The Early Development of Buddhist Literature and Language in India[1]

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After some preliminary considerations concerning orality and writing in India and the date of the Buddha, this article re-examines the questions of where and when a version of the Pali Canon was first set to writing and what were the contents of that collection. It then goes on to examine the origin and evolution of the Māgadha language we now call Pali, seeing it as derived from a written language which was in wide use over the major part of India during the last centuries B.C. rather than directly from spoken dialects.

Much of the history of Buddhism in India in the last centuries B.C. is dependent on material evidence, but some caution is required here. At one point I was trying to investigate the evidence for the date of the Emperor Asoka. Part of that evidence concerns the precise dating of five Greek kings mentioned in one of Asoka's inscriptions. In fact, of the five, four have frequently occurring names; only one has a rare name and is decisive for the dating. That is Maka, who can only be Magas of Cyrene. Many secondary sources gave precise dates for the death of Magas, but I wished to know the evidence for that. To cut a moderately long story short, I eventually determined that in order to give a precise date Hellenistic historians were relying on the work of Indologists, whereas Indologists were citing

[1] An earlier version of the material in this article was given in my first two lectures as Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Visiting Professor in January 2005 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and part of it as a single lecture in a conference organized for the Royal Asiatic Society at Harewood House in July 2006.

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articles by Hellenistic historians. In fact, we did not know the date of the death of Magas and that is probably still the case, unless some new evidence has emerged recently.

A similar problem can sometimes arise between textual studies and material studies. This is important in considering the development of Buddhist canonical literature. The most we can do there is provide relative dating of different texts or textual elements. There is no objective means of determining the duration of textual strata on the basis of texts alone. In the present context, this means that we are ultimately reliant on the evidence of the inscriptions of Asoka and the material evidence of Buddhism in India in the second and first centuries B.C. to provide any kind of dating of the evolution of the canonical literature. However, my aim in this article is to look at the textual background.

In examining the history of the development of Buddhist canonical literature, we come inevitably to a series of basic questions:

- what was written down ?
- where and when was it written down ?
- who was it written down by ?

But to answer these questions we have first to go back to two even more fundamental questions:

- when did the Buddha live ?
- when did writing first come into use in India ?

The first of these two more fundamental questions, the dating of the Buddha and also of Mahāvīra, the founder of the Jain tradition, has been much discussed over the last two decades. I do not have anything new to contribute on this topic; so I will simply summarize what I understand to be the result of this investigation to date.

The more legendary dates for the *Mahāparinibbāna*, widely posited at different times in the Eastern and Northern Buddhist traditions and ranging from 686 B.C. to the twenty second century B.C., have found little support in European scholarship in the last two centuries. Even the apparently more reasonable, and certainly better grounded, date of 543 B.C., universally accepted for considerably more than a thousand years in the Southern Buddhist literature, has met difficulties when confronted with other historical data.

As early as 1836 Turnour realized that the royal king lists associated with the Southern Buddhist chronology placed the first three Emperors of the Mauryan dynasty some sixty years too early. To this day, the consequential problems in dating the earlier history of Ceylon remain with us. Be that as it may, there are two reasonably certain facts in the earlier history of Ancient India that stand firmly in the way of simply accepting the Southern Buddhist chronology. The first of these is the identification of the founder of the Mauryan dynasty known to us as Candragupta or Candagutta with the Sandrakottos associated with the period of Alexander the Great's foray into the area of modern Pakistan. The other is the recognition of the author of numerous stone inscriptions of the third century B.C. as the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty, remembered in subsequent Buddhist tradition as Asoka Moriya. In recent years I have come across various attempts to reject or marginalize one or other of these, but I believe they remain unchallenged in serious scholarship.

The solution to this problem, first adopted towards the end of the nineteenth century, was in essence to remove sixty years from the traditional Southern Buddhist date of 543 B.C., usually assuming that the Sinhalese regnal lists may have included kings reigning simultaneously in different parts of the island of Ceylon. This gives a date early in the fifth century B.C. and several dates around that time have had support, variously adducing evidence from Jain sources, from the Purāṇas and from the so-called Cantonese 'Dotted Record'. For most of the twentieth century the resulting near consensus held sway.

Heinz Bechert, however, initiated a process of questioning in the early 1980s which led to a major conference on this subject and an important three volume publication.[2] This resulted in considerable discussion and the widespread adoption of a date around 400 B.C., although Bechert himself inclines towards a somewhat later date.[3] I will not address the arguments for this now, but refer anyone who is interested to my 1996 review article in JRAS.[4]

[2] Bechert 1982, Bechert 1983, Bechert 1986, Bechert 1988, Bechert 1991a.

[3] Bechert 1991b, p. 13: "… so muß man zu dem Ergebnis kommen, daß der Zeitpunkt des Todes des Buddha mit größter Wahrscheinlichkeit später anzusetzen ist als früher von der Mehrzahl der Wissenschaftler vermutet, und zwar in den Zeitraum zwischen etwa 420 v. Chr. und 350 v. Chr. … ein Zeitansatz in der zweiten Hälfte des genannten Zeitraums, also in der ersten Hälfte des 4. Jahrhunderts, wahrscheinlicher ist als ein Ansatz in den letzten beiden Jahrzehnten des 5. Jahrhunderts."

[4] Cousins 1996; Norman 1999. See now: Hinüber and Skilling 2013. The inscriptions published there are from North-eastern Madhya Pradesh, dating to c. 200 B.C. and provide two genealogies apparently going back to the Buddha. This confirms the use of teacher-pupil monastic genealogies

For the purposes of this article I shall accept this dating of the Buddha. That is to say, I shall assume that the main part of his teaching career took place in the second half of the fifth century B.C. or thereabouts. It should be noted that there remain a number of supporters of an earlier dating, especially in South Asia, but I have not so far seen any convincing presentation of a case for that.

That is not the case with a later dating. And I would like to take note here of the position taken by some who follow the so-called 'short chronology'.[5] This is a term adopted by Étienne Lamotte to refer to a dating based upon a number of early texts (possibly all, directly or indirectly, of Sarvāstivādin provenance) which place the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* 100 years before the accession of Asoka. Of course, these texts generally give no indication as to when they considered Asoka to have reigned; so it is rather artificial to combine the figure of 100 years with a modern, historically derived, date for Asoka. Moreover, since these are mostly not historical works, such figures as '100 years' need to be taken as round numbers.

I find such a 'short chronology' quite unbelievable, however. Our most reliable information concerning the life of the Buddha and Mahāvīra is, it seems to me, the **historical context** depicted in the Buddhist and Jain texts. In the Pali version, that gives us a king called Seniya Bimbisāra ruling over the Aṅga and Magadha peoples, one called Pasenadi (Praśenajit) ruling the Kāsi and Kosala peoples and various, more or less independent, tribal or federal aristocratic states nearby. To that has to be added the locations of the capital cities from which they ruled and the sons who succeeded them. Since Greek sources show no awareness of any of this, and they were certainly not entirely ignorant of Indian matters even before the invasion of Alexander (327–325 B.C.), it is simply not plausible to date that context very close to Alexander's invasion.

The Greeks knew a single powerful and wealthy state in Eastern India, almost certainly under the rule of a Nanda or Nandas. They do not know the old capital at Rājagṛha, nor a separate kingdom, centred on Śrāvasti. What they are familiar with is the end product of a process of growth which began in the lifetime of the Buddha, if not before. It seems unlikely that the Greeks would have been unaware of this, had it still been something within living memory at the time of Alexander.

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of the kind found in the *Dīpavaṃsa* already at the end of the third century B.C. or a little later. Unfortunately, there are too many uncertainties in the readings and dating of these two inscriptions to fix the date for the Buddha's *floruit* closer than late in the fifth century or early in the fourth century.

[5] See for example Charles Willemen's Preface to: Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998.

So I would take the view that the Buddha's active teaching career must have taken place a century or more before the time of Alexander.

As regards the second fundamental question, that of the introduction of writing in India East of the Indus, I will pass over the difficult question of the use of the Brāhmī alphabet for commercial or administrative purposes prior to the reign of Asoka. And likewise the possibility that Kharoṣṭhī or even Aramaic might have been used sometimes for diplomatic or commercial activities. For present purposes it suffices to say that from the time of Asoka onwards Buddhist texts **could** have been written down; this is not to say that any were. It follows that for the first century and a half after the Buddha's death down to the mid-third century B.C. Buddhist ideas can only have been preserved by a process of memorization and oral recitation. And it is highly probable, if not certain, that they continued for the most part to be so preserved for some time after this.

The relevance of this, for present purposes, concerns the question as to whether writing was known in India at the time of the Buddha. So I turn now to that issue.

Writing in India

As with the date of the Buddha, the views of many scholars have changed significantly in recent decades.[6] Previously, among Indologists at least, it had been widely accepted that the Brāhmī alphabet, first attested in the inscriptions of Asoka in the third century B.C., had been in use for some centuries before that. This near consensus, never complete, was largely based upon the ideas of Georg Bühler, first published as long ago as 1895.[7] That consensus is now under serious challenge. It is clear that the work of Harry Falk, in particular, has shown that there is no need to connect the origin of the Brāhmī alphabet with any particularly early Near Eastern form of writing. This leaves us with a more diverse range of opinions and in fact there seem now to be four main viewpoints.

i. Derivation from the Indus Valley script

There has long been considerable support in South Asia for the view that the Brāhmī alphabet is an indigenous invention. One position that has been argued a

[6] Goyal 1979; Fussman 1988–1989; Hinüber 1990; Falk 1993; Salomon 1995; Norman 1997, p. 79f.; Salomon 1998, 10–31.

[7] Second edition: Bühler 1898.

number of times is that the Brāhmī alphabet is a development of the undeciphered script used in the Indus Valley civilization.

A problem with this is obviously the long gap — most of two millennia — between the use of that script and the first attested use of the Brāhmī alphabet. Initially, it seemed reasonable to anticipate archæological discoveries which would fill this gap, but as the decades have gone by without any such finds, that has seemed less and less likely. Various similarities have been claimed between individual signs found on Indus seals and other objects and specific letters of the Brāhmī alphabet, but given that there are hundreds of distinct Indus signs some resemblances are predictable. Overall, the number of possible matches does not seem to exceed what we might expect by chance.

This does not, in itself, completely rule out a possible connexion, but new work on the Indus Script does seem to make it extremely unlikely. The 2004 publication of a paper by Farmer, Sproat and Witzel in the *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* has made available the results of careful statistical studies which have analysed sign repetition rates in the Indus inscriptions and claim to show that it is not possible that the so-called Indus script could have encoded language.[8] They propose rather to see the signs as cultic emblems of particular deities and the like, pointing to parallel widespread use of such symbols in the Near East and elsewhere.

It seems clear that their analysis shows beyond reasonable doubt that the script used in the extant inscriptions cannot be either alphabetic or syllabic. The situation is less certain with some kind of logographic writing, but as it stands there are far too few known signs for this and we must suppose that the so-called Indus script cannot be the source of later Indian writing. Nothing of course rules out the possibility that a few of the Indus symbols may have been still in use or known from artefacts to those who created or revised the Brāhmī alphabet, but any substantive connexion now seems very improbable.

ii. Invention under the aegis of the Emperor Asoka

The theory that writing in the Brāhmī letters was introduced during the reign of Asoka in fact dates back to the nineteenth century. Its great attraction lies in the evident fact that the earliest known, reliably dated, examples of the script are found precisely in the edicts of Asoka. The fact that this position has now been

[8] Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel 2004.

adopted in such important studies by v. Hinüber and by Falk can only mean that it is likely to be a widely accepted position henceforward.

Writing around 1994–5, Richard Salomon did express some hesitation, and clearly saw some merit in the idea that at least some kind of writing was used, perhaps exclusively for administrative purposes, before the time of Asoka. In the end, however, he concluded at that point that "we have not a shred of concrete evidence for this".[9] My own feeling is that lack of concrete evidence is no reason for us to lack common sense. The fact remains that Asoka circulated inscriptions over a very considerable area. If one translates into European equivalents, this is tantamount to a ruler instigating a program of setting up or inscribing edicts across an area encompassing Madrid, Rome, Bucharest and Berlin. No European ruler of the third century B.C. had any such capacity. However one looks at it, and whether or not pre-existing locations were sometimes used, this is a very considerable undertaking.

It is quite unbelievable that such a venture would have been adopted only a decade or so after the invention of the alphabet in which the inscriptions were written. Naturally, the great bulk of the population would have been illiterate, as has remained the case almost to the present day; so measures to have the edicts read out are to be expected. But writing has usually been addressed to an educated minority. No, the promulgation of the edicts is only plausible at a time when writing has spread sufficiently for there to be readers, and most probably readers of status.

I therefore exclude the possibility of the creation of the Brāhmī alphabet during the reign of Asoka. Even if I am wrong about this, I do not believe that it would seriously affect what I want to say later. It is highly likely that the very visible use of written inscriptions made by Asoka will in any case have influenced the attitude of later Buddhists towards the use of writing. This may well have something to do with the relatively early writing down of their scriptures by the Buddhist schools. It seems improbable that in the first century A.D., when a body of manuscript texts, if not a complete Canon, clearly existed in the Gandhāra region and already after the date when the Sinhalese sources claim to have transcribed their oral texts, any other religious tradition in India had as yet put their scriptural texts into a written form. At all events, there is certainly no unequivocal evidence of that.

[9] *op. cit.*, p. 279.

Returning to the date of the introduction of writing, we can group the remaining possibilities into two: early Mauryan or pre-Mauryan.

iii. Invention under Candragupta Maurya or under his successor

A limited amount of archaeological evidence for the early use of writing has been found on potsherds in the excavations at Anurādhapura, the ancient capital of Ceylon.[10] The initial discoveries were made by Deraniyagala, who at first favoured rather early dates B.C., partly based upon his previously published view that a type of bone point found in archaeological contexts both in India and in Sri Lanka is a writing implement. In his more substantial subsequent publication he proposed on the specific evidence from his Anurādhapura investigations to date the use of Brāhmī to approximately the sixth century B.C.[11] Further investigations were carried out by British archaeologists and F.R. Allchin initially suggested, more cautiously, that these potsherds are dated "by a large number of radiocarbon samples at least to the 4th–5th centuries B.C., if not earlier".[12]

In a subsequent collective publication by the British archaeologists involved a still more cautious position is indicated:

> To sum up the evidence of the early use of Brāhmī at Anuradhapura, the inscriptions provide a convincing series starting from their earliest occurrence in the early part of the fourth century B.C. The series shows three stages during which familiarity with and use of writing steadily develop.[13]

This seems to require that the invention of the earliest form of Brāhmī script be before the start of the Mauryan period. We must note, however, that nothing here establishes the use of the script for other than commercial (or, perhaps, administrative) purposes prior to Asoka.

A different, historical argument also suggests to me that the Brāhmī alphabet is unlikely to have been created from nothing under the Mauryas — or, at least, not after the extension of Candragupta's authority to the North-West. Assuming the priority of the Kharoṣṭhī script and its use in areas formerly under Persian rule

[10] Deraniyagala 1990b; Deraniyagala 1990a; Coningham and Allchin 1992; Allchin 1995, pp. 176–179; 209–211.

[11] Addendum III to Deraniyagala 1992, Vol. II pp. 739–750.

[12] Allchin 1995, p. 211.

[13] Coningham et al. 1996, p. 86; cf. also: Coningham and Allchin 1999.

and/or influence, it is difficult to believe that the ruler of a large empire would have introduced a new script for use in part of his empire with another, different script remaining in use in another part of his domains. That would only make sense in the case of an unrelated language, but the North-Western forms of Middle Indian in the early Mauryan period were certainly relatively close to the dialects spoken on the Gangetic plain. I know no historical parallel for such a procedure and it seems quite contrary to the practical necessities which have led many rulers of such empires to seek to devise means to unify their territories.

iv. A pre-Mauryan origin for Brāhmī

A number of attempts have been made to argue that evidence from the Pali Canon establishes the use of writing at the time of the Buddha.[14] The most detailed study of this has been made by Oskar von Hinüber, who concludes that evidence for writing is found only in parts of the Canon which are likely to be relatively late in date.[15]

If someone holds the view that every word of the Pali canon, as we know it now, dates back to the First Council, then there is evidence of writing at the time of the Buddha. Short of that, then, what is striking is rather the lack of mention of writing in most of the Canon. For me, given the newer dating of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha around 400 B.C., that makes it difficult to conceive of writing as being in any kind of significant use before the fourth century B.C.

What evidence we do have, seems to refer to a rather restricted use. The occupation of *lekhā* is given (alongside of *gaṇanā* and *muddā*) in a list of high status occupations (contrasted to the occupations of potter, weaver and so on).[16] Elsewhere we are told that the objection to this as an occupation is that it will be painful to the fingers.[17] In this context, it seems reasonable, if not entirely certain, to think of the occupation of scribe. That does not mean that anyone except

[14] e.g. Vimalananda 1965; Perera 1976; and see the extensive bibliography in Falk 1993.

[15] Hinüber 1990.

[16] Vin IV 6ff.; cf. 10; 13.

[17] Vin I 77 (cf. IV 128): *atha kho Upālissa mātāpitūnaṃ etad ahosi: sace kho Upāli lekhaṃ sikkhissati, aṅguliyo dukkhā bhavissanti*. cf. Ud p.32. Vin III 74; 76 also refer to information conveyed by a *lekhā*, but this may equally be a sign or mark. But note Vin IV 305f.: *anāpatti lekhaṃ pariyāpuṇāti … vāceti*.

scribes could read at this point in time and it does not tell us what script they were using.

It has been suggested that the story in the *Mahāvagga* of the brigand, who was tattooed (*likhitaka*) in the palace area so that people would know that he was to be killed on sight, indicates wide knowledge of reading.[18] But the *iti* clause used here need not imply that it was known that he was to be killed from written words; it may equally indicate a symbol of some kind, known to have that meaning. The similes of writing on stone, earth and water in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* and *Puggalapaññatti* perhaps imply some kind of writing.[19] Otherwise, writing is only referred to in two of the very latest works of the Canon: the *Parivāra* and (possibly) the *Paṭṭhāna*.[20]

A number of scholars have argued that the Brāhmī alphabet, as it appears in the inscriptions of Asoka, shows variations indicative of a prior history of development and, moreover, has a number of features which make a single invention in the Mauryan period improbable. They also suggest that some signs were probably introduced at a later stage on an ad hoc basis to cover features of the language, initially not distinguished (e.g. the differences between long vowels and short), to represent aspirates and nasals more completely and perhaps even to distinguish dental and retroflex consonants.[21] Possibly also, some of the additional letters required for Sanskrit were added later.

In his *Indian Epigraphy* Richard Salomon suggests that the final form of the Brāhmī script may indeed have been created under Asoka, but based upon a prior, less complete, form which had previously been in use.[22] This seems reasonable, although nothing really rules out one of the two previous reigns. In any case, for our purposes we can suppose that any script in use before the time of Asoka is likely to have been confined to commercial and administrative use. I assume then that there will have been no Buddhist written texts before Asoka, but that the writing of Buddhist works may well have begun then — around a century and a half after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

[18] Vin I 75; cf. 91; 322; 335.

[19] AN I 283f. = Pp 32f.; cf. 5. This could equally refer to signs or marks, but writing seems to fit better. cf. Vv 2.

[20] Paṭṭh I 126; II 238; IV 92f. These are in annotations that could have been added later.

[21] e.g. Norman 1992, p. 247f.

[22] Salomon 1998, p. 14.

Oral literature in India

It should not cause any surprise that India is so late in adopting writing for literary or religious purposes. It was far from alone in that. Nor in having a very highly developed tradition of oral literature. The examples of Iran and the Celtic world spring immediately to mind. However, there is no evidence that Buddhists ever adopted the kind of thorough and systematic methods for the exact memorizing and preserving of complex and even incomprehensible texts which were developed in the brahmanical tradition to preserve the Vedic literature.

At a later stage the typical Buddhist method of remembering texts was by collective recitation, but it is hard to imagine that texts could have been composed by some kind of scriptural composition committee. And indeed the Buddhist tradition does not so envisage it. In the traditional account of the first Council the texts are initially presented to the Council precisely by individuals such as Ānanda. In the world of scholarship the First Council is widely considered legendary, but we may suppose that the account at least preserves a memory of a time when texts were composed by individuals on the basis of their own memory of the Buddha or his teachings. What then seems to have evolved is a tradition of mnemonic chanting (no doubt with pre-Buddhist roots) by monks. I believe that the practice of collective chanting can only have developed later, as the Buddhist community increased in numbers.

In a paper on Pali Oral literature presented at a symposium at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1979 and subsequently published in a volume edited by Denwood and Piatigorsky, I suggested the application of the Parry-Lord theory of oral literature (oral formulaic) to the Pali texts.[23] This has led to a certain amount of subsequent discussion over the intervening years.[24]

It is clear that this theory was first developed in the context of epic poetry and it is debatable whether it applies to all or even most such cases. Since it does seem to correctly describe the working of some types of oral literature, there is no reason why we cannot apply it to Pali texts if that seems appropriate, but it has been argued that, since this theory applies to verse and not prose, it has limited relevance in the Pali case. I think this is a misunderstanding. The Pali texts are obviously prose if one thinks that any form of composition which is not in verse must be in prose. But in fact I would conceive of them as composed (or evolved)

[23] Cousins 1983.
[24] Allon 1997; Wynne 2004.

specifically for chanting and as such to constitute a kind of halfway house between verse and prose.

Some preliminary considerations

Sources which we have from the middle of the first millennium A.D. onwards suggest that each Buddhist school had its own version of the Canon. It is not quite clear how far this was actually true. Nor is it clear how many early Buddhist schools there actually were. Tradition often gives a figure of 18, but it is clear both from textual sources and from inscriptional evidence that later on there were more. In the oral period the number was probably considerably less. It seems likely that there would have been many schools (or rather groups of related schools) with only slightly divergent Canons, while on the other hand the number with radically different versions may have been much less than eighteen.

What is important to understand is that this relates to the period after the establishment of written texts as the norm. There is no certainty that there were actually multiple recensions or versions of complete Canons earlier in the period of oral recitation. Turning to the second century B.C., when Buddhists were certainly using writing for some purposes, we can suppose rather that the situation is as follows. The literature of the four Nikāyas is being preserved widely in the monastic tradition in a systematic manner. Verse works are probably being transmitted both by individual memorization and also in a written form, but probably not generally as part of the *bhāṇaka* tradition, although it is perfectly possible that there may have been exceptions to this. I see this as the explanation for the relative diversity of the surviving versions of the verse texts and the relative closeness of the prose works.

To expand on this. It is clear that Buddhism had already spread widely across the subcontinent and so there may well already have been regional or geographic variations in practice. There must already have been a number of monastic fraternities (*nikāya*), the so-called schools, although the number was certainly less than it later became.

It is crucial to realize that there is nothing to indicate that these schools would have separate *bhāṇaka* traditions. I would envisage rather that whenever a monk gained a reputation as a reciter and teacher of a particular body of material, monks of different fraternities would come to learn and study with him. Indeed, there are very good reasons for supposing that anything else is quite impossible. Let us suppose that in the first century B.C., there were indeed a dozen or so fraternities.

Let us suppose also that each school had its own Canon, each with its own specialists memorizing the four Nikāyas and whatever other types of Buddhist literature were memorized at that time. One then has to ask what percentage of monastics would have been capable of such very large-scale memorization. Let us say, 5%, although that figure seems very high to me.

I don't think this is actually possible for any likely population of South Asia. Let us try a thought experiment. If we assume a total Buddhist monastic population of 180,000 (although that must surely be too high), this gives an average of 15,000 monks for each of the twelve schools. If 5% are capable of large-scale memorization, then each school would have around 750 monks able to memorize large amounts of text. But of that number at least half would be involved in other monastic activities or too old or too young. So we are down to an available 375. That gives less than 75 in the whole of India for any given *Nikāya* (i.e. the *Vinaya* plus the four main *Nikāyas*). But these are average figures. The figure is going to be nearer twenty for the smaller fraternities. So this is surely not viable except for the very biggest schools or geographically localized schools of medium size. If there are only four monks capable of large-scale memorization in e.g. the North-west, presumably only one would have actually completed the task and there would be no real possibility of communal chanting of the more unusual texts.

I assume then that the *bhāṇaka* tradition was not wholly sectarian in nature, although it is also possible to conceive of e.g. separate Theriya and Mahāsaṃghika *bhāṇaka* traditions. I would also doubt whether we can assume a fixed content for each *Nikāya* during the oral period. It is equally possible that a *Dīghabhāṇaka* learnt a basic repertoire from his teachers and subsequently added appropriate long discourses as they became available.

What was written down?

So at last I can turn to the first of my three fundamental questions: what was written down ? The first thing to note is that Asoka already knows Buddhist texts; he lists seven of them in the Bhābrā edict. It is usually assumed that they can only have been handed down by word of mouth, although it is just possible that at some stage he saw them, or some of them, already in a written form. Unfortunately, there is no agreement as to how far they correspond to texts with similar names in the extant canonical literature and it does seem clear that there can be no certainty as to that, either way. Both earlier and later, there is considerable variation as to the names of texts in Buddhist literature. So the text which he refers to as the

Questions of Upatissa may well correspond to the discourse in the *Suttanipāta* which Pali tradition calls the *Sāriputtasutta* and also the *Therapañhasutta*, since Upatissa is the personal name of Sāriputta. But equally, it may not and, more importantly, it tells us nothing about how it relates to the various recensions of this discourse which probably existed at a later date.

Still, the information that he knew Buddhist texts is important and we can perhaps glean a little more. He refers also to the *Admonition to Rāhula* concerning wrong speech. In the extant collections of discourses, both those in Pali and those in Chinese translation, there are several discourses addressed to the Buddha's son Rāhula. Since in the other six cases Asoka does not mention the subject matter, we may suppose that he knew more than one *Admonition to Rāhula* and so he indicates that he means the one concerning wrong speech in order to differentiate it from other *Admonitions to Rāhula* known to him.[25] If this is correct, we can say that Asoka's reference establishes the existence in his time of this genre of Buddhist literature, perhaps also implying the existence of numerous such discourses. Since one of the seven texts mentioned contains *gāthā* in its title and another is referred to as a *summary of vinaya*, we know also that there were already verse texts and works on discipline at this stage. Indeed to require a summary, we may suppose that Vinaya material was already substantial.

I am assuming in the discussion here that the corpus of inscriptions of Asoka known to us is authentic. I am aware that it has recently been suggested or at least implied that some of the more Buddhistic minor inscriptions are ancient or recent forgeries.[26] I do not at present find this suggestion plausible.

But we are dealing with an oral literature in this period and we have to ask how these works were transmitted. Both inscriptions and later traditions show that it was the product of some kind of specialization within the Buddhist monastic order. Indeed, the long-term, reliable transmission of oral literature critically requires an institutional mechanism of some kind and this would have been well-known in India at this time. It is clear that the communal chanting of discourses

[25] Although some have questioned it, it seems virtually certain that what is meant is some version of the discourse contained in the *Majjhima-nikāya*. The specification of 'wrong speech' indicates that there were already multiple discourses addressed to Rāhula, as is preserved in surviving canonical literature in various languages. The specific discourse intended here would correspond to the *Ambalaṭṭhikā-Rāhulovādasutta* and its parallels in other languages. See: Anālayo 2011 I 341–353; II 836f.

[26] Tieken 2000, Tieken 2002, Tieken 2003.

by monks developed as one such mechanism, although it may well not have been the only one in use. Multiple redundancy is also standard in such cultures.

In this particular case, there was a tradition of reciters (*bhāṇakas*), specializing initially in one branch of the Buddhist Canon. It is clear, for example, that some specialized in reciting long discourses and others in discourses of medium length. This is the principle upon which part of the second section of the various extant Buddhist Canons, the *Suttapiṭaka*, is organized. The transmission of the disciplinary literature (contained in the first section of that Canon, the Vinaya) was no doubt the task of similar specialists, but that of the third section of the Canon may also have been in the hands of the same *bhāṇakas* who were responsible for parts of the discourses.

The core of early Buddhist literature is no doubt found in that second section, the *Suttapiṭaka*, itself divided into four or five *Nikāyas* or *Āgamas*. Pali sources generally use the word *Nikāya*, although we do find the term *Āgama* used occasionally. I am not aware of any extant Sanskrit source which uses the term *Nikāya* in this sense. However, it is used in some Prakrit inscriptions from the mainland of India and it is likely, but not quite certain, that it represents the earlier Middle Indic term. So the term *Āgama* is probably introduced as part of the process of Sanskritization in the early centuries A.D. The contents of the fifth *Nikāya*, when recognized, vary greatly in different Buddhist schools and there is some reason to believe that it was originally a kind of portmanteau section to accommodate everything considered authentic *Buddhavacana* not already included in the first four *Nikāyas*. In fact, such an understanding is an explicit alternative in the older Pali commentaries: "the *Khuddakanikāya* consists of the remainder of the teaching of the Buddha".[27] I take it then that this material was outside of the normal mechanisms for oral transmission.

The first four *Nikāyas* certainly each had their own *bhāṇaka* tradition. They are mentioned in inscriptions in India; their views, and even occasionally their disagreements, are referred to in the commentaries from Ceylon; and a number of named individuals have such titles as Dīghabhāṇaka incorporated into their names. Other types of *bhāṇaka* are occasionally mentioned, but these seem ei-

[27] Sv I 23; Sp I 27; Dhs-a 26; Pj I 12: *tattha Khuddakanikāyo nāma — cattāro Nikāye ṭhapetvā, avasesaṃ Buddhavacanaṃ*. This was encapsulated in a (probably old) verse: *ṭhapetvā caturo p'ete, Nikāye Dīghaādike.*
tadaññaṃ Buddhavacanaṃ, Nikāyo Khuddako mato ti ||

ther to represent a secondary institutional development or a later usage whereby anyone who has memorized a text may be called a *bhāṇaka* of that text.

The main mechanism then for the transmission of the discourses was the existence of four groups of specialists within the Buddhist monastic order: two ordered by size of discourse and two handling discourses, often smaller, arranged logically — the Saṃyuttabhāṇakas utilizing thematic principles and the Aṅguttarabhāṇakas employing a numeric method.

Proposed earlier divisions of the canonical material

My own belief is that this system of transmission is ancient and that we have no record or reasonable indication of any older method. The attempt is sometimes made to argue that there was an earlier recension of the texts based upon the list of the nine or later twelve *Aṅgas*. This view was rejected by Étienne Lamotte among others,[28] but has recently been revived in a rather modified form by Oscar von Hinüber.[29] He states that there were originally "perhaps three, then four, later nine, and in the Sanskrit tradition, even twelves (*sic*) items." He appears to envisage an early period when the texts were organized not into *Nikāyas* or even into the three parts of the Tradition (*Piṭaka*), but into three or four *Aṅgas*. I am not at all convinced that this was the case.

In fact, in the canonical texts this list is simply a division of '*dhamma*'. Only in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Apadāna*, among the very last texts added to the Canon, do we find reference to the Buddha's *sāsana* as *navaṅga-* 'ninefold.'[30] A reference to something as 'ninefold' is, of course, no evidence for the existence of Nine Folds. Similarly, the term '*Aṅga*' is extracted from such contexts, but there is no reason to suppose that the nine items were originally known as *Aṅgas*. By the fifth century A.D. (or earlier) the Jains did indeed refer to their scriptures as *Aṅgas* in a list of twelve; in their case, it occurs first in a simple mention as twelvefold.[31] But probably the most likely origin of the notion of *Aṅgas* as a category of parts of the Canon is some kind of competitive formation related to the terminology of the Jains or others.

[28] Lamotte 1988, p. 143f. (French ed. 157f.)

[29] Hinüber 1994; amended slightly in Hinüber 1996, p. 7; cf. Norman 1983, p. 15f. See now Anālayo 2011 p. 696ff.

[30] Ap I 44f.; Bv III 23; IV 16; XII 16; XIII 18; XIX 12 (*Satthusāsana*); V 2; XXV 15 (*Jinasāsana*); cp. also Dīp IV 15; Mil 21; 90; 161; 341; 344f.; 348f.; 362; 372; 381.

[31] *Duvālasaṅga- gaṇipiḍaga-*.: e.g. *Suttāgame* I 140, 649, etc.

In any case, it seems clear that the Pali Canon does not know a category of '*Aṅgas*' at all and so we should simply refer to a list of nine kinds of *dhamma*. Even this is actually quite rare in the first four *Nikāyas*. It is not found at all in either the *Dīghanikāya* or the *Saṃyuttanikāya*; it is present only in the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* in the *Majjhimanikāya* (M I 133f.) and only in a single place in the whole *Vinayapiṭaka* (Vin III 8f.). It is then very much a list of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, where it occurs more often than in the rest of the Canon combined.

In effect, it shows every sign of being a late development. To this we should add that one *sutta* in the *Majjhima* (the *Mahāsuññatā*) has a shorter list of just three items, while one in the *Aṅguttara* has four.[32] Significantly, the Tibetan version of the *Mahāsuññatā* has the standard list of twelve, but the Chinese is the same as the Pali.[33] This shows that, as one would expect, there was a later tendency to substitute the larger lists for the shorter ones. If so, we might suspect that this has already happened in the only two occurrences outside of the *Aṅguttara*; probably this was originally a purely *Aṅguttara* tradition. And, of course, it exemplifies the typical *Aṅguttara* concern with numerical lists.

The short versions are sometimes interpreted as earlier lists of '*Aṅgas*', but that seems quite anachronistic to me. It is possible that this shorter list may in fact refer to types of literature, although it is far from certain. Of the two early contexts with three or four items, one concerns learning *dhamma* from a teacher and the second concerns the power of hearing *dhamma* from the Buddha. The first item in each case is *sutta*, which von Hinüber takes as referring specifically to the *Pātimokkha*, but that is very unlikely when the context is so clearly *dhamma*, not *vinaya*.

The second item is *geyya*, no doubt in this context meaning simply 'verse works'. The third is *veyyākaraṇa* which von Hinüber takes as equivalent to 'prose' i.e., in effect, *Suttanta*. However, it simply means a detailed explanation either in response to a question or in reference to an outline (*uddesa*). So while it certainly can (and does) refer to any discourse which gives a detailed explanation, in this context it surely designates proto-*abhidhamma* material of some kind. We can compare a passage in the *Suttavibhaṅga*.[34] Here, in reference to the *pācittiya* rule which forbids monks from disparaging *vinaya* rules, it is specifically stated that,

[32] M III 115; cf. Nett 78; A III 237f.

[33] Skilling 1997a, p. 390.

[34] Vin IV 144: *iṅgha tvaṃ suttante vā gāthāyo vā abhidhammaṃ vā pariyāpuṇassu, pacchā vinayaṃ pariyāpuṇissasī ti bhaṇati.*

as long as there is no intention of disparaging *vinaya*, it is not an offence to say: "learn *suttantas* or *gāthās* or *abhidhamma*; later you will learn *vinaya*." This too reflects a time when both the *abhidhamma* and the verse literature are starting to become recognized as separate categories.

But there is no indication anywhere that any of this has anything to do with an arrangement of the canonical literature in some kind of earlier recension. The argument of von Hinüber depends upon the supposition that this is a remnant of an earlier stock list, but there is nothing in either of the two contexts to indicate this. It is far too large a step to take, based upon so little evidence, and it does not provide any solution to the problem of how the texts were transmitted.

Alongside the partially historical arguments I have put so far, there is a more textual perspective. What are the earliest Buddhist texts ? What is our best authority for the earliest accessible depiction of Buddhist ideas ?

There is clearly a widespread notion that for this we should look to the oldest verse texts of the kind found in the *Khuddakanikāya* and particularly to those which in Pali are preserved as parts of the *Suttanipāta*. Partly consequential upon this arises a belief that early Buddhism would be essentially an eremitic tradition, with cœnobitic elements only developing much later; it would probably, therefore, at that time involve a relatively small number of people. Clearly a view along these lines has been held by some scholars.

A contrary viewpoint is advanced by J.W. de Jong:

> It is a misconception to assume that the oldest form of the doctrine is to be found in verses which in their literary form are older and more archaic than other parts of the canon.[35]

He points out that many of these stanzas belong to poetic collections current among wandering groups of ascetics and concludes:

> The doctrines found in these verses became in this way part of the Buddhist teaching but that does not mean that they reflect the oldest form of the Buddha's message.

The primary arguments that are advanced for the antiquity in particular of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and the *Pārāyaṇa* are two. The first is the fact that they are referred to in relatively ancient sources in Pali in the *Saṃyutta¬nikāya* and the

[35] De Jong 1991, p. 7.

Aṅguttaranikāya, as well as elsewhere.[36] (The *Sakkapañha¬sutta* and the *Brahmajālasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* are also referred to in the *Saṃyuttanikāya*.[37]) Against this is the fact that they appear unknown to the *Majjhimanikāya* and *Dīghanikāya*; this does not support a very early date.

The second and most frequently advanced argument is the relatively archaic nature of their language. There are two comments I would like to make here. In the first place, we must note that verse texts are more likely to preserve archaic linguistic forms than prose texts. I would therefore expect a verse text to look more archaic than a prose text of the same date.[38] Secondly, if the separate verse texts were not part of the systematically preserved Canon, as envisaged above, they may well have been written down at a much earlier date than the *suttas* which had long been preserved through oral chanting in the *bhāṇaka* institutions of the Saṅgha. It is important to appreciate that a chanted text simply evolves in linguistic form with the passage of time as the language itself evolves. There is no need for any process of translation.

Let me spell out very clearly what I mean. I see the main part of the older *suttas* in the *Nikāyas* as in existence from, say, the fourth century B.C. Verse texts not part of the systematic repertoire of the monastic chanters might have evolved by, say, the third century B.C. Precisely because they were not part of that repertoire they could be written down at an early date and would then be subject to the uncertain vicissitudes of manuscript preservation at a time when methods of looking after written literature were still immature. The oral texts (including some verse material of course) continue to be chanted and are not finally written down until the first century B.C. or thereabouts. Their language naturally evolves with speech, as the written verse texts do not.

In sum, I accept neither the special antiquity of the verse texts nor the model of the nature of early Buddhism that can be derived as a result of a belief in that antiquity.

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[36] *Aṭṭhakavaggiya*: S III 9 = 12; Vin I 196 = Ud 59; *Pārāyaṇa*: S II 47; A I 133 = II 45; I 134; III 399 = 401.

[37] *Sakkapañha*: S III 13; *Brahmajāla*: S IV 286f.; cp. Vibh 349 = 340. It is surely not coincidence that these are the two discourses with the names of the two leading deities. For citations of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, see CPD s.v. *Aṅguttaranikāya*.

[38] We may note also the way in which verses in standard Sanskrit sometimes occur in a prose inscription in a more hybrid Sanskrit: Salomon 1998 p.88.

Where and when were the texts written down?

What is striking about this issue is the lack of information on the topic. Although there are plenty of indications both in the Pali commentaries and in Chinese sources[39] that tell us about the strength of the oral tradition, there is little or nothing said about the introduction of written versions of the texts in most sources. So we are particularly reliant upon the evidence of the Pali *Dīpavaṃsa*. I turn now to that.

i. The evidence of the Dīpavaṃsa

It is commonly stated that the *tipiṭaka* was first written down in Ceylon at a Council in the reign of King Abhaya Vaṭṭagāmani (d. 47 B.C. ±30). The relevant passage in the *Dīpavaṃsa* is simply two stanzas. They are copied exactly in the *Mahāvaṃsa*; so I infer that the source for the latter does not lie in the older commentaries upon which both these chronicles sometimes appear to draw. Most probably, the later *Mahāvaṃsa* is entirely dependent upon the *Dīpavaṃsa* for this information. Almost nothing further is apparently mentioned for a thousand years in Pali sources about the location and circumstances in which the writing down of these texts took place.[40] Even then, contradictory information is found in mediaeval sources. All of this very late material has to be discarded. We should rely primarily upon what can be concluded from these two stanzas alone.

Dīp XX 20f. = Mhv XXXIII 100f.:

> Formerly, learned monk<s> handed down the text
> of the Three Baskets and its explanation by means of oral recitation.
> Seeing the decline of beings, at that time monk<s> assembled and

[39] De Jong 1968, p.8ff. = De Jong 1979, p.84ff.

[40] The *ṭīkās* simply indicate that it was 'like a fourth *saṅgīti*'. See Vjb (Be) 543 (cf. Sp-ṭ (Be) III 456; Vmv (Be) II 272): *porāṇakehi mahātherehī ti Sīhaḷadīpe mahātherehi potthakaṃ āropitakāle ṭhapitā ti attho. Catutthasaṅgītisadisā potthakāruḷhasaṅgīti ahosī ti vuttaṃ.* Sv-pṭ III 135: *aparabhāge therā nāma pāḷiṃ, aṭṭhakathañ ca potthakāropanavasena samāgatā mahātherā, ye sāṭṭhakathaṃ piṭakattayaṃ potthakāruḷhaṃ katvā saddhammaṃ addhaniyaciraṭṭhitikaṃ akaṃsu.* cf. Kieffer-Pülz 2013, II 2334f.

had <the text> written down in books so that the Dhamma would last long.[41]

It was already pointed out by Friedrich Weller that these two verses interrupt the flow and could therefore be an interpolation.[42] In fact, however, this is fairly typical of the *Dīpavaṃsa*. It is much inferior to the later *Mahāvaṃsa* as a literary work, but often more useful as a historical source precisely because of its rather patchwork nature, which makes it easier to identify when it is drawing on material of diverse origin. The interruption suggests rather that it is derived from a source different from the account of Vaṭṭagāmani's reign.

What is immediately striking about these stanzas is that neither a location nor a royal supporter (nor even the language used) is mentioned. Yet the reference is to some sort of council or collective recitation, since it refers to the monks as 'coming together'. Yet it could be interpreted as referring to monks in general and understood as meaning that monks across India came together at different locations. Or it may refer only to the mainland ancestors of the Theriya school in Ceylon (perhaps with some others).

In any case the task of reciting and writing down the *tipiṭaka* (Threefold Tradition) must have been quite substantial and would require broad support. It has been suggested[43] that this Council had some connexion to the Abhayagirivihāra, founded or refounded by Vaṭṭagāmani, which was the main rival of the Mahāvihāra tradition to which the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa* clearly belonged. I suspect that there was no such rivalry in the first century B.C., but the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa* certainly thought there was.[44] The main objection to this is the lack of any report at all in the commentaries associated with the name of Buddhaghosa.

I believe that there is a more probable explanation. The actual initial writing down of the Canon may rather have taken place on the Indian mainland. This is despite the explicit mention in the *Vajirabuddhi-ṭīkā* that it took place on the Sīhaḷa island. Note that this is probably more than a millennium after the event

[41] *Piṭakattayapāliñ ca tassā aṭṭhakatham pi ca*
mukhapāṭhena ānesuṃ pubbe bhikkhū mahāmatī. (20)
Hāniṃ disvāna sattānaṃ tadā bhikkhū samāgatā
ciraṭṭhiṭatthaṃ dhammassa potthakesu likhāpayuṃ. (21)

[42] Weller 1987; rejected: Bechert 1992.

[43] e.g. Collins 1990.

[44] See now: Cousins 2012.

in question and is balanced by the striking absence of any location in the older *Dīgha-ṭīkā*. Had it occurred in Ceylon we might have expected, at least, influence from the local Sinhalese form of Middle Indian. Such influence has in fact been postulated by some scholars and rejected by others. But the proposed examples, even if valid – and I don't believe most of them are – are certainly fewer than might be expected, if the Canon had indeed been initially written down on the island.

ii. Evidence from the Pali commentaries

That the initial writing of the Canon was in mainland India gets support from some passages in the Pali commentaries. It is unclear from the stanzas in the *Dīpavaṃsa* which we are discussing whether the author intends to refer to the period after Vaṭṭagāmani's return to power or to the period of his exile. That exile is associated in the commentaries and in subsequent Sinhalese legend with a time of troubles (*bhaya*) linked with the name of the 'brigand' known variously as the brahmin Tissa (or Tīya) and the *caṇḍāla* Tissa.[45] What is significant here is the story that during this period of famine many or most of the monks on the island went to the mainland.[46] This is quite plausible. By way of comparison, the biography of the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang records that he met in Kāñcīpura a party of over three hundred monks from Ceylon who had left the island because of famine after the death of the king.[47]

Particularly interesting are some of the details of this story, first recorded in the fourth or fifth century A.D. by Buddhaghosa in his *Aṅguttara* commentary.[48] It declares that in the place to which they had gone the 700 monks maintained their memory of 'the *tipiṭaka* together with its explanation' without misremembering even a single syllable. When they returned to the island, they resided in

[45] Sv II 535f. = Ps II 399f. = Mp III 343f.; cf. Sv II 535; Spk II 111; Sah (Ee 2003) 45; 59; 251; 256f.; 265.

[46] Mp I 91f.; Vibh-a 445ff.; Sah (Ee 2003) 45; 59; 251; 256f.; 265; Sīh (Ee 1980) 142; 152; cf. 156 (Tīya); Vin-vn-pṭ I 284; Sp-ṭ II 89 and III 91; 463. Vibh-a refers to Pitumahārājā, but he is identified with Vaṭṭagāmani by Mhv.

[47] Li 1995, p. 115f.

[48] Mp I 92: *bhaye vūpasante sattasatā bhikkhū attano gataṭṭhāne sāṭṭhakathe tepiṭake ekakkharam pi ekavyañjanam pi anāsetvā imam eva dīpam āgamma Kallagāmajanapade Maṇḍalārāmavihāraṃ pavisiṃsu. therānaṃ āgatappavattiṃ sutvā imasmiṃ dīpe ohīnā saṭṭhi bhikkhū 'there passissāmā' ti gantvā, therehi saddhiṃ tepiṭakaṃ sodhentā ekakkharam pi ekavyañjanam pi asamentaṃ nāma na passiṃsu.* The Phayre Ms has the name as Kalalagāma. Vibh-a 448 has Kālakagāma. (These must be alternative renderings of the same vernacular form, originally written Kalaya ?) May be near Bhokkanta in Dakkhiṇadesa in view of Dhp-a 50f.

the Maṇḍalārāma monastery in the Kallagāma district. The sixty monks who had been left on the island joined them there. When the two groups recited the *tipiṭaka* together, they did not find even a syllable discrepant.

There are several significant features to this story. The numbers involved are more reasonable than sometimes. The monks who had gone to the mainland are involved in reciting the texts there — presumably with the local monks, although this is not said. There is no mention of writing down texts, but even in the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana in the late 1950s, which was mainly concerned with preparing a printed edition, the texts were still formally recited. So this is no obstacle to our supposing that this account has something to do with the introduction of written texts to Ceylon. We might imagine that what took place at the Maṇḍalārāma monastery was some kind of official acceptance of the new written texts, perhaps with a measure of reconciliation with any divergent local traditions (handed down from the time of Mahinda).

If we are looking to the mainland, the question arises as to where. I have elsewhere addressed the question as to why the Pali Canon is in Pali and not a local language.[49] I believe that this is because the Pali scriptures were imported from an area speaking a Dravidian language. It might have been possible to think of the nearby Tamil country, but more recent studies have shown that it was the Jains and not the Buddhists, as earlier believed, who were strongly represented there in early times.[50] It is noteworthy too that that area is not mentioned in the lists of places where Buddhist missionaries (of the Theriya tradition) were successful at an early date. That probably means that we must think rather of the area covered by the modern states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Going by the mission accounts, we could look particularly towards Vanavāsa in modern Karnataka.[51]

My hypothesis, then, is that the place from which written texts were introduced to Ceylon most probably lies to the north of the Tamil country in the area of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. If this is correct, then the tradition recorded in the *Dīpavaṃsa* tells about the date when written texts were introduced to Ceylon. In principle, the time when they were first written down could be earlier. It is in any case likely to lie between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D. Nothing of course proves that it happened on only one occasion or at only

[49] Cousins 2001.

[50] Schalk 1994, Schalk, Vēluppiḷḷai, and Nākacāmi 2002; Mahadevan 2003.

[51] And perhaps a southern Mahiṃsa(ka) ?

one time. So we need to consider now which Buddhist group(s) first recorded their texts in written form.

By whom were the texts written down?

Literary evidence for the history of Buddhism in India between the death of the founder and the immediate post-Mauryan period is remarkably scant. Apart from the account of the first two Communal or Collective Recitations (*saṅgīti*), the so-called Councils, and a certain amount of information relating to the reign of the Emperor Asoka, we are largely dependent upon two sources: traditional Buddhist accounts of the origin of the eighteen schools and whatever can be inferred from surviving works of this period. As regards the doxological works, Frauwallner has commented: "These accounts are late, uncertain and contradictory, and cannot be relied upon blindly."[52] That perhaps overstates the case. It is clear that there is a generally accepted tradition that in the course of the second and third centuries after the Buddha's *Mahāparinibbāna* the *Saṃgha* divided into a number of teachers' lineages (*ācariyakula*)[53] or doctrines (*vāda*;[54] *ācariyavāda*[55]) or fraternities (*nikāya*).[56] At a later date these terms became in effect synonymous, but that may well not have been the case earlier.

Following the doxological literature, it seems that two major traditions of Vinaya practice had come into existence. There is reason to believe that these two sections of the *saṅgha* were not originally distinguished by doctrine so much as by details of monastic practice, as is often the case in the Southern Buddhist *nikāyas* today.[57] The tradition known in Sanskrit as the Āryasthāvirīyanikāya (Pali Theriya-[58]) or *Sthaviravāda[59] is the ancestor of all existing branches of the Buddhist *saṅgha* today, since the other major form of monastic practice — the Mahāsaṃghika branch — became extinct, probably in the late mediæval period.

Quite distinct from the traditions of Vinaya practice and probably of somewhat later origin were three major schools of thought: the Sarvāstivāda, the

[52] Frauwallner 1956, p. 5.
[53] e.g. Kv-a 2-3.
[54] e.g. Dīp V, 51.
[55] e.g. Kv-a 3.
[56] ibid.
[57] See Cousins 1991, pp. 27–60.
[58] For Theriya as equivalent to Theravāda/Theravādin, see Cousins 2001, n. 23. See now: Gethin 2012.
[59] Ibid. n.25.

Vibhajyavāda (source of the ideas of the tradition which became established in Ceylon) and the Pudgalavāda. These were probably not originally separate fraternities or *nikāyas* so much as schools of thought either within the Theriya branch or within the *saṅgha* as a whole. Their existence is known from surviving works, mainly portions of the Abhidha(r)mma literature of the first two schools and their criticisms of the third.

Given all these uncertainties, we are not really in a position to say whether the earliest written version of some kind of Sthāvira Canon was produced as a collective endeavour among the common ancestors of the three schools of thought before their final adoption by distinct fraternities. Or whether we should think of different versions being produced around the same time in different areas and traditions. We do not know enough about the relations between the different fraternities to know how far monks of different lineages might have worked together on this task. There are perhaps some resemblances to the process of redaction of different printed editions in the Asian countries since the nineteenth century. If so, we might expect an extremely complex history of interrelationships. And there are some indications that this was indeed the case.

For now, however, I will simply assume that written texts of the four *Nikāyas* at least, originating immediately from some Vibhajjavādin tradition located in the Karnataka-Andhra region, were brought to the island of Ceylon in the first century B.C. They were accepted at some kind of assembly of the Saṃgha in a district (*janapada*) whose Sinhaḷa name is Palicized as Kallagāma(ka) or Kālakagāma, but we do not know if any additions or amendments were made.

The question obviously arises as to what was in written form at that time.

Contents of the earliest Canon in Ceylon

To determine the list of works in the Canon in Ceylon when they were first put in writing we must turn to another passage in the *Dīpavaṃsa*.

Dīp V 32–38; 49–51 = Kv-a 3ff. (The text is given below in an Appendix.):

> The monks of the Great Recitation turned the Teaching on its head.
> They altered the original Collection and made a different
> Collection. (32)
> Those who altered both form and content in the five Nikāyas,
> set suttas which had been collected in one place in a different
> place. (33)

Not understanding <the differences between> what is taught for a
particular context
and what is generally applicable
and between what is to be taken literally and what requires guidance,
those monks (34)
positioned elsewhere what was said in reference to something
specific.
Under pretext of following the letter those monks destroyed
the spirit. (35)
Throwing away a part of the Sutta and the profound Vinaya,
they fashioned a counterfeit Sutta and altered the Vinaya. (36)
The Parivāra, the Atthuddhāra and the six books of Abhidhamma,[60]
the Paṭisambhidā, the Niddesa and in part the Jātaka —
this much they rejected and composed others. (37)
The original name, dress, permitted requisites and rules of behaviour
they abandoned and adopted different ones. (38)

Then later in relation to the monks of the Theriya tradition we read:

These eleven doctrines splintered from the Original Doctrine
(Theravāda)
altered both form and content; rejecting part of the Collection,
and in part the Book, they fashioned <new ones>. (49)
The original name, dress, permitted requisites and rules of
deportment[61]
they abandoned and adopted different ones. (50)
Seventeen schismatic doctrines. A single doctrine not in schism.
All together they are eighteen including the doctrine not
in schism. (51)

It is clear that this account is quite mistaken as regards events six hundred years or more before. As has been widely recognized, it is not at all likely that the

[60] The *Mūlaṭīkā* understands that this means that some rejected just the appendix to Dhs and others the whole *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* (six books because the *Kathāvatthu* had not yet been promulgated). More probably Dīp or its source is referring to a work setting out multiple meanings of words in different contexts. This would have been later incorporated into the *Aṭṭhakathā* literature. (Kv-mṭ: *ekacce aṭṭhakathākaṇḍam eva vissajjiṃsu, ekacce sakalaṃ abhidhammapiṭakan ti āha: atthuddhāraṃ abhidhammaṃ chappakaraṇan ti.*)

[61] Oldenburg: "nouns, genders, composition and the embellishments of style".

Mahāsaṃghika tradition originates from a Collective Recitation held by the defeated party after the Second Collective Recitation described in the Vinaya literature of all schools known to us. The account is clearly an invention (not necessarily by the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa*) deriving from the name Mahāsaṃgha, in fact meaning 'the Saṃgha at large'.

What is not so often acknowledged is that it is very probably the product of perfectly accurate observation of the situation as it must have been in the early centuries A.D. or before.[62] So we learn that the ancestors of the Mahāsaṃghikas rejected certain specific texts:

1. the *Parivāra* — the *Vinaya* appendix which is clearly specific to the Pali school;
2. either the whole *Abhidhammapiṭaka* or the specific *Atthuddhāra* appendix to its first book: the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*;
3. the *Paṭisambhidā-<magga>*;
4. the *Niddesa*
5. a part of the *Jātaka*.

There is every reason to suppose that this list is correct in outline. It is hard to imagine any version of the *Parivāra*, the *Atthuddhāra* (or *Aṭṭhakathākaṇḍa*), the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, or the *Niddesa* in a Mahāsaṃghika version. Surely too the Mahāsaṃghikas would have had their own recension(s) of the *Jātaka*. Of course, it is likely that this information refers to the powerful Mahāsaṃghika schools of the Deccan in the early centuries A.D. It tells us nothing directly about their early history, but much about later times.

When we look at the corresponding section concerning the other eleven schools of the Theriya tradition, we find that what is said is rather different. In particular, there is nothing corresponding to verse 37, although verse 38 (cf. 44) is repeated and verse 33 (cf. 43) is reworded. I conclude that the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa* (or his source)[63] knew well that other Theriya schools had a Canon closely resembling his own. What is important is that he does not say that these

[62] But see Norman 1997, p. 143f.

[63] As previously suggested, apart from its account of the reign of Mahāsena the *Dīpavaṃsa* is something of a collection of disparate materials from an earlier period.

schools rejected the *Parivāra*, the *Atthuddhāra* (or *Aṭṭhakathākaṇḍa*), the *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, and the *Niddesa*. I take it that this is because he believed that they in fact included versions of these texts in their Canon.

In part, he must be mistaken in this. We know now enough about the Canon of the Sarvāstivādin school to suspect that it probably didn't include most of these.[64] But it is unlikely that the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa* knew very much about the Sarvāstivādins. In his day they wrote in Sanskrit, a language which he presumably did not know. Moreover, we have almost no evidence of the presence of Sarvāstivādins south of the Vindhyā in the first half of the first millennium A.D. The Theriya schools known to him would have most probably been Mahiṃsāsakas and perhaps some of the Pudgalavādin group of schools. It is almost certainly their Canon(s) to which he is referring and he is quite likely to be right about their contents. I infer then that the canonical writings available in Ceylon in the first century B.C. must have included these and probably most of the still older verse texts of the *Khuddakanikāya*.

When we turn to the commentaries of Buddhaghosa, which I take to date from the fourth century A.D., we do have a list of the contents of the Canon, although in the actual works of Buddhaghosa himself there are a few points of ambiguity, concerning the contents of the *Khuddakanikāya*.

The list of fifteen works as given in the table below is the one which is standard down to the present time. Just this list is given in the writings of close associates of Buddhaghosa, such as the redactors of the *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* commentaries.[65] It is partially confirmed by the fifth century Chinese translation of the *Vinaya* commentary, which refers to fourteen books, omits the *Khuddakapāṭha* and places the *Apadāna* out of order, but is otherwise identical.[66] The variation in number is not conclusive, as the *Theratherīgāthā* could have been considered as a single work. The omission of the first item: *Khuddakapāṭha* could also not be significant,[67] but other evidence can be taken to suggest that it had not yet gained admission to the list.

What is more interesting is that Buddhaghosa himself also gives the list in a different way. He cites a difference between the Dīghabhāṇakas and the Majjhimabhāṇakas as to whether the *Khuddakagantha* should be included in the *Suttanta-*

[64] An *Upālipāripṛcchā* might perhaps be considered equivalent to the *Parivāra*.

[65] Sp I 18; Dhs-a 18; Pj I 12. Buddhaghosa gives it at: Sv I 17.

[66] Bapat and Hirakawa 1970, p. 11.

[67] The name would have been unfamiliar to the Chinese and they may have thought it referred to the *Khuddakanikāya* as a whole.

piṭaka or in the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. This tells us that he is citing a discussion from earlier commentaries, since the *bhāṇaka* traditions were almost certainly no longer operating in his time as schools of thought.

Implicit in Dīpavaṃsa	Dīghabhāṇaka order	Majjhimabhāṇaka order	Post-Buddhaghosa
Jātaka	Jātaka	Jātaka	Khuddakapāṭha
Niddesa	Mahāniddesa	Mahāniddesa	Dhammapada
	Cūḷaniddesa	Cūḷaniddesa	Udāna
Paṭisambhidāmagga	Paṭisambhidāmagga	Paṭisambhidāmagga	Itivuttaka
Suttanipāta	Suttanipāta	Suttanipāta	Suttanipāta
Dhammapada	Dhammapada	Dhammapada	Vimānavatthu
Udāna	Udāna	Udāna	Petavatthu
Itivuttaka	Itivuttaka	Itivuttaka	Theragāthā
Vimānapetavatthu	Vimānapetavatthu	Vimānapetavatthu	Therīgāthā
Theratherīgāthā	Theratherīgāthā	Theratherīgāthā	Jātaka
		Cariyāpiṭaka	Niddesa
		Apadāna	Paṭisambhidā
		Buddhavaṃsa	Apadāna
			Buddhavaṃsa
			Cariyāpiṭaka
	10 works	13 works	15 works

What we have here is the list of the texts included in the *Khuddakagantha* by the earlier commentaries around the first or second century A.D. If we compare it to the list implied by the account of the supposed Mahāsaṅgīti in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, it is clearly very similar. The sequence of texts given here is found elsewhere and must be the original order of the *Khuddaka* texts in this tradition. When Buddhaghosa enumerates texts which were argued by some to lack the name of '*sutta*', the list which he gives is quite close to that given by the Dīghabhāṇakas.[68] This view is rejected by a Sudinnathera, of uncertain date; so this list too probably derives from the old commentaries. We can also note that the order of texts given in these earlier lists resembles the historical order in which commentaries were eventually written on these texts in the *Khuddakanikāya* after the time of Buddhaghosa.[69]

[68] Sv II 566 = Mp III 159. *Apadāna* is added at the end and *Niddesa* follows *Paṭisambhidā*.
[69] Hinüber 1996, 42f.

I conclude provisionally that the *Khuddakanikāya* texts brought to Ceylon in the first century B.C. and thereafter available in written form were the ten works contained in the Dīghabhāṇaka list. The *Vinayapiṭaka* and the first four *Nikāyas* were certainly included as well, and no doubt the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. It is of course possible that they existed in recensions different to that known to Buddhaghosa.

Summary of the discussion of the writing down of the texts

To summarize what has been said so far, I understand that in the second century B.C. many texts were orally transmitted, but others already existed in a less authoritative written form. I take the oral literature to have been largely common to all monks in a given neighbourhood, although there may already have been some sectarian differences. The written literature certainly varied. In or around the first century B.C. there was a move to written texts which I assume (in the absence of any definite evidence) to have occurred around the same time in all or most areas and traditions. This led to different monasteries and schools forming their own written collections, leading to rapid diversification. Such collections included both works of the earlier oral transmission and works which had already been written down at an earlier stage. As far as the Theriya tradition is concerned (and probably other non-Mahāsaṃghikas south of the Vindhyā) this would have included most of the works of the present Pali Canon. The disputed texts, notably *bodhisatta*-orientated works such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, will have been incorporated later, probably in the first century A.D.

I turn now to the question of the language in which they were written.

In what language were they written ?

i. The origin of the Pali language

It might be supposed that the Pali Canon was written in Pali, but in fact things are not so simple. It is far from clear that there really is such a thing as the Pali language. This is obvious if you try to say 'Pali language' in Pali. There is no way to say it. The expression *pāḷibhāsā* means simply the language of the texts i.e. it is not the name of a language. Even that much is not found in either the Canon or the commentarial literature. There you find the separate word *pāḷi* rather frequently in the sense of 'text'. The compound with *bhāsā* first occurs with the later

subcommentaries, known as *ṭīkās*. In fact, I know no example in those where the term *pāḷibhāsā* **must** have the meaning of 'Pali language' and a number of cases where it clearly means 'language of the texts'.[70]

Although there are some passages where it is difficult to rule out **completely** the meaning of 'Pali language',[71] as it stands we have to follow von Hinüber in supposing that the origin of the usage of the word Pali as the name of a language lies in the seventeenth century.[72] Or, at any rate, it is not attested earlier. In that case the earliest proven use in the published domain is a book published in Paris in 1674 which recounts Laneau's learning of Pali (Baly) in Siam in 1672.[73] Whether this new usage was an entirely home-grown product, I am not sure. It is entirely possible that an initial misunderstanding by the French or the Portuguese led to a growing supposition in Ceylon or Siam that *pāḷi* is the name of a language. In most contexts the usage probably remained ambiguous.

What is quite clear is that for the Pali commentators the language in which they were writing is known as the Māgadha or Māgadhika language or simply as Māgadhī. We do not know the **exact** form in which the Canon was written down. Undoubtedly, those involved considered it to be in the Māgadha language and their successors have, quite correctly, continued to refer to it by that name ever since. This name is generally disliked in European scholarship because it doesn't conform to descriptions of the Māgadhī form of Prakrit derived from Indian grammatical literature. But in fact, we need not privilege those.

No Pali manuscript survives which is earlier than Buddhaghosa in date and, as far as I know, the oldest Pali manuscript extant is from Nepal and consists of a few leaves of the *Vinayapiṭaka*, dating from the eighth or ninth centuries A.D.[74] Significantly older than this are the inscriptions on gold plates from Śrī Kṣetra, the ancient capital of the Pyu kingdom in present-day Burma.[75] According to Harry Falk, the earliest of these date from the early fifth century. Otherwise, there are a number of inscriptions from South-East Asia, probably belonging to the eighth or ninth century A.D.[76]

[70] A different view: Crosby 2004.

[71] E.g. Khuddas-ṭ 413: ***Bhāsantarena pi vattuṃ labbhan*** *ti na kevalaṃ pāḷibhāsāyam eva, sīhaḷādibhāsāya pi nissajjituṃ labbhatī ti attho.*

[72] Hinüber 1994 [1977].

[73] Pruitt 1987, p. 121.

[74] Hinüber 1991.

[75] Falk 1997; Stargardt 1995, Stargardt 2001.

[76] Skilling 1997b.

The only early direct evidence which is at least relatively near to Buddhaghosa in time consists of a few inscriptions from India which are considered by some to be in a continental variety of the Pali language.[77] While there is no doubt that these inscriptions are relatively close to Pali as compared to other forms of written Middle Indian, it can be argued that they differ in certain respects from standard Pali as we usually understand it. So others would prefer to reserve the name Pali for the language of the texts, the *pāḷi* proper.

ii. The development of a common epigraphic Prakrit

Turning now to the evolution of the written language in India from the time of Asoka, let me begin by restricting myself to India in a narrow sense of the term, i.e., one which corresponds not to the subcontinent as a whole but to the geographical area encompassed by the present-day Republic of India. More exactly, what I am referring to is that portion of the territories known to have been ruled by the Mauryans which lies within the territory of the modern Indian state, possibly excluding a few locations on the fringes of this area.

Within India so defined, and with one possible exception, a relatively uniform dialect is employed for Asoka's inscriptions. It is often referred to as the Eastern dialect, but while this is useful for the history of language, it is distinctly misleading from a historical perspective. I prefer to follow the designation adopted by Lüders (and others) and call it Old Ardhamāgadhī.[78] Whatever we call it, this dialect must reflect the language of either Asoka himself or of all or part of his court and/or administration. Very likely, it is an epigraphic version of the dialect of a ruling class dominated by persons originating from an area in the East. The exception is at Girnār in the West and in the fragments from nearby Sōpārā. There it is disputed whether what we are seeing represents a local dialect or simply a scribal practice. I shall not address that now. The significant point is that the Eastern or Eastern-influenced dialect of all other Mauryan inscriptions in India cannot have been the local or ordinary spoken dialect of most people in the majority of the places where it is used.

That this is so is indicated rather clearly by the fact that no post-Mauryan inscriptions in this dialect are extant. It is replaced by what Richard Salomon calls 'standard' or 'common' epigraphic Prakrit. Let me quote him at some length:

[77] Hinüber 1985.
[78] Hinüber 2001 §§17; 56.

> The dominant role in all regions except the northwest and Sri Lanka falls hereafter to a variety of Prakrit which most resembles, among the Aśokan dialects, the western dialect of the Girnār rock edicts, and which among literary languages has the most in common with Pāli and archaic forms of Śaurasenī.[79]

and a little later:

> This central-western MIA dialect was, in fact, virtually the sole language in epigraphic use in the period in question, and therefore seems, like Pāli, to have developed into something like a northern Indian lingua franca, at least for epigraphic purposes, in the last two centuries B.C.[80]

For a change of this kind to be so abrupt and so apparently complete, two things seem necessary. The abruptness of the change requires some kind of widespread administrative structure still to be in place. One thinks then of Asoka and his successors or, at the latest, the reign of Puṣyamitra; indeed it is unclear how far his successors would have had a sufficiently wide-ranging authority for this purpose.

Secondly, the completeness of this change suggests that it may well represent the adoption of features which derive in fact from the normal spoken dialect of most of the territory in India under Mauryan rule. It has to be noted that even in areas, such as Orissa, where the spoken dialect must have been Eastern, the new 'standard epigraphic' Prakrit is adopted. That strongly suggests an initial administrative change.

Salomon does not address the question as to what this language was called. It seems to me, however, that there is only one possible answer. The language used in the Indian inscriptions of Asoka was the state language of the kingdom of Magadha; it can only have been called the Māgadha or Māgadhī language. I can see no reason to suppose that the administrative or cultural change which led to the adoption of some western dialect features would have required a change of name. It could perhaps be argued that in some areas it was considered as the adoption of their local dialect, although that seems improbable. In the area of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh that would not have been an option, since the local language

[79] Salomon 1998, p. 76.
[80] Ibid. p. 77.

must surely have been Dravidian. There at least, and probably everywhere, it must have continued to be called Māgadhī. For present purposes and for reasons which will become clear I will call this language Old Pali, thereby in part reverting to a usage once common in the 19th century.

iii. The language used for the early Canonical recensions

At this point I want to address the question as to what language was used to write down the recension of the Canon brought to Ceylon in the first century B.C. Here, I think we have to start with two assumptions. The first is that Pali in the restricted sense (as used by K.R. Norman, for example) does not exist much prior to the time of the fourth or fifth century commentaries. This explains why we don't find it in inscriptions. My second assumption is that **writing** of Buddhist works begins already in the Mauryan period. I do not mean by this that the first four *Nikāyas* were written down at this point, although individual *Suttas* may have been. I mean that other works of various kinds were written down at this time and some of them will have subsequently been incorporated into the Canonical literature of various Buddhist schools.

Such written works (or at any rate some of them) must have been written down in Old Ardhamāgadhī. We have only this language attested in wide use in India for writing in this period. As previously mentioned, the exception is the possible Western dialect used at Girnār (and possibly at Sōpārā), but at present it seems more reasonable to suppose that this is a matter of local scribal practice rather than anything used more widely at this date. The use of Old Ardhamāgadhī is not merely a matter of hypothesis. In the *Kathāvatthu* we have an example of exactly this. The *Kathāvatthu* is traditionally believed to have been written in the Mauryan period and I believe its contents and other evidence support this for the core of the work. Frequently it presents debates between opposing views in a form that still preserves many so-called 'Eastern' features. This is particularly true of the basic framework, introduced at the beginning and intended to be applied throughout the work.

When written versions of the oral literature were systematically produced, probably in the first century B.C., and existing written works of established authority were joined to them to produce what we may call a Canon, the language which must have been used was a Buddhist version of the standard language known directly to us in its epigraphic form. I am calling both simply Old Pali. There is no evidence that any other written language was widely used in India at

this point. Presumably some form of Old Ardhamāgadhī did continue to be used somewhere, at least among the Jains, but it had clearly gone completely out of use among Buddhists in the South. Sanskrit was probably not a contender in this area at this time.

I see no reason to suppose that there would have been any major difference between the manner of writing Buddhist texts and these inscriptional or 'monumental' languages. If so, we can gain a good idea of how the texts were written from these post-Asokan inscriptions. Let me again quote Richard Salomon:

> Much more than is the case with the literary Prakrits of later times, the morphology and especially the orthography of the inscriptional dialects is unstandardized and inconsistent, to the extent that it is not unusual to find the same word spelled several different ways within the same inscription.[81]

We need then to be careful in using the existence of multiple spellings as evidence of dialect affiliations. Such variations may only reflect scribal virtuosity and scribal awareness of widespread spoken or written usages.

In particular, we should note that double consonants are almost always represented by a single consonant and *anusvāra* is used only sporadically to indicate nasalization, which is often left unindicated. Moreover, in the inscriptional dialect that I am calling Old Pali, consonantal groups are almost always assimilated. In that dialect too, as with later Pali, we find such features as the general adoption of the dental sibilant, the retention of the distinction between *'r'* and *'l'* and the nominative singular in *-o* rather than *-e*.

We have to note, however, that where we find surviving features characteristic of a more 'Eastern' dialect this may in some cases (but not others) tell us only about the survival of orthographic practices belonging to the Mauryan period, i.e., to the written language I am calling Old Ardhamāgadhī. In other cases this may be because a particular form of a standard Buddhist term became fixed. Then we might look rather to the preservation of terminology from the oral dialect of the region in which the Buddha lived.

[81] Salomon, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

Old Ardhamāgadhī or Aśokan (Eastern) 'dialect'	Old Pali or Standard Epigraphic Prakrit	Usual or expected form in Pali	Anomalous features in actual Pali
'kṣ' becomes *'kkh'*	*-cch-*	*-cch-*	*bhikkhu* < *bhikṣu*
historic *'r'* and *'l'* become *'l'*	historic *'r'* and *'l'*	historic *'r'* and *'l'*	*pali-* for *pari-*
nominative singular in *-e*	nominative singular in *-o*	nominative singular in *-o*	sporadic occurrences of nominative singular in *-e* and other 'Eastern' inflections e.g. *bhikkhave*
historic *'n'*, *'ṇ'* and *'ñ'* all become *'n'*	historic forms preserved	historic forms preserved	*nibbāna* < *nirvāṇa*
consonant groups may either assimilate or insert an epenthetic vowel	consonant groups usually assimilate	consonant groups may either assimilate or insert an epenthetic vowel	

It is also important to appreciate that both Old Ardhamāgadhī and Old Pali evince the sporadic occurrence of features that seem typical of a later stage in the development of Middle Indian. For example, the voicing of intervocalic unvoiced consonants is found at intervals in both of these languages. It is also found occasionally in standard Pali, as is the restoration of unhistoric unvoiced consonants by way of inadvertent over-correction: so-called 'hyper-forms'. This may either represent the influence of spoken dialects, already at a more advanced stage of development, or in some cases the influence of other written dialects, such as Gāndhārī or Sinhaḷa Prakrit. In the case of the inscriptions of Asoka we may also have to deal with influence from the personal speech of Asoka himself (or others in his court) whose speech may have been more 'Eastern' than standard Old Ardhamāgadhī.

I turn now to epigraphic developments in the North and North-west.

iv. Epigraphic developments

Beginning around the first century A.D., inscriptions occur written in a form sometimes referred to as 'mixed dialect' or as 'Prakrit influenced by Sanskrit' (or the reverse). The name used most often now is probably the term coined by

Damsteegt: 'Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit', conveniently abbreviated as EHS.[82] Closely related is the language of some Buddhist texts originating or revised in this period, commonly known as Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (BHS). We should probably assume that both EHS and BHS are specific applications and perhaps specific dialects of a form of language which came to be in wide use among educated people in this period, for writing purposes at least and perhaps also in spoken form.

Whatever the origin may have been, it is clear that the result was to facilitate a process that led eventually to the widespread adoption of Sanskrit as the unrivalled language of culture throughout South Asia and beyond. From this point of view, in inscriptions we see a steady increase in Sanskritization over the coming centuries until eventually EHS is largely replaced by classical Sanskrit. During its period of use Richard Salomon suggests that we should perhaps:

> think of EHS in terms of a broad spectrum of partial Sanskritization, verging into pure MIA at one end and standard Sanskrit at the other.[83]

In one respect, however, this is perhaps misleading. There is no final completion in a 'standard Sanskrit'. Rather, what is called standard Sanskrit itself retains significant elements of Middle Indian syntax and vocabulary — to this extent it is itself a hybrid language.

For present purposes what is important is the question of where and when Sanskrit (whether mixed or not) was **not used**. In fact, the language I have called Old Pali in this article remains the predominant language in inscriptions in the Deccan and further south into the fourth century A.D. It is only after this that it is largely replaced by Sanskrit.

What we do see develop around the third and fourth centuries, or perhaps a little earlier, is an increasing precision in orthography with such features as a more regular representation of doubled consonants. We could perhaps call this Epigraphical Hybrid Pali. But to understand why I say this, we need to turn to the question of the language which immediately underlies Pali.

[82] Damsteegt 1978.

[83] Salomon, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

v. The language which immediately underlies Pali

I have suggested that the language in which the canonical texts of some or all the Theriya traditions in India were written down was the language which I am calling Old Pali, with some features inherited from Old Ardhamāgadhī. We should of course recall that any kind of standard orthography is unlikely to have been present; indeed, variation of spelling might have been considered a stylistic feature at this time.

This is a rather different position to the view taken by K.R. Norman, who attributes the introduction of standardization to the time of the writing down of the texts. As he points out,

> Writing down would have been an excellent opportunity for the homogenisation of forms — all absolutives in *-ttā* being changed to *-tvā*, and the forms containing *-r-* being standardised, etc.[84]

Well, it certainly would have been, but this seems to me to go against the epigraphic evidence. I think that we should look to a later date and possibly to the time of the school of Buddhaghosa or a little earlier. What Norman is referring to here is the fact that standard Pali contains elements of relatively advanced Sanskritization. A few examples:

THE PROCESS OF SANSKRITIZATION

Old Pali	Hybrid Pali	Standard Pali
absolutives written as *tā*	absolutives written as *-ttā* or *-tvā*	absolutives written as *-tvā*
bāhaṇa, *bāṃbhaṇa*, etc.	*brāhmaṇa*	expected form would be: *bā-*
**vaka<vākya*	**vakka*	*vākya*
**utatha<utrasta*	**uttattha*	*utrasta*

HYPER FORMS

Old Pali	Hybrid Pali	Standard Pali
**būheti< bṛṃhayati*	?	*brūheti* instead of *būheti*
**ataja< ātmaja*	**attaja*	*atraja* instead of **attaja*

[84] Norman 1997, p. 78.

Mistaken Sanskritizations are occasionally found. Traditional etymologies for such words as *brāhmaṇa* sometimes imply a linguistically later stage of development. Sometimes too in verse the metre is more correct if such a stage is assumed. For these and other reasons, Norman writes:

> We can therefore conclude that these forms, and probably all other Sanskritic features, are deliberate attempts at Sanskritisation, made at some point during the course of the transmission of the canon.[85]

This is clearly correct.

The natural interpretation of this evidence is, it seems to me, that this particular stage of Sanskritization (as opposed to a later, but still significant, phase around the twelfth century) must have occurred in manuscripts at roughly the same time that it took place in inscriptions, i.e., during the period from the first century to the third century A.D.[86]

I therefore conclude that the manuscripts at this time were written in a 'Buddhist Hybrid Pali' closely related to the 'Epigraphic Hybrid Pali' familiar to us from inscriptions. This would resemble the relationship between Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit and Epigraphic Hybrid Sanskrit. Similarly, I would say that Hybrid Pali is related to Standard Pali in a manner which in some ways parallels the relationship between Hybrid Sanskrit and Classical Sanskrit.

The work of the Pali commentators must then have been in part to standardize the language, updating survivals from Old Pali and removing excessive Sanskritization. Whether this was completely the work of the school of Buddhaghosa or had already been largely accomplished by earlier commentators is impossible to say. Whoever it was, their achievement was the creation of a language pleasing to the mind (*manoramaṃ bhāsaṃ*), as Buddhaghosa puts it — a language free from defect (*dosa*) and appropriate to the manner of scripture.[87] He is speaking there of the language of his commentary to the 'excellent *Āgama* which is profound and <called> long (*dīgha*) because it features long discourses', but I believe this accurately reflects the editorial work that created the Pali Canon in a form close to that which we know.

[85] Ibid., p. 98. See Oberlies 2001, p.19f.; 102f.

[86] We may note that Pali inscriptions from Dvāravatī appear to write *-vv-* where modern Pali writes *-bb-*. This may be a local Pali orthography, but it has to be noted that there does not seem to be any source extant from the first millennium which definitely writes *-bb-*. Indeed, the distinction between *'b'* and *'v'* was probably not made in all scripts used for Pali.

[87] Sv I 1.

I have spoken so far of Old Ardhamāgadhī, Old Pali, Hybrid Pali and Standard Pali. There seems no reason to doubt that those who wrote in these ways knew only one name for the language and that was surely Māgadhī or something similar. If we are correct to call 'English' both the language in which Shakespeare wrote the manuscript of Hamlet and that in which we read Hamlet in the modernized editions of today, then they were certainly right to do so. Some might prefer to say that only a dialect which contains the distinctive features of the language of the ancient Angles can be called English.

For myself, I am happy to state that some Buddhist texts were first written down in a language they called Māgadhī in the Mauryan period. This was a type of κοινή with vocabulary and syntax deriving from various dialects and without a standardized spelling. More were written or rewritten in a language still called Māgadhī but possibly with some changes to orthography in the second and first centuries B.C., culminating in the first systematic written recensions of works previously preserved orally.[88] During the first centuries A.D. the orthography of the manuscripts evolved further in the direction of Sanskritization, or Palicization, if you prefer. Finally the standard Pali, largely as we know it today, was created around the third or fourth century A.D. The language was still called Māgadhī at that time and remains so called to this day. But it is convenient to continue to use the familiar name of Pali, since it does avoid confusion with the spoken dialect of Eastern India as described by Indian grammarians and its subsequent literary use in drama and perhaps elsewhere.

APPENDIX

Dīp V 32–38; 49–51 = Kv-a 3ff.:
Mahāsaṃgītikā bhikkhū vilomaṃ akaṃsu sāsanaṃ.
Bhinditvā mūlasaṃgahaṃ aññaṃ akaṃsu saṃgahaṃ. (32)
Aññattha saṅgahitaṃ suttaṃ aññattha akariṃsu te.
Atthaṃ dhammañ ca bhindiṃsu ye Nikāyesu pañcasu. (33)
Pariyāyadesitañ cāpi atho nippariyāyadesitaṃ
nītatthaṃ c'eva neyyatthaṃ ajānitvāna bhikkhavo (34)
aññaṃ sandhāya bhaṇitaṃ aññattha ṭhapayiṃsu te.
Vyañjanacchāyāya te bhikkhū bahuṃ atthaṃ vināsayuṃ. (35)

[88] I assume that such works were rendered into Gāndhārī during the same period, but I have for the most part not tried in this article to take account of recent discoveries from Greater Gandhāra.

Chaḍḍetvā ekadesaṃ Suttaṃ Vinayañ ca gambhīraṃ,
patirūpaṃ Suttaṃ Vinayaṃ tañ ca aññaṃ kariṃsu te. (36)
Parivāraṃ Atth'uddhāraṃ Abhidhammappakaraṇaṃ,
Paṭisambhidañ ca Niddesaṃ ekadesañ ca Jātakaṃ,
ettakaṃ vissajjetvāna aññāni akariṃsu te. (37)
Nāmaṃ liṅgaṃ parikkhāraṃ ākappakaraṇāni ca,
pakatibhāvaṃ vijahetvā tañ ca aññaṃ akaṃsu te. (38)
…
Ime ekādasa vādā pabhinnā theravādato,
atthaṃ dhammañ ca bhindiṃsu; ekadesañ ca saṅgahaṃ,
ganthañ ca ekadesamhi chaḍḍetvāna akaṃsu te. (49)
Nāmaṃ liṅgaṃ parikkhāraṃ ākappakaraṇāni ca,
Pakatibhāvaṃ vijahetvā tañ ca aññaṃ akaṃsu te. (50)
Sattarasa bhinnavādā, ekavādo abhinnako,
Sabbe v' aṭṭhārasa honti 'bhinnavādena te saha.(51)

Textual notes:

35b: read *aññattha*; eds and Mss vary between *aññatthaṃ* and *aññaṃ atthaṃ*.
35d: E^{e}: *bahu*.
36c: so Kv-a (E^{e}1979); E^{e}: *Suttavinayaṃ*.
37b: Kv-a (E^{e}1979): *Abhidhammaṃ chappakaraṇaṃ* (this derives from the context in Kv-a — Kv does not exist until the 3rd *Saṅgīti*); E^{e}: *Abhidhammappakaraṇaṃ*. Read: *chappakārakaṃ*.
38b & 50b: many eds and Mss read: *ākappakaraṇīyāni*; write: °*karaṇiyāni* m.c.
38c & 50c: E^{e}: *vijahetvā*; vl to E^{e}: *vijahitvā*; Kv-a (E^{e}1979): *jahitvāna*; vl to Kv-a (E^{e}1979): *jahitvā*.
49e: so Kv-a (E^{e}1979); E^{e}: *gaṇṭhiñ*; VRI: *gāthañ*?

A note on abbreviations and sources

Abbreviations of the names of Pali and Sanskrit texts in this paper follow the system of the *Critical Pāli Dictionary*.
See: http://pali.hum.ku.dk/cpd/intro/vol1_epileg_abbrev_texts.html

Page references for Pali texts are to the Pali Text Society (PTS) edition (E^e), where available, otherwise to the Burmese edition (B^e) as given on the Vipassanā Research Institute (VRI) CD, unless otherwise indicated.

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