The Sahassavatthu-atthakathā or Sahassavatthuppakarana

A PRELIMINARY STUDY.

The author of the work is not known. In his introduction the author, after venerating the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, salutes the Sihaḷacariyas (Teachers of Ceylon) and says that for his work he borrows material from the Sihaḷathakathā (Sinhalese works) and the traditions of the teachers.¹

The date of the work is doubtful. But the very name Sahassavatthu-atthakathā suggests that it belongs to a period at least earlier than the 11th century A.C. The word atthakathā had, during the early Anuradhapura period, a wider connotation than it has at present. Today it means only the Pāli commentaries on the Tipiṭaka. But during the early Anuradhapura period the term was applied to all kinds of literary works other than the Tipiṭaka. At that time there were only two forms of Literature—Pāli, signifying the Text of the Tipiṭaka, and Atthakathā, signifying all the other literary works including the commentaries on the Tipiṭaka and such works as Mahābodhivaṃsaṭṭhakathā (a work on the History of the Great Bodhi Tree), Cetiyaṃvaṃsaṭṭhakathā (a work on the History of the Cetiya), Mahācetiyaṃvaṃsaṭṭhakathā (a work on the History of the Great Cetiya), Dipavamsaṭṭhakathā (a work on the History of the Island), and Mahāvaṃsaṭṭhakathā (a work on the History of the Great Dynasty). These were all written in Sinhalese. The word Sihaḷathakathā was evidently used to denote Sinhalese "works in general. There was then no form of literature known as Tikā. The term Tikā came into vogue only during the Polonnaruva period. So far as we know, Ānanda's Mūlaṭikā was the first Tikā and it was written about the 11th century A.C. Ānanda was the teacher of Buddhappiya, the author of the Pāli Grammar, Rūpasiddhi. The Moggallāyana Vyākaraṇa, of about the middle of the 12th century A.C., knew Buddhappiya's Rūpasiddhi. Therefore we cannot be far wrong if we place Ānanda somewhere in the 11th century. Prior to this period all works other than the Tipiṭaka seem to have been known under the generic term Atthakathā. The name Sahassavatthu-atthakathā tempts one therefore to assign it at least to a date earlier than the Tikā period.

Both the Mahāvaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa-atthakathā are referred to in this work; reference is also made to an opinion expressed by Uttaravihāravāsins. The reference to Mahāvaṃsa shows that the work is later than the 5th century A.C. The mention of Sihaḷathakathā (in the introduction) and

¹ Sahassavatthuḥ bhāsissam, Sihaḷathakathānayaṃ gaṇhitvācariyavādaś ca
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the Mahāvamsa-âtthakathā (in the body of the work) shows that the Sōhassavatthu belongs to an early period, for the reference to Sihaḷaṭṭha-kathā is not to be found in works, either in Pāli or in Sinhalese, written later than about the 10th or 11th centuries. That the Mahāvamsa-âtthakathā was read by students at the time the Sahassavatthu was written is evident from the fact that the author of the work refers his readers to the Mahāvamsa-âtthakathā for further details.2

The Mahāvamsatīka which belongs approximately to about the 10th century A.C. has three references3 to the Sahassavaththagathakhathā. The first two (the one about Suranimma and the other about Goṭha-imbara) are found in the MSS. But the third one (about Prince Sāli) cannot be traced. In fact the story of Sāli is altogether omitted in the available MSS. They contain only one sentence about Prince Sāli: Sāḷirājakumāra-vatthu Mahāvamsa uttana-yena rāditabbā. Sāḷirājakumāra-vatthu duṭṭiyam. That is all. Whether the copyist of the archetype of these MSS. omitted the story merely referring the reader to the Mhv. in order to save himself the labour of copying a long story, or whether these MSS. represent an abridged form of the original Sahassavatthu cannot be decided unless and until some more MSS. can be consulted. But in the Rasavihini, which is generally believed to be a work based on the Shv., is found4 the reference to Sāli as given in the Mhv. Tīkā.

Vedeha, the author of the Rsv. says in his introduction that his book is based on a Pāli work written by a therī named Raṭṭhapāla who resided in Guttavānka Perivena at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura. Can the Shv. be the work here referred to?

The late Hugh Neville, in the Catalogue of his manuscript collections now in the British Museum (No. 115), has suggested that the Sāhassavatthu-pakara-ṇa formed the basis for the Pāli Rasavihini and that it was a work of the Dhammarucī sect. But Malalasekera sees no reason to justify this assignation to the Abhayagiri sect.5

A sentence in the story of Goṭha-imbara which reads Uttaravihāra-vāsino pana evaṃ vaddanti6 (thus the residents of the Uttaravihāra say) definitely proves that the Shv. was not a work of the monks of the Uttaravihāra, i.e. of the monks of the Dhammarucī sect.

5. Pāli Lit. of Ceylon, pp. 128, 129.
6. This sentence occurs in the Rsv. also. There kira is substituted for pana. (Rsv. II p. 88) kira is more idiomatic in this context.
The introduction of the Rsv. says further that Ratthapāla’s work was a translation into Pāli of stories told in Sinhalese by Arahants of old. A perusal of the Shv. shows quite clearly that the work is a very literal and often crude translation into Pāli of a Sinhalese original. The language of the Shv. is often ungrammatical, unpolished and abrupt, and has no pretense to literary elegance whatever. The work abounds in direct translations of Sinhalese idioms and usages which may be called “Sinhalese-Pāli” e.g.

Kālasigālaṃ pīmbaro aggahesi (Kālasigālassa vatthu)
Tava sahāyakam suvopotakam māritacoroti āha (Byagghassa vatthu)
Etassa manussassa geha-dinnamanusso (Coragehe vasita-manussassa vatthu)

Mayhaṃ āhāram khādītavā āgama-kālam maṃ ito muñcanupāyam karohiti (Coragehe vasita-manussassa vatthu)
Tava kathana-paccekabuddho nāma kīdisoti (Dhammāsokamahārājassa vatthu)

Sīhalodiye uttarapacchiyam (Dantakuṭumbikassa vatthu)
Taṃ pūjam karanasamaye (Kaṃcanadeviyā vatthu)

Such sentences as these which are abundantly scattered throughout the work cannot be fully understood and appreciated without a sufficient knowledge of Sinhalese.

Sometimes such usages as pōdam kīlītum “to fight” or “to wrestle” (Gotha-imbara vatthu) are met with. But they are not found elsewhere in Pāli. Perhaps the word pōda may be a Pālicised Sinhalese word for “fight,” like pīmbaro (Sinh. pīmburā, pīmburā) for “python” or “boa,” (the usual Pāli word for which is ajaṭara) or like pacchiyam (Sinh. pāsā, pāsā) for “direction” or “side” or “district” or “province” (usual Pāli for which is pāsā)

Ungrammatical sentences like -

Uloketva attana gate (Coraghātakassa vatthu)
Atha nāvā sattadivasam gatakale samuddamajjhe bhijji (Dantakuṭum-bikassa vatthu)

Raṇṇo putto vijāyi (Coragehe vasita-manussassa vatthu)

are not wanting. Side by side with these ungrammatical and crude forms we find good idiomatic usages such as---

yathā dhotena pattena (Tissadahara-sīmaṇerassa vatthu)
Dukkhāpetvā (Coraghātaka-vatthu)

There are sentences which exhibit also an influence of the Jātakatthakathā.

7. Rsv. I, Intro. vv. 5-7
8. Cf. Sukkāpetvā in the Janavasabha Sutta, D.N.

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The Rasavāhinī introduction adds that the stories told in Sinhalese by the Arahants of old had their origin in various places—tattha tatthāpapanāni vatthūni. Several examples in the Shv. show that the stories were evidently based on oral reports from various places. The relation of a story or an incident sometimes concluded with iti vadanti “so they say.” For example,

Tāvatimsabdhavane nighbattiṃsūti vadanti (Kākassa vatthu)
Cātuhi māsehi gatoti vadanti (Cūlanāgathērassā vatthu)
Gahetvā agamantsūti vadanti (Tambasumanatherassā vatthu)
AladdhāthānanāmNama natthiti vadanti (Pīve pabbatavāsī-Tissattherassā vatthu)

The author of the Rasavāhinī admits that his work is simply a revision of Raṭṭhapāla’s Pāli translation which abounded in faults such as repetition.³

No one who goes through the Shv. can help feeling that it needs revision very badly not only in language, but also in its arrangement.

Usually there are 10 stories to a vagga (chapter). But one vagga has 5 stories, another 9, while a third has 11. Very often the name of a story at the beginning is different from the name given at the end. The titles of stories are generally descriptive and long, and are meant to indicate the nature of the story. e.g. Cūlagallaraṭṭhe āsanasālam jaggantassā upāsakaśa vatthu; Mahāgāme Tissamahāvihāre dhammasūtRV-aśadassā vatthu. It is in this descriptive fashion that stories among the Sinhalese villagers are named even today.

The literary style of the fourth vagga is entirely different from that of the rest. The story begins with a gāthā which gives the gist of the story in brief. At the end of the story, immediately after the words tena vuttaṁ, the same gāthā is repeated. Sometimes, after the gāthā at the beginning, the story opens with tena yathā’nusuyyate. The fourth vagga seems to have had some Sanskrit influence.

There is no system in the arrangement of the stories either. They are all mixed. The stories from Jambudīpa are scattered among those of Laṅkā. The story of Kākavaṇṇatissa (9th of the IVth vagga) is really the story of three people, namely, Kākavaṇṇatissa, Duṭṭhagāmāni and Velusumana. But at the end of the vagga, without relating it, the story of Duṭṭhagāmāni is given as the tenth one. It simply says: Duṭṭhagāmāni-Abhayamahāraṇīno vatthu Mahāvamse vithāritam eva. Taṁ tato gahetabbam. This was evidently considered as good as relating the whole story.

The fifth vagga gives the names of the ten generals of Duṭṭhagāmāni as though the author intended to relate the stories in a series. But the stories

³. Punaruttādi dosehi tamāsi sabbam ākulaṁ anākulaṁ karissāmi Rsv. 1. Intro. v. 7.

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of Nandimitta (story 6, vagga II) and Velusumana (included in story 9, vagga IV) are given earlier. So the series begins with Suranirnmala, but ends after relating only four stories. Again, the first story of vagga VI contains only the following abrupt sentence: Sānkhepena Duṭṭhagāmini-rañño vatthum pathamaṃ. The second, the story of Prince Sāli is not given either, but the reader is requested to learn it from the Mahāvaṃsa: Sāliirājakumāravatthuṃ Mahāvaṃse vuttanayena veditabbo ṇ. Sāliirājakumāravatthuṃ dutiyam. Yet it is counted as having being actually told.

The commentary on the gāthā beginning with Aniccā vata sankhārā (in the first story, Dhammasoṇḍaka, of vagga I) is very elaborate and fanciful. Yet it contains phrases with deep philosophical meaning. This is the only commentary on a gāthā in the whole book.

The Sahassavatthu presents a great deal of historical material not found in other sources. It offers, for example, a clue towards the identification of Dhūpittihmahārāja found in the Rasavāhinī.10 Brāhmaṇatiyam corabhayam is the usual phrase found in Pāli commentaries and chronicles, though-liyam is inexplicable. But the Shv. gives the name four times and invariably calls it Brāhmaṇa Tissa-corabhayam. The story of Phussadevatthera is entirely a new thing not found in the Rsv. There is a story of Phussadeva in the Rsv.; but there he is the well-known general of Duṭṭhagāmiṇi. Phussadeva Thera of the Shv. is the son of Saddhātissa’s sister. Kaṭakanāroavāsī Phussadevatthero nāma Saddhātissa-mahārañño bhaginīyā putto—thus the therī is Duṭṭhagāmiṇi’s nephew. The information that Duṭṭhagāmiṇi or Saddhātissa had a sister is not found anywhere else.

The story of Phussadeva Thera is found in several other works. In the Sārasaṅgaha,11 under Sammājanānisaṃsā, the story is given as illustration to prove the merits of sweeping. Many details are omitted. Only the portions connected with sweeping and Māra’s appearance are given. In the Shv. story, Māra appears only once. But here he appears on three successive days, as a monkey, a bull and a lame man. The Thera is called Kālandhakālavāsi Phussadevatthero. The Saddhāramatnākara,12 (a Sinhalese work of the early part of the 15th century) calls him Kālakanda Phussadeva. (According to this book Kālakanda Vihāra was in Rohaṇa). Here also Māra appears three days successively as a monkey, a bull and a lame man. Many details are omitted. Only the portions connected with sweeping and Māra’s appearance are given. Here too, the story is cited as illustration to praise the merits of sweeping. The Visuddhimagga13 knows him as Kaṭakandaravāsī Phussadevatthera. He attained Arahantship by looking at the figure of

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10. See my Note, University of Ceylon Review, Vol I. No. II, p. 82.
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Buddha created by Mara. No other details are given, not even that he swept the yard, nor that Māra appeared in various forms. The three stories given above do not mention that Phussadeva was Saddhatissa’s sister’s son. But all the four stories agree that Phussadeva Thera attained Arahantship by looking at the figure of the Buddha created by Māra.¹⁴

The name Sahassavatthu suggests that the book should contain one thousand stories. But in fact there are only 94. Such round numbers as thousand and five hundred were generally used in ancient literature to denote large numbers. But 94 is too small to allow the word sahassa even for such a usage.

In this connection Malalasekera offers an interesting suggestion. He thinks that the word sahassa may be the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit word saharsa, which means “gratifying, delightful, mirthful, gladsome.”¹⁵ Then the title Sahassavatthu-âthha-kathâ or Sahassavatthu-pakaranâ means “Book of Gratifying Stories,” which is quite a plausible title. The suggestion seems to me to be all the more reasonable when we compare this with the title of Rasavāhini, which means “mellifluent” or “river of taste” or “flow of taste” or “joy-giver” or “pleasure-producer.” Then the two titles Sahassa and Rasavāhini mean essentially the same thing. This also suggests that the Rsv. was based on the Shv.

There are numerous sentences in the Rasavāhini which agree word for word with those of the Shv. In the Kiñcisaṁghaya vatthu of the Rsv. the gâthâ uttered by the devatâ living in the king’s chaṭṭa (parasol) is the same except for one or two words, as the one found in the Shv. The gâthâ uttered by Goṭha-imbara, after attaining Arahantship, is the same in both works except that the Rsv. gâthâ is touched up in order to make it more elegant and grammatical.

These considerations prompt the question: “Cannot our Sahassavatthu be the work of Raṭṭhapâla of Guttavaṅka Parivenâ at the Mahâvihâra in Anurâdhapura which Vedeha, in the 14th century, revised and re-named as Rasavāhini?”

Although the Sahassavatthu is crude in its language and arrangement it has much historical value. There is no doubt that the work is based on some reliable old Sinhalese records which were available to the author at the time.

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¹⁵. It may (philologically be argued) that saharaṇa ought to give sahamsa and not sahassa, just as ukaraṇa gives ukhamsa or praharaṇa gives pahamsa. But examples like varga> vassa and karaṇaka> kassaka justify the derivation of sahassa from saharaṇa. This may also be considered as a popular derivation, judging from the literary standard of the Shv.