

# THE ROLE OF THE SO-CALLED AŚOKA INSCRIPTIONS IN THE ATTEMPT TO DATE THE BUDDHA

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*The date of the Buddha is calculated on the basis of the date of Aśoka's consecration. According to one Buddhist tradition this event took place 100 years after the Buddha's death, according to another tradition 218 later. Aśoka's dates, in turn, are calibrated by those of the certain Greek kings mentioned in Rock Edict XIII. However, in the present article it is argued that the "Aśoka inscriptions" are not necessarily by Aśoka and that the name Aśoka found in some of the inscriptions is a later insertion.*

## INTRODUCTION

THE DATE OF THE BUDDHA forms a watershed in Indian history in the sense that developments are often labeled either pre- or post-Buddha.<sup>1</sup> At the same time this important date is itself far from settled accurately. Among the attempts to date the Buddha it is possible to distinguish between those that arrive at supposedly exact dates and those resulting in approximate dates with wide margins. Examples of the first type are those dates calculated on the basis of Aśoka's consecration in circa 268 BC. According to one Buddhist source the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* took place 100 years before Aśoka's consecration, according to another legend 218 before that event.<sup>2</sup> Examples of the second type of dat-

1. See H. Bechert, "Introductory Essay: The Dates of the Historical Buddha — a Controversial Issue", in H. Bechert, *When Did the Buddha Live? The Controversy on the Dating of the Historical Buddha. Selected Papers Based on a Symposium Held under the Auspices of the Academy of Sciences in Göttingen* (Delhi, 1995), 13.

2. According to the so-called Buddhaśāsana Era current in most Theravāda countries, the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* took place as early as in 544 BC.

ing the Buddha are those based on, for instance, archeological material<sup>3</sup> or doctrinal matter,<sup>4</sup> which generally tend to favour the later date of the two mentioned above. The latter type of approach is indeed mainly used as a corrective on the so-called exact dates, which, as we have seen, are basically calculated backwards from the date of Aśoka's consecration. However, apart from the fact that the traditional sources differ on the number of years elapsed between Aśoka's consecration and the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, Aśoka's dates themselves are far from certain. They have been calculated on the basis of his grandfather Candragupta, on the one hand, and information derived from the so-called Aśoka inscriptions, on the other. In both cases, however, the evidence does not seem to lead to dates as exact as one would wish.

Candragupta has been identified with the Sandrakottos mentioned in Greek sources as the contemporary of Seleukos Nikator. According to Filliozat Candragupta's date serves as the base for the entire chronology of early India.<sup>5</sup> According to the indigenous sources, in particular the Purāṇas, after a reign of 24 years Candragupta was succeeded by Bindusāra, who in turn after a reign of 25 (or 28) years was killed and succeeded by one of his sons, Aśoka. Unfortunately, what happened after Candragupta is not corroborated by the Greek sources, according to which Candragupta was succeeded by a certain Amitrokhates, that is, Amitraghāta, a name which is not known in this context from the indigenous sources. In general one may ask how reliable the Greek report is on the direct contact between, and contemporaneity of Alexander and Seleukos, and Candragupta. Furthermore, apart from the fact that it is not clear at exactly what time during Candragupta's reign the supposed contacts should have taken place one may question the authenticity and reliability of the years allotted to the various kings in the Purāṇas.<sup>6</sup> It is significant in this connection that in his

3. See H. Härtel, "Archaeological Research on Ancient Buddhist Sites", in H. Bechert, *When Did the Buddha Live?* (Delhi, 1995), 141-160.

4. L. Schmithausen, "An Attempt to Estimate the Distance in Time between Aśoka and the Buddha in Terms of Doctrinal History", in H. Bechert, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha / Die Datierung des historischen Buddha. Part 2 (Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, IV, 2). Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philologisch-historische Klasse. Dritte Folge. Nr. 194* (Göttingen, 1992), 110-147.

5. L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique: Manuel des études indiennes* (Paris, 1947), 212.

6. It should be noted that in the Purāṇas regnal years are available only for the kings of Magadha.

attempt to date the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* on the basis of the dynastic lists from the Purāṇas von Stietencron, rather than from Candragupta, preferred to work back from Aśoka, or, to be more precise, from the end of Bindusāra's reign four years before Aśoka's consecration.<sup>7</sup> The later feat he assigned to 268 BC, a date von Stietencron felt was calibrated with the help of Aśoka's RE XIII in which the emperor mentions several kings from the West supposedly as his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows I would like to discuss in particular the role of the Aśoka inscriptions in the attempts to date the Buddha. As I will try to show the identification of the ruler responsible for the Aśoka inscriptions with the Aśoka from Buddhist legendary literature can no longer be taken for granted. In any case, the name Aśoka found in some versions of the Minor Rock Edicts is almost certainly a later insertion, the ruler normally being referred to by the sequence *devānampiye piyadasi lājā*. In addition to that, the occasional use of the "name" *piyadasi* in some post-canonical texts for Aśoka (side by side with *piyadassana*) seems to be a relatively late phenomenon. In fact, it cannot be ruled out that we have to do here with a reflex of the very same tradition which identified the Piyadasi of the inscriptions with Aśoka.

In all this, much depends on the interpretation of the nature of the so-called Aśoka edicts. According to an interpretation, which has been current for a long time, the texts of the edicts were composed for the specific purpose of being engraved on rocks and pillars. However, there is evidence to suggest that in the inscriptions we are actually dealing with compilations of old letters. The selection of the letters and their compilation as texts for inscriptions seem to have been accompanied with a process of editing as becomes clear from certain errors and linguistic innovations. This process

7. H. von Stietencron, "The Purāṇic Genealogies and the Date of the Buddha", in Bechert, *When did the Buddha Live?*, 221-252, esp. 236.

8. See von Stietencron, "The Purāṇic Genealogies and the Date of the Buddha", 236, n. 30. The *yonalājā* Am̐tiyoko is identified with Antiochus II Theos of Syria (261-246), Tulamaya with Ptolemy II Philadelphos of Egypt (285-247), Am̐tekina with Antigonos Gonatas of Macedonia (276-239), Makā with Magas of Kyrene (died 258), and Alikasudala with Alexander of Epirus (272-256). It should be noted that the identification of, for instance, Am̐tiyoko with Antiochus II's father Antiochus I Soter of Syria (280-261) was ruled out because this did not fit with Aśoka's dates, which latter formed precisely the matter to be determined; see E. Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka. New Edition. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1925), xxxi.

of editing has to be distinguished from changes made in the local versions of the edicts. The name Aśoka is one of the latter category of changes. With this insertion we are thus two steps removed from the emperor on whose behalf the texts of the edicts were drawn up and whose date is fixed on the basis of his contemporary western rulers.

#### THE AŚOKA INSCRIPTIONS

The corpus of the Aśoka inscriptions includes two series and a number of individual inscriptions. The Rock Edict series consists of fourteen proclamations carved on large boulders and stone slabs at nine widely scattered sites. The Pillar Edict series consists of six proclamations found on free-standing pillars found at six different places.<sup>9</sup> Beside these two series there are a number of individual edicts, of which the so-called Schism Edict, the Bhabhru Edict and the Minor Rock Edicts I-II might be mentioned here. Typically, these latter three edicts deal specifically with the emperor's relation with the Buddhist Saṅgha. While the fact that the edicts of the two series are everywhere found in the same order suggests otherwise, it was generally assumed that we are dealing with more or less random collections. Recently, however, I have tried to show that the arrangement of the edicts in each of the two series is meaningful in its own way.<sup>10</sup> This seems to suggest that the texts of the Rock Edicts as well as the Pillar Edicts were disseminated as a series. If the fourteen Rock Edicts form indeed a series this implies that the compilation (and engraving) did not take place before the most recent edict of the series, which is RE v. This edict, which is itself not formally dated, refers in the text to the institution by the ruler of so-called Dharmamahāmātras in the thirteenth year of his reign. RE v, and with it the whole series, must have been issued an unknown number of years later. At that time edicts III and IV, which are said to be issued in the twelfth year were already "old" edicts. That is to say, the Rock Edict series consisted at least in part of old documents. This is a point to which I will return below.

It has also appeared that there is a kind of division of labour between the Rock Edicts, on the one hand, and the Pillar Edicts, on the other. In this

9. In Delhi-Tōprā, and only there, a seventh edict is added to the series of six pillar edicts. The text of PE VII is also found in Kandahār in Aramaic script and with an Aramaic translation interspersed.

10. H. Tieken, "The Dissemination of Aśoka's Rock and Pillar Edicts", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 46 (2002): 5-42.

connection it has been noted that the Rock Edicts seem to have been selected on the basis of formal features rather than their contents. Furthermore, except for III and IV none of them is formally dated; the edicts are presented out of context. By contrast the Pillar Edicts are systematically dated in the same, 26<sup>th</sup>, year of the ruler's reign, which seems to lend them topicality. In addition to that, some of the measures mentioned in the Pillar Edicts are of a strikingly concrete nature, especially when they are compared to those mentioned in the Rock Edicts. The distinction seems to be a function of the medium, that is rock and pillar respectively. Thus, the same type of distinction is found in the Minor Rock Edicts (on rocks) and the Schism Edict (on pillars). Both the Schism Edict and the Minor Rock Edicts deal with the emperor's involvement in the affairs of the Buddhist Saṅghas. However, in the Schism Edict the emperor provides concrete legal aid to the Saṅgha with regard to how to deal with monks exhibiting disruptive behaviour.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, MRE I lacks references to concrete measures. Instead, the emperor is basically concerned with his image, in this case that of a Buddhist monarch, describing his activities in terms derived from the lives of wandering monks. This contrast between the Rock and Pillar Edicts may be explained with reference to their locations. While the Pillar Edicts are found in the middle of the realm in the Ganges basin, the inscriptions on rocks are found far removed from the centre at its very edges. As such they were addressed to people who, unlike those addressed in the Pillar Edicts, could not be regularly visited by the emperor, let alone be conquered; they could, however, be brought over by persuasion.

This complementarity of the two sets of edicts suggests that their dissemination was part of one and the same project, in which certain edicts were collected to be engraved on pillars in the centre of the realm and others to be engraved on rocks at the frontiers. If this was indeed the case, this casts a completely different light on the inscriptions. As indicated, it has been assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that the edicts were meant to be engraved. Thus, RE IV, which is issued in the emperor's twelfth year, is supposed to have been engraved in the very same year. However, as argued above, the fourteen Rock Edicts were compiled and disseminated an unknown number of years after the thirteenth regnal year, the most

11. See H. Tieken, "Aśoka and the Buddhist Saṅgha: A Study of Aśoka's Schism Edict and Minor Rock Edict 1", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63/1 (2000): 1-30, and J.C. Wright, "Aśoka's 256-night Campaign", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2000): 319-339.

recent year mentioned in the series. That means that the series included a number of old edicts which at the time must already have been stacked away in the royal archives. If, as suggested just now, the dissemination of both series was indeed part of one and the same undertaking, it follows that the Rock Edict series was not compiled and engraved before the 26<sup>th</sup> year, the date of issue of the Pillar Edicts. That means that the the Rock Edict series consisted in its entirety of old edicts. If so, the question arises if the Pillar Edict series as well as the Minor Rock Edicts and the Schism Edict have not been based on old edicts as well.

In this connection I would like to note that there is evidence of two linguistic strands in the texts, one belonging to the authors of the original edicts and the other presumably to the compilers of the texts for the inscriptions. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that at the time of the compilation of the texts for the inscriptions their wording was not always properly understood. As to the two linguistic strands, I refer to the use of *kaṃ*, *kāni* and *kiṃti* and *(y)ena* respectively in dependent causal clauses.<sup>12</sup> The latter construction is typically found in texts which may well have been drawn up for the occasion by the compilers of the inscriptional texts (RE XIV) or were added later to the corpus as it were on second thought (the two Separate Rock Edicts found in Dhauli and Jaugaḍa and PE VII). Apparently, the compilation of the texts took place in a linguistic environment different from the one in which the original letters had been drawn up. As I have suggested elsewhere the introduction of the *(y)ena* construction need not necessarily have taken place under the influence of the spoken language; it might also be due to the influence of Sanskrit, which suggests that at the time of the compilation this language was taking over the position of court language from the regional languages. Whatever is exactly the case here, the phenomenon suggests that we allow for some distance (in time, place or linguistic environment) between the writing of the original letters, on the one hand, and their inclusion in the inscriptional texts, on the other.

Apart from that there is evidence in the edicts of editing in order to remove from the text forms which were apparently not properly understood. A case in point is formed by the words *visvaṃsayitave* and *vivāsayātha/vivāsāpayātha* in the second part of the Schism Edicts, which is found only in the Sarnāth version.<sup>13</sup> The form *visvaṃsayitave* appears to be the result

12. See H. Tieken, "The Interrogative Pronouns *kaṃ*, *kāni* and *kiṃti* in the Aśoka Edicts", *Acta Orientalia* 64 (2003): 39-63.

13. See Tieken, "Aśoka and the Buddhist *Samgha*".

of the attempt to emend *visamsayitave* after the latter's derivation from *viśamsay-* "to cause to recite" had been lost sight of. Next, the "emendation" *visvamsayitave* was itself emended into *vivāsay(ātha)*, "to dispatch", from "to cause to live abroad", in an attempt to make sense of the passage. The final result was that the whole passage came to be considered a colophon giving instructions concerning the dissemination of the text. This, in turn, would explain its omission in the Kauśāmbī and Sāñcī versions of the edicts. It is tempting to trace the corruption back to the so-called archetype of the three versions of the edict, which may have its origin in the chancery where the project of the dissemination of the inscriptional texts was organized.<sup>14</sup>

COMPOUNDS WITH MATA AS THEIR FINAL MEMBER  
IN THE AŚOKA INSCRIPTIONS

Another instance of editing the text, which seems to go back to the archetype, is provided by a curious type of compound. In the corpus of Aśoka inscriptions a number of compounds are found with the past participle *mata* as their final member.<sup>15</sup> We may distinguish two types, depending on whether the first member is an adjective (*sādhumata* RE I E; *gulumata* RE XIII E, I, K; *gulumatatara* RE XIII F; *mokh(i)yam(a)ta* RE XIII P, SE I II C [DH], D [J], PE VI F) or gerundive (*kaṭaviyamata* RE VI I); *paṭivedataviyamata* RE VI F [only Erṛaguḍi]; *khamitaviyamata* RE XIII L; *vedaniyamata* RE XIII E). The compounds are generally translated as "considered (*mata*) as a heavy burden" (*gulumata*) and "considered a person or a thing to be forgiven" (*khamitaviyamata*).<sup>16</sup> This type of compound, however, seems to be pecu-

14. The corruption is also found in the Rūpnāth version of MRE I. References to the texts of the Minor Rock Edicts are to P.K. Andersen, *Studies in the Minor Rock Edicts of Aśoka* (Freiburg, 1990).

15. References to the Rock Edicts are to U. Schneider, *Die grossen Felsen-Edikte Aśokas. Kritische Ausgabe, Übersetzung und Analyse der Texte* (Wiesbaden, 1978); those to the Pillar Edicts are to E. Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum I* (Oxford, 1925).

16. See Woolner, s.v. *mukhamate*, "considered important", *kaṭaviyamate*, "considered something to be done", *vedaniyamate*, "appears, is considered very painful" (A.C. Woolner, *Asoka Text and Glossary, Part II, Glossary* (Calcutta, 1924)). Bloch seems to translate *gulumate* as if it is a Karmadhāraya ("a heavy thought"): "une pensée qui pèse à l'ami des dieux" (J. Bloch, *Les inscriptions d'Aśoka* (Paris, 1950), 127), but in doing so he evades the problem posed by *mata* in, for instance, *kaṭaviyamata*. As far as I know, Andersen

liar to the Aśoka inscriptions. That is to say, it is absent from Sanskrit, in which adjectives or gerundives and *mata* are not compounded.<sup>17</sup> The only exception in Sanskrit is *bahumata*, which, however, is formed on the basis of the idiomatic expression *bahu manyate*. In fact, a similar expression, *sādhu manyate*, might account for *sādhumata* in RE I E.<sup>18</sup> But, as said, otherwise this type of compound is absent in Sanskrit.<sup>19</sup> In this connection the combination *gulumatatala* in RE XIII is doubly problematic. For one thing, this comparative seems to assume a “common” *gulumata*, for which evidence outside the Aśoka inscriptions is missing. Secondly, the order is peculiar; as noted by Norman, the expected form would be *gulutalamata*.<sup>20</sup>

The rareness of the compound in other texts than the inscriptions is problematic. As I see it we might well be dealing with a corruption, in which *mata* stands for the original superlative suffix *tama*. In this connection I like to draw attention to *kaṭaviyamata* in RE VI (H-κ) occurring side by side with the comparative *kaṁmatatala*:

[H] *nathi hi me tose uṭhānasi aṭhasamtilanāye ca*  
 [I] *kaṭaviyamate hi me savalokahite*  
 [J] *tasa ca mina esa mūle uṭhāne (ca) aṭhasamtilanā ca*  
 [κ] *nathi hi kaṁmatatal(aṁ) savalokahitena.*

In this edict the emperor orders his officials that in case of problems he must immediately be informed of these, even if he is in the harem: “For, he says, he never sits back when an initiative is required, and, once he has started,

is the only scholar who derives *mata* from *smṛta* instead of *mata* (P.K. Andersen, “Die ta-Partizipialkonstruktion bei Aśoka: Passiv oder Ergativ”. *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 99 (1986): 91), but for the meaning this does not really make a difference; see Arthaśāstra (ed. K.P. Kangle) 2.2.15: *kāliṅgāṅgarajāḥ śreṣṭhāḥ [...] dāsārṇāśca [...] madhyamā matāḥ* side by side with *saurāṣṭrakāḥ [...] pratyavarāḥ smṛtāḥ* in 16.

17. For *mata* with adjectives and gerundives, see *madhyamā matāḥ [...] pratyavarāḥ smṛtāḥ* in Arthaśāstra 2.2.15-16 (quoted in the preceding note) and *hṛdyatarāṁ mataṁ* and *arcyatamo mataḥ* in Mahābhārata (Critical edition, Poona) 2.35.16 and 5.7.18 respectively.

18. *sādhumata* is also cited in the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary (1201) for Sanskrit. Unfortunately the dictionary does not refer to any actual instance.

19. The compounds are to be distinguished from such Tatpuruṣa compounds as *kuṭṭanīmata*.

20. K.R. Norman, “Aśoka’s Thirteenth Rock Edict”, *Professor Gregory M. Bongard-Levin Felicitation Volume. Indologica Taurinensia* 13-14 (1997-1998): 465.

he never gives up before the task is completed” (paraphrase of H). The next sentence (I) Schneider translates as “Denn ich betrachte es als meine Pflicht, für das Heil der ganzen Welt zu wirken”, in which the words “ich betrachte es” represent *mata*. The translation of *kaṭaviya* with “Pflicht” seems to serve to add at least some strenght to the emperor’s commitment. Apparently, the literal translation “I consider the good of all people as something to work for” did not sound convincing enough. In J the emperor adds that “at the root of that, i.e. the welfare of all people, are energy and endurance”. Then, in K, he repeats more or less literally what he had said in sentence I: “For (as said just now) there is no work more important (*kaṁmatat[am]*) than to ensure the welfare of all people”.<sup>21</sup> As I see it, this sentence seems to imply a superlative in J: “this is the most important thing to do”, which may be reconstructed by emending *kaṭaviyamata* into *kaṭaviyatama*.

When applied to *gurumatatala* the same emendation gives *gulutamatala*, which would be an instance of the common comparative of a superlative, such as *jyeṣṭhatara*, *śreṣṭhatara* and *bhūyiṣṭhatara*.<sup>22</sup> If *gulumatatala* in RE XIII (F) indeed hides an original *gulutamatala*, then *gulumata* in the immediately preceding sentence (E) will have to be emended accordingly into *gulutama*. This, in turn, affects *vedaniyamata* occurring side by side with this *gulamata* (*vedaniyamate gulumate ca*).<sup>23</sup> In this connection it should be noted that in all the instances of the *mata*-compounds the superlative makes excellent sense (I leave aside *sādhumata* in RE I). In fact, this is not the problem. The problem is to understand how or why *tama* may have been changed into *mata*. For one thing, in the relevant scripts, Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī, *ta* and *ma* are clearly distinguished. In the second place, the supposedly original superlatives were common formations.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not

21. For the compound *kaṁmatara*, see J. Wackernagel and A. Debrunner, *Altindische Grammatik II, 2 Die Nominalsuffixe* (Göttingen, 1954), §451a, 601.

22. See J. Wackernagel and A. Debrunner, *Altindische Grammatik II, 2*, §450c, 600. For *gulutama* instead of *gariṣṭha*, §450b, 599-600.

23. E: *avijitāṁ hi vijinamane e tata vadhe vā malane vā apavahe vā janasa, se bādham vedaniyamate ca gulumate va devānāṁpiyasa*. F: *iyam pi cu tato gulumatatala devānāṁpiyasa*.

24. For *gurutama* instead of *gariṣṭha*, see fn. 22; for the pseudo-double superlative *m(o)kh(i)yatama*, see *mukhyatama* in Mahābhārata 1.220.5; for superlatives of gerundives, see, for instance, *kṛtyatama* in Mahābhārata 2.66.21 (A. Holtzmann, *Grammatisches aus dem Mahābhārata: ein Anhang zu William Dwight Whitney’s indischer Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1884), §963), *gopyatama* and *alaṅghyatama* in G. Bühler, P. Peterson and G.J. Agashe,

very likely that they had not been recognised or had been misunderstood. On the other hand, the corruption of *tama* to *mata* looks very much like one arising during recitation. However, such an incidence cannot explain how *tama* came to be replaced by *mata* in virtually all its occurrences. If we are indeed dealing with a corruption there must have been more to it than that. The result of the corruption, *mata*, must somehow have agreed with certain ideas one had about the texts or the emperor's intentions. In this connection it should be noted that in the edicts the emperor frequently expresses his opinions, which are presented as important guiding principles in his administration. An example is found in RE X (A): *devānarṃpiye piyadasi lājā yaso vā kiṭi vā no mahatḥāvaham* manati.<sup>25</sup> The change of, for instance, *gulutama* into *gulumata* may have been implemented by the wish to imitate passages such as these.

With all this uncertainty we should not forget that, for all we know, the compounds found in the inscriptions are *ad hoc* formations. Furthermore, in at least one passage discussed above rather than *kaṭaviyamata* one would have expected a superlative *kaṭaviyatama*. If we are indeed dealing with a corruption (or emendation), what is striking is its systematic implementation. Thus, the same corruption is found in the Rock Edicts as well as the Pillar Edicts and, with one exception, they are found in all the available versions of the edicts in question. This would point to the conclusion that the two series of texts have indeed been disseminated virtually in one go from one and the same centre after having been rigorously edited first.

As indicated, there is one exception, namely the instance *paṭivedataviyamate* in RE VI (F),<sup>26</sup> which is found only in the Eṛṇaguḍi version. It would seem that we are dealing with an addition made locally here. In any case, the inscriptions do not present evidence of the secondary removal of *mata*, which could account for its loss in the other versions of the edict. A possible explanation for the insertion of *mata* may be that the scribe's eye had accidentally strayed to *kaṭaviyamate* in the following sentence. Otherwise, starting from a conscious addition, it is not clear why after *paṭivedataviy(e)* anything had to be added at all. If something might have been felt to be

*Daśakumāracharita of Daṇḍin* (Bombay, 1919), 70, line 13 and 88, line 10 respectively. See in this connection also the comparative *kaṭaviyatata* in RE IV (L).

25. See also RE XII (B and L) and XIII (w).

26. [...] *tāye aṭhāye vivāde nijhati vā samtaṃ palisāye anamṭaliyenā paṭivedataviy(amat)e me savata savam kālām* (Schneider's reconstructed text).

missing, rather than *mata*, it may well have been precisely the superlative suffix, which would have added another marker of urgency to the available list of three: *anantaliyenā*, *savata* and *savaṃ kālam*. It is almost too absurd to raise the idea, but this would imply that the scribe who added *mata* might have been thinking that he was adding the superlative suffix!

As indicated, there is evidence to suggest that the texts for the inscriptions have been compiled only after the 26<sup>th</sup> year of the emperor's reign. However, the occurrence of two different types of dependent causal clauses and of errors and emendations raise the question if the compilation of the inscriptional texts has not been carried out after the ruler responsible for the original letters had died. Or, if the inscriptions might not have been intended as commemorative monuments. In this connection it is interesting to note that most of the inscriptions of the Guptas belong precisely to this category of monuments. For instance, the Allahābād Pillar Inscription is dedicated by Candragupta II to his dead father Samudragupta. It is not unlikely that the Guptas — who, as their use of the name (Candra)gupta indicates, claimed to be the successors of the Mauryas — were continuing a practice inherited from the very same Mauryas here.

#### AŚOKA'S NAME IN SOME OF THE VERSIONS OF THE MINOR ROCK EDICTS

The local versions of the Rock Edicts (including the Minor Rock Edicts) may show considerable textual variation, especially when compared to the Pillar Edicts, which have a much more uniform text. In addition to the textual peculiarities discussed so far, which most likely have to be traced back to the original manuscript of the compilation, and leaving aside the “translations” of some of the versions of the Rock Edict series into the local administrative languages, practically all versions, or small groups of versions, of the inscriptions have peculiarities, or innovations, of their own. Thus, the Gīrnār version of the Rock Edicts in the west and the Dhāuli and Jaugaḍa versions in the east share a set of innovations compared to the versions in the north (Kālsī), northwest (Shāhbāzgarhī, Mānsēhrā), and south (Eṛṇaguḍi). Apparently, first the series of edicts was sent to the north, northwest, and south. Only after a revision the text was sent to the west and east. Furthermore, leaving aside errors in copying, practically each version of the edicts has peculiarities of its own, which were presumably introduced locally. The name Aśoka found in some versions of the Minor Rock Edicts seems to belong to the latter category of innovations.

While in all edicts<sup>27</sup> the emperor of the original missives is referred to by the words *devānaṃpiye piyadasī lājā*, in some of the versions of the Minor Rock Edicts the name Aśoka is found. Thus, Maski and Gujarā MRE I open with the words *devānaṃpiyasa asokasa* and *devānaṃpiyasa piyadasino asokarājasa* respectively. These two versions are also otherwise closely related, both showing a genitive construction here, to which is probably to be supplied the word *vacanena*. The Niṭṭūr version ends with the words *yathā asoko āhā tathā ti*. The Niṭṭūr and Uḍegolam versions of MRE II, which are likewise closely related, open with *rājā asoko hevaṃ āha* and *rājā asoko devānaṃpiyo hevaṃ āha* respectively. Taking into account the distribution of the instances of the name Aśoka we are evidently dealing with elements introduced locally. In any case, the name Aśoka was not used by the ruler responsible for the composition of the original letters. Furthermore, the identification of that ruler with Aśoka was not made by the compilers of the inscriptional texts either.

What has happened here? I venture to suggest that we have here a case of the conflation of two legendary figures, that is, the legendary ruler mentioned in the inscriptions, on the one hand, and the Buddhist hero Aśoka, on the other. As indicated above, at the time the texts of the inscriptions were compiled the emperor on whose behalf the original letters had been composed was most likely already dead. This implies that the inscriptions were basically a means with which a contemporary ruler tried to establish a direct connection between himself and a legendary predecessor. As to the insertion in this context of the name of a Buddhist hero, it should be noted that, just like some of the other individual edicts, Minor Rock Edict I deals in particular with the emperor's relationship to Buddhism. Thus, in that edict he tells that he has been a lay-follower for more than two and a half years and that it is somewhat more than a year ago since he has visited the Saṃgha. Since then he has become much more zealous in touring the country. Unfortunately, how MRE II fits into this picture is not clear; that edict deals, among other things, with the relationship between teacher and pupil, using what seems to be brahmanic terms (*ācariye* and *aṃtevasīni*) rather than specifically Buddhist ones.<sup>28</sup>

27. With the exception of the Calcutta-Bairāt Edict, which opens with the formula *priyadasī lājā māgadhe* "King Priyadasī from Magadha".

28. The Brahmagiri version of MRE II looks like a hotchpotch. Corresponding to the phrase *nātikā yathārahaṃ* of the other versions it has *nātikesu ca kaṃ yathārahaṃ* (o). The particle *kaṃ* comes completely out of the blue here and makes no sense. Rather, we seem to be dealing with an echo of sentence M from PE IV: *nātikā va kāni* [...], the latter having *kāni*

At the same time it should also be noted that the Buddhists appear to have cherished a tradition concerning Aśoka which credited him in particular with Buddhist inscriptions. This tradition has been documented by the Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hsien (fourth century) and Hsuan-Tsang (seventh century).<sup>29</sup> *Mutatis mutandis* copies of “Aśoka” inscriptions were made for Buddhist pilgrims to take away as souvenirs as late as the Gupta period.<sup>30</sup>

If the evidence for the popularity of the Aśoka legends among Buddhists is relatively late, some of the versions of the Minor Rock Edicts contain features which otherwise appear only relatively late as well. For instance, the versions from Brahmagiri and Śiddāpur and possibly also the one from Jaṭiṅga-Rāmeśvara begin with the word *suvarṇagirīte*, that is, “from Suvarṇagiri”, meaning that the edict was issued from that place. Information like this, which is not found elsewhere in the Aśoka inscriptions, is quite common in later inscriptions. It is first attested in inscriptions in the Gupta period.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this some of the versions of the Minor Rock Edicts use the *daṇḍa* for punctuation. The *daṇḍa* is found in Maski, Sahasrām and Uḍegolam.<sup>32</sup> Punctuation marks appear with some regular-

instead of *kaṁ*. The constructions with *kaṁ* and *kāni* have been discussed by me earlier; see “The Interrogative Pronouns *kaṁ*, *kāni* and *kiṁti* in the Aśoka Edicts”. In this connection I would also like to draw attention to the phrase *etinā ca vāyajanenā yāvataka tupaka āhāle savara vivasetavāya ti* in the Rūpnāth version of MRE I (R). Evidently, we have to do with a phrase borrowed from the Sārṇāth version of the Schism Edict containing the ghost word *vivasetaviye* (see above and my article “Aśoka and the Buddhist *Samgha*”). It shows that the compilers of the Rūpnāth version of MRE I were not only familiar with the text of the Schism Edict but felt free to add material from this edict into that of the Minor Rock Edict. In fact, this same phrase was subsequently taken over by the composer of the Niṭṭūr version, who, however, abbreviated it considerably (*savapaṭhaviyaṁ ca vivāsite ti*).

29. É. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: from the origins to the Śaka era* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1988), 244-267. Parts of the legendary stories about Aśoka have been depicted in Gandhāra art, as well as in Sāñcī, Nāgārjunikonda and Amarāvati.

30. H. Falk, “Spurious Aśokan Records”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* LXXII-LXXIII (1991-1992): 263-273.

31. For this information at the beginning of an inscription, see D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* (Delhi, 1965), 128-129 and R. Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (Oxford, 1998), 115-116.

32. For Uḍegolam, see Srinivas Ritti, “Newly Discovered Edicts of Asoka from Karnataka”, *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India* 8 (1981): 101-104. The *daṇḍa* is also

ity in the Gupta period but even then they are not used systematically.<sup>33</sup> One of the questions which arises in this connection is how long “Aśoka” inscriptions remained to be produced, which is difficult to answer directly and with any certainty as most of our evidence of early epigraphy has been based precisely on the Aśoka inscriptions.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF DEVĀNAMPIYE  
PIYADASI LĀJĀ WITH AŚOKA

As said, in the inscriptions the ruler is referred to by the phrase *devānampiye piyadasi lājā*. The use of *devānampiya* in RE VIII (A)<sup>34</sup> suggests that, as in the case of *lājā*, we are dealing with a title.<sup>35</sup> It is generally assumed that *piyadasi* is a proper name. Senart compares the sequence (*devānampiye*) *piyadasi lājā* with the introduction in the Achaemenid inscriptions, in which the king’s name (e.g. Darius) precedes the title “king”.<sup>36</sup> According to Benveniste it is hard to believe that the emperor’s name was not mentioned in the edicts. The only word of the three in the introduction which came into consideration as such was according to him *piyadasi*. In this assumption he felt supported by the fact that in the Aramaic and Greek versions *piyadasi* has been left untranslated.<sup>37</sup> In this connection, however, I would like to make the following comments.

found in Kālsī XI-XIII, which part is generally assumed to have been written by another hand than the preceding part. Apart from that, however, the distribution of the *danḍa* in XI-XIII is uneven and, contrary to the instances in the Minor Rock Edicts, non-sensical, sometimes cutting phrases into two. Apparently we are not dealing with a punctuation mark here, but with a decorative element. The two instances in the first part of Kālsī have by Janert been identified as possible rough spots in the surface of the natural rock (K.L. Janert, *Abstände und Schlussvokalverzeichnungen in Aśoka-Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1972), 112, note 10 *ad* RE V B, and 123, note 18 *ad* RE IX G).

33. See R. Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy* (Oxford, 1998), 66.

34. *atikaṃtaṃ aṃtalaṃ devānampiyā vihālayātaṃ nāma nikhamisu* (Eṛṇaguḍi, Kālsī, Mānsehrā and Shāhbāzgarhī; for *devānampiyā* the other versions read *lājāno*).

35. See H. Scharfe, “The Maurya Dynasty and the Seleucids”, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 85 (1971): 211-225, though it is hard to agree with his interpretation of the title *devānampiya* as a calque of *philos tōn basileōn*, if only because the latter title did not exist as such.

36. M. Senart, *Études sur les inscriptions de Piyadasi*, Paris 1882, 384.

37. É. Benveniste, “Édits d’Asoka en traduction Grecque”, *Journal Asiatique* 252

In the first place, as far as I can see, we cannot be so certain about the necessity, assumed by Benveniste, to mention the emperor's personal name in the introduction. It might well be possible that the compilers of the inscriptional texts had removed all personal information from the original letters and restricted the introduction to the official titles, in this way facilitating the transference of the image projected in the inscriptions to the contemporary ruler. In the second place, the comparison with the introduction in the Achaemenid edicts does not seem to account for the word *devānampiye* before *piyadasī*. In this connection it should also be noted that there is a priori no argument against the interpretation of *devānampiye piyadasī lājā* as an accumulation of three titles.<sup>38</sup> The phenomenon is not unknown as is shown by the expression *mahārāja rājātīrāja devaputra śāhi*, consisting of no fewer than four titles, used by the Kuṣāṇas. However, this sequence is met with only relatively late and seems to have been calqued on Iranian examples.<sup>39</sup> Another point to be noted in this connection is that according to the current interpretation in *devānampiye piyadasī lājā* the title "king" would come after the king's proper name. In later Indian inscriptions, however, the titles usually precede the proper names. Thus we come across *rājño mahākṣatrapasya sugrhitānāmaḥ svāmi-caṣṭanasya*<sup>40</sup> and *mahārāja-devādhyā-pranaprā mahārāja-prabhāñjana-naptranā mahārāja-dāmodara-sutena [...] mahārāja-śrī-hastinā*.<sup>41</sup> In expressions such as these, as in the Kuṣāṇa examples, the proper name is usually the last item in the list.<sup>42</sup> Admittedly, it is difficult

(1964): 142-146. But note *devānampiyasa piyadasino asokarāja [...]* in the Gujarā version of MRE I (B), with both *piyadasī* and *asoka*.

38. For such accumulations, see R. Salomon, "The Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas of India", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 18 (1974): 23.

39. A. Marique, "Inscriptions de Surkh-Kotal (Baghlān): la grande inscription de Kaniška et l'éto-Tokharien. L'ancienne langue de la Bactriane", *Journal Asiatique* 246 (1958): 372-383.

40. Junāgaḥ Rock Inscription of Rudradāman I, D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 1, (Delhi, 1993 (reprint)), 175-180.

41. The Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin, J.F. Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum III* (Varanasi, 1970), no. 21.

42. But note *naravarmma-nrpaḥ* in the Gangdhar Stone Inscription of Visvavarman (Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, no. 17, line 3), in which, however, *nrpa* is not a title but a description of Naravarman's function. Furthermore, the passage is in verse and the words had consequently to be fitted into the particular metrical pattern.

to project these later types of titles (Kuṣāṇa and Gupta) backwards on the Aśoka edicts or inscriptions. At the same time, the comparison with earlier Achaemenid titles does not seem to convince either.

A different matter is if, if *piyadasī* is indeed a proper name, it does indeed refer to the king otherwise known by the name Aśoka. The identification has been made, apart from in some versions of the MREs, in *Dīpavaṃsa* 6. 1, 14, 24, in which Aśoka is referred to as Piyadassī.<sup>43</sup> *Piyadassī* is also found in other Buddhist Pāli texts as a personal name, either of the Buddha or else of some monk (see note 43). In all cases we seem to be dealing with relatively late texts. It is possible that the use of *Piyadassī* for Aśoka in these passages goes back to the identification of Piyadasī in the Minor Rock Edicts with Aśoka.<sup>44</sup> In this connection it should also be noted that in the same *Dīpavaṃsa* (11. 14) the title *devānaṃpiya* is used as a proper name as well.

I think that when all is said and done in *devānaṃpiye piyadasī lājā* we could well be dealing with a sequence of three titles. Of these three the first two seem to form a meaningful pair. That is to say, while the gods love the king (*devānaṃpiye*) the king in his turn loves his subjects, looking at them with fondness (*piyadasī*). This “connection” between gods, king and subjects is indicated by the juxtaposition of the word *piya* in *devānaṃpiye piyadasī*. In fact, after this phrase the function of the title *lājā* seems almost to remind us that we are dealing with a wordly ruler, who is fully entitled to use force.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of the above exercise is not to deny the possibility that the king mentioned in the inscriptions is the same person as Aśoka mentioned in

43. According to P.H.L. Eggermont (*The Chronology of the Reign of Asoka Moriya: A comparison of the data of the Asoka inscriptions and the data of the tradition* (Leiden, 1956), 25-27) verse 24 might well be an interpolation derived from another source. Piyadassī is also found as a name for a Buddha in the introductory story to the Jātaka collection, the *Nidānakathā* (38. 27-28, 39. 8 and 44. 7). See also *Mahāvamsa* 1. 8 (name of a former Buddha) and 29. 32 and 65 (name of a monk).

44. The instances in the *Dīpavaṃsa* of the name Piyadassana “dear to look at” (e.g. 6. 1 and 2) side by side with Piyadassī may well have been introduced as the easier formation instead of obscure Piyadassī “looking with fondness (at his subjects)” (cp. Sanskrit *samadarsin* “looking impartially”). Differently, Y.V. Vassilkov, “On the Meaning of the names Aśoka and Piyadasī”, *Professor Gregory M. Bongard-Levin Felicitation Volume, Indologica Taurinensia* 13-14 (1997-1998): 441-457, esp. 445-447.

Buddhist legendary literature. The point I want to make, however, is that this is not as certain as has been assumed sometimes and that we should therefore be careful to apply the identification to other fields, such as the dating of the Buddha. The Aśoka of Buddhist legends is anyhow most likely a composite figure, combining the deeds and characteristics of a number of persons who in their time had been instrumental in the growth of Buddhism, or a figure to whom in the course of time all kinds of measures beneficial to the Buddhist community have come to be ascribed. The ruler mentioned in the so-called Aśoka inscriptions clearly was such a person, but this does not automatically make him the “one and only” Aśoka.

The above comments concerning the so-called Aśoka inscriptions should be taken into account in evaluating the attempts to establish exact dates for the Buddha, which have been calculated backwards from Aśoka. Despite the fact that these dates do not seem to fit those based on other evidence such as archeology or doctrinal matters, scholars continue to fall back on them if only as starting point. The exact dates keep on exercising considerable attraction. Thus, Cousins in a review article on two volumes of contributions on the dating of the historical Buddha edited by Bechert, while admitting that practically nothing really works, ends with the remark that it is not impossible that the so-called long chronology (218 years *ante* Aśoka’s consecration) may have to be rehabilitated.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the comments on the Aśoka inscriptions might have consequences for other fields of study as well, in particular that of epigraphy. For instance, so far it is assumed that the use of the Brāhmī script in India was not much earlier than Aśoka, or, what is supposed to come to the same, not much earlier than the Aśoka inscriptions.<sup>46</sup> One of the problems is that the date of the Aśoka inscriptions is no longer certain and will have to be determined anew. In addition, if the texts of the Aśoka inscriptions have indeed been based on old letters, the inscriptions assume a prior tradition of letter writing and record keeping. The existence of these two streams, inscriptions and letters, is also to be taken into account in dating Brāhmī inscriptions on paleographical grounds, in which so far one does not seem to have reckoned with the use of a cursive variant of the script.

45. L.S. Cousins, “The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 6 (1997): 57-63.

46. See R. Salomon, “On the Origin of the Early Indian Scripts”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115/2 (1995): 271-279.

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