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# AŚOKA, THE BUDDHIST SAṂGHĀ AND THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

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The ambassadors of Aśoka whom the emperor sent to spread his *dhamma* both in frontier regions and in foreign countries, notably among the Hellenistic rulers in the west, are a well-known and often-discussed subject.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a few more considerations seem useful.

These envoys (*dūta*) were probably his so-called *dhamma* officers. According to the 5th Major Rock Edict, thirteen years after his consecration King Piyadassi appointed his *dhammamahāmātras* to attend the *dhamma* and to supervise all sects, to work also among the Greeks, Kambojas, Gandhāras, Rīṣṭhikas, Pitinikas and other peoples of the west ... and everywhere in his kingdom. The 7th Pillar Edict adds that through the *dhammamahāmātras* the glory of the *dhamma* will increase throughout the world. We are further told (2nd Separate Edict) that these officers should explain the King's ideas to frontier peoples, to the unconquered peoples living on his borders.

In his 2nd and 13th Major Rock Edicts Aśoka mentioned the Western kings by name. In the 2nd it is stated that medical services were arranged as far as the frontier lands of the Cōlas, Pāṇḍyas, Satyāputras, Keralaputras, Sri Lanka, the Greek king named Antiochus and his neighbours.<sup>2</sup> In the 13th we read that the conquest by *dhamma* is obtained on all frontiers at the distance of 600 yojanas, where reigns the Greek (*yona*) King Antiochus and beyond him the four kings Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas, and Alexander, and in the south among the Cōlas and Pāṇḍyas and as far as Ceylon, also in the (northwestern) provinces of the Greeks and Kambojas, among Nābhakas and Nābhapañktis, Bhojas and Pitinikas, Andhras and Pārindas, everywhere people follow *dhamma*. Thus the most important or familiar among these kings appears to be Antiochus II Theos, mentioned in both texts, while beyond him were Ptolemy II Philadelphos of

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1 Even by myself, see e.g. Karttunen 1997: 264 ff. and 2009. For the edicts, I have usually checked Bloch's edition. Dr. Robert Whiting has kindly checked my English.

2 Aśoka's interest in the medical care of his subjects is also mentioned elsewhere in his edicts. A legendary echo of the same is found in the Mahāvamsa (5, 215–227).

Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander, probably the king of Epirus. Their identity has often been confirmed and we need not go into the details here.

Who were these “dhammadūtas”? Were they Buddhist missionaries, or, at least, Buddhist monks employed by the Emperor for his own purposes? In ancient India monks as well as Brahmans were often used on diplomatic missions because of their (relative) immunity. I have always thought that it was probably natural for Aśoka to employ monks, as he also had good relations with the *saṅgha*, but we cannot be certain of this. Missionaries they were not; we have rather different accounts of the contemporary Buddhist mission.

During the reign of Aśoka a great Buddhist council was arranged in Pāṭaliputra, chaired by Thera Moggaliputra. During this meeting, a number of monks were sent to spread the message of the Buddha to various countries. The account of the council and the sending of the missionaries is preserved in Pāli texts in different versions: in Dīpavaṃsa 8, Mahāvāṃsa 12, Samantapāsādikā (Vinaya Commentary) 1, pp. 63–64 & 67, Mahābodhivaṃsa pp. 113–115, Thūpavaṃsa 6, p. 192 (Jayawickrama, tr. p. 57).

Where were the monks sent? To different parts of India, but not outside South Asia. According to Mahāvāṃsa 12 they were the following: Majjhantika went to Kasmīra and Gandhāra (Mv. 12, 3 & 9–28), Rakkhita went to Vanavāsa (i.e. North Kanara; 4 & 31–33), Yona Dhammarakkhita went to Aparanta or Gujarat (4 & 34–36),<sup>3</sup> Mahādhammarakkhita went to Mahāraṭṭha (5 & 37–38), Mahārakkhita went to Yona (perhaps the Indo-Greek north-west; 5 & 39–40),<sup>4</sup> Majjhima went to the Himalayan country (6 & 41–43), and Soṇa and Uttara to Suvāṇṇabhūmi (6 & 44–50).<sup>5</sup> Asoka’s own son, Mahinda (Mahendra) went with four disciples to Sri Lanka and established Buddhism there (12, 7 and book 13 ff.), but according to our sources nobody went to the Western countries.

It thus seems clear that the missionaries sent from the Buddhist council of Pāṭaliputra were different from Aśoka’s *dhamma* envoys. It would be interesting to know more of the travels of these missionaries, but the accounts are schematic and, with the exception of Sri Lanka, offer no useful information beyond the names of the missionaries and the countries into which they were sent. Instead,

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3 Yona in his name does not necessarily make him Greek. I would rather associate him with the Yonas often met in Western Indian inscriptions as Buddhist donors and often having Indian personal names.

4 Strictly speaking, this is a bit too early for the term Indo-Greek, but there were Greeks both in Bactria and in the Kandahar area, where the Greek edicts were found.

5 Suvāṇṇabhūmi is the name of Lower Burma, but this seems to be rather early date for Buddhist mission there. Perhaps Bengal is meant.

we are told which *suttanta* was used to make converts, how many on hearing it entered the stream or attained arhatship and so on. But let us now return to the envoys of Aśoka.

We are not told how Aśoka's envoys travelled, but nevertheless we can consider the possible routes. Did they use sea or land? Is there any reason to prefer one particular route, at least as a hypothesis? The first part, starting from Pāṭaliputra, was easy, as the king himself had done much to make travel easier. In the 2nd Major Rock Edict he says that along the roads wells were dug and trees planted. According to the 7th Pillar Edict, banyan trees were planted to give shade to beasts and men, mango groves planted and rest houses built at every eight kos, and watering places made for beasts and men. Roads were needed by merchants and other travellers, but also for the tours of royal inspection (3rd Rock Edict). According to the 1st Separate Edict the king himself sends a touring officer every five years, but the regional governments of Ujjain and Taxila do this at intervals not exceeding three years. The king was also himself an active traveller. Thus we hear of Aśoka's pilgrimages. The 8th Major Rock Edict states that eight years after his consecration the Beloved of Gods went to see the Bodhi Tree and according to the Rummindei Inscription he visited the Lumbinī Park twenty years after his consecration.

To return to the envoys, there are five possible routes to reach the Near East from India.

1. First, there was the long land-route over the Hindukush to Bactria and further to Iran. It had been much used earlier, for example in the Achaemenid period. At the time of Aśoka there were close contacts between Bactria and India, borne out, for example, in the finds of Ai Khanum; and of course the age-long contact between Bactria and Iran continued, although we are now considering the period, when Diodotus, originally a Seleucid Satrap, was making his country independent (on this development, see Holt 1999).

2. Another, somewhat shorter way was the Arachosian route via Kandahar. This had been used by Alexander's veterans returning west under Craterus and later on, in the first century BCE or CE, it was described by Isidorus of Charax in his Greek account of the *Parthian Mansions*.

3. The southern route through the desert was not feasible in the light of Alexander's difficulties there. A strong general could lead his army through it, but only with considerable losses. It is impossible to think that the envoys would have staked their lives on this route.

Now we turn to the possible sea connections. There was no shortage of ships in India, but where did they sail?



4. The Gulf Route was certainly important. It was used in the Achaemenid period and much earlier, too (Karttunen *forthcoming*). Alexander's navy used this route sailing from the Indus Delta to the bottom of the Gulf, and they were able to find pilots for the entire way. The Seleucids seem to have continued the trade relations with the east using this route (Salles 1996). Probably it was also possible to reach the Gulf from the ports of Gujarat.

5. Finally there was the South Arabian Route. Apparently there was even then frequent contact between the Indian west coast and South Arabian ports – probably mainly carried out by Indian ships – but from there merchandise went in caravans and ended up rather in Egypt than Syria. This way the travel of the envoys would have taken a long time and ended up rather in Ptolemaic than in Seleucid territory. The direct sailing connection between India and Egypt was only opened in the second half of the second century BCE.

In Aśokan accounts of his envoys to the west, Antiochus is mentioned as the only king (RE II) or as the first king (RE XIII). Thus it seems likely that they first arrived in the Seleucid realm. It seems to me that the only feasible way to do this was to use the Gulf Route.

I am afraid that not much can be said beyond this. Apparently the envoys reached their destination, at least Antiochus, and delivered their message. We can suppose that this message was written in Greek. There is a reference to the correspondence, apparently in Greek, of Aśoka's father with Antiochus I,<sup>6</sup> and there are north-western versions of Aśoka's edict translated into good Greek. It thus seems clear that Aśoka could also have had his diplomatic messages translated into good Greek. But the message itself left no echo in the west. In fact, we seek without success even a mention of the very existence of a king named Aśoka or Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin in contemporary Greek sources. However, this is quite natural in the light of our existing Western sources about India.<sup>7</sup>

The Greek and Latin Indography (to use the term coined by Parker 2008) followed certain conservative conventions. The historians of Alexander, supplemented with Megasthenes, formed a corpus (see Dihle 1964, now also Parker 2008: 3 ff.) that almost exclusively provided the information about India used in our major sources (Strabo, Diodorus, Plutarch, Curtius, Pliny, Arrian). Everything else was ignored. We can thus forget the nineteenth century hypothesis<sup>8</sup> deriving the third and fourth century CE accounts of Buddhism from Megasthenes. He was much used, but never quoted for Buddhism. Considering

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6 An anecdote told by Hegesander, see Karttunen 1997: 324.

7 Note also that the majority of literature produced in the Seleucid Kingdom is lost.

8 First suggested by Schwanbeck (1846: 45 ff.), then often repeated in literature.

the considerable number of his fragments, I think this kind of *argumentum ex silentio* can be accepted. If Buddhism was mentioned at all in Hellenistic literature, we have lost it.

Aśoka's envoys probably really came to the west and left their message, but it is not clear whether it was considered important. Perhaps it was just taken to be a part of standard diplomatic rhetoric. And perhaps we should also note the context of our evidence. Aśoka is not giving us an account of his diplomatic activities, he is telling his own subjects that as his envoys went even to these distant countries to preach his *dhamma*, how much more reason had his own subjects then to follow it.

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