

MANUSCRIPTS IN THE SCHØYEN COLLECTION



BUDDHIST MANUSCRIPTS

Volume III

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HERMES PUBLISHING · OSLO

2006

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	xiii
CONVENTIONS	xvii
ABBREVIATIONS	xix
I) Sūtra:	
a) Āgama:	
1. A Version of the Śikhālakasūtra/Siṅgālovādasutta, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Klaus Wille	1
2. Maitreyavyākaraṇa, Jens-Uwe Hartmann	7
b) Mahāyāna:	
3. Fragments of the Bodhisattvapiṭakasūtra, Jens Braarvig, Ulrich Pagel	11
4. Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā, Paul Harrison, Shogo Watanabe	89
5. Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra, Paul Harrison	133
II) Vinaya:	
6. The Prātimokṣa-Vibhaṅga of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins in Early Western Gupta Script, Seishi Karashima	161
7. More Fragments of Karmavācānā Texts, Jin-il Chung	177
8. A Vinaya Fragment on the Qualifications of a Vinayadhara, Shizuka Sasaki, Nobuyuki Yamagiwa	189
III) Miscellaneous:	
9. A Fragment of a Commentary (?) on a Hitherto Unknown Recension of the Mahā- samājasūtra, Siglinde Dietz, Olle Qvarnström, Peter Skilling	195
10. Fragments of the Avadānaśataka, Mitsuyo Demoto Hahn	207
11. A Fragment of a Play, Jens-Uwe Hartmann	245
12. A Copper Scroll Inscription from the Time of the Alchon Huns, Gudrun Melzer, in collaboration with Lore Sander	251
13. Radiocarbon Dating of Kharoṣṭhī Fragments from the Schøyen and Senior Manuscript Collections, Mark Allon, Richard Salomon, Geraldine Jacobsen, Ugo Zoppi	279
14. On the Metre of the Verses of the Sarvadharmāpravṛttinirdeśa, Asao Iwamatsu	293
BIBLIOGRAPHY	301
PLATES	317
Photographs of the possible place of origin of Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection	I–II
Facsimiles	III–XXXVIII

A Fragment of a Play*

Jens-Uwe Hartmann

Among the fragments added to the Schøyen Collection since the summer of 2002, there is a piece that is remarkable for several reasons. First, it preserves part of a play. Second, the play is unknown. And third, it is the first example of that literary genre among the many manuscripts from Afghanistan. Not altogether unexpectedly, since plays were found a hundred years ago among the Sanskrit manuscripts from Central Asia,¹ it confirms an acquaintance with that kind of diversion on the part of educated Buddhists all along the ancient Silk Road, wherever Sanskrit was used by the religious élite. It is impossible, of course, to deduce from the few surviving fragments if the plays were ever staged there or only enjoyed as a literary genre. Judging from the evidence offered by the Central Asian finds, the latter rather appears to be the case, since both the manuscripts containing plays² are written on palm leaf and may have been imported from India. Among the indigenous paper manuscripts which represent the overwhelming majority of the Central Asian finds, no plays are preserved. This hints at the possibility that these works did not form part of the shift from imported to locally adopted literature³, and this in turn would seem to speak against a performative use of the texts.

Regrettably, only a single fragment of the new play has turned up so far, but it preserves enough text to leave no doubt that it is indeed a play that we are dealing with here. Except for the division into acts, all the characteristics of the genre are found:

1. A *vidūṣaka*, a “jester,” appears (line a1).

2. Abbreviations are used, and presumably for speaking actors: if *vidū* in a5 and b5 is an abbreviation for *vidūṣaka*, and this is very likely, it becomes possible to understand *amā* in b2 as an abbreviation of *amātya*, all the more so since an *amātya*, a “minister,” is clearly involved in the action (cf. b5).

3. The text consists of a mixture of prose and verse; in a2 *pravrajyāvyaśāyam asya yad a///* corresponds to the beginning of a Śārdūlavikrīḍita verse, and *drṣtvā hy astamitārkaśailasa///* in a3 again could form the beginning of a Śārdūlavikrīḍita. In b3 we find the first half of an Anuṣṭubh in *imam bālyau mayā tyaktam kulavr̥kṣāṅkuram mama*, and b6 most probably contains another Anuṣṭubh with the end of the half verse after *pāṃsubhiḥ, kkrīditam saha pāṃsubhiḥ*, representing the even quarter of an Anuṣṭubh verse.

4. The language is a mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit; for Prakrit passages see *pekkhitum* at the beginning of a5 and the brief sentence spoken by the *vidūṣaka* in b5.

* It is my pleasant duty to thank Stefan Baums, who independently identified the fragment as a play and kindly provided me with his provisional transliteration and translation. This was fortunate, since it made me rethink and correct some of my previous readings. Christine Chojnacki (Lyon), Anna Esposito (Würzburg), and Paul Harrison read earlier drafts of my manuscript and made valuable comments on it, for which I am very grateful to them. A German version of this paper will appear in Hartmann forthcoming.

¹ Lüders 1911a and Lüders 1911b.

² Catalogue numbers 16 and 57, cf. SHT I: 10f. and 37f.

³ However, the picture is complicated by the fact that the second manuscript (Catalogue number 57) is a palimpsest written in an early form of Central Asian Brāhmī. In other words, only the material was imported, but the text was written in Central Asia.

5. The text contains stage directions, as in a2 *nirvarṇya*, “having contemplated,” and in a5 *niṣkrāṃto*, “exit.”

Thus the evidence is unequivocal. It is less easy, however, to decide whether this is a Buddhist play. The fragment preserves neither a decisive name nor a significant term which could help in answering that question. The compound *pravrajyāvyavasāya*—if it is a compound—in a2 probably means “the decision (to receive) ordination,” and *pravrajyā* is a term that is employed extensively, but not exclusively, by the Buddhists. In a1 the word *viśākhaḥ* is found; could it perhaps refer to the husband of Viśākhā, also known as Mṛgāramātā, the “leading female lay disciple” of the Buddha (cf. BHSD)? This is impossible to answer. Among the other words and expressions I for one fail to see anything specifically Buddhist.

In fact Buddhist compositions count among the oldest plays we know. As already mentioned they were found in Central Asia, unfortunately not fully preserved, but surviving only in small fragments. Until ten years ago, one of the oldest Indian manuscripts available to us was the so-called “Dramenhandschrift,” the manuscript containing plays. This palm leaf manuscript was found a hundred years ago in Qizil by one of the German expeditions.⁴ It was dated to approximately the second century by Heinrich Lüders, who edited the fragments in 1911.⁵ Originally, the manuscript may have contained three plays, and at least one of them, the *Śāriputraprakaraṇa*, was written by a Buddhist poet, the famous Āśvaghoṣa. This proves that Buddhist writers participated in the very refined literary art of composing plays. They may have been quite active in this field, but even if so, very few traces of those activities have been preserved. There is no translation of a play into Chinese, and Tibetan translations are available of only two later plays, one by Candragomin,⁶ possibly from the 5th century,⁷ and the other by Harṣadeva⁸ from the 7th century. The present fragment is another trace, and to date the only one from Afghanistan and the area of Greater Gandhāra.

Description of the fragment

The material is palm leaf, and the script represents a late variety of the Gupta type, perhaps to be dated to the 5th or 6th century (cf. Sander 1968: alphabet k, Tables 9-20). The folio contains six lines; only its right part is preserved. There is no trace of a string hole, usually placed on the left side of a folio, and this renders it difficult to guess the total length of the original leaf. However, metrics offer at least a possible start. Line a2 begins with a Śārdūlavikrīḍita verse, and line a4 contains the end of a verse in the same metre. Line a3 presents a problem: evidently it contains the end of one pāda and the beginning of the next. While the latter is clearly a Śārdūlavikrīḍita too, the metre of the preceding pāda is difficult to assess, since it does not appear to fit into any metrical scheme. However, when slightly modified by deleting the word *na*, it becomes another perfect Śārdūlavikrīḍita pāda. Presuming this emendation to be justified and necessary, two possibilities suggest themselves. The words *///hair dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmabhir me {na} kṛtam** in line a3

⁴ Cf. SHT I, no. 16 (p. 10) and the facsimile on plate 1 of the same volume.

⁵ However, according to a Radiocarbon dating recently ordered by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin the calibrated dates are 264, 270 or 340 CE. I thank Dr. Hartmut-Ortwin Feistel of the Staatsbibliothek for making this information available to me.

⁶ Hahn 1974; for an English translation see Hahn 1987.

⁷ Cf. Hahn 1993: 45ff.

⁸ Cf. Steiner 1997, esp. pp. 286–287 for editions and translations.

represent either the second or the fourth quarter of the verse beginning in line a2. If the second, only 15 akṣaras would be missing in the first part of line a3 (8 of pāda a and 7 of pāda b); if the fourth, the gap would comprise 53 akṣaras (again 8 of pāda a, twice 19 of pādas b and c, and 7 of pāda d). The relation between lines a3 and a4 is practically identical: either 13 or 51 akṣaras would be missing (9 of pāda a and 4 of pāda b or d). In the light of line a4, the first possibility can be ruled out, since a4 definitely contains a fourth quarter, and this will only fit if a2 preserves pāda a of a first Śārdūlavikrīḍita verse, a3 pāda d of the same verse and pāda a of the second, and a4 pāda d of the second. If this somewhat complicated deduction proves right, each line contains about 70 to 75 syllables which would mean that only one third of the folio is preserved.

Transliteration

MS 2381/265; A

- 1 /// .. tu mahārājo bālo tāva hakam* vidūṣako mohamgataḥ viśākhaḥ ā
- 2 /// + vyam* nirvarṇya · sabāṣpaḥ atha vā || pravrajyāvyavasāyam asya yad a
- 3 /// + .. hair dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmabhir me na kṛtam* dr̥ṣṭvā hy astamitārkaśailasa
- 4 /// .. n. sa sthitaṃ mama na tat kartuṃ samartha ntakaḥ viśvilaḥ gacchami haga[m]*⁹
- 5 /// .. [j]aṃ pekkhitum* niṣkrāṃto viśvilaḥ pratī · mama pratihāra vā · vidū ·
- 6 /// + + .. nta gaccha pauraṇam brūhi · atha vā tiṣ[ṭha] svayam abhidhās.ā[m]i

B

- 1 /// + + .. mā · mahārāja · rājā iha samkkrāntaṃ rāj. tvam apī tu · s. h. [pā].[s]u
- 2 /// + [bha]vantam* amā · ājñāpayatu mahārājaḥ rājā · na khalu vyamsayitavyaḥ
- 3 /// [hā] rājā · i[m]aṃ bālyau mayā tyaktaṃ kulavṛkṣāṅkuraṃ mama · gurvyāṃ rājadhuri nya
- 4 /// + .. s te dadāti · pratigṛhya cāmātyo bhūmau jānubhyām¹⁰ patitaḥ pāmsukkrī
- 5 /// mi · vi[dū] · hanta patitṭhito khu pukkharapālito · amātyaḥ svāmin* cha
- 6 /// .ā dhātrīstanau pītau kkrīḍitaṃ saha pāmsubhiḥ sāmpratam ca tapaś cartuṃ na ma

Reconstruction

(a1) ///.. tu mahārājo bālo tāva hakam* vidūṣako mohamgataḥ
viśākhaḥ ā(a2)///

/// vyam*

nirvarṇya · sabāṣpaḥ

atha vā ||

pravrajyāvyavasāyam asya yad a (a3) - | - - - - - ×

- - - - - | - - - - - ×

- - - - - | - - - - - ×

- - - - - hair dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmabhir me {na} kṛtam*

dr̥ṣṭvā hy astamitārkaśailasa (a4) - - | - - - - - ×

⁹ Most probably virāma, but it is not very clear which letter is written below, perhaps a *t* or an *m*.

¹⁰ The *jā* shows traces of an—apparently deleted—*e* pṛṣṭamātra.

-----|-----x
 -----|-----x
 --- n(a) sa(m)sthitaṃ mama na tat kartuṃ samartho 'ntakaḥ
 viśvilaḥ gacchami hagam* (a5) ///
 /// .. jaṃ pekkhitum*
 niṣkrāṃto viśvilaḥ prati ·
 mama pratihāra vā ·
 vidū (a6) ///
 (rājā?) /// .. nṭa gaccha pauraṇamaṃ brūhi · atha vā tiṣṭha svayam abhidhās(y)āmi (b1) ///
 (a)mā · mahārāja ·
 rājā iha saṃkrāntaṃ rāj(a)tvam api tu · s(a)h(a)pā(m)su (b2) ///
 /// bhavantam*
 amā · ājñāpayatu mahārājaḥ
 rājā · na khalu vyaṃsayitavyaḥ (b3) ///
 /// hā rājā ·
 imaṃ bālyau mayā tyaktaṃ kulavṛkṣāṅkuraṃ mama ·
 gurvyaṃ rājadhuri nya (b4) × × × × - - × ///
 /// s te dadāti · pratigṛhya cāmātyo bhūmau jānubhyāṃ patitaḥ pāṃsukkrī (b5) ///
 /// mi ·
 vidū · hanta patiṭṭhito khu pukkharapālito ·
 amātyaḥ · svāmin* cha (b6) ///
 × ā dhātrīstanau pītau kkrīḍitaṃ saha pāṃsubhiḥ
 sāmprataṃ ca tapaś cartuṃ na ma × × - - × ///

Translation

(a1) ... the great king, the boy so far am I (?)¹¹. The Vidūṣaka is confused.

Viśākha: ... should ...

(a2) ... *Having contemplated, in tears, (he says):*

Or

His decision for ordination¹² (a3) ... lasting in this world what is done to me through my own deeds.

For, having seen the ... of the mountain of the sunset ... (a4) ... not remaining for me; death is not able to do this¹³.

Viśvīla: I will go (?).

(a5) ... to look at.

*Exit Viśvīla, to himself/in expectation*¹⁴: Or you should announce yourself to me!

Vidūṣaka: (a6) ...

¹¹ Prakrit *hakam* for Skt. *aham*, like *hagam* in line a4? Without more context, the meaning of the sentence is difficult to assess.

¹² A possible continuation would be *pravrajyāvyavasāyam asya yad a(ham ...)*, "That I have to (witness/stand etc.) his decision for ordination."

¹³ Or, if *mama* is connected with *kartuṃ*, "death is not able to do this for me."

¹⁴ *prati* for *praticīnam* or something like this, "back to one's self"? Or from *pratīkṣ-*, "looking backward"?

(Rāja?): ... go¹⁵ (and) talk to the townsfolk! Or stay, (and) I will address (them) myself **(b1)** ...

Minister: Great king!

King: Here sovereignty is transferred, but yet: a friend from childhood¹⁶ **(b2)** ... you, sir.

Minister: Let the great king command!

King: By no means is he to be cheated **(b3)** ...

...

King: Him whom I abandoned in childhood¹⁷, a sprout of my family tree, in the heavy yoke of the king(s position) **(b4)** ...¹⁸

...: ... he gives you;¹⁹ and the minister, having received (it), fell on his knees to the ground, the friend from childhood²⁰ **(b5)** ...

...: I ...

Vidūṣaka: Look, installed is the one protected by Puṣkara²¹.

Minister: Master, **(b6)** ...

... (You)²² drank from the breast of the nurse and played with sand; but presently to practice austerity is not ...

¹⁵ Restore to *(ha)nta*, “look!”?

¹⁶ In the light of b4 *pāmsukkrī///* and b6 *kkriḍitaṃ saha pāmsubhiḥ* this is possibly to be restored to *s(a)h(a)pā(m)su(kriḍita)* or the like.

¹⁷ *bālyau* apparently mistake for *bālye*.

¹⁸ Reconstruct *nya///* to a form of *nyas*, “to place in”?

¹⁹ Or, if *(ha)ste* has to be reconstructed, “he gives into the hand”.

²⁰ Cf. note 17 above.

²¹ Without more context, the precise reference of this word or name is difficult to establish; should it be understood as a personal name, Puṣkarapālita?

²² Or “I”, depending on the speaker, since the akṣara remains hint at *tvayā* or *mayā*.