

Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection.

Jens Braarvig, Professor, University of Oslo

The Buddhist manuscripts found in the Schøyen Collection are a set of material which contains valuable information about how Buddhism developed in India, but also how this religion from early on, even before the beginning of our era, but especially in the first centuries A.D., blossomed in the rich culture that was associated with the Silk Road. On these trade routes between China and the West, between India and the West, as well as between India and China, and India and the Mediterranean areas, the soldiers of conquering armies came and went, and with them traders bringing luxury goods from the great kingdoms of the East and the West throughout the millennia. But also the flow of culture along these routes is amply documented, that of Greek art which influenced Buddhist art, that of the writings of Nestorian Christianity which were translated into Chinese, as well as Manikeism which was translated into the Chinese idiom, developed by the process of translating the Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. This process of translating the Buddhist scriptures took place between the second and eleventh centuries A.D., and the travelling involved in bringing the scriptures to China, as well as translating Buddhist thinking, religious practice and culture into what became the Chinese, Korean and Japanese expressions of Buddhism, took place along these routes.

Now, one of the very important stops for the Silk Road caravans was the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan. This place recently became very well known when the Taliban destruction of the huge Bamiyan Buddhas was televised throughout the entire world. The site of these Buddha statues is surrounded by caves, and in one of these caves were found the manuscripts we now have as they are preserved in the Schøyen Collection – the result of the effort of Mr. Martin Schøyen in acquiring these manuscripts systematically through purchase from Afghan tradesmen through London antiquarians.

What exactly the collection represents, being the remains of a great ancient collection of Buddhist scriptures, and what function and status this collection had, has not yet been decided with certainty. It had, however, been kept in the cave where it was found in the early nineteen nineties, since as an original collection it was destroyed in the early 8th century A.D., possibly by the then invading Muslim armies from the West. Thus the collection is, unfortunately, fragmentary. So the cave in which it was found just less than ten years ago probably served as a deposit from what once formed a huge library, that is, unless all the disconnected leaves originally formed pious gifts offered by passing pilgrims for the safety of their journey - a practice also documented elsewhere on the Silk Road.

The material has been dated by paleographical criteria as from between the late first and early eighth centuries. The script is mostly historically developing variants of the so called Brahmi script - the script that has mothered all later Indian types of script - as well as the Kharoshti script which was much in use in early times, but which disappeared around the middle of the first millennium. Paleographically sorting and dating the materials according to these criteria have been one of the main tasks of the research group, now at the CAS, in the earliest stages of the publication project.

The language of this collection is mostly Sanskrit in its special Buddhist form, but there are also a few examples of the Bactrian language, written with a variant of Greek letters. Of the Bactrian documents there is one which has a Buddhist topic, while the others are letters. There is also a trade contract from about 200 A.D., which is written on a tree plank in Sanskrit with

Kharoshti writing. This is a particularly interesting piece, since most of the literature found in the collection is Buddhist religious literature from all the main Buddhist genres, those of a) monastic rules, containing the historical and fictional literature of Buddhism (Vinaya), b) the speeches of the Buddha (Sutra), and c) the scholastic and learned literature (Abhidharma). The earliest manuscripts are written on palm leaf, which is the most usual writing material in India, while the later writing material is mostly birch bark, which is the "paper" mostly used for Buddhist literature in the north-western areas of South-Asia, today's Afghanistan, Pakistan etc. A few pieces, mostly medical texts, are written on leather.

Thus the manuscripts represent all genres of Buddhism. Much research work remains to be done to understand the history of all these texts, and their affiliations to the various sects of Buddhism - being from such a great time span, as well as from a very extensive geographical area. The material represents a very broad spectrum of what Buddhism is, both as concerns what are the Buddhist ideas, as well as their historical development. Some of the texts have parallels in Tibetan and Chinese, being translated into these languages on the introduction of Buddhism to these countries, but many of the texts are hitherto quite unknown and are as such completely new historical evidence on Buddhism. From this last mentioned category there are a great number of unidentified Abhidharma fragments. Both the two main traditions of Buddhism are represented, those of Mahayana and the traditional Thera- or Sthaviravada traditions. There seems to be an overweight of materials from the so-called Mahasamghika sect, that of the traditional sects mostly connected to the Mahayana. Thus among the insights we hope to gain are those of a better understanding of the origin of this important movement of Buddhism.

There are a few complete manuscripts in the collection, e.g. a very good manuscript of the Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita ("The Diamond Cutter Sutra), and the Samghatasutra, as well as sizeable parts of the Buddhist monastic codex, but apart from these there are about 2000 sizeable fragments from whole pages down to 5 or 6 cm², while there are more than 5000 microfragments smaller than this.

Cataloguing the material on the basis of paleographical criteria was to some degree accomplished by the core members of the group at an earlier stage. During the project year at the CAS one has produced a digitalized version of the material, but the main task of the group is at present to bring in specialists on the various aspects of Buddhism for the publication, translation and historical treatment of the texts. This process will go on for many years from now on, but the project year at the CAS has to a very great degree made possible a very intensive research period, in which the very best specialists on Buddhism from the whole community of this discipline have had the chance to give their contribution to the huge research work involved.

The collection is undergoing what could be styled a complete scientific treatment in the way that the materials are being taken through virtually all stages of manuscript research. Firstly, the materials are catalogued with assigned library numbers according to the type and date of script - scripts dating from the 1st up to the late 7th century A.D. As such the collection presents a complete documentation of the early Indian manuscript types. A relatively small part is written in the Kharoshti type - a script that died out about 500 A.D., while the main part of the collection is written in the so-called Brahmi script - the script which is the ancestor of the modern Indian alphabets as well as the alphabets of Tibet and other South and South-East Asian scriptural systems. A complete treatment of the styles and ages of the different types of both Kharoshti and Brahmi writing is being prepared by the group.

After sorting the manuscript fragments, of all sizes from complete folios to micro-fragments numbering more than 10.000, into temporal categories according to paleographic criteria, the fragments are transliterated. In this process the fragments are brought together and made into reconstructed folios or parts thereof - the process appears as a huge jigsaw puzzle. The colour and quality of the writing materials - those of palm leaf in the earlier manuscripts from central India, and birch bark which has a preponderance in the later materials from the north western areas - are also able to guide us on how to assemble the fragments into more or less complete folios. After transliteration into Latin letters, the transliterations are reconstructed into as full texts as possible, and this is done by means of comparing and identifying the texts with their Tibetan and Chinese translations when extant. Such translations are a great help for identification and reconstruction of the original Sanskrit or Indic text, and parallel versions in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese of our material are also reproduced in the final publications, along with English translations made by the group. In many cases, however, the Indic texts have no parallel Tibetan or Chinese versions, and are often extremely difficult to identify. Especially these texts often belong to hitherto unknown traditions of Buddhism, and have as such particular interest.

With the texts reconstructed as far as possible on the basis of the criteria of historical text criticism, the historical placing of the texts is undertaken, that of age, genre, sect affiliation, with the purpose of analysing their historical, religious and philosophical impact on the Buddhist tradition. Efforts have also been made to try to understand the collection as a whole: Is it a consciously constructed library of a certain sect of Buddhism in Bamiyan, or was it randomly put together by monks and pilgrims travelling along the Silk Road? We have not yet reached any definite conclusion on these questions, but several hypotheses connected to the question have been made. Apart from the manuscript materials mentioned, there are also a few examples of inscriptions on copper plates, or copper "scrolls", in the collection - one of which has great historical value, in recording a dated gift from the Huna king Toramana to a Buddhist community in the year A.D. 492. This, among other important pieces of the collection, helps us to get a better understanding of Buddhist history - as is well known, exact historical information on Indian history is exceptionally scanty. Thus, through its scientific treatment, the collection is giving us substantial and important new insights into the history of the Buddhist tradition and its development throughout Asia.

The Schøyen collection does not contain only Buddhist materials, but scriptural materials from virtually all the great historical traditions of the world. So far the following publication projects have been initiated: Pictographic and cuneiform tablets; Greek papyri; Coptic papyri; Buddhist manuscripts; Aramaic, Mandaic, Syriac and Pahlavi incantation bowls; and English medieval stamp seal matrices. A digitalized copy of these materials too is being partly completed by the project at the CAS. All the projects will be published in a series especially established for the purpose, viz., The Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection Series (MSCS). Scholars from these other disciplines are also attached to the project at the CAS - thus extended multi-disciplinary activity is taking place on the basis of the collection as a whole.