

An Eye Transplant and a Pound of Flesh



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The Sivi Jataka from Mathura, 2nd century.

Sibi is a small rural town in Pakistan's Balochistan Province and like many such places it has little to recommend it. It is occasionally the scene of terrorist attacks by Balochi separatists, it has no forts, palaces or ancient ruins that might attract tourists from outside, and it often records the highest temperatures in Pakistan. But as unlikely as it

may seem, this woebegone, dusty town was once the setting for one of Buddhism's most enduring and beautiful legends. In ancient times it was the capital of the small city state of Ariththapura and at one time was ruled by a king named Sivi or sometimes Sibi or Shibi. This king gets a mention in the Mahabharata and the Cholas of south India claimed to be descended from him, a claim that had no basis in fact. The earliest mention of King Sivi however is from the Jataka, in the Sivi Jataka, story



From Nagarjunakonda, 4th century CE.

499 of the collection. According to this story the Bodhisattva was once reborn as King Sivi and he had made a vow to give anything if anyone asked it of him. Aware of this vow, Sakra decided to test the king to see how genuine his vow was. He manifests himself as a blind man and approached the king pleading; "Give me sight. Will no one give me sight?" Hearing this, filled with compassion, and determined to fulfil his vow, the king led the blind man to a surgeon and asked that his own eyes be taken out and transplanted into the sunken sockets of the blind man. At this point the Jataka increases the tension of the story by having the surgeon ask the king; "Are you sure



A panel from Borobudur, 9th century.

this is what you want to do?" But the king is adamant and requests that

the operation proceeds. What follows is a fairly explicit description of how the eyeballs were squeezed from their sockets, how the optic nerve (or is it the extraocular muscles?) is severed, and the pain this caused. Before the surgeon severs the optic nerve for good he again asks; "Are you sure you want me to do this? Once I cut it there is no turning back." The king, now in terrible pain, begs the surgeon to hurry up and do the needful. The scene is so vivid that one is tempted to think that the ancient Indian physicians may have actually tried to perform such an operation. As happens in most such Jatakas, the drama ends well with the king's sight being restored.

In later Buddhist Sanskrit text there is another version of this story. Here King Sibi makes a vow that he will do whatever he can to save a life should the need ever arise. Sakra manifests himself as a hawk who



The Sivi Jataka from from Dunhuang, 7th century.

catches a dove within view of the king. Seeing this the king pleads with the hawk to release its prey but the bird retorts: "Then how am I to feed myself and my young?" The king thinks for a moment and then says; "I will cut some flesh from my thigh and give it to you if you let the dove go." Driving a hard bargain, the hawk agrees but says it wants the same amount of flesh as would have been provided by the dove. The king

agrees, a pair of scales are produced, the dove is weighed, and the process of slicing off a dove's-worth of flesh is about to begin when Sakra reveals himself and expresses his satisfaction that King Sibi has had the courage to go through with his vow.

Although the imagery of cutting eyes balls out of their sockets or slicing flesh off a living person are disconcerting, even shocking, the purpose of both versions of this Jataka story is clear. A true hero will be prepared to sacrifice much of himself or herself for others. Jesus said very much the same thing in the Gospel of John: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The Sivi version of the story is depicted in a relief from Sarnath and Nagajunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, in a mural on the



Mural from Mukirigala, Sri Lanka, early 19th century

walls of the ancient Mulkirigala temple in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. This version has had an unexpected consequence. Sri Lankan has the highest number of people

willing to donate their corneas after death to be used to help restore sight to the blind. This is due to campaigning starting in 1964 by the Sri Lankan Eye Donation Society and also because Buddhists in the country are familiar with the story of King Sivi's gift. The society has 450 branches in the country and every year is able to provide thousands of corneas to be used in eye surgery around the world.

The alternative Sibi version of the story is depicted in the art of numerous Buddhist countries. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the depiction on one of the panels of the great Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Java. In the middle of the panel a pair of large and impressive scales can be seen and in the right hand dish of the scales the dove is waiting to be weighed against the king's flesh. This version of the story has had an influence too, although in literature rather than medicine.

In around 1597 William Shakespeare wrote his famous play *The Merchant of Venice*. In the play a young merchant promises to guarantee a loan his friend plans to take out in order to woo his sweetheart. The agreement is that if the loan, which is given without interest, cannot be repaid by a set date the moneylender will be repaid not in cash but with a pound (about 450 grams) of the guarantor's flesh. The moneylender made this stipulation because he secretly hates the guarantor and hopes that he will not be able to repay the money. The date passes without the loan being repaid and the moneylender demands his pound of flesh. The lender is soon gets enough money to repay the loan and even offers to

double the amount rather have his friend's flesh cut off, but the moneylender demands that the original agreement be kept. He does not want the money; he wants the pound of flesh. The parties go to court and the judges uphold the original agreement, that that moneylender can have his pound of flesh but only if he sheds no blood, which would be a criminal offence under the law.

This is one of Shakespeare's most dramatic plays and scholars have explored the ideas in it in great detail. Its chief source was Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* written in 1378. But where did Fiorentino get the idea of cutting off flesh of a certain weight to repay a loan? The simple answer is that no one knows. But the idea is so gripping, so iconic, so unusual, that one cannot help thinking that at some time before the 14th century, probably many centuries earlier, it may have travelled from India, through the Middle East and eventually filtered into Europe. If this is correct, it may be a small contribution Buddhist literature made to the works of Shakespeare.

The story of King Sibi endured for centuries despite the disappearance of Buddhism in India. In 1907 M. Longworth Dames published his *Popular Poetry of the Baloches*, containing English translations of verses, songs and poetry he had transcribed in the Balochi tongue during the previous decades. One of the poems he recorded in 1884 is immediately recognizable as the Jataka story, except that King Sibi is a Muslim named Ali.

But to return to the town of Sibi. In a semi-desert area to the south of the town is a collection of ruins. One of these looks suspiciously like it was once a stupa. We know that there was such a monument somewhere in or near the town because the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang mentioned one in his travelogue, erected “where King Sivika sliced his body to ransom a dove from a hawk, in order to acquire Buddhahood.” No archaeological examination has ever been done to determine the date and purpose of this monument, and probably never will be. But it is quite likely that it is what remains of the stupa erected to commemorate king Sivi’s noble deed.