

RECENT DISCOVERIES OF BUDDHIST MANUSCRIPTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Parallel to the tragic and most distressing news of intense human suffering and destruction of Buddhist art treasures which has been reaching the outside world from Afghanistan for too many years, there has been the welcome trickle of information on surprising discoveries of fragments of Buddhist manuscripts of remarkable antiquity. The suggested dates for some of these manuscripts would imply that they are among the oldest Buddhist manuscripts known to the community of scholars today. The discoveries have aroused wide interest and excitement among students of Buddhism. This communication, intended to draw the attention of Sri Lankan students of early Buddhism to these discoveries, is based on recent publications on the collections, especially those of Professor Richard Salomon, a scholar closely involved in the study of these finds.

Perhaps the largest and the most impressive group of manuscripts is the Schøyen Collection, a private collection in Norway. It is reported that about 5000 "sizable fragments" and about 8000 "micro fragments" are to be found in this collection (Braarvig 2000:xiv). These manuscripts are said to have been found in the Bamiyan caves by Afghan refugees fleeing from the Taliban forces. Evidently, the manuscripts had been damaged in ancient times and again during the recent fighting near Bamiyan (Braarvig 2000:xiii).

Deserving close comparison with the manuscripts of the Schøyen Collection are three collections from Britain, the British Library Scrolls and two private collections known as the Senior Scrolls and the Dr D.N. Khalili Collection. Though there has been no official or formal indication of the provenance of these finds, it has been suggested that the British Library Scrolls and the Senior Scrolls had been found near Hadda in Afghanistan (Salomon 2002b). While the manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection have been on palm-leaves and leather, those in the British Library and Senior Collections are on tree bark and have been described as "birch

bark scrolls.” There are 29 fragments in the British Library scrolls among which have been identified fragments of *sūtra*, *avadāna*, *abhidharma* and commentarial literature as well as poetry. The Senior Scrolls, consisting of 24 fragments, are predominantly a collection of *sūtras* (Salomon 2002b). The Hirayama Collection in Kamakura, Japan, is another relevant collection of manuscripts in which a Brāhmī fragment is found, evidently from the same source as the Schøyen Collection (Salomon 2002a:266).

It is in respect of the Schøyen Collection that the most impressive progress has been made in the decipherment and translation of manuscripts. Two volumes have been already published (Braarvig 2000, 2002). The material carried in the first volume is given below and the names of the scholars responsible for decipherment and translation work are indicated within brackets. The volume includes contributions on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (Lore Sander) and the *Caṃgī Sūtra* (Torkel Brekke). The editors have grouped together four assemblages of fragments as forming what they term a Mahāyāna Sūtra manuscript. These are i. *Śrīmâlâdevîsîmhanâda-nirdeśa* (Kazunobu Matsuda), ii.a Mahāyāna version of the *Pravâraṇâ Sūtra* (Kazunobu Matsuda) iii. *Sarvadharmâpravṛtti-nirdeśa* (Jens Braarvig) and iv. the *Ajâtaśatru-kaukṛtyavinodanâ Sūtra* (Paul Harrison and Jens-Uwe Hartmann). Among the other material included in the volume are fragments of the Asoka legend (Klaus Wille), the *Prâtimokṣa-Vibhanga* of the Mahāsānghika-Lokottaravâdins (Seishi Karashima), a *Gândhârî* version of the *Mahâparinirvâṇasūtra* (Mark Allon and Richard Salomon) and a Bactrian Buddhist manuscript (Nicholas Sims-Williams). The last-mentioned manuscript, which is written in the Graeco-Bactrian script, is most significant. It is on two leather fragments and the text is on both sides of the fragments. The terms Buddha Śākyamuni and Lokeśvararâja have been recognized in the text. It has been reported that there is another such Bactrian Buddhist manuscript in the Dr D.N. Khalili Collection in London (Sims-Williams 1997).

In the second volume on the Schøyen Collection (Braarvig 2002) are 19 contributions presented under four main sections: i. Sūtra ii. Vinaya iii. Abhidharma and Miscellaneous. The Sūtra section is further subdivided into two as *Āgama* and Mahāyāna. Five of these papers deal with additional passages on texts already published in the first volume. Among these are more fragments of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (Lore Sander), the *Caṃgī Sūtra* (Jens-Uwe Hartman), the *Mahâparinirvâṇa Sūtra* (Klaus Wille), the *Ajâtaśatru-kaukṛtyavinodanâ Sūtra* (Paul Harrison and Jens-Uwe Hartman), and the *Prâtimokṣa-Vibhanga* of the Mahāsānghika-Lokottaravâdins (Seishi Karashima).

Of the fourteen other contributions in the second volume, one deals with three texts of the Āgama category: the Andha Sūtra, the Sūtra on the Three Moral Defects of Devadatta and the Kavikumāravadāna (Siglinde Dietz). This paper and the two previously mentioned papers on the Camgīsūtra and the Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra complete the section on the Āgama sub-category. Apart from the papers on the Aṣṭasāhaśrikā and the Ajātaśatru-kaukṛtyavinodanā Sūtra mentioned above, there are four contributions in the section on Mahāyāna Sūtras: the Candottarādārika-vyākaraṇa (Jens Braarvig and Paul Harrison), the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (Hiroyuki Toda), the Samādhirāja Sūtra (Andrew Skilton) and the larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra (Paul Harrison, Jens-Uwe Hartmann and Kazunobu Matsuda). In the Vinaya section there are two papers, the one on the Prātimokṣa-Vibhaṅga mentioned above, and another on the Karmavācanā collection (Jin-il Chung). The single paper in the section on the Abhidharma section relates to the Śāriputra-Abhidharma (Kazunobu Matsuda). Of the seven contributions grouped under the heading “Miscellaneous,” four focus on an early commentary (Lambert Schmithausen, Jens Braarvig and Lore Sander), an anthology of Buddhist legends (Richard Salomon), a text on the relationship between Word and Object (Eli Franco) and the text of the Jyotiṣkāvadāna (Stefan Baums). The next paper deals with poetical texts with Jens-Uwe Hartmann focusing on Mātṛceta’s Buddhastotras and Āryasūtra’s Jātakamālā and Michael Hahn presenting the readings of the text of Haribhaṭṭa’s Jātakamālā. The last two papers in the volume deal with what is termed “an unusual *ye dharmā* formula (Lore Sander) and a brush-painted inscription on a clay pot found together with the manuscript fragments (Richard Salomon).

The material from the two volumes help to focus attention on the richness and variety of the manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection and would be of enormous interest to students of the early history Buddhism. Most of these fragments, it may be noted, are in the Kharosthī and Brāhmī scripts and the form of Prākṛit used in these writings has been described as Gāndhārī by the scholars working on them. On the other hand, some texts have been described as “Gāndhārī Hybrid Sanskrit.” The texts would be of interest also to students of both the history of language and palaeography. Some of the fragments in the collection have been dated in the 2nd-3rd centuries A.D. while some others could be as late as about the eighth century (Braarvig 2000, Salomon 2002b). Sander has dated the Aṣṭasāhaśrikā manuscript specifically in the Kuṣāṇa period and Salomon has noted a reference in the anthology of Buddhist legends to Huiṣka being a follower of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Of particular interest are the manuscripts in the Graeco-Bactrian script. The interest that Asoka had in propagating his *dhamma* widely among the Greek-speakers to the west of his kingdom is evident from his thirteenth rock edict, but it is not possible to be certain that Asoka's reference was to Buddhism. However, traditions relating to the expansion of Buddhism among the Bactrian Greeks and the roles played by monks and laymen of Greek descent in this process has been preserved in the *Milindapañha* and the Sri Lankan chronicles. When placed against this background, the Graeco-Bactrian manuscripts acquire an exceptional significance as actual examples of Buddhist records from the Greek-speaking peoples.

Comparable with the dates assigned to the Schøyen fragments are the dates associated with the finds in the other collections mentioned above. A date "probably in the 1st century A.D." has been suggested to the British Library Scrolls and a date "probably in the 2nd century A.D." has been suggested for the Senior Scrolls. It is noteworthy that the Senior Scrolls were found in a jar with an inscription dated in the "12th year," and it has been suggested that this was Kaniṣka's regnal year. A "birch bark" scroll recently acquired by the University of Washington, Seattle, has been identified as probably belonging to the first or the second century A.D. (Salomon 2002b).

It is striking that some of the manuscript fragments found in Central Asia have also been dated within broadly similar chronological contexts. The "birch bark scroll" of the *Gāndhārī Dharmapada*, discovered near Khotan in 1893 and published by Professor John Brough (1962), has been identified as a manuscript datable probably to the 1st century A.D. The dating of the Bibliothèque Nationale fragments has been problematic, but it has been suggested that they may be from the 2nd - 3rd centuries A.D. (Salomon 2002b).

The chronological data collated above points to the significance of the first three centuries of the Christian era in the efflorescence of Buddhist activities in the northwestern parts of the South Asian subcontinent. Its effects were evident in Central Asia and, of course, in the great eastward expansion of Buddhism into China. There are noteworthy hints in the recently discovered manuscripts confirming the impression that the patronage received from the Kuṣāna rulers was an important factor in the upsurge of Buddhist activity during this period. This was somewhat later than the phase of dominant political activity on the part of the Indo-Greeks, but it is clear that the influence of Buddhism still persisted among them. The manuscripts also carry indications that, among the Śaka rulers, such feudatories

and army-leaders as Jihonika and Āspavarman were friendly toward Buddhism (Salomon 1999). While the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism was one of the significant aspects of the cultural history of this period, the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādins appear to have played an active role.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the collections of fragments of manuscripts discussed above represent the oldest datable assemblages of Buddhist writings known to the international community of scholars engaged in the study of Buddhism. A host of scholars from Europe, America and Asia have laboured to produce valuable readings and interpretations which will attract the attention of the entire community of students of Buddhism for many years to come. The present writer was somewhat surprised to find that no South Asians figure among collaborators in these projects. However, at a time when the study of Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī regrettably appears to have passed its best times in South Asia, it is most heartening to find an awakening of interest elsewhere in the world accompanied by the rise of new centres of study in this field. It is evident that the University of Washington is one such emerging centre where, under the leadership of Professor Richard Salomon who has worked on the Schøyen, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale collections, a band of scholars is earnestly getting down to the study of these manuscripts, especially the Kharoṣṭhī scroll which their University acquired recently. We look forward with profound interest and expectations to the publications emerging as the result of the endeavours of all these scholars.

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