

Poona Oriental Series No 39

JHĀ COMMEMORATION VOLUME

ESSAYS ON ORIENTAL SUBJECTS

PRESENTED TO
VIDYĀSĀGARA

MAHĀMAHOPĀDHYĀYA
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ON HIS COMPLETING THE 60TH YEAR ON 25TH SEPTEMBER 1932

BY
HIS PUPILS, FRIENDS AND ADMIRERS /

POONA
ORIENTAL BOOK AGENCY
1937

AN IRANIAN PRINCE OF THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY AS THE FIRST PROMUL- GATOR OF BUDDHISM IN CHINA

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Dr. Leo Wieger has recently published an excellent History of the Religious Beliefs of China in French and Mr E C Werner has given us a good translation of it ¹ He has written it in the form of Lessons at the request of the Catholic Institute of Paris The History is divided in four periods of which the third period treats of "Buddhism and Taoism," from the year 65 to the year 1000 A C. During this period, in the second century after Christ, it was a Parthian prince, An-shihkao, who is said to have produced, for the first time, translations into Chinese of some Buddhist texts, and thus, to have been the first promulgator of Buddhism The object of this paper is to determine who this Persian prince was and to give an account of what may have led him to Buddhism.

China was known to the Early Persians even of the Avesta times ² The relations between the two countries of those times may be taken as pre-historical The first historical relations are said to have begun in 140 B C when "under the Han dynasty missions were

Early Relations
between China and
Persia

¹ "A History of the Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Opinions in China from the beginning to the present time" by Dr Leo Wieger, S J (1917) Translated by Edward Chalmers Werner (1927)

² Vide my paper "References to China in the Ancient Books of the Parsees," read at the International Congress held at Hanoi

despatched in every direction, and more than one of these penetrated as far as Parthia, which is termed An-Sih—the Chinese form of Arsaces as Kingsmill first pointed out. The Chinese description of Parthia is to the effect that rice, wheat, and the vine were cultivated, that the cities were walled and that it was a very great country.”³ Reference, moreover, is made to the use of silver coins bearing the effigy of the reigning monarch.

As said by Rev Wigram, “The Chinese knew the Parthians, as men who coined silver money with the head of their King Al-Sak (Arsaces) upon it. They had mastered the art of writing, and so were not without some tincture of the civilization that is lawfully only the heritage of the Celestial Kingdom.”⁴ Again “The Parthians were received as allies by the Chinese Emperor in the East.”⁵

Buddha, according to Dr Rhys Davids, lived in the 5th Century B C and died, at the age of about 80 in 400 B C or a few years later.⁶ The first

The very first
Pioneers of
Buddhism in China

pioneers of Buddhism in China were two monks Emperor Ming of the second Han dynasty, having heard of the spread of Buddhism at Khotan and in its neighbourhood at the doors of China, wished to know something more of the religion and sent for some monks to explain the religion. Two went to China and were welcomed by the King who

(French China) in December 1902. *Vide* “Compte Rendus, Analytique des Séances, Premier Congrès International des Études D’Extreme-Orient Hanoi (1902),” pp 76-77. *Vide* my “Asiatic Papers,” Part I, pp 241 *et seq*.

³ Lieut Col P M Sykes’s History of Persia (1915), Vol I, p 265

⁴ “The Assyrians and their Neighbours” by Revd Wigram. pp 17-18

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 17

⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 9th Edition, Vol IV.

caused to be built for them, in 67 A C , “ at the capital Lo-yang (now Honan Fu) the convent of the White Horse ”⁷ Both the Indian monks were of the Brahman caste Both these monks died in China,—one Moteng or Matang at the end of 67 A C , and the other Fa-lai (the Indian name, perhaps may be Dharma-aranya) about 70 A C “ There remains to us, from these two men, a single pamphlet, and four titles of lost works They did not translate Indian treatises in their entirety, but set forth briefly the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism. And that, for obvious reasons First, that was all that the emperor desired He had caused them to come, not in order to make a thorough study of Buddhism, but to learn approximately what it was about It is clear also that they were unable to acquire a very extensive knowledge of the Chinese language, during the short time they lived in China ”⁸ They, therefore, contented themselves by making a few summaries of (a) the account of the life of Buddha, (b) of the principles of Buddhism, (c) of a discourse of Buddha and (d) of the rules of ascetic life. These monks did no propaganda work All the above summaries are said to have been lost Only “ a short exposition of Buddhist principles called ‘ *the Sūtra in 42 articles* ’ has remained ”

Then, for more than 70 years, no body went to China Then “ finally, in 148 (A C), there arrived at the Chinese Court a man, whose personality and work are of great interest ”⁹ This man was a Parthian prince, “ an authentic Arsacide, who yielded the throne to his uncle, the younger brother of his father, became a Buddhist monk,

An Iranian Prince, the first promulgator of Buddhism

⁷ Dr Wiegner's History, *op cit* , p 343

⁸ *Ibid* , p 343

⁹ *Ibid* , p 351

for a long time led a wandering life, arrived at Lo-yang in 148, settled there and died there in 170. Some beings to whom he had done injury, pursued him, he said; and he predicted that he would die a violent death. In fact, one day, when he was interposing to stop a fight, a projectile thrown by chance struck his head, and killed him. He bore in China the name An-shihkao¹⁰ "An" in the name is a contraction of Arsace. The name means "he who had been great in the world."

Revd Dr Wieger says that this Parthian Prince An-shihkao was Parthamasiris or Psarmatossorim, the son of the Parthian King Pacorus II. He had not come to the throne of his father, but had become the king of Armenia. He had, under certain circumstances, to give up the throne of Armenia. This young prince, having met with misfortunes, seems to have renounced the world and become a monk. He came to India and thence went to China. The story of his life, as briefly described by Dr Wieger, runs thus —

"Pacorus II ascended the royal throne of the Parthians in A D 90. In 97, he had as successor, not his son, but his younger brother, whose name has been variously written by the authors, Osroes, Osdroes, Cosdroes, Chosroes (not to be confused with the Sassanide king of that name), and finally Corroes. This Corroes had as successor, in 134, his son Vologes II. Pacorus II had been the friend and ally of Decebalus, the famous king of the Dacians. He had an only son, Theodosius. Minor says expressly. The name of this son was Parthamasiris according to Pausanias, Xiphilinus, Theodosius Minor, Capitolinus, S Rufus; Psarmatossorim, according to Aelius Spartianus. Why did he

Who was this
Persian Parthian
prince An shihkao?

¹⁰ *Ibid*

not succeed his father? Very probably, because he was too young. The times were unsettled. The enterprises of Decebalus caused Trajan to march against the Dacians in 101-102, and in 105, Corroes having afterwards made his nephew Parthamasiris King of Armenia, Trajan who considered Armenia as a dependency of Rome, marched against the Parthians and defeated them. At an interview at which he humiliated him as he pleased, he extorted from the young king the cession of Armenia, and then pretended that he wished to make him King of the Parthians in place of his uncle Corroes, but abandoned that project when he found that the Parthians held him in but slight estimation. In 114, near Susa, a Roman troop made a prisoner of Corroes's own daughter, who was sent to Rome as a hostage (Dion Cassius in Trajano). Trajan having died in 117, his successor Hadrian showed himself more tractable. Peace was at length concluded, and the daughter of Corroes, a hostage at Rome for sixteen years, was sent back to him in 130 (L. Aelius Sparthianus in Hadriano). Of Parthamasiris there is no further mention. If, as Theodosius Minor expressly states, Pacorus II had only one son, one must believe that this son Parthamasiris, and An-shihkao, are one and the same person. Where and when did he become a Buddhist and a monk? Probably after his misfortunes. It is credible that he avoided his uncle, to whom Trajan had wished to oppose him, and that he did not see his cousin who had returned from Rome. The Buddhist historians insinuate, without saying it clearly, that he went to India, and thence to China. He could have heard mention in Central India of the two monks who had formerly gone from there to the capital of China, and tried the adventure. Intelligent and a worker, he soon managed to make himself understood, and set himself to translate, with the aid of interpreters, Buddhist texts,

for the emperor The Buddhist catalogues attribute to him 176 works, of which 55 still exist."¹¹

The above identification of An-shihkao being the same as Parthamasiris is not supported by what we read in Lt Col Sykes's History of Persia.

The story of the
Prince as given by
Western Historians

Sykes's account of the events in Persia is as follows —Vologes I (Vulhash of the Pahlavi books) had a war with the Romans, especially for the throne of Armenia, which the Romans claimed He had appointed his brother Tiridates (Tirdad) on the throne of Armenia The Romans under Nero (55—63 A C) opposed him Vologes gave way because his hands were weakened by the rebellion of his son Vardanes Three years later, having subdued his son, he again put Tiridates on the throne of Armenia In the subsequent war, Tiridates was defeated, and peace was made on the term, that Tiridates may be put on the throne of Armenia which was known as the "cockpit of the Near East,"¹² as a tributary of Rome and that he was to receive the crown of Armenia at the hands of Nero in Rome Tiridates did not go immediately to Rome, by sea-route as desired, having sacerdotal objection But, a little later on, in 66 A C , he went to Rome by land-route with an escort of 3000 horsemen. He was received with honour The cost of his journey to Rome and back and the stay there, altogether a period of nine months, cost the Roman Empire £6000 a day, *i e* , the total expenses to the Roman Empire is said to have come to about (£6000 × 30 days × 9 months =) £1620000 Vologes died in 77 A C and was succeeded by his son Pacorus II Pacorus died in 105 A C His reign was not a successful one He was succeeded by Osroes, also

¹¹ Wieger's History, *op cit* , pp 351—53

¹² Sykes's History of Persia, Vol I, p 407

spoken of by various authors as Osdroes, or Cosdroes or Chosroes or Corroes ¹³ He ruled from 100 to 129

Upon the death of his brother Tiridates in 100 A C , Pacorus had placed on the throne of Armenia his son Assidares without any recognition by Rome Emperor Trajan resented this To win over Trajan, Osroes sent an Embassy to Rome with rich presents and a message, that Asirades, who was put on the throne of Armenia without the recognition of Rome, was recalled, and that Osroes would put on the throne of Armenia, with the recognition of Trajan, Parthamasiris, the only son of the late Parthian King Pacorus II As Trajan " was burning to imitate the career of Alexander the Great, he declined the gifts and replied that on reaching Syria, he would do what was right " ¹⁴

On reaching Antioch, Trajan had a letter from Parthamasiris, who wrote to him as the King of Armenia Trajan gave no reply So Parthamasiris (also spoken of by some writers as Psarmatossorim) wrote another submissive letter without calling himself " King of Armenia " Trajan replied to this letter, saying that he must receive the crown of Armenia at the hands of the Roman Emperor When Trajan went to Armenia in the spring of 115, the Parthian Prince went to him and placed his crown at the feet of Trajan in expectation that he would immediately receive it back from the hands of Trajan But no Trajan not only deprived him of the crown, " but after his departure even stooped so low as to have him pursued and murdered It is satisfactory to know that public opinion in Rome condemned this gross act of treachery " ¹⁵

¹³ Dr Wieger's History of China, *op cit* , p 351

¹⁴ Sykes's History of Persia, I, p 411

¹⁵ Sykes's History of Persia, p 411.

The above Vologes is the Vulkhash of the Pahlavi Dinkard. He is referred to in the Pahlavi Bahman Yasht¹⁶. There, a tree is referred to as having seven branches, which symbolized seven coming periods. They are the following—(1) The Golden period when Zoroaster revealed his religion in the reign of Vishtasp. (2) The Silver period of Vohuman (Bahman), the son of Spenda-dad, also known as the Kayanian Ardashir. (3) The Brazen period of Ardashir Babagan the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. This includes the period of the time of King Shapur and the time of Adarbad (Marespand). (4) The Copper period in the time of the Askanian King. (5) Tin period of Behramgore. (6) The Steel period of the reign of Khosru Kobad (Noshirwan the Just). (7) Iron period ending with the millenium of Zoroaster.

The question is, why is the time of Vologes I (Vulkhash) taken by the predictionary writing of the

Pahlavi Bahman Yasht as a critical time in the religious history of Iran? I think,

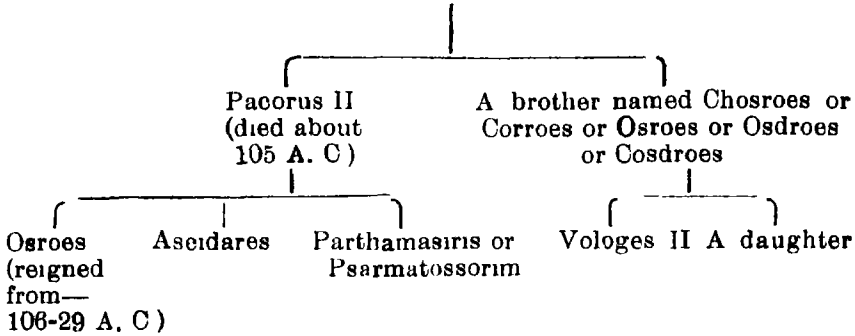
The Time of Vologes I is referred to as Critical in Parsee books possibly on account of the inroads of Buddhism

that that was owing to the inroads of Buddhism in Iran. It was, as the result of this inroad, that the Iranian prince of his family turned a Buddhist and went even to China as a propagandist. The

following table shows the relationship of Parthamasiris (the An-shihkao of the Chinese writers) to the other members of his family. The name, as we find it in Western writers, is not in its real Iranian form. It is a corruption. The proper Iranian name seemed to begin with Pahlava.

¹⁶ Chap II, 19 S B E , Vol V, p 201

Vologes I (The Vulkhash of the Pahlavi writers, brother of Tiridates II—Pahlavi Tirdad—77 A. C.)



The above referred to visit of Tiridates to Rome was “ as a sop to Roman *amour propre*, the prince in question was allowed to pay a visit to Rome and receive a crown there —the sort of sham triumph that might appeal to Nero ”¹⁷

The reference in the Chinese books to the figure of the Persian King on the Coins is significant, because the Parthians are said to have had an instinct as it were for king-worship or extreme reverence to the King Rev Wigram in his history of the Assyrians says “ The instincts of the (Parthian) race seem to have been for king-worship, the head of the Arsacid house being regarded as personally semi-divine ”¹⁸ When the Parthians came into closer contact with the Magi, the latter led them to keep this view of king-worship within proper limits

From this brief survey, we see that it was a Persian prince, who first promulgated Buddhism in China His western name was Parthamasiris His exact Iranian

¹⁷ The Assyrians and their Neighbours by Rev W A Wigram, (1929), p 22

¹⁸ The Assyrians and their Neighbours by Rev W A Wigram (1929), p 32.

name is not known but it seems to be something like Pahlavasara

The Renaissance in the time of Vologeses (Vulhash) requires to be explained It seems that by the time of

The Iranian Renaissance in the time of Vologeses (Vulhash), perhaps, aimed against Buddhism

his reign Buddhism had arrived at the gates of Persia and had even entered it here and there The conversion of the above referred to Parthian prince to Buddhism, seems to have been the result of this entry So, to protect the people against its entry, the house had to be set in order, and it seems, therefore, that Vologeses or Vulhash made such an attempt to set the house in order, and tried to help the Renaissance of Zoroastrianism begun by Ardashir Babagan.