



Reading Aśvaghōṣa Across Boundaries: An Introduction

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Abstract The prominence and the importance of Aśvaghōṣa's works and persona—to the understanding of the history of Sanskrit poetry, to the understanding of Indian Buddhism in a transitional stage and to its introduction to other parts of Asia—is well acknowledged in contemporary scholarship. But with few exceptions the existing scholarship on Aśvaghōṣa has tended to be highly specialized and focused, inviting further reading that builds on this in-depth research to offer an integrated treatment of the variegated aspects and contexts of his works. This special issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* is intended as a modest step toward a holistic exploration of Aśvaghōṣa works, which reads them across disciplinary as well as regional and temporal boundaries. This introduction is designed to highlight, very schematically, some points of interest and recurring concerns with respect to Aśvaghōṣa works; to point out how the set of articles address these concerns, and to suggest a particular order in which they can be profitably read.

Keywords Aśvaghōṣa · Buddhism · kāvya · Sanskrit literature

Paper

The prominence and the importance of Aśvaghōṣa's works and persona—to the understanding of the history of Sanskrit poetry, to the understanding of Indian Buddhism in a transitional stage and to its introduction to other parts of Asia—is well acknowledged in contemporary scholarship, as attested by the extensive bibliography, compiled by Eltschinger and Yamabe, that concludes this issue.

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But with few exceptions (foremost Johnston's seminal and still authoritative works),¹ the existing scholarship on Aśvaghōṣa has tended to be highly specialized and focused, inviting further reading that builds on this in-depth research to offer an integrated treatment of the variegated aspects and contexts of his works.

This special issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, which grew out of a conference on the works of Aśvaghōṣa held at Tel Aviv University,² is hence intended as a modest step toward a more holistic exploration of Aśvaghōṣa works, which reads them across disciplinary as well as regional and temporal boundaries. This brief introduction is designed to highlight, very schematically, some points of interest and recurring concerns with respect to Aśvaghōṣa works; to point out how the set of articles address these concerns, and to suggest a particular order—surely not exclusive—in which they can be profitably read.

There is little that we know in definitive terms of Aśvaghōṣa life apart from the information given in the colophons of his three extant works, which include two epic poems, in the genre of extensive poetry (*mahākāvya*), on Buddhist themes—the *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha) and *Saundarananda* (Beautiful Nanda); and a Buddhist drama—the *Śāriputraprakaraṇa* (The Drama of Śāriputra), from which, unfortunately, we have only fragments.³ We know by his own account that he originated from Sāketa (the Buddhist name for Ayodhyā, in the north of India), of his fathers' name (Suvarṇākṣī), and that he is said to have been a Buddhist monk, an eminent poet, and a Buddhist preacher (*mahāvādīn*). Later traditions claim that he was a Brahmin who underwent a conversion (a possibility that sits well with his deep knowledge of Brahmanical sources and tradition in his poems)⁴ and that he composed his works under the patronage of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kaniṣka. But more

¹ Most notably Johnston's introductions, editions and translations of the *Buddhacarita* (1935/1936 rep1984), and *Saundaranada* (1928, 1932).

² "Reading Aśvaghōṣa across Boundaries," Department of South and East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel, 20 December, 2015, consisting of presentations by the following participants (in alphabetical order): Janet Gyatso (Harvard University); Charles Hallisey (Harvard University); Thomas M. Hunter (University of British Columbia); Shenghai Li (Fudan University, Shanghai); Patrick Olivelle (University of Austin, Texas); Andrew Ollett (Harvard University); Richard G. Salomon (University of Washington, Seattle); David Shulman (Hebrew University, Jerusalem); Eviatar Shulman (Hebrew University, Jerusalem); Gary Tubb (University of Chicago); Roy Tzohar (Tel Aviv University). The additional papers by Vincent Eltschinger, (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris); and Sonam Kachru (University of Virginia) were included in this issue because of their thematic relevance.

³ Contemporary scholarship regards Aśvaghōṣa's authorship of these three works to be uncontested, while there is also a tangible if more tentative agreement regarding the doubtful nature of his authorship of more than twenty additional works, such as the *Vajrasūcī*, and the *Mahāyānaśraddhotpāda*, etc., which are traditionally ascribed to him. As for Aśvaghōṣa's dramatic works, while only the *Śāriputraprakaraṇa* is preserved in fragmentary form, there is some evidence to suggest that he was the author of at least one additional drama, the *Rāṣṭrapālanāṭaka*, of which, unfortunately, no copy survived. See Salomon (2015, pp. 511–512).

⁴ See Hildebeitel (2006) and Olivelle (2008).

basic details of his career, such as his dates (either first or second century CE)⁵ and his particular sectarian and scholastic affiliation,⁶ are a matter of ongoing scholarly discussion (the Aśvaghōṣa bibliography that concludes this issue provides a panoramic view of this debate).

What remains uncontested is the literary quality and philosophical value of his works and their impact on subsequent Sanskrit literary production and the Buddhist world within and outside of India. Masterpieces of poetic elegance and perceptiveness, Aśvaghōṣa's works are the earliest surviving works in the genre of extensive poetry (*mahākāvya*) in India, and they played a constitutive role in what can be described as the northern branch of a "*kāvya* movement" in Indian literature (see Ollett's paper for this argument, and Kachru's and Tzohar's papers on Aśvaghōṣa's own use and understanding of the genre). Characterized by a richness and innovativeness of expression and themes, his works are highly original, stylish and yet unassuming, approachable but deeply multi-layered, and influential on the poetical tradition both in India (foremost on Kālidāsa)⁷ and beyond the subcontinent (see Salomon's and Hunter's articles on Aśvaghōṣa's poetic afterlife in Central Asia and Java, respectively).

Aśvaghōṣa's works are also among the earliest extant examples of Buddhist literature in so-called classical Sanskrit (albeit with some distinctly Buddhist features of vocabulary, syntax, and morphology).⁸ Written at a time when Buddhist composition operated within a highly diversified linguistic context, in terms of both vernacular and literary languages, Aśvaghōṣa's appeal to the genre of *kāvya*, in Sanskrit, to deal with distinctively Buddhist themes hence reflects a highly reductive choice.

Current scholarship, pointing out the way in which his works are deeply invested in and incorporate the Sanskrit Brahmanical literary imaginaire and tradition, often interpreted this feature as a conscious effort to deliver Buddhism to the Brahmins (see in this respect Olivelle's contribution to this volume); and his choice of genre and language under Buddhism attempt to integrate itself with a growing Sanskrit Cosmopolis. By the same token, however, the very same choices may be also seen as an attempt to deliver Sanskrit *kāvya* to Buddhist circles—that is, to persuade what was until then a deeply multi-lingual literary community of the efficacy and hence the superiority of a common and to some extent monolingual mode of aesthetic expression. Whatever the reason, Aśvaghōṣa's works must figure as a vital link in any attempt to understand the growing "Sanskritization" of northern Indian Buddhism from around the second century CE.

⁵ See Hildebeitel (2006, pp. 233–235) for a summary of scholarly views in favor of placing Aśvaghōṣa in the first century CE. Richard Salomon, while noting that Aśvaghōṣa's dates remain uncertain, has pointed out that "A 2nd century date is supported by the Central Asian fragments of Aśvaghōṣa's dramatic work, which on paleographic grounds seem to date from around the time of Kaniṣka or his successor Huviṣka (Lüders, 1911a)," (2015, p. 507).

⁶ See Eltschinger (2013, pp. 168–170) and Salomon (2015, p. 508) for a summary of the current state of scholarship on this issue.

⁷ See Tubb (2014).

⁸ Salomon (1983).

In addition to their distinctively poetic quality, Aśvaghōṣa's works draw extensively on canonical Buddhist sources as well as on certain non-Buddhist sources (see Eltschinger's, Shulman's, Olivelle's and Shenghai Li's contributions to this issue), and as such, form a reservoir of information on Buddhist doctrine and philosophy, meditative practices, Indian social norms and court and urban culture. This feature, which makes them highly interesting for contemporary scholars, held its appeal also for Buddhist communities outside of India in the centuries following their composition. Most notable is the influence and popularity of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*, which set the standard for the hagiographies of the Buddha for centuries to come, all the way through to modernity. In antiquity it was circulated and quoted/imitated in Nepal and Central Asia (see Salomon's contribution to this issue, as well as previous works)⁹ and had a lasting effect on literary production and iconography in South East Asia (see Hunter's paper). In East Asia the fate of Aśvaghōṣa's work was mixed. The *Buddhacarita* (but surprisingly not the *Saundarananda*) was translated into Chinese in the fifth century and into Tibetan in the thirteenth century CE, and the former (but not so much the latter, see Shenghai Li's paper for a discussion of this discrepancy) was used as an authority and source of information on everything Buddhist.

With the aim of providing a continuous intellectual and historical context from which to approach Aśvaghōṣa's works, the articles in this issue have been grouped under three subtopics (though overlapping concerns and themes run through them, as I noted earlier). The first deals with the question of Aśvaghōṣa's sources and the intertextual and ideological realm in which he operated and on which he draw (Eltschinger's, Shulman's, and Olivelle's papers); the second focuses specifically on his choice of genre (*kāvya*), its characteristics, and the way in which it is negotiated and utilized for his purposes (Ollett, Kachru, Tzohar); and the third surveys and examines his textual 'afterlife' outside the Indian sub-continent, in various Asian contexts (Salomon, Hunter, Shenghai Li).

Opening this issue's exploration of Aśvaghōṣa's sources of influence, Vincent Eltschinger's paper, "Aśvaghōṣa and His Canonical Sources (III): The Night of Awakening (*Buddhacarita* 14.1-87)," uncovers the canonical sources of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* and, to the extent possible, his sectarian affiliation. The third in a series of papers (the first two focused on Chapter 16's linkage to Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya and Sūtra literature), the current paper examines the sources of Aśvaghōṣa's account of the Buddha's enlightenment (Chapter 14). Pointing out a striking resemblance (in structure and theme as well as phraseology and metaphorical repertoire) of Aśvaghōṣa's account and a number of texts (T. 189, the *Nagar(opam) asūtra* of the *Samyuktāgama*, and textual materials that have come to be identified with the Mūlasarvāstivāda), Eltschinger discusses possible ways of determining the direction of this cross borrowing, and strengthens his case for a link between Aśvaghōṣa and (proto-) Mūlasarvāstivāda circles or compilers.

Still on the topic of Aśvaghōṣa's intertextual realm, Eviater Shulman's "Aśvaghōṣa's *Viśeṣaka*: The *Saundarananda* and its Pāli 'equivalents'" compares Aśvaghōṣa's rendering of Nanda's tale—the story of the ordainment and liberation

⁹ Salomon (1999, 2015).

of the Buddha's half-brother—with the extant versions in the canonical Pāli literature. Focusing mainly on the *Udāna* (possibly the story's earliest version) and *Jātakas*, Shulman highlights differences in narrative and emphasis, foremost the absence in the Pāli versions of Nanda's deep ambivalence toward the Buddhist path versus its prominence in Aśvaghōṣa's version. Based on this comparison, Shulman makes a more general theoretical argument about Buddhist literature—that it is the genre, rather than any historical conditions involved in its transmission, that defines the special features of each telling of the story.

Concluding the first subtopic, Patrick Olivelle's "Aśvaghōṣa's Apologia: Brahmanical Ideology and Female Allure" situates and examines Aśvaghōṣa's two epic poems within the broader context of the Brahmanical sources extant in his time. The paper begins by observing that Aśvaghōṣa's presentation of Brahmanism as the obvious and natural condition of society and kings (as it is depicted in the Brahmanical writings themselves) was by no means dictated by the social reality of his time. Seeking to make sense of his choice, Olivelle finds a possible explanation in Aśvaghōṣa's arguments against certain central Brahmanical theological positions regarding premature asceticism and the importance of desire and marital love, and their seeming incompatibility with the Buddhist path and monastic celibacy. Drawing on an array of Brahmanical sources (the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Arthaśāstra*, *Mahābhārata*, *Dharmaśāstras*, to name a few), Olivelle analyzes the way in which Aśvaghōṣa's deals with these positions and argues that his choice to situate Buddhism within the framework of Brahmanical theology serves primarily as an argument for the conversion of his fellow Brahmins, and possibly as justification for his own conversion.

The second subtopic of this issue concerns Aśvaghōṣa's choice of Sanskrit *kāvya* as his main genre and linguistic medium, his characteristic style and aesthetic ideals, and the way in which he utilized these to convey his Buddhist subject matter.

Providing the broad theoretical and historical framework for this exploration, Andrew Ollett's "Making It Nice: Kāvya in the Second Century" situates Aśvaghōṣa's two epic poems in the context of what he convincingly argues to be a *kāvya* movement. This movement, from around the second century CE, encompassed a particular linguistic and geopolitical space whose centers were the kingdom of the Kuṣāṇas to the north (identified by the tradition with Sanskrit *kāvya* and poets such as Aśvaghōṣa, Mātṛceṭa, and Kumāralāta) and the kingdom of the Sātavāhanas to the south (identified with Prakrit poetry such as the *Sattasāi* compiled by Hāla). Ollett identifies the essence of this discourse as a concern with ornamentation (*alaṃkāra*), which stands not merely for particular figures of sound and sense but for a new aesthetic sensibility with respect to textual beauty. He then describes the manifestation of this discourse in two different poetical ideals, corresponding to real communities of poetic practice. Whereas the northern poets—among them Aśvaghōṣa—considered poetic artifice as that which transforms their subject-matter into poetry (and therefore ought to be conspicuous), the Prakrit texts associated with the Sātavāhana court held that ornamentation must remain inconspicuous, making "the artful seem artless." The paper concludes with a discussion of the possible reasons for these two roads taken, the extent of their interaction and their respective influence on later Indian *kāvya* and poetics.

The emphasis on *kāvya* as primarily an aesthetic sensibility serves also as the premise of the two subsequent papers, by Kachru and Tzohar, which both deal—albeit in different ways—with the apparent tension between *kāvya* and Buddhist ideology, and with Aśvaghōṣa’s own reflexivity on his use of medium in this context.

Sonam Kachru’s “After the Unsilence of the Birds: Remembering Aśvaghōṣa’s Sundarī” focuses on the way in which Aśvaghōṣa’s poetical treatment of the story of Nanda uncovers a deep moral ambivalence underlying the work, which complicates its understanding as a straightforward aesthetic expression of the ascetic goal of renunciation. The paper focuses on the poem’s depiction of Sundarī, the wife who is forsaken by the newly ordained Nanda and who, inexplicably, is not mentioned at all in the larger part of the work. A close reading of sections of the work demonstrates the ways in which Sundarī is gradually lost to Nanda’s view. Following through on the imagery of birds and voice threaded throughout the poem, Kachru points out how Sundarī—in Nanda’s reverie—is metamorphosed into nature, and becomes voiceless and inhuman. Showing how her pain becomes isolated and inaccessible to Nanda, the essay suggests that there may be, for Aśvaghōṣa, a relationship between the aesthetic experience derived from poetry and moral attention.

The starting point of my paper, “A Tree in Bloom or a Tree Stripped Bare: Ways of Seeing in Aśvaghōṣa’s *Life of the Buddha*,” is the poet’s somewhat apologetic statement concluding the *Buddhacarita* (as well as the *Saundarananda*) regarding his use of *kāvya* to deliver the Buddha’s words. These statements were often considered by scholarship as empty rhetoric designed to assuage the typically suspicious attitude of the Buddhist canon toward *kāvya*, which consists in ornamented language for the sole purpose of pleasure.

This paper suggests that we should take Aśvaghōṣa’s statements seriously, and that indeed his poetry can be understood as conducive to liberation (and as useful for mitigating the tension—and there is a palpable tension here—between *kāvya* and liberation). Focusing on the *Buddhacarita*, the paper provides a close reading of a selection of passages from the work, and draws on literary analysis to examine how Aśvaghōṣa uses the narrative voice to provide a multi-perspectival account of experience. What defines these opposing perspectives for Aśvaghōṣa, it is argued, is primarily the way in which they stand in relation to the world of poetry and to the aesthetic values of *kāvya*, and in this respect Aśvaghōṣa should be understood as offering a highly reflexive account of his own choice of medium.

The third and final subtopic surveys and examines some examples of Aśvaghōṣa’s textual ‘afterlife’ outside the Indian sub-continent, in various Asian contexts. First in this sequence of papers is Richard Salomon’s “The Sincerest Form of Flattery: On Imitations of Aśvaghōṣa’s *Mahākāvyas*,” which deals with imitations as a form of tribute to the works of Aśvaghōṣa, especially the *Buddhacarita* (but also the *Saundarananda*), with a focus on Central Asian sources. The paper discusses two main kinds of imitations, the first being in the form of individual verses in the texts themselves that are suspected as interpolations; and the second, restructured versions of Aśvaghōṣa’s work (either the entire texts or parts) in Sanskrit and Tocharian (preserved only in fragmentary form). Providing a

detailed analysis of many instances of both kinds of imitations of Aśvaghōṣa's work, Salomon proceeds to suggest explanations for their appearance and to point out the ways in which they shed light on the creative process and norms (specifically regarding notions of authority and originality) involved in the creation of Sanskrit poetry. He argues that a plausible explanation for the first kind of imitation is found in the methods of training aspiring poets (the interpolations incorporated into the main text by subsequent copyists, perhaps by mistake). As for the second kind of imitation, Salomon demonstrates, drawing on traditional Indian literary theory, that such reworked versions can be compared to the genre of imitative poetry, a legitimate practice in Sanskritist circles, and thus that such works should be regarded not as plagiarism but as tributes to the original author.

Next, Thomas Hunter's paper "Processions, Seductions, Divine Battles: Aśvaghōṣa at the Foundations of Old Javanese Literature" deals with the influence of Aśvaghōṣa in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago from around the seventh century CE. This influence is traced by examining several tropes or themes that were presented by Aśvaghōṣa and were picked out and developed by several important composers of *kakawin*, the Old Javanese literary genre comparable to South Asia's *kāvya*, up until the fourteenth century CE.

As Hunter notes, while Chinese pilgrim Yijing (end of the seventh century CE) reports that the *Buddhacarita* was studied in the Sumatran capital Śrībhoga, there is a gap of nearly two hundred years between Yijing's testimony and the appearance of the first works in the Old Javanese literary language; and it is another two hundred years before tropes of Aśvaghōṣa appear in works of the *kakawin* genre. Since a study of literary history was never developed in the Javano-Balinese tradition, Hunter argues, evidence for the influence of Aśvaghōṣa can only be gained by thematically analyzing the works themselves and considering the historical background, particularly the pivotal role of the "Shailendra royal preceptors" in bringing Sanskrit learning to Central Java between the seventh and eighth centuries CE.

The final paper in this subtopic, Shenghai Li's "The *Nirvāṇa* of the Buddha and the Afterlife of Aśvaghōṣa's *Life of the Buddha*," brings this issue full circle insofar as it pertains both to the question of Aśvaghōṣa's sources and to his textual afterlife (in China and Tibet). The paper's first half provides a comparative analysis of the narrative of the Buddha's last journey leading to his *nirvāṇa* (focusing on the *Buddhacarita* chapters 22–26, extant only in Tibetan and Chinese translations), with the parallel account in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbānasutta*. Based on this comparison, the paper proposes a hypothetical "base narrative" of the journey, concluding that Aśvaghōṣa's sources were already a highly literary rendition of this basic narrative.

Turning to the issue of the reception of these sections and the *Buddhacarita* as a whole in China and Tibet, the paper surveys the authorship, histories, methodologies, and stylistic transformation involved in the work's translations into these languages (in the fifth and thirteenth centuries, respectively); and the extent to which it was quoted and used. The paper's findings are that in China the work was used as an authority and a source of information for an array of scholastic and religious Buddhist works (but as many of its literary and poetic features were lost in the Chinese translation, it had no substantial bearing on belletristic literature). In

Tibet, where Indian literary classics were actively studied, interpreted, and used as literary models, the *Buddhacarita* has been surprisingly ignored, perhaps because it was rendered by a less-known translator.

Concluding this issue is an extensive bibliography on Āśvaghōṣa, compiled and edited by Vincent Eltschinger in collaboration with Nobuyoshi Yamabe. It is intended to serve as the basis for an online open-access resource, which will be regularly updated.

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