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Editorial

Richard Gombrich

In my editorial to the first issue of the Journal, just two years ago, I mainly wrote about the IABS conference which had recently been held in Taiwan, and lamented “the eclipse of studies of early Buddhism and of Theravāda”. The next IABS conference, the 17th, is to be held in Vienna 18-23 August 2014. The titles of 36 panels have been published, and so has a list of 26 sections, which are more general in character. At this stage it is impossible to be certain, but it does look as if my comment, alas, remains justified. In the list of sections, “Early Buddhism” does appear, but the subject is not the obvious focus of any of the panels – though it may of course crop up. Neither the word “Theravāda” nor the word “Pāli” occurs in either list.

Under these circumstances, there seems to be little hope of laying to rest the pernicious fashion for claiming either that no such person as the Buddha ever lived, or that, if he did, we can know next to nothing about what he thought and taught. Outside our little circle, the circle of Buddhologists, these opinions are met with disbelief and derision; but within it deconstruction, which elsewhere has long ago had its day, continues to prevent us from finding a wide audience and joining hands with the millions of people who are interested in Buddhism and would dearly like to learn more, if only they could understand what the academics are saying.

A learned friend of mine, who is not a Buddhologist but works in adjacent fields, has recently remarked to me how amazingly little the study of Buddhism in its first few centuries has advanced since the great pioneers of the 19th century. For this, facile skepticism is surely much to blame.

I have therefore decided to use this editorial to try to give some publicity to a recent discovery and publication (in Japan) by two of the very few scholars who are still keeping the flickering flame of early Buddhist studies alight: Prof. Dr.

Oskar von Hinüber and Dr Peter Skilling. This publication is alluded to by Lance Cousins in footnote 4 of his article published in this volume, with the full reference in his bibliography.

The article concerns two inscriptions at a site called Deorkothar in Madhya Pradesh, which was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1999-2000. The excavator, P.K.Mishra, published his results in 2000 and 2001. On a huge pillar, now fallen and fragmented, there are two inscriptions in the Brāhmī script, both somewhat damaged but clearly legible in parts. The script is crucial for the dating. Von Hinüber and Skilling write that the inscriptions “are dated by the excavator to the third century BC, that is to say almost to the time of Aśoka, which is perhaps slightly too early.”

Both the inscriptions begin in the same way with a passage that occupies well over half of the entire inscription, about four lines out of six in the case of the first inscription, about four lines out of five in the case of the second inscription. As many passages are damaged or entirely lost, these facts are approximate. It is quite clear, however, that both of these passages record the teacher-pupil lineages of the donors whom the inscriptions commemorate. And both begin with the words Bhagavato Budhasa, “of the blessed Buddha”, and the context unambiguously shows that the pupillary lineages are traced back to him.

The first inscription records that Dhammadeva (presumably a monk) had a pillar made, and a teacher whose name begins with Kasi had it erected; all this may refer to the pillar which bears the inscriptions. The second inscription is likely to be later, because the lineage of the donor is longer; it seems that he too had a pillar made, and maybe something made of brick, perhaps a gateway (*torāṇa*).

Except that both go back to the Buddha, the two lineages are different. There are quite a few names legible, but also several gaps; the epigraphists have to guess how many names, and therefore how many generations, need to be supplied to complete them. Obviously the best one can do is to suggest a lower and an upper limit to how many are needed. Then the next step is to guess how many years to allow for a generation.

The crucial point is that both inscriptions are about acts performed by monks who recorded that they could trace their pupillary lineage **back to the Buddha himself**, giving all the intermediate names.

Unfortunately, the data are not enough to enable us to date the Buddha more precisely. There are three components of the dating:

1. The dates of the inscriptions themselves. It seems that we can only place them, on epigraphic grounds, some time round 200 BC, give or take quite a few years.
2. The number of pupillary generations between the donors and the Buddha. The article's authors write of the first inscription: "Depending on the number of *akṣaras* [letters] assumed to be lost, either eight or eleven teachers precede Dhammadeva as the ninth or the twelfth teacher at the end of the lineage."
3. The number of years estimated as the length of an average pupillary generation. The article allows fifteen to twenty years. I believe this is too little, but this is not the place to argue that issue.

If we put these three uncertainties together, it seems to me that all we can deduce is that the dating of the Buddha's death which others and I have argued for within the last few years, namely some time very close to the end of the fifth century BC, remains perfectly plausible.

India still contains plenty of unexcavated or only partially excavated ancient Buddhist sites, and what we have to hope for is that further work will discover more evidence. Even as I was writing this, I received from Prof. Harry Falk of the Freie Universität, Berlin, a paper he has just written on another exemplar of Asoka's First Minor Rock Edict, found at Ratanpurvā in Bihar in 2009. The paper will be published in *Jñāna-Pravāha Research Journal*, 16, 2013, pp. 29–49. The text itself was first published as *A New Aśokan Inscription from Ratanpurwa*, ed. K.K. Thaplyal, in the monograph series of Jñāna-Pravāha, Centre for Cultural Studies and Research, Varanasi, in 2009.

How much better to go on looking for and examining evidence, than to pontificate that we shall never know more than we do now!