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Photographs of the possible place of origin of Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen
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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 elite. 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 plays\(^2\) 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 literature\(^3\), 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 \textit{vidūṣaka}, a “jester,” appears (line a1).

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

3. The text consists of a mixture of prose and verse; in a2 \textit{pravrajyāyavasāyam} asya \textit{yad a///} corresponds to the beginning of a \textit{Sārḍulavikrīḍita} verse, and \textit{dṛṣṭvā} \textit{hy astamitārkaśatlasa///} in a3 again could form the beginning of a \textit{Sārḍulavikrīḍita}. In b3 we find the first half of an \textit{Anuśtubh} in \textit{imām bālyau mayā tyaktam} \textit{kulavṛṣāṅkuram} \textit{mama}, and b6 most probably contains another \textit{Anuśtubh} with the end of the half verse after \textit{pāṃsubhīh}, \textit{kṛdiṭaṁ saha} \textit{pāṃsubhīh}, representing the even quarter of an \textit{Anuśtubh} verse.

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

\(^{\ast}\) 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 Brāhmi. 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 niskrānta, “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 viśākhā is found; could it perhaps refer to the husband of Viśākhā, also known as Mrgāramātā, 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. It was dated to approximately the second century by Heinrich Lüders, who edited the fragments in 1911. Originally, the manuscript may have contained three plays, and at least one of them, the Śāriputraprakaraṇa, was written by a Buddhist poet, the famous Aśvaghōsa. 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, possibly from the 5th century, and the other by Harsadeva 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 Śārdūlavikṛṣṭa 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 Śārdūlavikṛṣṭa 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 Śārdūlavikṛṣṭa pāda. Presuming this emendation to be justified and necessary, two possibilities suggest themselves. The words īha dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmābhīr me {na} kṛtam* in line a3

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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.
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 pāḍa a and 7 of pāḍa b); if the fourth, the gap would comprise 53 akṣaras (again 8 of pāḍa a, twice 19 of pāḍas b and c, and 7 of pāḍa d). The relation between lines a3 and a4 is practically identical: either 13 or 51 akṣaras would be missing (9 of pāḍa a and 4 of pāḍa 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 pāḍa a of a first Śārdūlavikṛiti verse, a3 pāḍa d of the same verse and pāḍa a of the second, and a4 pāḍa 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 viśākhah ā
dd// + vyam* nirvārṇya · sabāspah atha vā || pravrajyāvyavasāyam asya yad a
3 /// + .. hair dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmabhir me na kṛtam* drṣṭvā hy astamitārkaśailasa
4 /// // n. sa sthitam mama na tat kartum samartho nataḥ viśvilah gacchhami hagam[m]as
5 /// // [j]am pekkhitum* niṣkramto viśvilah prati · mama pratiḥāra vā · vidū ·
6 // + + .. nta gaccha paurajanaṃ brūhi · atha vā tis[tha] svayam abhidhās.ā[m]i

B

1 /// + + .. mā · mahārāja · rājā iha sāmkkrāntam rāj. tvam api tu · s. h. [pā],[s]u
2 /// + [bha]vantam* amā · ājñāpayatu mahārājaḥ rājā · na khalu vyamsayitavyah
3 /// [hā] rājā · i[m]am bālyau mayā tyaktam kulavrksānkuraṃ mama · gurvyām rājadhuri nya
4 /// + .. s te daḍāti · pratigrhya cāmātyo bhūmāv jāmubhyām10 patiḥā pāṃsukkri
5 /// mi · vi[dū] · hanta patiṭhito khu pukkharapālito · amātyah svāmin* cha
6 /// .a dhātristanau pitaḥ kṣriṣitaṃ saha pāṃsubhīḥ sāmpratam ca tapaś cartum na ma

Reconstruction

(a1) /// tu mahārājo bālo tāva hakam* vidūṣako mohamgataḥ
viśākhah ā(a2)//
/// vyam*
nirvārṇya · sabāspah
atha vā ||
pravrajyāvyavasāyam asya yad a (a3) - | - - - - - - x
- - - - - - - - | - - - - x
- - - - - - - - | - - - - x
- - - - - - - - hair dhruvam iha svaiḥ karmabhir me (na) kṛtam*
drṣṭvā hy astamitārkaśailasa (a4) - | - - - - - - x

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.
viśvilaḥ gacchami hagam* (a5) ///
/// jaṁ pekkhitum*
iṣkṛānto viśvilaḥ prati •
     mama prathihāra vā •
vidū (a6) ///
(rājā?) /// na gaccha purājanam brūhi • aṭha vā tiṣṭha svayam abhidhās(yāmi (b1) ///
(a)mā • mahārāja •
rājā • iha saṃkkrāntam rāj(a)tvam api tu • s(a)h(a)pā(m)a su (b2) ///
/// bhavantam*
amā • ājñāpayatu mahārājaḥ
rājā • na khalu vyāmsayitavyah (b3) ///
/// hā rājā •

  imaṁ bālyau mayā tyaktam kulavrksāṅkuram mama •
gurvāyam rājadhuri nya (b4) × × × x x x x x ///
/// s te dadāti • pratigrhyam cāmātyo bhūmau jānubhyāṁ patitaḥ pāṁsukkri (b5) ///
/// mi •
vidū • hanta patīṭhitu khu pukkharapālito •
amātyāḥ • svāmin* cha (b6) ///
  ×.ā dhāṭristanau pitau • kārikṛitam saha pāṁsubhiḥ
  sāmpratam ca tapaś cartum na ma × x x x x x ///

Translation

(a1) ... the great king, the boy so far am I (?)\(^1\). The Vidūśaka is confused.
Viśākha: ... should ...
(a2) ... *Having contemplated, in tears, (he says):* Or
His decision for ordination\(^2\) (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 this\(^3\).
Viśvila: I will go (?)\(^4\).
(a5) ... to look at.
Exit Viśvila, to himself/in expectation\(^5\): Or you should announce yourself to me!
Vidūśaka: (a6) ...

\(^1\) Prakrit *hakam* for Skt. *aham*, like *hagam* in line a4? Without more context, the meaning of the sentence is difficult
to assess.
\(^2\) A possible continuation would be *pravrajyāvavasāyam asya yad aḥam ...*, “That I have to (witness/stand etc.) his
decision for ordination.”
\(^3\) Or, if *mama* is connected with *kartum*, “death is not able to do this for me.”
\(^4\) *prai* for *pratičīnām* or something like this, “back to one’s self”? Or from *prātiṣ-, “looking backward”?
(Rāja?): ... go\(^{15}\) (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 childhood\(^{16}\) (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 childhood\(^{17}\), 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 childhood\(^{20}\) (b5) ...

... I ...

Vidūṣaka: Look, installed is the one protected by Puṣkara\(^{21}\).

Minister: Master, (b6) ...

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

\(^{12}\) Restore to /hajenta, “look!”?

\(^{15}\) In the light of b4 pāṃsukṛṣṭi/// and b6 kkrīdaṃ saha pāṃsubhīḥ this is possibly to be restored to s(a)h(a)pā(m)su(krīda) or the like.

\(^{16}\) 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.