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# THE BUDDHACARITA

*Or*

ACTS OF THE BUDDHA

PART II :

Cantos i to xiv translated from the original Sanskrit  
supplemented by the Tibetan version

TOGETHER WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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## INTRODUCTION

### AŚVAGHOṢA

#### i. LIFE AND WORKS

One phenomenon recurs again and again in the history of Sanskrit literature, namely that we know nothing certain of the lives of its greatest figures beyond what they themselves choose to tell us and what is stated in the colophons of their works. Aśvaghōṣa is no exception to the rule. While he is silent about himself, the colophons of the three works which we know to be his agree in describing him as Sāketaka, a native of Sāketa, and as the son of Suvarṇākṣī.<sup>1</sup> Before discussing the bearing of these facts, it is best to determine his date with such accuracy as is possible. The lower limit given by the Chinese translation of the *Buddhacarita* made early in the fifth century A.D. can be set back by three hundred years; for Professor Lüders holds that the handwriting of the MS. fragments which contain all that is left to us of the *Śāriputra-prakaraṇa* must belong to the times of the Kushan kings, probably to the reign of Kaniṣka or Huviṣka.<sup>2</sup> Dating by palæography does not always give as assured results as is sometimes supposed, but the margin of error in the present case cannot be large; for the MS. was corrected by a Central Asian hand, which equally on palæographical grounds may be as early as the end of the Kushan era,<sup>3</sup> and it shows signs of having been long in use before the overwriting took place, so that to impugn the first date means impugning the second

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<sup>1</sup> The *Śāriputraprakaraṇa* (SBPAW, 1911, 392) has *Suvarṇākṣīputra*, shortening the *i* under *Pān.*, vi. 3, 63; the name can only be that of his mother, i.e. Suvarṇākṣī.

<sup>2</sup> H. Lüders, *Bruchstücke buddhistischer Dramen* (Berlin, 1911), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Lüders, *op. cit.*, 15.

one also and it is hardly probable that both should be misleading.

Two other points afford some indication, though of lesser probative value, that the reign of Kaniṣka should be taken as the lower limit. At *B.*, xii. 115, Aśvaghōṣa writes :—

*Vyavasāyadvitīyo 'tha . . . so 'śvatthamūlam prayaṃau.*

Now the commentary on the *Nāmasaṃgīti*<sup>1</sup> has preserved a line of Mātṛceṭa running :—

*Vyavasāyadvitīyena prāptam padam anuttaram.*

The connexion between the two is obvious, and the expression, *vyavasāyadvitīya*, is apt in Aśvaghōṣa, because the Buddha has just been deserted by the five bhikṣus and has nothing but his resolution to accompany him on the march to the *bodhi* tree; but Mātṛceṭa's version spoils the point, because a Buddha can have no companions in the process of obtaining Enlightenment. This view is enforced by *B.*, xiv. 99, where Indra and Brahmā more appropriately find the Buddha with the *dharma* he had seen as his best companion. Is it not clear then that Mātṛceṭa has borrowed a phrase from Aśvaghōṣa and turned it into a cliché? That the former is somewhat later in date seems to follow also from the style of the *Śatapañcāśatka*<sup>2</sup>; thus note the fanciful verbs, *jaladāya*, *Vainateyāya*, *madhyamdināya*, *Śakrāyudhāya*, of verses 74 and 75, which suggest some advance on Aśvaghōṣa in verbal tricks. He is moreover the author of an epistle to Kaniṣka, and if we accept the latter's name as authentic, it would follow that Mātṛceṭa lived in his reign and Aśvaghōṣa before it. I would not press this piece of evidence, but, so far as it goes, it suggests that Lüders' dating of the MS. of the dramas is at any rate not at odds with the probabilities.

Our other evidence derives from Chinese tradition, which

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<sup>1</sup> *AK.*, VI, 144, *ad* ch. ii, 205, n. 2, the line is partially preserved in verse no. 26 in Hoernle, *Manuscript Remains*, I, 61, the first line running :—*Iti tribhir asamkhyeyair evam udyacchatā tvaṃyā.*

<sup>2</sup> *JRAS.*, 1911, 764-769.

associates Aśvaghōṣa both with Kaniṣka and with the composition of the *Vibhāṣā*, the great Sarvāstivādin commentary on the Abhidharma, said to be the outcome of a general council held in the reign of the Kushan king<sup>1</sup>. For a later Buddhist writer such information would be of value, seeing that the Chinese with their more practical minds are intensely interested in the collection of historical and personal detail, and that the regular intercourse of pilgrims and monks between India and China provided sufficient opportunity for obtaining contemporary information. But in this case the traditions are far from contemporary and cannot at present be traced further back than the end of the fourth century A.D.; they are at hopeless variance among themselves regarding the poet's actual date and present him as a figure of romance, not as a sober historical personage. In considering the association with Kaniṣka we must allow for the tendency to couple the names of great writers with great kings. One Indian scholar, it is true, has seen in the mention of Ātreya at *B.*, i. 43, a reference and compliment to Caraka, the legendary physician of Kaniṣka; but little weight attaches to so problematic a suggestion. Moreover the internal evidence of the extant works makes it somewhat doubtful whether they could have been written in the Kushan kingdom. For while Brahmanical literature represents that dynasty as hostile to the Brahmans<sup>2</sup>, Aśvaghōṣa writes for a circle in which Brahmanical learning and ideas are supreme; his references to Brahmans personally and to their institutions are always worded with the greatest respect, and his many mythological parallels are all drawn

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese traditions have been discussed in a series of important papers by S. Lévi in the *JA* spread over many years, of which the chief are 1896, ii, 444 : 1908, ii, 57 : and 1928, ii, 193. References to incidental mentions by other scholars will be found in these papers. For a list of the Chinese authorities on the Aśvaghōṣa legend see *JA*, 1908, ii, 65, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> For this see K. P. Jayaswal in *JBORS*, 1933, 41ff., though he does not allow sufficiently for Brahman bias in his appreciation of the passages, the evidence is too strong to be discounted altogether.

from Brahmanical sources<sup>1</sup>. Further we know nothing with certainty about the date of the *Vibhāṣā*, even if we could say that it was all composed at one time; and the story of the council in Kaniṣka's reign at which it was drawn up is open to the grave suspicion of having been invented to secure authority for Sarvāstivādin views. Nor, as I shall show in the next section, does the poet appear to know the doctrines of the great commentary. In valuing this evidence we shall do well to bear in mind Professor Demiéville's verdict that Chinese tradition, for all the mass of documents on which it rests, hardly affords, at least for the early period, more positive historical information than Indian tradition with its complete absence (*carance*) of documents<sup>2</sup>. All we are entitled to say is that these traditions prove Aśvaghōṣa to have lived long before the time at which they first appear in the fourth century A.D.; the forms the legends took may have been determined by the popularity of the plays in the Kushan kingdom, as shown by the dilapidated state of the MS.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence then leads to the conclusion that the poet lived not later than the time of Kaniṣka and may have preceded him, and is thus consonant with what, as I show later, we know of his relation to classical Sanskrit literature. His style proves him to have lived several centuries before Kālidāsa, he is imitated by Bhāsa, and his vocabulary suggests a date not far removed from that of the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya: The problem would have been much more complicated if the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*<sup>4</sup> were really by Aśvaghōṣa, since it is posterior

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<sup>1</sup> The only exceptions are the two verses, *S.*, xi. 56-57, which would be suspicious on that score alone, but their clumsy style and the impossibility of fitting them logically into the argument of the canto are decisive against their genuineness

<sup>2</sup> *Bulletin de la Maison franco-japonaise*, II, p. 76 of offset.

<sup>3</sup> And by confusion with the personality of Mātreceta, if he really lived under Kaniska ?

<sup>4</sup> H. Luders, *Bruchstücke der Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā des Kumāralāta*, Leipzig, 1926.

to Kaniṣka and alludes also to the *Vaiṣeṣikusūtras*, a system unknown to the genuine extant works. But as I reject the attribution to him of this collection of tales, I need not try to reconcile the irreconcilable. The further question remains of the date of Kaniṣka, and if agreement is not yet reached on this thorny point, the limits of variation are no longer large, most scholars accepting a date in the last quarter of the first century A.D. and none placing him later than the second quarter of the second century.

As the poet may have been earlier, though not much earlier, than Kaniṣka, it should be noted that the upper limit for his date is determined by the mention of the Aśoka legend in the final canto of the *Buddhacarita*, a passage not discussed by Professor Przyluski in his well-known book on the subject. According to that scholar the *Aśokāvadāna*, some early form of which was evidently known to Aśvaghōṣa, took shape between 150 and 100 B.C.<sup>1</sup> Allowing a certain period for it to obtain recognition, we might set the upper limit at approximately 50 B.C., and can therefore not be much in error if we say that the poet flourished between 50 B.C. and 100 A.D., with a preference for the first half of the first century A.D.

Turning back now to the colophons we can obtain a few hints of value. As belonging to Sāketa, Aśvaghōṣa is an Easterner, and his origin has left its traces in his work. While the absence of relevant texts prevents us from ascertaining if the divergencies of his grammar from the Paninean system are to be accounted for by his having studied one of the *prācya* treatises, the sect of Buddhism, to which he seems to have belonged according to the views set out in the next section, was the one most prevalent in Eastern India at this period, and the lasting impression which the historical associations of Sāketa made on him is apparent both in the influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* displayed by his works and also in the emphasis which he lays from the very start of both poems on the descent

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<sup>1</sup> *La légende de l'Empereur Açoka*, 166.