



AŚOKA IV. THE LEGEND OF AŚOKA AND THE FOUNDING OF KHOTAN

iv. The Legend of Aśoka and the Founding of Khotan

Chinese and Tibetan sources have preserved four accounts of the founding of the kingdom of Khotan, all of which relate this to the reign of Aśoka in the third century B.C., and either to Aśoka himself or to his sons. The four accounts are summarized in Lamotte, *Histoire*, pp. 281-83. Of the four accounts two are in Chinese and date from the seventh century A.D.; the other two are in Tibetan and at least one of them was probably compiled about the seventh century (Lamotte, p. 282).

Both Chinese accounts are reported by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xüan-Zang (Hsüen-Tsang), who traveled to India in 629-45. In his *Buddhist Records of the Western World* Xüan-Zang reports that, according to the legend, the cruel queen of Aśoka, Tiṣyarakṣitā, made the officials of Takṣaśilā blind his son Kuṇāla (see above on the *Aśoka-avadāna*). The officials were then exiled by Aśoka and crossing the Snowy Mountains (the Himalayas) went to the desert in the western part of Khotan (the Takla Makan desert). At the same time a Chinese prince, also in exile, came to the western part of Khotan. He conquered the Indians, then settled in the middle of Khotan, and later extended his rule to all of Khotan. When the king grew old without having



obtained an heir, he prayed to the guardian god of Khotan, Vaiśravaṇa (or Vaiśramaṇa), who granted him a son. The boy was suckled by a breast swelling up from the earth, whence the local name of the kingdom, Kustana “earth-breast.”

In the second account, the *Life of Xüan-Zang*, which was composed by his followers, it is the king’s son, Kuṇāla, himself who is exiled and settles in Khotan. Being sonless, Kuṇāla prays to Vaiśravaṇa and a boy is born from the forehead of the god. The infant is suckled by a breast miraculously emerging from the earth. Hence the boy is called Kustana. See also Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, p. 159.)

In the first of the Tibetan accounts, the *Gośṛṅgavyākaranā*, which was compiled about the seventh century, it is a Chinese king who asks Vaiśravaṇa for a son, and the god gives him a boy who is none other than a son of Aśoka. In this version of the legend, too, an earth breast suckles the child; who is then called “he whose mother-breast is a breast from earth” (*sa-las nu ma nu*). His adoptive father names him king of Khotan and he goes to Khotan accompanied by the Grand Chancellor Yaśas and several Chinese armies. Well established in Khotan, they are joined by an Indian people with which they live in peace, with common use of the waters.

The fourth version of the foundation legend is found in the Tibetan “Prophecy of the country of Li” (*Li-yul luṅ-bstan-pa*). This version is somewhat more elaborate than the other three: The Indian king Dharmāśoka, after having been converted to the Buddhist faith by his minister Yaśas, once traveled to Khotan. While there, his wife was made pregnant by Vaiśravaṇa and bore a son. Aśoka, naturally fearing future competition from the boy, especially in view of a prophecy that the boy would be king during his father’s lifetime, left him, and the boy was suckled by an earth-breast and was called Sa-nu “earth-breast.” In the meantime, a Chinese king, worrying about being almost childless since he had only 999 sons though with the power in him for one more, had prayed to Vaiśravaṇa, who then gave him one more, namely Sa-nu. After growing up, the prince fell out with his father and brothers and returned to Khotan with 10,000 Chinese colonizers. Aśoka’s minister Yaśas, who on account of his relatives had become unpopular in India also came to Khotan, with 7,000 men. The two groups were shortly reconciled and lived in peace with each other.

Historical background of the legend. A connection between Aśoka, or any of his



descendants, and Khotan has not been confirmed by any other historical sources, so it is doubtful whether the legend is anything but an attempt to provide Khotan with an eponymous founder hero (see on the name below). On the other hand, there is definite archeological evidence of a Sino-Indian symbiosis in Khotan. At the site of the ancient capital, Yotqan, coins have been found with Chinese legends on the obverse and Indian ones on the reverse. Moreover, the existence of an Indian colony in Khotan at an early time is confirmed by the finds at Niya and Endere of documents written in Indian language in Kharoṣṭhī script. The earliest of these documents dates to the third century A.D.

One is struck by the absence of any allusion whatsoever to an Iranian element in Khotan in the four founding legends. As a matter of fact, we know nothing about when and how the Iranians entered the area. It may have been quite early, though, since the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius I and Xerxes I (6th to 5th cents. B.C.) mention Iranian Saka tribes far up in the northeast. Actually, various Saka tribes may have been wandering about Central Asia from a very early period, probably from the first half of the second millennium B.C. (see Emmerick, *Guide*, p. 3).

There is no direct evidence for such an early presence of Iranians in the area, nor do we know the exact location of the Saka tribes mentioned by Darius and Xerxes; however, in one inscription they are listed after Sogdia and Gandhāra, and in another after Gandhāra and India, so they must have belonged to the extreme northeast. An argument against identifying the Sakas of Darius and Xerxes with the Iranians of Khotan is perhaps the fact that when Darius built his castle at Susa, he received building materials from the entire empire, but the Sakas are not mentioned in this connection. If the Sakas of Darius were already settled in Khotan, we would certainly expect them to have contributed with their famous jade stone. (On the Khotanese jade see, e.g., Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, pp. 132-33; Bailey, *Culture*, pp. 1f.; R. E. Emmerick, in R. E. Emmerick and P. O. Skjærvø, *Studies in the Vocabulary of Khotanese II*, Vienna, 1986, s.v. *īra*-.)

The earliest evidence of any kind whatsoever not only for Iranian presence, but also for Iranian supremacy in the region, is a document found at Endere, probably dating from the third century A.D. The document is dated in the “regnal year of the Great King of Khotan, King of Kings” (*Khotana maharaya rayatiraya*). The king bears the title of *hinajha*, which is a Northwest Prakrit



spelling for **hīnāza*, Khotanese written *hīnāysa*, “general,” the Iranian equivalent of Sanskrit *senāpati*, which is found in other documents of the region. Also, the word for “regnal year” is *ch’una*, the equivalent of Khotanese *kṣuṇa*. The use of this terminology shows that “already at that time [there must] have been a long-established connection between the Iranian inhabitants of Khotan and royal power” (Emmerick, *Guide*, p. 4).

Kustana and the name of Khotan. The story about Kustana and the “earth breast,” though now extant only in the Tibetan and Chinese sources, must have originated among the Indian-speaking population, which used the name Gostana for Khotan, of which it made Kustana the eponymous founder and about whom it spun the legend of the “earth breast” and the rest. Neither the local Khotanese form nor the attested Chinese name could have given rise to the legend: The Khotanese called their land Hvatana (pronounced Hwadana, later reduced to Hvaṃna and Hvaṃ, i.e., Hwāna and Hvā) and the Chinese used Yú-tiān (Mathews, nos. 7592, 6374; Karlgren, nos. 97a, 375r; the character for the second element varies some) from **hwāh*-den (Pulleyblank, pt. 1, p. 91). (The modern name is Hé-tiǎn, lit. “peace field,” Mathews, nos. 215, 6362). The Indian and Chinese forms are also found in Khotanese documents as Gaustana (variants Gāstana, Gāstam, Gāstamā, i.e., Gostan or Gostā; the name is also found in Chinese texts as Ju-sa-dan-na from older **Gīou*-sat-tan-na) and Yūttiṃni (with or without *kūhi*: i.e., Chinese *guó* “land”) respectively.

Obviously, only the Indian form could give rise to the story of Kustana. As for the name Gostana, it is of course unlikely to contain Ind. *stana* “breast” (cf. Av. *fštāna*-, NPers. *pestān*), and Pelliot (*Marco Polo*, pp. 410f.), taking up a suggestion by Thomas (*Tibetan Texts*, pt. 1, p. 18 n. 1), proposes to derive it from *sthāna* “place,” or rather, Iranian *stāna*, the well-known suffix forming names of places and lands which apparently also influence the corresponding use of Indian *sthāna* in this area (cf. Ind. *Cīnasthāna*, Kharoṣṭhī *Cinasthana*, Iran. Čīn(e)stān in Mid. Pers. and Sogd.). The origin and meaning of the element *Go*- remains unknown (Pelliot, op. cit., pp. 412f.). Eventually, Khotanese *Hva*-, Indian *Go*-, and Chinese **Hwāh*- may represent the same original, local, name, to which was later added *-dan*, which still later was replaced by the common *-stan*. The Tibetan name for Khotan is quite different: Li or Li-yul “country of Li.”



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See also H. W. Bailey, *The Culture of the Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan*, Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies 1, ed. E. Yarshater, New York, 1982, esp. p. 3, where an Iranian etymology for Hvatana- is proposed (tentatively “the (land of the) lords” [?], connected with Iran. *xwata-* “self”). Chinese quoted from *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, rev. Amer. ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1972 (12th printing) and B. Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa*, Stockholm, 1972.