



## AŚOKA III. THE LEGEND OF AŚOKA IN KHOTANESE

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### iii. The Legend of Aśoka in Khotanese

The name of Aśoka appears in late Khotanese texts in the form of Aśū' or Isū', i.e., phonemically Azū, a further development of a Northwest Prakrit form \*Azūga- also seen in the Middle Chinese transcription \*A-yuk (Mathews, nos. 1, 7687; Karlgren, nos. 1m, 1020a), where -y- has the transcription value of -ž- (Pulleyblank, pt. 1, p.115; Bailey, "Hvatanica IV," p. 919 with n. 1). Note that in contrast with Khotanese, Sogdian has a form borrowed from Sanskrit, šwk' (Henning, "Murder," pp. 138-41).

The legend of Aśoka is told in a number of *avadānas* (Buddhist stories, legends), of which the *Aśoka-avadāna* proper is only one. It is customary, however, to use this name for the entire story complex which in the original Sanskrit also includes the legend of Aśoka's son Kuṇāla and various anecdotes about Aśoka's minister Yaśas. The entire *Aśoka-avadāna* was translated into Chinese several times, two of the versions being still extant, whereas in Tibetan only the *Kuṇāla-avadāna* is still found. The earliest Chinese version was made about A.D. 300 by the monk Fă-qīng (Mathews, nos. 1762, 1095), a Parthian (*ān*, short for *ān-xí*, Mathews, nos. 26, 2495, from Middle Chinese \**an-siək*, from Iranian *aršak*, see Pulleyblank, pt. 2, p. 228; see also [An-hsi](#)). There is also a versified Kuṇāla-story in Chinese, which appears to contain some of the elements found in the Khotanese version but not in the *Aśoka-avadāna* (see



below).

Of the Khotanese version there are two fragmentary copies, both of which were published by Bailey (*Khotanese Buddhist Texts*, pp. 40-42) and later translated by him (“A Tale of Aśoka”). No detailed comparison of the Khotanese with the other versions (Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese) has yet been undertaken; however, the Khotanese does not agree closely with any of them. Following is a résumé of the Khotanese text, with page references to the *Aśoka-avadāna* in the *Divyāvadāna* in Cowell and Neil’s edition.

Though not a *sūtra*, both the Sanskrit and the Khotanese start with the customary introductory formula of Buddhist *sūtras*: “Thus I have heard” (cf. Strong, *Legend*, p. 173 n. 2). We then have a description of how, after the Buddha’s *mahāparinirvāṇa*, there ruled in the town of Pāṭaliputra a king named Aśoka, who reigned over the whole of Jambudvīpa (the world), and its kings acknowledged him. (This is similar to *Divyāvadāna*, pp. 368-69, where the Buddha prophesies of the boy Jaya, that a hundred years after the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* he would become the king Aśoka, etc.). He built 18,000 *caityas*, Buddhist shrines where relics of the Buddha are preserved. (The Sanskrit and Chinese have 84,000 *stūpas*.) There follows the story of the birth of Kuṇāla; Aśoka had two queens, Padmāvatī and Tiṣyarakṣitā, and a harem of 8000. Padmāvatī bore him a son whom they named Varmavardam (probably for \*Darmavardam; the Sanskrit has Dharmavivardhana “Dharma-increasing,” *Divy.*, p. 405.) Once Aśoka looked at the boy’s eyes and was struck by their beauty, he asked the ministers whether they had seen anything on earth like them. They responded that on Mount Gandhamādana there was a bird named *kuṇāla* who would be the only being on earth with eyes similar to those of the boy, which were like two chalcedony jewels upon a blue lotus leaf. The king ordered the bird brought to him and saw that its eyes were indeed like those of the prince, whom they consequently renamed Kuṇāla (*Divy.*, pp. 405f.). After Kuṇāla had grown up (the Sanskrit and Chinese versions add that he was married to a girl named Kāñcanamālā) Aśoka once took him to a monastery (*saṃghārāma*, in *Divy.*, p. 406 called Kurkuṭārāma), where the boy was a delight to the Elder Upagupta. (This is the only mention in the Khotanese version of Upagupta, who plays a prominent part in the Sanskrit and Chinese versions.)

There then follows the story of the minister Yaśas and the heads, which in the Sanskrit is placed at the beginning of the *Kuṇāla-avadāna* (*Divy.*, pp. 382-84): On another occasion, Aśoka honored a Buddhist teacher (*ācārya*) by bowing



with his forehead at the other's feet, and was reproved for this by Yaśas, a very unbelieving minister. (The Khotanese text has *tvari iṣadā* "very unbelieving" for the Sanskrit *paramaśrād dho*, which confirms Przyluski's proposal [p. 109 n. 1] that we should read this as *param' aśrāddho* "very unbelieving," not *paramaśrāddho* "of utmost faith," as, e.g., Strong, p. 234.) Thereupon the king ordered all his ministers (7,000 in all) to bring one head each, without, however, killing a living being (this last condition is not in the Sanskrit). Yaśas was to bring a human head. When they brought the heads in the morning, the king ordered them to take the heads to the market and sell them. All were able to sell their heads except Yaśas. By explaining that the reason for this was the repulsive nature of the (dead) head, Aśoka was able to convince Yaśas that it was no bad thing for the king to bend his valueless human head to the feet of Buddhist monks or teachers, who possess immeasurable good qualities.

There follows the story of the rebellion of Takṣaśilā and the incestuous passion of queen Tiṣyarakṣitā for Kuṇāla, which in the Khotanese version are connected in a manner differing noticeably from the Sanskrit (and Chinese). In the Sanskrit we first have the attempt by the queen to seduce Kuṇāla (*Divy.*, p. 407) and Kuṇāla's rebuttal of her advances, after which the queen always sought to find fault with Kuṇāla. Next Aśoka, following the advice of his ministers, sent Kuṇāla to quell the rebellion of Takṣaśilā. During his absence Aśoka fell ill but was cured by Tiṣyarakṣitā, who in recompense was granted the kingship for seven days. The queen seized the opportunity to take revenge on Kuṇāla by ordering the citizens of Takṣaśilā to have him blinded. In the Khotanese this appears as follows: After Aśoka had gone to deal with the rebels, the queen made advances to Kuṇāla, who, however, withstood all her guiles. When Aśoka returned Kuṇāla mentioned nothing of all this, but the queen was bent upon revenge and schemed with Yaśas to have Aśoka send Kuṇāla to Takṣaśilā, who thus "lost his native land." Yaśas, for his part, had reason to hate Kuṇāla because he had put him to shame publicly on one occasion by striking him six times on the head when his hat fell off. This story is not in the Sanskrit text but parallels are found in the Chinese versions, e.g., in the versified Kuṇāla-story (see also Bailey, "Tale," p. 11).

It is a matter of regret that the Khotanese texts are incomplete, since the Khotanese version might be expected to contain some reference to the legend of the foundation of Khotan, which in Tibetan and Chinese sources is connected with Aśoka and Kuṇāla. For details and bibliography see below.