

Some Literary Embellishments in the Gupta Inscriptions*

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Introduction

The Guptas are generally associated with the flourishing of Kāvya literature. On the other hand there is hardly any evidence linking this dynasty directly with specific Kāvya texts.¹ The evidence is mainly found in their inscriptions. Since the Guptas did not leave behind inscriptions recording land grants,² what has survived are mainly inscriptions on commemorative monuments. The texts of these inscriptions are veritable Kāvya works.³ This phenomenon has long been recognized. As early as 1890, Georg Bühler demonstrated that inscriptions share many features with Kāvya poetry.⁴

Recently I have argued that the Kāvya poetical tradition has its origin in the royal chanceries which were otherwise mainly occupied with composing diplomatic letters and documents for the king.⁵ However, studies of the features shared by Kāvya poems and the inscriptions are mainly restricted to the occurrence of *alamkāras* and the use of long, complicated metres. A recent case in point is Brocquet's study of the South Indian Pallava inscriptions.⁶

In what follows I intend to draw attention to some other types of embellishments in some Gupta inscriptions,⁷ which have not been acknowledged so far; namely the occurrence of poems praising kings in eight verses or else eight clauses and an instance of a *digvijaya* in reverse gear.

Descriptions in Eight

The text of the Allāhābād inscription of the Gupta king Samudragupta (4th century AD) begins with a verse passage, which is followed by one in prose. The first passage consists of eight verses,⁸ all relative clauses describing Samudragupta. Unfortunately, some of the relative pronouns have been lost because of damage to the text. This is the case in the first,⁹ second and sixth verses. The relative pronouns of the remaining verses have been preserved: *yasya* in 3,¹⁰ *yaḥ* in 4, again *yasya* in 5, *yena* in 7 and, again, *yaḥ* in 8. All these relatives are dependent on *tasya* with which

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the following prose section begins and which anticipates *samudraguptasya* found at the end of the prose passage in line 29 of the text.

This is not the only such passage presented in eight verses. In fact, among the descriptive verse passages in the inscriptions of the Guptas, those of eight verses appear to occur relatively frequently. So the question arises of whether we are dealing with a meaningful phenomenon here.

Other sets of eight verses are found in the Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription (Fleet 13) and the Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription (Fleet 33). The situation in each of these two inscriptions differs in some minor points from what we have seen in the Allāhābād inscription as well as from each other. On the other hand, all three appear to underline the importance of the number eight in the poetic description of the ruler.

The Mandasor Stone Pillar inscription consists of eight *sragdharā* verses, which are followed by a brief *śloka* verse and a brief prose sentence. The latter two parts, the *śloka* and the prose sentence, have the nature of a colophon, mentioning the poet, a certain Vāsula, the son of Kakka, who had composed the preceding verses in praise of the king and supplying the name of the person, Govinda, who had taken care of the engraving of the text.

The preceding section may be divided into several smaller parts. It opens with a single *maṅgala* verse of the type which is common in inscriptions, *stotra* collections and Kāvya play texts. After this we get five verses consisting of relative clauses describing King Yaśodharman. The name of the king is mentioned in verse 7, where it is said that “by him this pillar has been erected here” (*tena ... śrīyaśodharmmaṅāyaṃ stambhaḥ ... ucchritiṃ nāyito 'tra*). The final, eighth, verse describes the pillar in a relative clause: “This pillar, which shines as if it were a lofty arm of the earth, raised in joy to write upon the surface of the moon the excellent virtues of Yaśodharman.”

If we leave aside the *śloka* and the brief prose sentence at the end, what we have here is a composition in eight well-wrought, classical *sragdharā* verses. However, as we have seen, in the Allāhābād inscription of Samudragupta the verse section is in its entirety taken up by the description of the king in eight relative clauses, each verse containing one relative clause.¹¹ In the inscription under consideration the corresponding descriptive passage is restricted to five verses, namely verses 2 to 6. At the same time, however, this description consists of eight relative clauses. Thus, while verses 2, 4 and 5 each contain one relative clause (introduced by *yasya*, *yo* and *yasya* respectively), verse 3 contains two relative clauses (introduced by *yo* and *yatra* respectively) and verse 6 no less than three relative clauses (introduced by *yena*, *yasya* and *yasya*).

The Bhitari inscription begins with the genealogy, in prose, of the Gupta kings from Gupta to Kumāragupta. This is followed by a set of eight verses in long metres, namely *puṣpitāgra* (1), *mālinī* (2-6) and *śārdūlavikrīḍita* (7-8), which describe Kumāragupta's son Skandagupta. After this, four *ślokas* follow, dealing with so-called practical matters, which include the statement that king Skandagupta, praised in the preceding verses, had done [something which is unclear] for his father.

The transition from the prose genealogy to the description of Skandagupta in the following eight verses is established in a very subtle way. The genealogy ends as follows: *tasya* [Candragupta] *putras tatpādānudhyāto mahādevyām dhruvadevyām utpannaḥ paramabhāgavato mahārājādhirājaśrīkumāraguptas* [/] *tasya*. This final *tasya* anticipates the final words of the following *puspitāgra* verse, namely *suto 'yam*, “Kumāragupta. Of him ... this one is the son”. Furthermore, the largest part of the first *pāda* consists of forms in the genitive describing *tasya*: *prathitapr̥thumatisvabhāvaśakteḥ ... pṛthivīpateḥ*. However, with the last word of the *pāda*, which is in the nominative, the attention is directed to Skandagupta, described in the second *pāda*: ... *pṛthuśrīḥ* [/] *pitṛparigatapādapadmavartī ... pṛthivīpatiḥ suto 'yam*.

The first *pāda* of the second verse, a *mālinī*, mentions the name of Kumāragupta's son, Skandagupta. The second *pāda* contains a relative clause describing this Skandagupta: “By whom (*yena*), practicing good behavior, the conduct of those who perform good actions is not obstructed.” The following six verses continue in this vein, describing and praising Skandagupta. After what we have seen in the inscription from Allāhābād, and in particular the one from Mandasor, it will not be a surprise that the eight verses as a whole, beginning with the second *pāda* of verse 2, contain altogether eight relative clauses, or relative clauses marked by relative pronouns, with verse 7 having two such clauses.

A fourth set of eight descriptive verses is found in the famous Mandasor inscription of the silk-weavers (Fleet 18). Verses 4 and 5 tell how the members of the weavers' guild, who came from Lāṭa, arrived in Daśapura.¹² This is followed by a section of eight verses (7-14) in different metres with eight relative clauses describing this town. The story of the “adventures” of the silk-weavers is continued in verse 15: “So (*atha*), all together, they [the weavers] dwelt happily, rejoicing in the city.”

The inscriptional literature abounds in descriptive passages in verse. In these the number of verses generally varies. For instance, in the Gangdhar stone inscription (Fleet 17) King Viśvavarman is described in seven verses. The king is mentioned in line 7. After this, seven verses follow consisting of seven relative clauses. These anticipate *tasmin* in line 17 in the locative absolute construction *tasmin praśāsati mahī(m)*, “while he ruled the earth”. Another case in point is the Mehrauli pillar inscription (Fleet 32), which consists of three *śārdūlavikrīḍita* verses. The first two verses contain four relative clauses (*yasya*, *yena*, *yasyā*, and *yasya*) and the third one mentions that “this banner for Viṣṇu has been erected” by the ruler (*tena*) described in the two preceding verses.

Among these descriptive passages those consisting of eight verses or eight sentences seem to form a special group.¹³ If we turn to Kāvya literature proper, the situation appears to be similar. That is to say, descriptive passages in longer texts appear to consist of any number of verses or sentences. On the one hand, if we turn to the anthologies, the so-called *aṣṭaka*, that is a collection of eight verses, does seem to form a type in itself.¹⁴ A case in point is the *mayūrāṣṭaka*. Examples of so-called *aṣṭakas* in Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala are known from Sri Lanka in the

seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. They are praise poems celebrating the Buddha or, as has also been found, the British colonial administration.¹⁵ For examples of descriptions in eight verses, grammatically connected or not, in the context of Kāvya compositions, see *Kirātārjunīya* XIV 35-42¹⁶ and *Śiśupālavadha* II, 14-21. However, beside these passages there are many others, consisting of any number of verses.¹⁷ A case in point may be found in the third *sarga* of Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha*. Verses 2-20 of the *sarga* describe Kṛṣṇa who is about to leave for "Hariprastha." The description consists of grammatically independent sentences. As shown by Anna Trynkowska, it is possible to distinguish several sections.¹⁸ First we get two verses (2-3) mentioning the insignia of royalty. Then follow nine verses (4-12)¹⁹ describing Kṛṣṇa's clothes and ornaments, going from head to toe. At this point the description of Kṛṣṇa is interrupted by three verses (13-15) in which women are portrayed as they are surrounding him. Finally, in 16-20, the description is continued with an enumeration of Kṛṣṇa's weapons (*cakra*, *kaumodakī* club, *nandaka* sword, bow and conch). The verses describing Kṛṣṇa, his insignia, his ornaments and his weapons, again number 16.

As shown by Jan Gonda, in enumerations the number sixteen seems to play an important role.²⁰ One of the meanings attached to the number seems to be that of totality. A question which arises is if the number eight may have had some specific meaning as well which, moreover, was relevant in the passages in question. In connection with this, I would like to draw attention to some other lists of eight; for instance, the eight *rasas* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or the eight nail marks and the eight tooth marks in the *Kāmasūtra*.

As I have argued elsewhere, in these enumerations we are dealing with supposedly randomly selected examples.²¹ The variety of *rasas*, nail marks and tooth marks is in principle infinite; the eight selected are to serve merely as examples and as such seem to imply that in enumerating them one could easily have gone further. In fact, at the end of many a list in the *Kāmasūtra* the reader is advised to supply the other examples himself.²² In order to understand the meaning of the number eight in these lists I think we have to go back to seven. Seven appears to be used almost universally – take our expression "seventh heaven" – to indicate the highest imaginable number. As such seven is used in counting generations in, for instance, *Mānavadharmasāstra* III 146:

*eṣāṃ anyatamo yasya bhūñjīta śrāddham arcitāḥ
pitr̥ñāṃ tasya tṛptiḥ syāc chāśvatī sāptapauruṣī,*

If one of these three [brahmins] dines, duly honored, at a funeral sacrifice, the ancestors of him (who gives the feast), as far as the seventh person, will be satisfied for a very long time.²³

By adding one to seven, the limitation implied with this number ("this is all one can possibly count") is, as it were, broken. Eight seems to say that if one would have had more time or space one could have gone on much longer. This idea seems

indeed eminently fitting in praising a king or, as in the inscription of the weaver guild, a town.

The same idea seems to be present in the 1008 names of Śiva:²⁴ given more time the devotee would have gone on much longer. 1008 may be divided into 1000 and 8. If so, enumerations in eighteen might be included in the category of eight as well.²⁵ A case in point may be found in the Aihole Inscription of Polekeśin II.²⁶ This inscription provides a description of King Polekeśin, which consists of eighteen verses (15-32), which are all relative clauses.²⁷ In this connection I would also like to draw attention to *Kumārasambhava* I 33-49, providing a head-to-toe description of Pārvaṭī. The description does not, as in the passage discussed above, consist of relative or participial clauses but of grammatically independent sentences. The number of verses in the accepted text is sixteen. However, if we include verse 46* or 46**, describing Pārvaṭī's ears, it consists of exactly the same number of verses, 18, which we have encountered in the Aihole inscription.

King Candra's *Digvijaya* Described in the Mehrauli Inscription

The verses in the Aihole describing Polekeśin are mainly dedicated to his *digvijaya*. This conquest appears to have encompassed virtually the whole of India, which he traversed in a clockwise direction. He started somewhere in South Karnataka and proceeded north to Lāṭa, Māḷava, and Gūjara. Next he turned eastwards to Kālīṅga, (southern) Kosala and, finally, south towards Kāñcīpura, where he liberated the Cōḷas, Keraḷas and Pāṇḍyas from oppression by the Pallavas.

Interestingly, Candra's conquest described in the Mehrauli inscription follows a counterclockwise direction (Fleet 32). First he is said to have conquered Vaṅga in the east. Next we see him in the north-west crossing the Sindhu river and conquering the Vāhlikas. Finally, his fame is said to reach the southern ocean.

In order to understand what is going on here we should start from the fact that the king praised in this inscription was already dead when the iron pillar on which the inscription is engraved was erected. In the first verse we are told that his fame "even now" (*adyāpi*) perfumes the southern ocean. The same expression (*adyāpi*) occurs in the second verse, in which the king is expressly said to have left the earth (*visrjya gāṃ*).²⁸ The reversal of the normal procedure, that is, going counterclockwise instead of the clockwise direction, is also otherwise associated with the cult of the dead. Thus, Āpastamba 2.4.5 enjoins a householder when making an offering to the ancestors to wear his upper garment slung over the right shoulder and under the left arm. The normal way of wearing his upper garment is described in 1.15.1: over the left shoulder and under the right arm. The same is seen with the sacrificial cord, which is normally worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm; but, following Baudhāyana 1.11.24, when a death has occurred it should be worn the other way around.

If the geographic references in the Mehrauli inscription already seem to be vague and general, the presentation of the *digvijaya* as having taken place in a

counterclockwise direction seems to indicate that, in this inscription, poetic fancy completely dominates whatever there is in the nature of historical information.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of the present article is to show that inscriptions deserve as much investigation as poems. The findings may make us aware of poetic peculiarities other than figures of speech and complex metrical patterns, which are the staple concern of poetic studies. One question which follows more or less automatically from the study of the texts of inscriptions as literature concerns the nature of the so-called historical information presented in them. To put it plainly: does the list of conquests found in the inscription represent historical facts?

One may legitimately ask if the kings concerned did indeed make such wide conquests as described; and, if they did, whether the reality matched the order laid out in the inscriptions. As to the latter question, what is striking in most cases is the neatly organized way in which the geographical knowledge is presented, either in a clockwise (or counterclockwise) direction; or else, as in the case of the Allāhābād inscription, into four categories of adversaries according to the type of imperial policy pursued against them.²⁹ It is highly unlikely that kings planned their conquests in such a systematical way. In fact, the way in which the order is, so to say, turned around in the Mehrauli inscription would indicate that in this respect the inscriptions should not be taken all that literally.

As to the first question, it seems to be highly unlikely that Samudragupta or Polekešin II conquered all the lands they are said to have conquered in their inscriptions. Of course, they may have made some conquests; but the actual number is surely inflated, as such feats of battle would have been almost impossible physically. Rather, we seem to be dealing with an image of the king as conqueror of the world as derived from, for instance, the *Mahābhārata*, which, in its turn, seems to have been based on the *rājasūya* sacrifice.³⁰ For instance, in *Mahābhārata* 1. 23-29, as part of the preparation for his consecration, Yudhiṣṭhira dispatches his four younger brothers to conquer the peoples in the four regions (in this order: North, East, South and West).³¹ If the knowledge of the geography of India shown in the inscriptions was indeed not the result of conquests, it may well have been acquired through trade.

As I see it, the literary nature of inscriptions, and I refer here of course in particular to those of the *praśasti* type, cannot be sufficiently acknowledged. To emphasize the point, I would like to refer briefly to the discussion of the Allāhābād inscription by Fred Virkus in his study of the Gupta empire.³² In the second part of this inscription (in prose) many kings are mentioned, who by various measures, including conquest, have been included in the Gupta empire. Two of these, namely Acyuta and Nāgasena, are mentioned in the preceding verse part as well. From this Virkus concluded that at the time when Samudragupta continued his conquest in the south of India, these two northern vassals had rebelled and would have had

to be subdued a second time. However, a closer look at the text of the inscription suggests that something else might be happening here.

In the Allāhābād inscriptions, there is a clear distinction between the verse and prose parts. The verses contain pure praise of the king and abound in fanciful and far-fetched literary conceits. The information is basically of a fictional nature. This becomes especially clear if we compare the passage with the following prose part, which appears to provide factual information or at least aims to convey the impression that it does so. It lists the names of the people included in the empire, arranging them into different categories according to the strategies employed against them. Verse 7 stands out among the other verses by the seemingly concrete historical information it supplies concerning the conquest of Acyuta and Nāgasena.

However, we should reckon with the possibility that in this context this particular reference serves basically as an example of the many conquests carried out by Samudragupta. It may be assumed that as far as this particular topic is concerned, the text simply has to be concrete and apparently cannot afford to be vague in a literary way on pain of being unconvincing.

Notes

- ¹ One generally likes to believe that Kālidāsa is a Gupta poet. The evidence for this, however, is indirect and circumstantial. For instance, Annette Claeßen raised the question if Gupta art could be interpreted as illustrating Kālidāsa's works. See Annette Claeßen, *Kann die Gupta-Kunst Kālidāsas Werke Illustrieren?*
- ² Except for a rather late landgrant from Guṇaighar in Bangladesh by a certain Vainyagupta; see Fred Virkus, *Politische Strukturen im Gupta-Reich (300-550 n. Chr.)*, 162-163.
- ³ In line 31, the text of the Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta is called a Kāvya (*etacca kāvyam ...*). John Faithfull Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*, no. 1.
- ⁴ Johann Georg Bühler, *Die indischen Inschriften und das Alter der indischen Kunstpoesie*. See also Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: a guide to the study of inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the other Indo-Aryan languages*, 232 ff.
- ⁵ Herman Tiekens, "Aśoka's Fourteenth Rock Edict and the Guṇa *mādhurya* of the Kāvya Poetical Tradition."
- ⁶ Sylvain Brocquet, "Le kāvyā épigraphique du Tamiḷ Nāḍu." See also Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, "Les inscriptions sanskrites du roi Pallava Mahendravarman Ier."
- ⁷ References are in the first place to John Faithfull Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*.
- ⁸ On the basis of the fragments retrieved from the first two verses, their meters could not be identified. The following six verses are in classical Kāvya metres, namely verses 3, 5, and 8 *sragdharā*, verses 4 and 7 *śārdūlavikrīḍita*, and verse 6 *mandākṛānta*.
- ⁹ The first word of the first verse, the relative pronoun *yaḥ*, is highly uncertain. The same applies to *yasya* at the beginning of the second *pāda*. This verse would thus have consisted of two relative clauses.
- ¹⁰ The construction of the third verse is not clear. The genitive *yasya* refers to Samudragupta, who, however, also seems to be the subject of the verb *bhunakti*.
- ¹¹ In the text as reconstructed, the first verse of the Allāhābād inscription contains two relative clauses. However, as already noted above, both relative pronouns are highly uncertain.

- ¹² For a translation of the inscription, see Arthur Llewellyn Basham, "The Mandasor Inscription of the Silk-weavers."
- ¹³ It is tempting in this connection to assign a special meaning to the fact that the eight verses of the Allāhābād inscription are actually numbered. In fact, this inscription is the earliest evidence of verse numbering. In inscriptions it becomes common only from the medieval period onwards, but even then its usage is not consistent. See Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: a guide to the study of inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the other Indo-Aryan languages*, 66. The numbering of verses is also found in the Eran stone inscription of the same Samudragupta (Fleet 2), of which only fragments of eight consecutive verses have been preserved. It is not clear, however, if these eight verses are all there was and we are dealing with a text of eight verses, or if the complete text had been much longer. On the other hand, the numbering does not seem to have been restricted to texts of eight verses. Thus, it is also found in the Udayagiri cave inscription of Candragupta II (Fleet 6), which consists of five *anuṣṭubh* verses.
- ¹⁴ Daniela Rosella, "L'Ottavina di Mayūra (*Mayūrāṣṭaka*)."
- ¹⁵ Steven Collins, "What is Literature in Pali?," 676, esp. note 65.
- ¹⁶ See also Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic*, 146-149.
- ¹⁷ See Siegfried Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry: Sanskrit-Pali-Prakrit*, 104, esp. note 147.
- ¹⁸ Anna Trynkowska, "The Description of Kṛṣṇa in Māgha's *Śiśupālavadhā*."
- ¹⁹ That is, nine verses if we ignore the verse *kavāṭavisṭūra* ... quoted in the critical apparatus after 12. The verse does indeed not seem to add anything new after 12.
- ²⁰ Jan Gonda, "The Number Sixteen."
- ²¹ Herman Tiekken, "On the Use of *Rasa* in Studies of Sanskrit Drama," 124.
- ²² Herman Tiekken, *Kāvya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry*, 73-74.
- ²³ Johann Georg Bühler, *The Laws of Manu*, 102. See also *Mānavadharmasāstra* V 60: *sapiṇḍatā tu puruṣe saptame vinivartate*, "But the Sapiṇḍa-relationship ceases with the seventh person" (Johann Georg Bühler, *op. cit.* p. 178). For seven generations enumerated in inscriptions, see Herman Tiekken, *Kāvya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry*, 136-137.
- ²⁴ For a text setting forth the 1008 names of Śiva, see John Nicol Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, 101-102.
- ²⁵ The number 18 is common in Indian literature. For instance, the *Mahābhārata* has 18 *parvans* and we have 18 *Mahāpurāṇas*. See also Otto Stein, "The Numeral 18." *The Poona Orientalist* I (1936), pp. 1-36 and "Additional Notes on the Numeral 18." *The Poona Orientalist* II (1937), pp. 164-165. Both articles have been reprinted in *Otto Stein: Kleine Schriften*, 515-553.
- ²⁶ Franz Kielhorn, "Aihole Inscription of Pulikesin II; Saka-Samvat 556."
- ²⁷ Note that verse 27 contains two relative clauses, the first introduced by *yena*, the second by *yasya*.
- ²⁸ I would like to pass over the claim made in the inscription that Candra had himself erected (that is, after his death) the pillar on which the inscription is found. If the claim is intentional, one of the questions which arises is whether the fact that the pillar was made of iron has something to do with this "miracle". It would in any case be interesting to find out what, if any, were the special ideas attributed to pillars made of iron.
- ²⁹ Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, 179.
- ³⁰ A similar ideal character may be found in the genealogies presented in inscriptions, and I refer here in particular to the first genealogies of a particular dynasty. As I have tried to show elsewhere the composers of these genealogies were apparently obliged to come up with lists of either four or seven kings (Herman Tiekken, *Kāvya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam*

Poetry, 136-137.) Given this situation, we cannot rule out that some element of fabrication went on in compiling the genealogical lists, from filling up hiatuses and combining different branches to downright falsification. In filling in hiatuses the composers of the genealogies were no different from modern historians; see in this connection David P. Hennige, "Some Phantom Dynasties of Early and Medieval India: Epigraphic Evidence and the Abhorrence of a Vacuum."

- ³¹ The picture which emerges here is that of wheel with four spokes, with Yudhiṣṭhira occupying the hub in the middle. At the same time one may notice a clockwise movement, with Arjuna conquering the North, Bhīma the East, Sahadeva the South and Nakula the West.
- ³² Fred Virkus, *Politische Strukturen im Gupta Reich (300-550 n. Chr.)*, 66.

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