

New Evidence for Mahayana in Early Gandhāra

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I. INTRODUCTION: NEW SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON THE EARLY MAHAYANA IN GANDHĀRA

THE ORIGIN of the Mahayana—its date, location, motivations, institutional circumstances, and so on—has been a preoccupation, if not an obsession, of academic Buddhist studies for several decades now. The discussion has been pursued in a wide range of academic publications. By way of example, volume 35 (2003) of this journal contained three important articles dealing with early Mahayana and its origins, published together under the heading “Symposium: Early Mahāyāna.” These were “Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras” by Paul Harrison, “Early Mahāyāna and Gandhāran Buddhism: An Assessment of the Visual Evidence” by Rhi Juhung, and “Towards a New Working Hypothesis on the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism” by Aramaki Noritoshi.¹ Among these, Rhi’s article has a particular bearing on the present one in that it deals specifically with Gandhāra and proposes a view of the early phase of the Mahayana that is similar to our own; but whereas Rhi

THIS ARTICLE is based on a lecture of the same title presented jointly by the authors at an international symposium entitled “The Mahāsāṃghika School, Mahāyāna, and Gandhāra: The Encounter of Buddhist Art Historians and Archaeologists and Buddhist Philologists” held at Soka University, Hachioji, Japan (29–30 November 2008), and a similar lecture by Richard Salomon at Otani University, Kyoto, Japan (1 December 2008).

¹ Other articles on early Mahayana published recently in this journal include Harrison 1995, Sasaki 1997, Schopen 2000, and Dessein 2009.

explores the visual evidence for Mahayana in Gandhāra, the present article will concentrate on the information provided by new textual materials.

Not surprisingly, given that the origins and early phase of Mahayana continue to be of intense interest to Buddhist scholars, many other articles and books dealing with this topic have appeared since 2003,² and several recent conferences or conference papers have also addressed the issue.³ Although we have made use of these and previous publications, it is not our intention here to provide a survey of current research in this field. Rather, we intend to summarize recently discovered evidence from inscriptions and contemporary manuscripts of a Mahayana presence in Gandhāra at a relatively early period, that is, in and around the first three centuries of the Common Era.

The materials in question include some previously published materials, but also several as-yet unpublished documents for which preliminary descriptions are presented in print for the first time here. The manuscripts concerned are part of several large collections of manuscripts from Pakistan and Afghanistan which have come to light since the 1990s, including large numbers of uniquely early texts in the Gāndhārī language and Kharoṣṭhī script. These new discoveries are opening entirely new perspectives on the early history of Buddhist literature and have vastly improved our understanding of the development of Buddhism in Greater Gandhāra, that is, the northwestern edge of the Indian subcontinent corresponding approximately to present-day eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, together with adjoining regions of South and Central Asia which at the period in question came under the cultural influence of Gandhāra proper.

The new finds from Greater Gandhāra include a large group of Sanskrit and Gāndhārī manuscript fragments from the neighborhood of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, which are now divided among the Martin Schøyen manuscript collection in Norway and the Hirayama Ikuo and Hayashidera Genshū collections in Japan, as well as several groups of Gāndhārī manuscripts, most

² For example, Nattier 2003a, Ruegg 2004, Skilling 2005, and Walser 2005. The most recent publications are Boucher 2008, Murakami 2008, and those in the issue of *Acta Asiatica*, vol. 96 (2009) entitled *Mahāyāna Buddhism: Its Origins and Reality*. In the latter, the articles by Shimoda (2009) and Sasaki (2009) provide good overviews.

³ Besides the Soka University Symposium mentioned above (n. 1), the subject was addressed by several presenters in the “Mahāyāna Buddhism” panels at the twenty-fifth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, USA (23–29 June 2008). Of particular interest was Douglas Osto’s paper (Osto 2008). See also Murakami 2004.

importantly the British Library, Senior, Bajaur and so-called “split” collections.⁴ Single Gāndhārī manuscripts are also now held in the University of Washington Library, Seattle and the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. The newly found Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* manuscript is also believed to have originated in Greater Gandhāra, from the Gilgit region.⁵

The sudden glut of Buddhist texts from the Northwest stands in stark contrast to the scarcity of early manuscript finds from this region prior to the 1990s. As each of these new manuscripts or manuscript collections came to light and its contents were identified, scholars have been forced to rethink their ideas about Buddhism in this region. And given that research on these manuscripts is still in its early stages, and that more manuscripts surely remain to be discovered, we will undoubtedly see our views shift yet again. Only a small fraction of these new materials has been published, though it is hoped that detailed editions of many more will be available in the reasonably near future. In the meantime, this preliminary presentation and discussion will at least give a general indication of the significance of these discoveries for the study of early Mahayana in general and particularly in Gandhāra.

II. SURVEY OF NEW DOCUMENTS BEARING ON EARLY MAHAYANA IN GANDHĀRA

II.a. *Epigraphic and Manuscript Discoveries Bearing on Mahayana in Gandhāra, Published up to 2002*

In this section, we discuss recently published materials relevant to the early history of Mahayana Buddhism in Gandhāra. These materials set the stage for the earlier and more direct testimony of an early Mahayana presence embodied in the manuscript texts to be discussed in part II.b.

1. A stone inscription in Gāndhārī discovered at the Endere site in Xinjiang 新疆 characterizes the king of the kingdom of Shan-shan or Kroraina as one who had “set out on the Mahayana path” (*mahayana-[sam]prasti[da]sa* = Skt. *mahāyāna-samprasthitah*).⁶ The name of the king is lost on a damaged

⁴ See Allon 2008 for an up-to-date summary of the new manuscript materials in Gāndhārī and other languages. For general descriptions of the individual collections, see Salomon 1999a (British Library), Allon 2007 (Senior), Strauch 2008 (Bajaur), and Falk 2009 (“split”; on this collection, see also section II.b.5 below). For the Bamiyan manuscripts, see Braarvig 2000, Braarvig 2002 and Braarvig 2006.

⁵ See Allon 2008 for a survey of past and recent manuscript finds from this region.

⁶ Salomon 1999b. The characters enclosed within brackets are transcriptions of unclear or partially preserved syllables.

part of the inscription, but he was most likely Aṃgoka, who ruled around the middle of the third century CE and was the longest-reigning of the kings of Shan-shan. This inscription thus provides us with the earliest epigraphic attestation of the word *mahāyāna*, which had not previously been seen in inscriptions earlier than the fifth or sixth century CE.⁷

2. A fragment (now in the Martin Schøyen collection in Norway) found among the many recently discovered manuscript fragments from the Bamiyan region contains an unidentified text in Sanskrit/Gupta Brāhmī script, apparently an *avadāna* collection, which similarly refers to a King Huveṣka as having “set out on the Mahayana path” (*(*mahā)yānasamprasthito huveṣko nā(*ma rājā)*).⁸ This Huveṣka is no doubt the Kuṣāṇa emperor who is better known as Huviṣka, successor of the great Kaniṣka, who probably ruled in the latter half of the second century CE. This document, together with the Endere inscription, reveals for the first time that prominent Buddhist rulers in the early centuries of the Common Era presented themselves as (Endere) or were claimed as (Bamiyan) adherents of the Mahayana. This strongly implies that the Mahayana, or at least some early manifestation of what we now understand as Mahayana, had already been established and influential among elite communities of Gandhāra and adjoining regions by the second and third centuries CE.

3. The earliest unambiguous inscriptional reference to Amitābha, and thus to what would be unquestionably an important manifestation of Mahayana cult practice, occurs in a pedestal inscription in Brāhmī script and hybrid Sanskrit language from Govindnagar (Mathurā),⁹ which was discovered in 1977 and authoritatively edited in Schopen 1987 (also included in Schopen 2005). The inscription refers to the ritual establishment of an image of the Buddha Amitābha (*bhagavato buddhasya amitābhasya pratimā pratiṣṭh[ā]pi[tā]*) in the year twenty-six during the reign of the Mahārāja Huviṣka, which would correspond to approximately 153 CE if it is assumed that the Kaniṣka era began in 127 CE. The reference to Huviṣka

⁷ Schopen 1987, p. 99 (Schopen 2005, p. 247). The epithet *mahāyāna-samprastitasa* (sic) was however previously attested in a secular document on a wooden tablet from Niya which was more or less contemporary with the new stone inscription (Salomon 1999b, pp. 6, 10).

⁸ Salomon 2002. The characters enclosed in parentheses and preceded by an asterisk—that is, (*)—represent lost syllables that have been conjecturally restored on the basis of context.

⁹ Although this is not a Gandhāran inscription, it is included in this discussion as relevant to the history of Mahayana in Gandhāra, since it reflects the cultural milieu of the Kuṣāṇa empire which was centered in Gandhāra at the time.

both in this inscription and in the aforementioned Bamiyan manuscript fragment suggests that the Mahayana may have been, or may have become prominent during his reign; and it is entirely conceivable that his personal patronage played a major role in this development.

4. According to the interpretation proposed by John Brough (1982), another reference to Amitābha occurs in a Gāndhārī inscription on the pedestal of a Buddha triad of unknown provenance, which is now in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, USA. The last word on the surviving portion of the stone was read by Brough as *amridaha* and interpreted as equivalent to Sanskrit Amṛtābha, that is, Amitābha, supposedly serving as a label for the figure which would have been on the lost left side of the triad. However, Salomon and Schopen argued that the word in question should be read as *amridae* and translated “for the immortality” (i.e., nirvana) as part of the blessing invoked on behalf of the donor, Dharmitra.¹⁰ The interpretation of the second word of the inscription, *oloispare*, is also controversial; according to Brough, it is equivalent to Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara and serves as a label for the right-hand figure of the triad, whereas Salomon and Schopen suggested, though with considerable uncertainty, that it may be a toponym.¹¹

The interpretation and significance of this inscription, however, remain controversial, as shown, for example, by the discussions in Iwamatsu 2006 and Murakami 2008.¹² Although the supposed reference to Amitābha in it is doubtful, a better case can still be made that the word *oloispare* refers to Avalokiteśvara, and therefore that this inscription represents another testimony to the presence of Mahayana belief and practice in the Gandhāra region in about the second century CE; the issue remains open.

5. One of the oldest of the recently discovered Bamiyan fragments contains a text of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*¹³ in late Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī script datable on paleographic grounds, according to the editor,¹⁴ to about the second half of the third century CE. Therefore this was, until very recently, the oldest surviving manuscript of a Mahayana text in an Indian language.

¹⁰ Salomon and Schopen 2002, pp. 6–16.

¹¹ Salomon and Schopen 2002, p. 27.

¹² Murakami 2008, pp. 126–31.

¹³ Sander 2000a.

¹⁴ Sander 2000b, p. 288.

II.b. *Recent Unpublished Discoveries of Mahayana Texts in Gāndhārī Manuscripts*

Within the last few years, six Mahayana texts have been identified among the newly discovered collections of manuscripts in the Gāndhārī language, dating from about the first or second to the third or fourth centuries CE. More such examples may well remain to be discovered or identified, particularly among the many still-unidentified Gāndhārī fragments from Bamiyan.

1. Three of the six Gāndhārī Mahayana manuscripts have been identified among the massive corpus of fragments found in the Bamiyan area which are now divided among the Schøyen, Hirayama, and Hayashidera collections. The largest remnant consists of some twenty-five fragments of a manuscript which was identified by Matsuda Kazunobu and Andrew Glass as a Gāndhārī version of the well-known *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*.¹⁵ The fragments include portions of the list of one thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa and their characteristics, as well as of the section of the sutra which describes the six perfections. As an example of the first topic, Hirayama fragment 3, verso, lines 1–3, reads in part:

ugamasa tathagadasa · aṇamta ///
putro · ñaṇakusuma ṇama [vaṭṭha]yo · prañaprabhaso ṇama
prañamamta ///
*thubo · ṇavati varṣasahasra sadharmavaṭṭhiti 10 2*¹⁶

(*The birthplace) of the *tathāgata* Ugama [Udgama] will be Ananta. . . His son will be . . . his attendant will be named Ñaṇakusuma [Jñānakusuma]. (*His foremost disciple) in wisdom will be named Prañaprabhasa [Prajñāprabhāsa]. (*He will have a single) stupa. His true dharma will endure for ninety thousand years. [Buddha number] 12.

A specimen of the perfections section is preserved in Schøyen fragment 116, line b2:

¹⁵ These fragments are currently being prepared for publication by Matsuda, Glass and Stefan Baums in the fourth volume of the series *Buddhist Manuscripts: Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection*, edited by Jens Braarvig. The sample texts presented below were prepared with their assistance.

¹⁶ Three slashes (///) indicate the beginning or the end of an incomplete line. The dots (·) represent punctuation marks in the original text to indicate phrase divisions.

[p.ra]mida ṣo · ya daṇo śravaga-pracegabudha.¹⁷

The six perfections: the giving . . . to *śrāvakas* and *pratyeka*-buddhas.

Thus there is no doubt as to the identification of this text, which was widespread in Buddhist literature of the northern tradition and is preserved in translations into Tibetan, Chinese, Khotanese and other languages. These Gāndhārī fragments, and another recently discovered fragment of the *Bhadrakalpika* in Sanskrit from Khotan,¹⁸ constitute the first known specimens of this popular and influential sutra in an original Indian language.

It may however be questioned whether the *Bhadrakalpika* is a “Mahayana” sutra in the full sense of the term. Although classified as such in the Chinese and Tibetan canons, it has little in terms of doctrinal content which is definitively and exclusively Mahayanistic. For example, the enumeration of a series of one thousand Buddhas appearing in succession within the Bhadra eon is not necessarily a Mahayana concept, since it is only the notion that multiple Buddhas can exist *simultaneously* (in different worlds) that definitively distinguishes Mahayana from mainstream Buddhist doctrine. Thus the status of the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra* in this regard is open to question, and it can be understood to fall into the large grey area between the common fund of mainstream *āgama* sutras and the full-blown Mahayana sutras. Thus this find in and of itself cannot be said to constitute proof of the presence of the Mahayana in Gāndhārī literature.

2. This is not the case, however, with a single small fragment in the Schøyen collection of the *Sarvapūṇyasamuccayasamādhi-sūtra*, which is an unquestionably Mahayana text.¹⁹ This fragment comes from the portion of the text containing a dialogue between a sage named Uttara and a past Buddha called Vimalakīrtirāja, as can be seen from the first line of side b of the fragment, which reads “O young man, that (**tathāgata*) Vimalakīrti” (*khu kulaputra so vimalakī(*rti tathagata)*). This line at first gave rise to the thought that the fragment belonged to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, but the third line of the same side, reading “this collection of all merit” (*ima sarvapūṇyasamuca[y.]*), made it clear that the text was in fact the

¹⁷ The period in *p.* indicates that the vocalic portion of the syllable is uncertain.

¹⁸ See Duan 2009. She hypothesizes (p. 18) that the Sanskrit text derives from “an exemplar that was most probably written in Kharoṣṭhī.

¹⁹ Schøyen Kharoṣṭhī fragment 89.

Sarvapūnyasamuccayasamādhi-sūtra.²⁰ This identification is confirmed by the Chinese translation of this text by Kumārajīva,²¹ which reads in the corresponding places “O young man, having explained this dharma, the *tathāgata* Vimalakīrti”²² and “He explicated and preached this *samādhi* of all merit.”²³ The Bamiyan fragment is the only known remnant of an Indian-language version of the *Sarvapūnyasamuccayasamādhi-sūtra*.

3. The third Mahayana sutra so far identified among the Bamiyan fragments is the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra*. To date only one small fragment of this text has been found,²⁴ though there may be others that remain to be identified among the Bamiyan Kharoṣṭhī fragments. Schøyen Kharoṣṭhī fragment 17 was identified by Matsuda Kazunobu as part of the ninth chapter, entitled “Vīryapāramitā” (Ch. Pīlie boluomiduo 毘梨耶波羅蜜多), of the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra*, which is classified in Chinese and Tibetan canons as sutra no. 12 of the Ratnakūṭa group. Here, as in the cases of the previous two texts, the identification is beyond any reasonable doubt. For example, line 2 of the recto of the Schøyen fragment reads “does not see the world-protectors. He arouses fear among people”²⁵ (*(*lo)[kanatha] na paśati · 2 bhayo jane ca satvana (*-) deya [d.]*), corresponding to the translation of the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra* by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) in the Ratnakūṭa, reading “They do not meet the world-protector. They arouse fear in many creatures, or take.”²⁶

A particular point of interest regarding this fragment is that remnants of a later manuscript of the same sutra in Sanskrit, paleographically datable to about the fifth to sixth centuries,²⁷ were also found among the Bamiyan materials, although the surviving portions of the Gāndhārī and Sanskrit versions unfortunately do not overlap. This continuity suggests that the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra* was a popular one in the monastic community of Bamiyan, although here, as usual, conclusions based on chance finds of individual manuscripts must be viewed with due caution.

²⁰ This discovery was made by Lin Qian of the University of Washington.

²¹ *Jiyiqie fude sanmei jing* 集一切福德三昧經, T 12, no. 382.

²² 男子 淨名王如來說是法已 (T 12, no. 382: 996b27).

²³ 生廣敷演說此集一切福德三昧 (T 12, no. 382: 996c3).

²⁴ Schøyen Kharoṣṭhī fragment 17.

²⁵ The significance of the word *deya* (“would give”?) at the end is not exactly clear, but it seems to be somehow related to *na* 納 in the Chinese translation.

²⁶ 不遇世間依怙者 令多有情生怖畏 若納 (*Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經, T 12, no. 310: 274c18b–19b).

²⁷ Braarvig and Pagel 2006, p. 30.

As to the date of the Bamiyan fragments of Mahayana sutras in Gāndhārī, so far only one of the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra* fragments has been subjected to radiocarbon testing, and it yielded a range (2-sigma, with 95.4 percent probability) of 210–417 CE. The Bamiyan Gāndhārī fragments as a whole seem to fall within the late second and early fourth centuries CE,²⁸ and we can assume that the two other Mahayana sutras identified so far would be within or around this range. If this is correct, these Mahayana sutras in Gāndhārī are not necessarily older than the earliest Mahayana text in Sanskrit from Bamiyan, namely the aforementioned *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (see § II.a.5). However, three other manuscripts have more recently been discovered which testify to the existence of Mahayana literature in Gāndhārī at a considerably earlier period, reaching back, apparently, into the formative period of the Mahayana itself.

4. The recently discovered collection of Gāndhārī scrolls from the Bajaur region of Pakistan includes a lengthy fragment of a Mahayana sutra describing the teachings of the Buddha Akṣobhya and his realm Abhirati.²⁹ This manuscript “comprises with its altogether around 640 lines nearly 50 percent of the entire collection,”³⁰ making it the longest text in Gāndhārī discovered to date. Although some features of the text “recall the central Buddhist text on the Buddha Akṣobhya, the Akṣobhyavyūha,”³¹ it is clear that “both texts—the G *Akṣobhyasūtra and the Akṣobhyavyūha—are most probably not dependent upon each other but should be regarded as based on a common concept/text. This makes the G sutra a particularly valuable, since independent, source of the early variety of ‘Pure Land’ Buddhism which centers around the Buddha Akṣobhya and his Abhirati Buddha field.”³²

Thus this discovery provides powerful support for Jan Nattier’s argument that it was the cult of Akṣobhya, rather than that of Amitābha, which played a pre-eminent role in the early development in India of what was later to develop into the “Pure Land” Buddhism of East Asia.³³ In this connection, it is interesting that among the later Sanskrit manuscripts from Bamiyan there are some fragments of the “larger” *Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra* which are paleo-

²⁸ Allon et al. 2006, pp. 288–90.

²⁹ Strauch 2008, pp. 123–25.

³⁰ Strauch 2008, p. 123.

³¹ Strauch 2008, p. 123.

³² Strauch 2008, p. 125.

³³ Nattier 2000, Nattier 2003b.

graphically datable to about the sixth or seventh century CE.³⁴ This too supports Nattier's theory that the early popularity of the cult of Akṣobhya was later supplanted by that of Amitābha, though once again we must be cautious about drawing conclusions on the basis of chance finds. Nevertheless, for the time being at least, Nattier's theory looks convincing—indeed, almost prescient.

No radiocarbon dating is available for the Bajaur *Akṣobhya-sūtra*, but Strauch plausibly concludes that a comparison of the paleographic features of the Bajaur scrolls in general with those of other datable Gāndhārī manuscripts “would speak in favour of a date within the first and second centuries CE with a preference to the latter half of this period.”³⁵ In any case, the Bajaur manuscripts are clearly older than the Bamiyan Kharoṣṭhī fragments, and the *Akṣobhya-sūtra* therefore confirms the existence of what can be unreservedly called a Mahayana sutra in the earlier phase of Gāndhārī Buddhist literature.³⁶

5. The so-called “split” collection of Gāndhārī manuscripts, which has not yet been published but which is being studied by Harry Falk,³⁷ contains a manuscript with texts corresponding to the first (on the recto side) and fifth (verso) chapters of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. This scroll has been radiocarbon dated to a range of 23–43 CE (probability 14.3 percent) or 47–127 (probability 81.1 percent),³⁸ and a date in the later first or early second century CE is consistent with its paleographic and linguistic characteristics. Therefore in this Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript we have the earliest firm dating for a Mahayana sutra manuscript in any language, as well as the earliest specific attestation of Mahayana literature in early Gandhāra.³⁹

³⁴ Harrison, Hartmann and Matsuda 2002, p. 181.

³⁵ Strauch 2008, p. 111.

³⁶ Although no other manuscripts in the Bajaur group have been definitely identified as Mahayana texts, a group of scholastic or commentarial texts (Bajaur fragments 4, 6, and 11) contains terms such as *bodhimaṇḍa*, *gaṇaṇadivāṣamal(o)ḡadhadu* (Skt. *gaṅgānadīvālukasamalokadhātu*), and *prañāparamida* (Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*) which “could indicate that the texts might even be located within the circle of early Mahāyāna literature” (Strauch 2008, p. 119; cf. also p. 125).

³⁷ Falk 2009.

³⁸ As discussed in Falk 2009, p. 7.

³⁹ Another manuscript in the “split” collection, containing an *avadāna* collection, has been radiocarbon dated to 184–46 BCE (2-sigma; Falk 2009, p. 7). The difference in results of radiocarbon dates for these two manuscripts in the “split” collection presumably means that the group contained materials of different ages, and need not cast doubt on the accuracy of the tests themselves. In this connection, it may be noted that a Gāndhārī scroll in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. has been radiocarbon dated to 206 BCE–59 CE, confirming

6. A very fragmentary Gāndhārī scroll in a private collection, as yet unpublished, contains fragments of a text corresponding to a Mahayana sutra preserved in three Chinese translations⁴⁰ which describes the encounter between the Buddha and the young son of the famous layman Vimalakīrti.⁴¹ The little boy is referred to in the text as a “Licchavi lad” (*lichavikumarasa*) or as Sucitti (*suciti*), and the latter name corresponds to *shansi* 善思 in the title of T 479, the Chinese translation by Jñānagupta. The Gāndhārī fragments agree reasonably closely, in some cases exactly, with the corresponding portions of one or more of the Chinese translations, so that the identification of the text can be considered confirmed, although it seems to contain an independent version with significant differences from all three Chinese translations.

This scroll has not been radiocarbon dated, but its general appearance and linguistic and paleographic features would place it in the earlier phase of the Gāndhārī manuscript tradition, that is, the first or second century CE, or conceivably even earlier. Unlike several of the other Mahayana sutras which have now been discovered in Gāndhārī manuscripts, such as the *Bhadrakalpika*, *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Bodhisattvapīṭaka*, the **Sucittisūtra* does not seem to have been particularly prominent or popular in later Mahayana tradition. It is, however, associated by content with the very important *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, and we may therefore suspect that the latter text also existed in a Gāndhārī version; perhaps this too will come to light some day.

III. EARLY MAHAYANA IN GANDHĀRA: A NEW EVALUATION

III.a. *Mahayana in Gandhāran Manuscripts: A Shifting Picture*

Among the several recently discovered collections of early manuscripts from Gandhāra and adjoining regions, the first two to become known, the British Library and Senior collections, comprised groups of texts in Gāndhārī, about two dozen in each case, which all belonged to “mainstream,” that is, pre- or non-Mahayana traditions, apparently associated with the Dharmaguptaka school.⁴² Thus in the earlier stages of the redis-

that some Gāndhārī Buddhist manuscripts may date back to the BCE period, or at least to the first half of the first century CE.

⁴⁰ *Foshuo dafangdeng dingwang jing* 佛說大方等頂王經 (T no. 477), *Dacheng dingwang jing* 大乘頂王經 (T no. 478), and *Shansi tongzi jing* 善思童子經 (T no. 479).

⁴¹ Identification by Lin Qian, Seattle.

⁴² On the Dharmaguptaka affiliation of these collections, see Salomon 1999a, pp. 166–78 and Allon 2007, pp. 5–6; compare also Boucher 2004, pp. 189–91.

covery of Gandhāran Buddhist literature, the Mahayana seemed to be entirely absent; for example, it was stated that “the British Library scrolls do not offer any support for the hypothesis of a relatively early origin for Mahāyāna Buddhism.”⁴³

Subsequent discoveries, however, as summarized in the preceding section, have shone an entirely new light on the issue. Although the first of the Gāndhārī texts in the Bamiyan group to be identified and published⁴⁴ was the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, a classic non-Mahayana *āgama* text, not long afterwards several fragments from the same collection were found to belong to a Gāndhārī version of the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*, which is commonly classed as a Mahayana text (see § II.b.1). Subsequently, fragments of two other indisputably Mahayana sutras were found among the Bamiyan collections.

At this point it still appeared that the mainstream schools went unchallenged in Gandhāra in the early period, since the earlier manuscript groups, namely the British Library and Senior collections, datable to the first and second centuries CE respectively, contained no Mahayana material, while Mahayana texts in Gāndhārī were known only in the later Bamiyan material, from about the late second to early fourth centuries. However, the recent discoveries of the Bajaur and “split” collections of Gāndhārī manuscripts have challenged this scenario. Both of these corpora, which seem to date from approximately the same period as the British Library and Senior manuscripts, that is, around the first and second centuries CE, consist predominantly of mainstream materials, but each one also includes at least one definitely Mahayana text. If the radiocarbon dating of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript in the “split” collection to the first or early second century CE (see § II.b.5) is accurate—and there is no reason to doubt this—it can no longer be held that the Mahayana first appeared in Gandhāra as late as the second or third century CE. This, plus the **Sucitti-sūtra* manuscript which appears to be of similar antiquity to the *Prajñāpāramitā*, shows that the Mahayana was already a significant, if perhaps still a minority presence in the earlier period of the Buddhist manuscripts in Gandhāra.

⁴³ Salomon 1999a, p. 178.

⁴⁴ Allon and Salomon 2000.

III.b. *The Mahayana and the Mainstream as Seen in Gandhāran Manuscripts*

All of the Mahayana texts in Gāndhārī which have been discovered to date are part of larger collections in which the majority of the manuscripts contain distinctly non-Mahayana or mainstream texts. This seems to support the view of the origins and early development of Mahayana currently favored by an increasing number of scholars,⁴⁵ according to which those who espoused the new ideas and practices which we now associate with Mahayana and who composed the texts which traditional commentators commonly class as Mahayana did not live in distinct communities apart from the mainstream *nikāya* monastics, but rather were fully ordained and active resident members of various mainstream communities.

It may be tempting to see the large number of Mahayana texts from Bamiyan as support for the traditional view that the origins of Mahayana lay with the Mahāsāṃghikas,⁴⁶ since according to Xuanzang Bamiyan was a Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin stronghold, and also since several Mahāsāṃghika(-Lokottaravādin) texts have been identified among the new Bamiyan manuscripts. However, it remains to be determined whether the Bamiyan manuscripts actually belonged to only one *nikāya* community, or rather to several different ones. But since they do include texts attributable to *nikāyas* other than the Mahāsāṃghikas, the latter scenario would seem more likely,⁴⁷ and if so, we cannot be certain that all of the Mahayana texts in the collection were associated with the Mahāsāṃghika community.⁴⁸ In any case, the presence of at least one Mahayana text in the Bajaur collection of mostly mainstream texts, which apparently belong to a *nikāya* (or perhaps *nikāyas*) other than the Mahāsāṃghika, appears to confirm this view of the early period of the Mahayana. Thus the Bajaur and Bamiyan manuscripts provide indications that practitioners of the Mahayana were found within different *nikāya* communities, including the Mahāsāṃghika

⁴⁵ E.g., Bechert 1973; Harrison 1995 (esp. p. 56ff.); Sasaki 1997; Sasaki 2009; Karashima 2001, pp. 161, 175; Silk 2002; Rhi 2003, p. 183ff. (with further references in n. 91); Cousins 2003, p. 19; Skilling 2005, p. 99ff.; Murakami 2008, esp. pp. 142–43.

⁴⁶ For criticism of this view, see Sasaki 1997, pp. 80–83.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hartmann 2004, p. 127a.

⁴⁸ Of course, the Bamiyan manuscripts could represent the contents of a Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin library which included texts belonging to other *nikāyas* in its holdings; see further discussion of this point below.

(and possibly other *nikāyas* as well) in the case of Bamiyan, and apparently the Dharmaguptaka in the case of the Bajaur manuscripts.⁴⁹

This mixture of large numbers of mainstream texts with a few Mahayana texts attested in the Bajaur and “split” collections may be compared to the situation among the Central Asian manuscripts discovered along the northern silk route, particularly the Sanskrit manuscripts collected during the German expeditions of the early twentieth century and collectively referred to as the “Turfanfunden” (Turfan finds). The vast majority of the Sanskrit manuscripts from the northern silk route contain texts which are either attributable to the Sarvāstivādins on the grounds of comparison of *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* fragments with surviving versions in other languages, or which are poetic compositions, *stotras* and *dhāraṇīs* and other such texts that have no inherent affiliation to a particular *nikāya* or *yāna*. Among the hundreds of texts that have been identified so far among the Turfan finds,⁵⁰ many of them represented by multiple copies, only a little over thirty have been classified as Mahayana.⁵¹ Moving from west to east along the northern silk route, the findspots of these Mahayana texts are: three manuscripts from Qizil (two containing unidentified texts, one containing quotes from two texts); fifteen from Šorčuq; and, among the Turfan oasis sites, seven from Toyoq, six from Xočo, four (one purchased) from Sängim, and two from Murtuq/Bäzäklik, plus a further three from unidentified findspots.⁵² Although the manuscript material (palm leaf) and/or the script type⁵³ suggest that some of these manuscripts were imported from India or from the

⁴⁹ Strauch 2008, pp. 114–15, 116–17. Strauch cautiously concludes (p. 115) “Among all available parallels there is a strong affinity towards the Dharmaguptakas. Nevertheless, some features of the G[āndhārī] texts coincide with other traditions and prove that the texts as we have them in the G[āndhārī] corpus are not identical with those texts which are part of the (mostly) later Chinese collections.” (Information on possible *nikāya* affiliations of the “split” collection are not yet available.)

⁵⁰ The exact number of texts cannot be determined, since the count varies according to what definition of “text” is adopted, and since the original status of many fragments cannot be determined. For example, in many cases it is unknown whether a text fragment formed part of an anthology, an *āgama*, or was transmitted as an independent text.

⁵¹ Hartmann 2005, p. 1146b.

⁵² These figures are based on Wille 2000, pp. 224–25 and Wille 2005, p. 12. Klaus Wille and Karashima Seishi inform us (in personal communication) that several of the “unidentified” Mahayana fragments have now been identified.

⁵³ Gilgit/Bamiyan type II (2 fragments), Indian Gupta script (1), “special form” of Gupta script (1), Pāla script (1), and south Turkestan Brāhmī (4), following the terminology of Sander 1968.

southern silk route where Mahayana was predominant, the majority of the Mahayana Sanskrit manuscripts from the northern silk route are local productions, the material being paper and the script one or another of the north Turkestan Brāhmī types of different periods. Although the presence of these few Mahayana texts in these northern silk route sites is yet to be fully explained,⁵⁴ it is clear that Sarvāstivādin monastics in this region read and copied Mahayana texts over a period of at least several centuries.⁵⁵ Like the Bajaur and “split” manuscripts, these Mahayana texts found in Sarvāstivādin monastic settings could be taken as further evidence that practitioners of the Mahayana were ordained members of various *nikāya* communities, in this case Sarvāstivādin, living within the mainstream monastic compounds.

However, the presence of one or more Mahayana texts in a collection of predominantly mainstream texts found at a particular site does not automatically prove that there were practitioners of the Mahayana in that monastery, or that some individuals in that monastery were sympathetic towards the views expressed in that text. In fact, in the case of the Bajaur and “split” manuscripts, where a single Mahayana text (or possibly, a few Mahayana texts) was interred together with many non-Mahayana ones, we cannot even say with certainty that anyone in the institutions in which these manuscripts were collected had actually read such texts, as there can be other explanations for their presence. For example, Mahayana texts may have been collected by a monk to be used as material for his criticism of the views and practices expressed in them, or for debates with the exponents of such unorthodox ideas and practices who may have lived in a neighboring monastery. Or else, these manuscripts may have been acquired or borrowed out of mere curiosity or scholarly interest; or they may have been left in that monastery by a visiting monk or layman but never read by any of its inhabitants. The presence of a fragment of a non-Buddhist Mīmāṃsā text among the Bamiyan manuscripts may provide a parallel here, for this text was most likely brought into the Buddhist monastic environment at Bamiyan for purposes of scholarly scrutiny or polemic ammunition.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Hartmann 2004, p. 126b.

⁵⁵ This does not take into consideration the texts in Central Asian vernacular languages, which began to be produced only from the sixth century CE onwards (Nattier 1990, pp. 211–12).

⁵⁶ Franco 2002.

Similarly, the presence of Mahayana texts in the Sarvāstivādin monasteries of the northern silk route of Central Asia may be explained in various ways other than simply assuming that some of the monastics were practitioners of the Mahayana. The fact that such texts were copied over several centuries in these monastic environments may merely indicate that there was a tradition of ensuring that copies of these texts were always available. That the Mahayana texts make up such a small proportion of the Sanskrit finds from these sites tends to support this interpretation. Given the importance of written texts to Mahayana practitioners (at least in later times), we would have expected a greater number of Mahayana manuscripts to have been discovered at these sites had they been home to well-established communities of Mahayana practitioners.

Unfortunately, our ability to interpret these collections is hampered by the paucity of information regarding the production and use of any of these manuscripts, both in Central Asia and in Gandhāra. In the case of the Bajaur Akṣobhya manuscript, for example, we do not know who copied it; who paid for its production; whether it was written in the monastery in which it was found; why it was in that monastery; whether it was ever read by members of that monastery; if it was read, whether it was read and used by the majority of the monastic community or privately (or even secretly) by an individual; and whether members of that monastery were sympathetic towards the ideas and practices it espoused.

These words of caution notwithstanding, the very fact that Mahayana texts appear in at least two separate early collections, namely the Bajaur and the “split” collections, does still provide strong evidence that there were adherents of the Mahayana in the institutions that interred these manuscripts, or at least in some neighboring institutions. So, these manuscripts do beyond a doubt indicate a significant presence of Mahayana in Gandhāra, in some shape or form, at this very early date. Moreover, the Bamiyan manuscripts with their healthy mixture of Mahayana and mainstream texts provide more secure evidence of this phenomenon. Xuanzang, who visited Bamiyan in the seventh century CE, describes the monasteries there as belonging to “Little Vehicle of the Lokottaravādins,” while also referring to others in the region as being dominated by practitioners of the Mahayana,⁵⁷ whereas Huichao 慧超 (704–787), who was in Bamiyan in 727 CE, reports

⁵⁷ Beal 1884, vol. 1, pp. 50, 55.

that there were monks devoted to both the Mahayana and Śrāvakayāna.⁵⁸ Thus it is reasonable to suppose that at least some of the monasteries in Bamiyan which were formally designated by their *nikāya* affiliation (presumably Mahāsāṃghika) housed practitioners of the Mahayana.

Since the earliest Mahayana manuscripts so far discovered come from Gandhāra—probably from the first to second centuries CE in the case of the Gāndhārī manuscripts of the Bajaur and “split” collections and from the second half of the third century CE in the case of the Sanskrit *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in the Schøyen collection—this material could be invoked in favor of the theory that Gandhāra played a formative role in the emergence of Mahayana, and that such texts were originally composed in this region.⁵⁹ However, the discovery of these very early Mahayana manuscripts in Gandhāra rather than, say, in southeastern India may be due merely to the comparatively dry climate of the northwest which is more favorable to the survival of manuscript materials. Similarly, the first to second century dates for the Gāndhārī manuscripts of the British Library and Senior collections, which are the earliest mainstream and probably the earliest Dharmaguptaka manuscripts yet discovered, surely do not prove that mainstream Buddhism or the Dharmaguptakas originated in Gandhāra, nor that Buddhist texts were first committed to writing in Gandhāra. It is, in fact, quite reasonable to assume that the types of texts (though not necessarily these specific texts), both mainstream and Mahayana, which we are seeing among these Gandhāran finds would have been available at other major Buddhist centers throughout the subcontinent during this period. It is merely the subcontinental climate, which is so deleterious to the preservation of organic materials, that has denied us the evidence.

III.c. *Manifestations of the Mahayana in Manuscripts and Inscriptions*

In a highly influential article published in 1979, Gregory Schopen interpreted the paucity of inscriptional references to the Mahayana from the early centuries of the Common Era as evidence for the marginal status of the Mahayana during this period. However, in light of the new indications from the Gandhāran manuscript finds of a more significant Mahayana pres-

⁵⁸ Yang et al. 1980, p. 52.

⁵⁹ This view is espoused by, for example, Lamotte 1954, pp. 389–95 and Shizutani Masao in his 1974 article that is cited in Rhi 2003, p. 158. For a discussion of such views, see Ray 1994, pp. 404–17.

ence in mainstream monasteries, the absence of references of Mahayana in donative inscriptions from Gandhāra can now be interpreted differently. For the types of donations which are frequently recorded in Gandhāran inscriptions would have been designated as the property of the *nikāya* lineage of a given monastery (e.g., Mahāsāṃghika, Sarvāstivādin, or Dharmaguptaka) regardless of the doctrinal or *yāna* affiliations of the individual members of that institution. That is to say, the absence of references to the Mahayana in such inscriptions does not prove the non-existence of Mahayana beliefs, practices, and adherents in the institutions concerned, because their Mahayana doctrinal affiliation (if any) was irrelevant to the form and content of the inscriptions.

In other words, as is so often the case, the silence of the inscriptions in this regard proves nothing, whereas the actual presence of Mahayana manuscripts among mainstream collections indisputably establishes a significant presence of the Mahayana in some shape or form—albeit still, apparently, as a minority—in mainstream Gandhāran monasteries in the early centuries of the Common Era.

III.d. *The Language(s) of the Mahayana*

The discovery of early manuscripts of Mahayana texts in Gāndhārī also has an important bearing on the philological dimensions of the Mahayana phenomenon. In their edition of the Sanskrit fragments of the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra* from Bamiyan (see § II.b.3), Braarvig and Pagel referred to them as “the first contact with the sūtra’s likely language of conception” (scil., Sanskrit).⁶⁰ However, the discovery of a Gāndhārī fragment of this text, considerably earlier than the Sanskrit one, shows that its “language of conception” was surely not in fact Sanskrit. It may have been Gāndhārī, or the Gāndhārī version itself may, in turn, have stemmed from an earlier version in some other MIA language; this, unfortunately, cannot be determined at the present time, if ever. But it is now certain that the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra* as well as the other Mahayana sutras which are presented in this paper existed in Gāndhārī versions well before they were translated into Sanskrit, and by extension, we can suspect that this was the case for many if not most other early Mahayana sutras. Thus, the traditional association between Mahayana and the Sanskrit language is in all likelihood an illusion.

⁶⁰ Braarvig and Pagel 2006, p. 14.

IV. CONCLUSION

Although the discovery of Gāndhārī versions of several Mahayana texts among the new manuscript finds from Gandhāra in some ways only makes an already complicated picture even more complex, it nevertheless provides us with new material and concrete evidence for the presence of the Mahayana in Gandhāra, and by implication elsewhere in India, at an early period. We have outlined above some of the possible ways in which these new documents can be interpreted, and we hope that we have communicated in the process something of the caution with which they should be treated. In any case, our understanding of Mahayana Buddhism in Gandhāra will undoubtedly change in the course of the further study of the new collections and, we may hope, as a result of further new discoveries and identifications. As always, nothing is permanent, all is in a state of flux.

ABBREVIATION

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. 100 vols., ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–34.

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