

An Epigraphical Buddhist Poem from Phanigiri (Andhrapradesh) from the Time of Rudrapuruṣadatta.

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The site of Phanigiri has been excavated systematically by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Andhra Pradesh, since 2001/2¹ (I). Recently, P. Skilling introduced the site by giving a survey of excavations and findings at the time of his visit in March, 2005, in an article which appeared in *Arts Asiatiques*². Among the archaeological discoveries is an inscription in ten lines on an octagonal pillar, which not only preserves a new date of King Rudrapuruṣadatta of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, but also contains a nice little piece of Buddhist poetry³. At the time of Skilling's visit the inscribed pillar was kept in the storage centre in the village (fig. 1).

A first attempt to read the inscription was made by K. Munirathnam, who seriously misread a few *akṣaras* and, consequently, could not arrive at a correct understanding of the contents⁴. His summary shows that he failed to understand the imagery, assuming, for example, that “the king ... is compared to god Viṣṇu”, when the whole point of the poem is to praise the Buddha's superiority over Viṣṇu. It is unnecessary to discuss the errors in further detail.

The text of the inscription can be established without much difficulty (fig. 2-6):

/1/ siddham || saṃvatsaram 10 6 hemaṃtapakṣam 3 divasam 3

prakkhyātadīptaya/2/śaso rājñ(o) śrī ruddrapuruṣadattasya
aggrabhiṣajā kṛto (')yam sa/3/mucchrayo dharmmacakkrasya (1)

¹ Reports on the ongoing excavations were published in *Indian Archaeology: A Review 2001/2*, p. 99; 2002/3 [2009], p. 15 foll.

² P. Skilling: New discoveries from South India: the life of the Buddha at Phanigiri, Andhra Pradesh. *Arts Asiatiques* 63. 2008, p. 96-118.

³ This inscription is mentioned by P. Skilling, p. 99 with Fig. 5.

⁴ K. Munirathnam: Rudrapurīśadatta Inscription from Phanigiri. *Studies in Indian Epigraphy. (Bhāratīya Purā-bhilekha Patrikā) Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*. 32. 2005, p. 78-81.

darppaddhvajo yo makaraddhvajasya
na pātito /4/ govṛṣabhaddhvajena
taṃ pāditaṃ śakkyakuleddhva(j)ena
imena cakkrena sa /5/ dharmmajena (2)
mahātmanā kaṃsanisūdanena
na sūdito yo madhusūdanena /6/
sa sūdito rāganisūdanena
doṣāsuro cakkravaren(‘) imena (3)
māyāśarīrā/7/raṇisaṃbhavena
tenottamadyānaguṇendhanena
jñāṇārcciṣā kleśamahāvanāni
/8/ dagdh[ā]ni cakkrena imena tena (4)
taṃdharisaṃ cakkaṃ mahāsenapatisa ramanam/9/dinokasa deyadhammaṃ apaṇo
nivāṇasambharathatāyā thāpitaṃ bhadanta (be)/10/masenena aṃnuthitaṃ x x .i x x
(sa) x x x x mānuso loko iti

Translation

“Success! Year 16, third half month of the winter, third day (ca. 18th December 306 or 316 AD).

(1) The raising of a wheel of the law was made by the chief physician of King Śrī Rudrapuruṣadatta of well-known brilliant fame.

(2) The banner which is pride of the one whose banner is a crocodile (Kāma), which was not brought down by the one whose banner is a bull (Śiva), that was brought down by the banner in the Śākya family by (the help of) this wheel originating from the law.

(3) The *asura* Hate, who was not destroyed by the exalted one (Kṛṣṇa), who destroyed Kaṃsa, who destroyed Madhu, he was destroyed by the one who destroyed passion by means of this excellent wheel of law.

(4) The great forests of defilement were burnt by means of this wheel by the spark which is insight, (the spark) that arose from the kindling wood which is his magic (illusory?) body, by this fire wood which is virtue, the deepest meditation.

The wheel which accompanies [the pillar] is the donation of the great general Ramanandinoka, set up for the sake of his own prerequisites for *nirvaṇa*, supported by the venerable Dhemasena (Bemasena?) ... the world of men.”

At the end about ten *akṣaras* are lost; at present it is therefore impossible to connect this part of the text to the preceding sentence. A parallel text, however, if found, help to fill the gap.

Remarks

Palaeographically, the two different shapes of the figure “three” used in the date are remarkable. There is no system in the use of the characters *-na-* and *-ṇa-*.

The language of the first part of the inscription, that is date and verses, is in Sanskrit while the second part is given in Prakrit. A prose introduction gives the date in regnal years. Then follows the primary text consisting of four verses, the first in *āryā-*metre, the next two in *upajāti*, and the last in *indravajra* metre.

The Sanskrit is mostly correct with even a learned word-formation such as *kule-dhvaja* being used⁵. There is, however, also one error. The word *pāditam* (verse 2c) instead of *pātitaṃ* is a mistake perhaps due to the fact that the engraver most likely was native speaker of a Dravidian language⁶.

The beginning of the inscription provides a new date for the Ikṣvāku King Rudrapuruṣadatta, the last of the four kings of this dynasty, which is known from inscriptions to have ruled on the eastern coast of South India for roughly a century between 225 and 325. King Rudrapuruṣadatta was known previously from two inscriptions found at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and commemorating the death of his mother (year 11, 1st *pakṣa* of the rainy season, 8th day, ca. 23rd July 301 or 311 AD) and at Gurzāla respectively (year 4, 8th *pakṣa* of the summer, 10th day, ca. 25th May 294 or 304), both in Prakrit. The Phanigiri inscription shows that his rule was longer than the fifteen years hitherto attributed to Rudrapuruṣadatta, when he was dated to approximately between 290/300 and 315/325. Consequently, the Phanigiri inscription is also of some historical importance, because it confirms the “longer chronology” of the Ikṣvāku rulers⁷.

Due to the metre, the comparatively simple title *rājā śrī* is used instead of *mahāra(!)jasa sirī Ruḷupurisadatasa* or *raño Vāsiṭhīputt(!)asa Ikhākūnaṃ sirī Ruḍapurisadatasa* in the Gurzāla and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa inscriptions respectively.

⁵ On compounds with a case ending in the first member cf. J. Wackernagel, *Altindische Grammatik*. II, 1. Göttingen 1905, § 109 ad and Pāṇini 2.2.24. A corresponding compound *kaṇṭhe-guṇa* is used in a kāvya like Buddhist text from Central Asia, cf. O. v. Hinüber, *IIIJ* 48. 2005, pp. 303 = *Kleine Schriften* 2009, p. 975.

⁶ In the inscriptions from Kanaganahalli *sugha* is regularly substituted for *sukha*.

⁷ For the dates cf. E. Rosen Stone: *The Buddhist Art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa*. Delhi 1994, p. 4-9, particularly p. 6, and H. Falk: The Pāṭaṇḍigūḍem copper-plate grant of the Ikṣvāku King Ehaḥala Cāntamūla. *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 6. 1999/2000, p. 275-283, particularly p. 280. — An earlier, less likely chronology proposed by D. C. Sircar long ago is repeated without reference to the results reached at by E. Rosen Stone, who refuted Sircar’s dating with good arguments, in I. K. Sarma (ed.): *Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh* Vol. II: Early Historic Andhra Pradesh 500 BC - 624 AD. Delhi 2008, p. 36. — The Nāgārjunakoṇḍa inscription is published in *EI* 34. 1960/61, p. 20-22, cf. also O. v. Hinüber: Cremated like a king: The funeral of the Buddha within the ancient Indian cultural context. *Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies* 13. 2009, pp. 33-66, particularly p. 43, where the outdated earlier Ikṣvāku chronology is used erroneously; for the Gurzāla inscription cf. *EI* 26. 1941/42, p. 123-125.

The donation consists of two parts. First, the chief physician sponsored the raising (*samucchraya*) of the *dharmacakra*. As the term *samucchraya* (Pali *samussaya*) most commonly means “body” in Buddhist usage, one might be tempted to translate “the body of a wheel of the law” and consider the wheel itself as the head. However, one is also reminded of the famous Udānavarga verse, *patanāntāḥ samucchrayāḥ*, Uv I, 22 “All that is raised up ends by falling down”, especially with the occurrence of *pātito* and *pātitaṃ* in the verse that follows. Moreover, the poet, who composed these verses, may well have used this word with its common meaning in Sanskrit. The term *agrabhiṣaj* seems to be of singular occurrence. Consequently, it is impossible to decide, whether it means simply “best physician” or, alternatively, points to a medical hierarchy of royal physicians⁸. Strangely enough, the physician does not mention his name. This, however, is perhaps again due to the metre.

The first two verses praise the superiority of the Buddha over two of the major Hindu gods, first over Śiva and then over Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. This may well be an echo of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhists and Hindus, which is mirrored in Hindu texts as described by G. Verardi⁹.

Although the content of the fourth verse is not too difficult to understand, there are some problems in detail. The syntax of this verse with the slightly clumsy *tena ... imena tena* points to two agents “by the wheel, by the Buddha.” At the same time this seems to preclude referring the pronoun *imena* and the respective compounds to the wheel in verses 2 and 3 as well.

The unusual term *māyāśarīra* seems to be unattested elsewhere. Does it allude to the insubstantial and illusory nature of the body, as in the Dhammapada verse *phenūpamaṃ kāyaṃ imaṃ viditvā / marīcidhammaṃ abhisambudhāno ...*, Dhṛp 46? In this way it would refer to the Buddha’s mortal or physical body (*rūpakāya*). Or can it be a synonym for the *nirmāṇakāya*, the magically created body? In this case, the inscription provides a datable reference for this docetic Buddhist concept in Andhrapradesh in 306 or 316 AD.

Equally uncertain is the exact translation *dhyānagūṇa*, if any specific meaning beyond “virtue, which is the deepest meditation” should be hinted at. It is of course also possible to understand “deepest meditation and virtues.” Given the structure of the comparison, it is perhaps not too far fetched to suspect that this compound might have been formed

⁸ A *rājaveja* “physician of the king” is mentioned in H. Lüders: *A List of Brāhmī Inscriptions from the Earliest Times to about AD 400 with the Exception of those of Asoka*. Appendix to *EI* 10.1909/10. Calcutta 1912 [reprints Calcutta 1959, Delhi 1973], no. 1192.

⁹ Giovanni Verardi: *Images of Destruction. An Enquiry into Hindu Icons and Their Relation to Buddhism*, in: *Buddhist Asia 1. Papers of the First Conference of Buddhist Studies Held at Naples in May 2001*. Kyoto 2003 (rev.: M. Lehnert, *EAs/ASr* 58. 2004, pp. 1145 foll.), p. 1-36, 20 figures. Similarly, the destructive person who split the *saṃgha* as the founder of the *Mahāsāṃghikas* is called polemically *Mahādeva* by his adversaries, who purposefully use a name of Śiva, according to an apt observation by J. Silk: *Riven by Lust. Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography*. Honolulu 2009, p. 60-62.

with a Middle Indic play of words in mind, because the word corresponding to dhyāna, e.g. Pāli, *jhāna*, is derived from the verb *jhāyati* mostly meaning “to meditate”, but, less frequently, also “to burn”.

The general Ramanandinoka donated the *cakra* to be raised and put on a pillar erected by the physician. The general clearly states his goal: *apaṇo nivāṇasambharathatāya*, which corresponds to Sanskrit *ātmano nirvāṇasambhārathatāyai*. This slightly unusual and complicated expression for a simple purpose is not without parallel. Recently, H. Falk published a Kharoṣṭhī inscription dated to the Azes year 121¹⁰, in which the goal of the donor is stated in similar terms as: *apaṇasa hidasuhadaye nivaṇasabharadae metreasa mosañadae (ātmano hitasukhatāyai nirvāṇasambhāratāyai maitreyasya mokṣaṇatāyai)* “for my own state of welfare and happiness, for the state of being prepared for the *nirvāṇa*, for the state of liberation by Maitreya¹¹.”

A monk, the venerable Dhemasena (or less probably, Bemasena) seems to have assisted (*anuthitaṃ*) the erection of pillar and wheel, although the exact meaning and the syntactic connection of the word *aṃnuthitaṃ* immediately before the gap is difficult to determine. Following a practice usual when making donations, he should have been a monk, which is indicated by his title *bhadanta*, who assisted the lay donor the general Ramanandinoka.

The context of the last words “world of men” remains unclear. Shadows of characters in front of these two words would point to an expected text pronouncing some sort of blessing and using words such as *hita* and *sukha*, perhaps even *sugha* (see note 6 above).

The inscription ends in *iti*, which is rare, but not without parallel¹².

This is the first inscription to use the Sanskrit name Rudrapuruṣadatta instead of the Prakrit forms found in the Nāgārjunikoṇḍa and Gurzāla inscriptions as mentioned above. The name of the second donor, Ramanandinokasa, and that of his *kalyāṇamitra* Dhemasena defy interpretation¹³.

Only the column bearing this inscription seems to survive, but further excavations might also bring the *cakra* to light. The complete donation should have looked like one of the

¹⁰ H. Falk: Signature phrases, Azes dates, Nakṣatras and Some New Reliquary Inscriptions from Gandhāra. *ARIRIAB* 13. 2010, p. 13-33, particularly p. 18.

¹¹ In contrast to the interpretation suggested by H. Falk “for the state of Maitreya’s liberation.”

¹² E.g., both, the inscription from Hatūn and the one from Danyor (before a final note added by the scribe) end in *iti*, cf. O. v. Hinüber: *Die Palola Śāhis. Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzzauber*. Antiquities of Northern Pakistan. Reports and Studies 5. Mainz 2004, nos. 22 and 23.

¹³ Cf., however, the similar name in the inscription no. 6:1: *śrī dh(e)masena* from Basha to be published in *Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans XI* (under preparation). In the Basha inscription, neither a reading Vemasena nor Bemasena can be excluded.

many columns with *cakras* on top, as shown in reliefs at Phanigiri itself (fig. 7) or at Kanaganahalli in Karnataka (fig. 8).