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BRONZE AGE BACTRIA AND INDIAN RELIGION

The discovery of a previously unknown Bronze Age culture in Bactria (North Afghanistan) and the adjacent Margiana (Merv in Turkmenistan) over the past fifteen years¹ has opened up new possibilities for understanding what happened in this part of the world around the beginning of the second millennium B.C. I have been trying to correlate the new information from Bactria with our other sources, and a substantial part of the results has already been published in detail.² The present paper only summarizes some principal ideas, adding a few new observations here and there.

As my starting point has been the Indus Civilization, I would like to begin with a few conclusions regarding the Harappan religion.³ In 1931, Sir John Marshall surmised that the conical and circular stones found at Mohenjo-daro may have represented the male and female genital organs. Marshall compared them to the *linga* and *yonis* stones which are connected with the Hindu worship of Śiva and his spouse, the Great Goddess. He voted for the Harappan origin of later Śāktism with its cults of ceremonial promiscuity, pointing out that they are paralleled by the sacred marriage rites of the ancient Near East.⁴ These ideas have been accepted by many scholars, while others have criticized and denied them.⁵ Recently it has been asserted that there is no clear evidence of a sexual cult in the Indus Civilization.⁶ Yet one amulet from Mohenjo-daro appears to depict human sexual intercourse.⁷ But there are also other reasons why I think Sir John Marshall's hypothesis is essentially correct.

The 'contest' motif is shared by both Mesopotamian and Indus glyptics.⁸ The earliest representations of this motif seem to be the Proto-Elamite seals depicting the fight between the lion and the bull. These two animals subdue each other in turn, so they seem to represent, as Pierre Amiet has suggested, two opposing and alternating powers of nature, like day and night. In Mesopotamia, the bull is replaced by the water buffalo in the 'contest' scene in the Akkadian period, when contacts with the country

¹ See especially Sarianidi 1986; 1990; Ligabue and Salvatori [1989].

² Parpola 1985; 1988. See now also Parpola 1992 and Parpola, in press (1).

³ I am excluding here considerations relating to the Indus script, which in my opinion was created and used by speakers of Proto-Dravidian. For a comprehensive account, see Parpola in press (2).

⁴ Marshall 1931.

⁵ Criticism, e.g., in Sullivan 1964.

⁶ Dales 1984.

⁷ Parpola 1985: 102f. and fig. 28.

⁸ For the following, see Parpola 1984.

of Meluḥḥa begin. At the same time, the hero subduing the buffalo places his foot on the head of the buffalo, like the man spearing the buffalo in the Indus seals and amulets. This suggests that the bull of the Near East and the buffalo of the Indus Valley had a similar symbolic meaning.

In the Akkadian seals, Ishtar as the goddess of war is associated with the lion. On a cylindrical Indus seal from Kalibangan (whose foreign form points to Western influence), a goddess with the body of a tiger is associated with warriors (who wear their hair in a 'double-bun' at the back of the head, typical of Mesopotamian warriors). The later Indian goddess of war and victory, Durgā, has the tiger or the lion for her vehicle, and she is the main recipient of buffalo sacrifices. In some Purāṇic and modern folk stories, the (slaughtered) buffalo is the husband of the goddess, just like the (dying) bull (the animal of the thunder god) stands for the husband of the goddess in a number of ancient Near Eastern religions (Çatal Hüyük, Yazılıkaya near Boğazköy, Ugarit, Mesopotamia). Though the Hindu cult of Durgā is little attested before Christian times, there is thus reason to assume that it goes back to the third millennium B.C. and is of Near Eastern origin.⁹

Bactria and Margiana appear to have been influenced by the Indus Civilization as well as by the ancient Near East during the early second millennium B.C. Pierre Amiet¹⁰ and other scholars have shown that the Near Eastern influence came to Bactria mainly from Elam and from Syria. This influence, which was later transmitted to the Indian subcontinent,¹¹ is manifested in architecture as well as small finds including seals and ritual weapons. There is clear evidence for the worship of a goddess of Near Eastern affinity, associated with lions and eagles or griffins. She appears on several Bactrian seals.¹²

In the Near East, particularly in Anatolia (with extensions to the Aegean and Rome) and in Syria, the goddess associated with the lion or other felines is specifically connected with the city wall and the fortress.¹³ This suggests the derivation of the name *Durgā* from *durga* 'fort'. The goddess Durgā is actually worshipped, for instance in present-day Nepal, predominantly in forts. The same was true of ancient Tamilnadu, where Durgā's temples were called *kōṭṭam* 'fort'. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that several other names for Durgā are all associated with the concept of 'fortress'. These names include *Kōṭṭavī* (from Proto-Dravidian *kōṭṭa* 'fort' < ? perhaps from early Aryan *goṣṭha* 'cowpen'), *Aparājitā* 'unconquered, name of Durgā' (cf. *aparājitā pūḥ* 'unconquered citadel' in Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8,5,3), *Tripurā*, from *tripura* 'threefold fort', and *Śāradā*, to be compared with the Ṛgvedic phrase *śāradī pūḥ* 'autumnal fort'.

The 'autumnal fort' is connected in the Ṛgveda with inimical tribes against whom the Vedic Aryans fought while invading India. These enemies were called *Dāsa*, *Dasyu*

⁹ Cf. now also Parpola 1992; in press (1).

¹⁰ Amiet 1986.

¹¹ An interesting example is the 'palace' of Dashly-3, which in form is the prototype of the later Tantric maṇḍala. Cf. Brentjes 1983 and Parpola 1988: 257 and fig. 29.

¹² Parpola 1988: 257 and fig. 30.

¹³ Cf., also for the following, Parpola 1988: 258ff.

and Paṇi, and they are said to have had a dark skin colour.¹⁴ Eventually, the Vedic Aryans stormed a great number of such enemy castles and won cattle and wonderful treasures kept in them. The Dāsas worshipped gods called Asuras, and their religion differed from the Vedic cult, which mainly centred on the preparation of a cultic drink called **Sauma*; **Sauma* was offered to Indra, the god of war and thunder, and the head of the Vedic pantheon.

When Sir Mortimer Wheeler unearthed the huge walls of Harappa in 1946, he identified the Dāsa forts with the fortified cities of the Indus civilization.¹⁵ This hypothesis was widely accepted until 1976, when Wilhelm Rau published his study of the relevant Vedic passages. Rau showed that, unlike the square Indus cities, the Dāsa forts had circular and often multiple, concentric walls. Moreover, the Dāsa forts were not regularly inhabited cities but only functioned as temporary shelters.¹⁶

The Dāsa castles (called *pur*) rather appear to be the numerous citadels of Bactria and Margiana. The citadel of Dashly-3 in North Afghanistan, with its three concentric walls, agrees with a later Vedic description of the *tripura* of the Asuras (ŚB 6,3,3,24-25).¹⁷ The tradition of building forts with three concentric walls survived in Bactria until Achaemenid times. The citadels of Bactria and Margiana have yielded large numbers of animal bones, and in Togolok-21 (belonging to the later phase, c. 1750 B.C.), vessels with residues of Ephedra (i.e. **Sauma*).¹⁸

The Timber Grave culture of the South Russian steppes and the Andronovo culture of Kazakhstan are ancestral to the later Scythian and Sarmatian cultures; their predecessors, the Pit Grave and Hut Grave cultures of South Russia, seem to represent the source of early Aryan loanwords in Proto-Finno-Ugric, dated to c. 3000-2500 B.C.¹⁹ Therefore, handmade ceramics found in Margiana and coming from the the Volga and southern Urals and later from Kazakhstan, suggest the introduction of Indo-Iranian languages into southern Central Asia from the late third millennium onwards.²⁰

The forts in Bactria and Margiana are just where the Dāsas, Dasyus and Paṇis were placed a hundred years ago by Hermann Brunnhofer and Alfred Hillebrandt. For the Old Persian, Greek and Latin sources inform us that these regions were inhabited by peoples called *Da(h)ae* and that one of the Da(h)a tribes was called *Parnoi*.²¹ Sir Harold Bailey has shown that the tribal name Daha is originally a noun meaning 'male person, man, hero' and surviving as such in Khotanese Saka *daha*. The Wakhi word *dāi*, *Gayək* has the same meaning; it goes back to Old Iranian *dahyu* from earlier *dasyu*.²² These etymologies from East Iranian languages suggest that the Dāsas,

¹⁴ Cf., also for the following, Parpola 1988: 208ff.

¹⁵ Wheeler 1947: 81-83 and 1968: 131-133.

¹⁶ Rau 1976.

¹⁷ Parpola 1985: 76f. and fig. 22; 1988: 213-217 and figs. 11-12.

¹⁸ Sarianidi 1990: 102ff. and 203ff. On the botanical identity of **Sauma*, see Falk 1989 and Nyberg, in press.

¹⁹ Parpola 1988: 200-202.

²⁰ Parpola 1988: 230ff.

²¹ Parpola 1988: 220ff.

²² Bailey 1960; cf. Parpola 1988: 221f.

Dasyus and Paṇis (or at least their ruling élite) were Aryan speaking, and that they represented an earlier wave than the Ṛgvedic Aryans.

Other evidence supports this by pointing to an élite that engaged in warfare with horse-drawn chariots. Trumpets made of gold and silver have been found from Gurgan and Bactria; as pointed out by Roman Ghirshman, trumpets were needed in directing chariots in battle, and Egyptian frescoes show that trumpets were used in training horses. Similar trumpets have been found at Tepe Hissar III, where a cylinder seal bears what is claimed to be the earliest known representation of a horse-drawn chariot.²³ The chariot has two cross-bar wheels, which represent a transitional stage between solid wheels and spoked wheels.²⁴ The horse is present among the animals represented in the ornamental axe- and mace-heads of Bactria,²⁵ which anticipate the later Scythian 'animal style'.²⁶ A bronze statuette of an ithyphallic horse-rider in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is also said to come from Bronze Age Bactria.²⁷ These and other material remains match the Ṛgvedic descriptions of the rich Dāsas who defended their gold and cattle with sharp weapons, horses and chariots.²⁸

The name of the gods worshipped by the Dāsas, *asura*, also is an originally Indo-European word, which in the Veda came to mean 'demon' at first. After the conquest of the Dāsas, however, Asura became an epithet of the Vedic gods too, called *deva* < **daiva*, and the principal Asura, called Varuṇa, was adopted into the Vedic pantheon. This is likely to have happened in Central Asia before the Ṛgvedic Aryans entered Northwest India, because both Indra and Varuṇa are invoked as oath deities by the Mitanni Aryans in 1380 B.C. The Mitanni Aryans had arrived in Syria by 1500 B.C., probably even a century or two earlier. Zarathustra, on the other hand, is to be placed later, for he revolted against the worshippers of the *daēva* < **daiva*, and restituted the worship of the *Ahura* < *Asura*.²⁹

People representing the earlier phase of the Bactrian culture entered India through Baluchistan in the 20th century B.C. This has been shown by the French excavations led by Jean-François Jarrige at Mehrgarh, Sibri, and Quetta. The arrival of immigrants from Bactria coincides with the beginning of the Late Harappan cultural phase, represented by the Jhukar culture in Sind; the Jhukar culture predominantly continues the traditions of the Indus Civilization, but has some new elements of Bactrian affinity.³⁰ There are tribal names in present-day Sind that are derived from the name Dāsa.³¹ The similarity of Bactrian and Gangetic swords, sharing antennae-shaped hilts, suggests that this pre-Vedic wave of Aryan speakers may have been connected

²³ Ghirshman 1977; cf. Parpola 1988: 204f.

²⁴ Littauer & Crouwel 1977; cf. Parpola 1988: 205 and fig. 9.

²⁵ Cf. Parpola 1988: 217 and figs. 13b, 14a.

²⁶ Cf. Brentjes 1988: 50-51, 56-60.

²⁷ Bothmer 1990: 43 no. 29.

²⁸ Parpola 1988: 217.

²⁹ Parpola 1988: 227-229.

³⁰ Santoni 1984; Jarrige 1985; 1987; 1991; cf. Parpola 1988: 202ff.

³¹ Parpola 1988: 262.

with the later phases of the 'Copper Hoards' culture in the northern parts of central and eastern India.³² An early origin for the easternmost branch of later Indo-Aryan, Māgadhī, is suggested by the age-and-area theory as well.³³

Apart from their dark skin color, which is a very relative concept,³⁴ the principal reason why the Dāsas, Dasyus and Paṇis are still commonly thought to have been non-Aryan speakers is the apparently foreign look of many of their proper names.³⁵ Most important, perhaps, is the name Śambara, which so far has been considered to be probably of Austro-Asiatic origin, being connected with the tribe of the Austro-Asiatic speaking *Sora* (< *Śabara*) in Orissa.³⁶ The Mahābhārata, however, has preserved several variants of Śambara as the name of an enemy of Indra, one of them being *Samivara*. This suggests that Śambara is a Proto-Māgadhī-like variant of a noun meaning 'protector, defender', from the root *vṛ-* 'to surround'. This agrees well with the meaning 'fort(ification)', which *śambara* as a neuter noun in the plural has in Ṛgveda 2,24,2, according to Thomas Burrow. This etymology would also explain the variation *Śambara* : *Śabara* (cf. *sam* : *sa-* < **sm-*). The alternation of palatal and dental sibilants is attested also for the word *dāsa* itself.

This Aryan etymology of Śambara is also in line with Karl Jettmar's comparison of the Dashly-3 fort with Avestan *var* 'fort' as the elysium built by Yima. Jettmar has further pointed out that the Dashly-3 fort could not have been inhabited continuously but was probably used only during yearly festivals, like the divine forts of the goddess Disani in present-day Nuristan.³⁷ We have already noted that, in the Ṛgveda, the Dāsa forts often have the epithet *śārādī* 'autumnal'. The exact meaning of this epithet has remained unclear. We may compare it to the fort of *Śardi* < *Śārādī* in Kashmir, one of the principal places of celebrating the great autumnal festival of the goddess.³⁸

The orgiastic culmination of the autumnal festival of Durgā festival is called *śabara-utsava*, understood to mean 'festival celebrated in the manner of wild tribes'. The original meaning may have been 'the festival of the fort' or 'the festival of Śambara', i.e., the Śaiva deity who survives in Vajrayāna Buddhism as Cakra-Saṁvara,³⁹ and who may be compared to the ithyphallic Bhairava worshipped in the circular Yoginī-temples of Orissa.⁴⁰ The name of Varuṇa, the foremost Asura, is likely to be a derivative of the root *vṛ-*, so this early Vedic deity may be just a variant of the Dāsa god Śambara.⁴¹ That the religion of the Dāsas was an early form of Śāktism is suggested also by the groundplan of the 'palace' of Dashly-3 in Bactria, closely agreeing with the Tantric maṇḍala,⁴² and a Bactrian cylinder seal showing

³² Parpola 1988: 207 and fig. 10.

³³ Parpola 1988: 262-264.

³⁴ Parpola 1988: 208-210.

³⁵ Cf. Parpola 1988: 219.

³⁶ Cf., also for the following, Parpola 1988: 260ff.

³⁷ Jettmar 1981; cf. Parpola 1988: 256f.

³⁸ Cf., also for the following, Parpola 1988: 259f.

³⁹ Cf. Snellgrove 1987: 153ff.; Parpola 1988: 261.

⁴⁰ Cf. Dehejia 1986.

⁴¹ This idea was not published in Parpola 1988; cf. now Parpola 1992.

mating pairs of different beings.⁴³

The śākta worship still prevails especially in eastern India, and has done so for quite some time. In this connection I would like to call special attention to Durgā's name Tripurā that is popular there and its above assumed connection with the strongholds of the Dāsas. Of course the Śākta tradition of eastern India is far removed from Bactria and the Indus Valley both temporally and geographically. But the distance between these two traditions can be bridged by means of Vedic and epic evidence relating to Vrātya religion. This, however, is a complex topic which cannot be entered upon here.⁴⁴

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⁴² Cf. Parpola 1988: 257 and fig. 29; Brentjes 1983.

⁴³ Parpola 1988: 256 and fig. 28.

⁴⁴ See Parpola 1988: 251ff.; 1992; in press (1).

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