iti, sa etena yajeta/ puṇyam evāsmiṇ loke kṛtvāpāpaṃkṛtya svargaṃ lokam gacchati/

About this sacrifice in the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*, Caland (1903: 28) says the following:

Es giebt einen gewissen Ekāha, welchen derjenige verrichten soll, der sich den Tod wünscht, d. h., nach Āpastamba, der ohne Krankheit das Jenseits zu erreichen wünscht. Dieser Ekāha ist auch unter dem Namen sarvasvāra bekannt; in den Yajus-texten trägt er den Namen: "Opfer" oder "Stoma des Śunaskarṇa". Über dieses Opfer lesen wir in Baudhāyana³⁵: "Es war einmal ein edler Fürst, der viele Opfer dargebracht hatte, Sunaskarṇa, des Śibi Sohn.³⁶ Dieser, in traurigem Zustande verkehrend, weil er sein Volk *pratihitām* erblickte, fragte seine Opferpriester: "Giebt es wohl ein Opfer, durch dessen Darbringung ich hinscheiden könnte?" "Ja, das giebt es", antworteten die Opferpriester. Nun schöpfte (bei dem zu seinem Gefallen gehaltenen Somaopfer) der Adhvaryu die Grahas, während er die Opferschnur vom Halse herabhängend trug³⁷ und jedesmal die Pururuc fortliess; der Sāmānsänger sang (?) die Svāra-Sāmāns mit Weglassung des Schlussrefrains; der Hotar sagte die Ṛkstrophen her, während er zurück (? nach Westen ?) hinlief (?). Als er (Śunaskarṇa) von dem Schlussbad zurückkehrte, da starb er. Wen er hasst, für den soll er dieses Opfer errichten, oder auch er bringe es dar für einen, der (um Erlösung seiner Leiden (?) zu ihm) herantritt. Dann geht er ohne Verzug aus dieser Welt fort (er stirbt)".

³⁵ XXI. 17.

³⁶ Im Pañc. Br. heisst er Sohn des Baṣkiha.

³⁷ Wenn *adhonivīti* zu lesen ist. Diese Tracht der Opferschnur ist bekanntlich die beim Pitṛmedha beim Hinaustragen der Leiche üblich.

The quoted passage is as follows (*Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 18.48):

*śunaskarṇo ha vai śaivyo rājā puṇyakṛd bahuyājy āsa/
sa ha pāpīyāñ janatām pratihitām pratikhyāyartvijah papracchāsti svit sa
yajñakratur yenāham iṣṭvaiva prayāyām iti/
asti hīti hainam ṛtvijah pratyūcus/
tasmā adhvaryur ayonīn apurorukkān grahān jagrāha/
svarāṇy udgātā sāmāny anaiḍāny anidhanāni/
parāñ evargmiyaṃ hotānuvāca/
sa hāvabhṛthād evodetya mamāra/
yaṃ dviṣyāt tasyaivaṃ yajñam kuryād upasṛtaṃ vā yājayet/
kṣipraṃ haivāsmāl lokāt praiti/*

Kashikar (2003: III: 1243) translates:

King Śunaskarṇa, son of Śibi was benevolent and had performed many sacrifices. Perceiving the people in poor and wretched condition, he asked the priests, "Is there any sacrifice, having performed which I would depart?" "Yes, there is one" the priests replied. The Adhvaryu took for him the Soma-draughts without reciting the formula referring to its birth-place and without the Puroruc. The Udgātṛ chanted the Svarasāmans without the stobha *iḍa* and without the Nidhana. The Hotṛ recited the set of Ṛks consecutively. After having returned from the Avabhṛtha, the sacrificer died. One should perform this sacrifice for one who hates, or one who approaches him (for this purpose). Soon he departs from this world.

The following, too, occur in the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* (26.33):

*athāsmiñ chunaskarṇayajñe
tilamiśram aśitvā matsyān khāditvā kṣāramātraṃ pibet
atha sāmāpathe saṃviśet
svapnād eva svapne gacchati*

Kashikar (2003: IV: 1713) translates:

In this Śunaskarṇa sacrifice the sacrificer should eat food mixed with sesame, should eat fish and drink only salt water. He should lie down in the region destined for Sāman-chanting. He becomes asleep and attains (permanent) sleep.

Finally there is the *Lāṭyāyana Śrautasūtra* (8.8.1 - 5-6):

*sarvasvāreṇa yakṣyamāṇo dīkṣāprabhṛti prayateta yathā sautye 'hani
preyām iti/ (1)*

...

*ārbhave pavamāne stūyamāna udumbaryā dakṣiṇā prāvṛto nipadyeta
kṛṣṇājinam upastīrya dakṣiṇāsīrās tad eva saṃgacchate tad eva mriyata
iti/ (5)*

*evaṃ mṛtaṃ yajamānaṃ havirbhiḥ saha rjīṣair yajñapātrais cāhavanīye
prahr̥tya pravrajeyur iti śāṇḍilyaḥ/ (6)*

Ranade (1998: 838-841) translates:

One who is going to perform the *Sarvasvāra* (*trivṛt agniṣṭoma*) sacrifice, should make efforts from the consecration ceremony thinking "I will proceed to the yonder world on the day of pressing". (1)

...

When the *Ārbhava pavamāna* is being chanted he should lie covered to the south of the *Audumbarī* post on a black-antelope skin, having spread the same, with his head to the south. Thus itself he makes his departure. This is the way he breaths his last. (5)

Śāṇḍilya opines that they (the officiating priests) should consign the sacrificer, who is thus dead, to the *Āhavanīya* fire along with the remaining oblations inclusive of the sacrificial utensils containing the residue of the Soma and quit the place. (6)

This passage indicates that the sacrificer is dead before he is consigned to the fire, and this passage (but only this one) is therefore in clear disagreement with the passage quoted by Śabara.

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