

*The Kalawān Copper-plate Inscription: Early Evidence for Mahāyāna-type Thinking?* by  
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## THE KALAWĀN COPPER-PLATE INSCRIPTION: EARLY EVIDENCE FOR MAHĀYĀNA-TYPE THINKING?

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The copper-plate inscription found in the north-western part of the South Asian subcontinent, at Kalawān (Taxila or Takṣaśilā), raises questions of importance for the historian of Buddhism and early Mahāyāna.

Recording the installation (Skt. *pratiṣṭhā-*) of a corporeal relic (Skt. *śarīra*), and placed in the base of a *stūpa* (*gahathuba: gṛhastūpa*) at Chaḍaśilā, the inscription is dated in the 134th year of Aja (= c. 77/78 CE?)<sup>1</sup>. Its installer-dedicator was a certain *upāsikā* named Caṃdrabhi (or °bha), the daughter of the householder (Skt. *gṛhapati*) Dhraṃma (Skt. Dharma) and the wife of Bhadravala. In the inscription it is specified that she was acting together with her householder brother Ṇaṃdivaḍhana (Skt. Nan-divardhana), her two sons and daughter, her two daughters-in-law, and Jivaṇaṃdi (Skt. Jīvanandin), the teacher (Skt. *ācārya*). For the historian of Mahāyāna this inscription is of considerable potential significance, but in its final portion it is difficult to interpret with complete certainty.

The Prakrit (Gāndhārī) text in Kharoṣṭhī script as edited by R. Salomon reads as follows in its final portion (lines 4-5):

... sa[rva]sti[line 5]vaṇa parigrahe raṭhanikamo puyāita sarva[sva]tvaṇa  
puyae ṇivaṇasa pratīae hotu<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> On the era of the Śaka ruler Aja/Aya (= Azes), equated with the Vikrama *saṃvat* of 58/57 BCE, see recently R. Salomon, *Indian epigraphy* (New York, 1998), p. 182, following on A.D.H. Bivar, 'The Azes era and the Indravarma casket', *South Asia archaeology 1979* (ed. H. Härtel, Berlin, 1981), pp. 369-76, and G. Fussman, *BEFEO* 1980, p. 43. The identification of 'Aja', here without title or *biruda*, has been much debated (compare below, n. 4), as has been the starting date of the Azes era.

As for the enigmatic expression *gaha-thuba*, its significance has been briefly remarked upon by G. Fussman, *JIAS* 27 (2004), p. 242 n. 8.

<sup>2</sup> R. Salomon, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-70. Salomon has translated the end of the inscription as follows: 'for the acceptance of the Sarvāstivādins. The country and the town are [hereby] honored; [and] it is for the honor of all beings. May it lead to [their] attainment of Nirvāṇa.'

The precise significance for the history of Mahāyāna of this part of the inscription not being entirely clear, it was not considered in the present writer's recent article 'Aspects of the study of the (earlier) Indian Mahāyāna'<sup>3</sup>. The epigraph states explicitly that the installation was placed by the donor in the *parigraha* — the 'acceptance' or perhaps rather 'keeping' — of persons described (by a Prakrit equivalent) as Sarvāstivādins, one of the main schools (*nikāya*) of the Śrāvakayāna. At the same time it hopes for the attainment of *nirvāṇa* by the dedicator herself and perhaps by her entourage — possibly even by all sentient beings, an idea characteristic of various stages of Mahāyānist thought. At this point the syntax is unfortunately ambiguous. The wish for *nirvāṇa* with no reference to *all* sentient beings appears frequently in inscriptions and texts<sup>4</sup>. In developed Mahāyānist thought the hope for the attainment of *nirvāṇa* — *nirvāṇāvāpti* or its equivalent — by *all* sentient beings (*sarvasattva*)

The Kalawān inscription was first published by S. Konow, *EI* 21 (1931-32), pp. 251-9 (cf. id., 'Kalawān copper-plate inscription of the year 134', *JRAS* 1932, pp. 949-65). See also J. Marshall, *Taxila*, i, p. 327; D.C. Sircar, *Select inscriptions* 2 (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 131-2; and K. Tsukamoto, *Indo-bukkyō himei no kenkyū – A comprehensive study of the Indian Buddhist inscriptions*, i (Kyōto, 1996), p. 971. The inscription has recently been discussed by G. Fussman, *JIAS* 27 (2004), pp. 241-2, who translates the end as follows: 'Given in trust (*parigrahe*) to the Sarvāstivādins. The kingdom and its corporations are honoured. All beings are honoured. May it be <for their and our> attainment of *nirvāṇa*.'

The use here of the word *pyayae* 'in honour, for respect of' in connexion with 'all sentient beings' finds numerous parallels in the use of this word, or of etymologically related words, in connexion not only with, e.g., 'all the Buddhas' but also with 'all beings' and with the dedicator's parents in Mathurā inscriptions (see H. Lüders, *Mathurā inscriptions* [Göttingen, 1961], p. 124 with p. 80), as well as in connexion with Buddhas, with the dedicator's parents, and with all sentient beings in Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions (where in relation to 'all sentient beings' *hita-sukha* also appears; see S. Konow, *Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions* [CII ii/1, 1929], pp. 77, 114 and 155, with pp. 5, 62, 65, 100).

<sup>3</sup> *JIAS* 27 (2004), pp. 13-18.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Konow's *Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions*, p. 77: the Taxila silver scroll inscription dated in the year 136 of Aya [Aja] = 79 CE (?), where the dedicator himself may be the only beneficiary of the wish for *nirvāṇa*; the inscription of Ajitasena, father of Senavarma, published by G. Fussman, *BEFEO* 75 (1986), p. 2; and the inscription dated in the year 98 of Azes published by A. Sadakata, *JA* 1996, pp. 308-09. On Senavarma's inscription dated to no later than the middle of the first century CE, and also on the Kuṣāṇa inscription from Hidda dated to the year 28, see below. Compare also G. Schopen, 'Mahāyāna in Indian inscriptions', *IJ* 21 (1979), pp. 1-19. Concerning the wish that *all* sentient beings might attain *nirvāṇa*, see our 'Aspects of the study of the (earlier) Indian Mahāyāna' (as in n. 3), p. 13 f.

stands beside another characteristic wish: that all sentient beings may attain the supreme Gnosis (of the *buddha*), *anuttara-(buddha)jñāna*<sup>5</sup>.

Now, concerning the possible reference in the Kalawān inscription to the attainment of *nirvāṇa* by all *sattvas* and at the same time the mention of Sarvāstivāda, the following considerations may be noted:

1) It is possible that the reference to the attainment of *nirvāṇa* is not to be connected directly with the preceding *sarva[sva]tvaṇa*, from which

<sup>5</sup> The Govindnagar (Mathura) Brahmi inscription from the time of HuveḌka/HuviḌka dated to the year 26 reads: ... *sar(va)(sat)[v]ja anut(t)ara(-) bud(dh)ajnana- pra(prva)-(tu)* ... See 'Aspects of the study...', p. 13. A further variant of the formula appears in another inscription from the same reign recently published by H. Falk, 'Two new inscriptions from the time of Huviṣka', *BIS* 12-14 (2000), p. 32 f.: \*imena kuśalamūlena sarvasattvānuttarasya nirantarasya jñānāvāptaye\*, where *nirantara jñāna* 'unimpeded, or immediate, Gnosis' does not appear to be the precise equivalent of terms such as *anantarattva-jñāna*, *ānantaryasamādhī*, *ānantyamārga*, *ānantaryamūrdhaprayoga* found notably in Prajñāpāramitā literature (on which see E. Obermiller, 'The doctrine of Prajñāpāramitā, AO 11 [1932]).

A variation on this very frequent formula appears in an inscription of Queen Mahādevī of Gupta lineage on a bronze of the Buddha with his hands in *dharmacakra* position, now in the British Museum, and dated to the fifth century. The recent editor of this inscription, O. von Hinüber, reads (*Die Palola Śāhis* [Mainz, 2004], p. 127): ... *yad atra puṇyam tad bhavatu sarvasattvānā(ṃ) mātāpitypurvaṃgamana anuttarapadajñānāvāptaye*. (In v. Hinüber's book, the more usual formula *anuttara-jñāna*<sup>o</sup> is found in colophons of Gilgit Mss. published on pp. 18, 77 and 79; it is of course frequent elsewhere.) Whether the form of words on the bronze in the British Museum — also known as an *Ichchāwar* inscription (H. Lüders, *List* no. 11; K. Tsukamoto, *op. cit.*, p. 612) — represents a conflation or contamination with the expression *amṛta(pada)dhātu* (cf. *ibid.*, p. 179 n.) — equivalent to *nirvāṇadhātu* (?) — is not perfectly clear. — For *amuda dhatu*, a Prakrit equivalent of *amṛta-dhātu* (: *nirvāṇadhātu*), see line 12b of Senavarma's inscription in O. von Hinüber, *Beiträge zur Erklärung der Senavarma-Inschrift* (AWL Mainz, Stuttgart, 2003), p. 37. Cf. *ṇivaṇadhatu* [i.e. *nirvāṇadhātu*] in line 7c of the same inscription, *ibid.*, p. 23. Senavarma's inscription has again been discussed by G. Fussman, *BEFEO* 90-91 (2003-04), pp. 517-20.

It is interesting to note that the inscriptions on the British Museum bronze and on the Kalawān copper-plate both originate with women, the first a queen and the second an *upāsikā*. For a further instance see n. 12 below. It is to be recalled that, in one of the main canonical texts of the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching according to which all *sattvas* carry in themselves the potentiality of becoming *tathāgatas* or *buddhas*, the *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādasūtra*, the Buddha's interlocutor and speaker of this teaching is Queen Śrīmālādevī.

The inscriptional materials gathered in this article are to be added to those noticed in our *Théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra* (Paris, 1969), p. 31 n. 2.

it is separated by the word *pyae*. In other words, the syntax allows the rendering: 'May [this installation] be for respect towards all sentient beings, for attainment of *nirvāṇa* [viz. by the *upāsikā* and perhaps her circle, namely her relatives and the *Ācārya*, but *not* by *all* sentient beings]'. This interpretation would be in conformity with the text of numerous other inscriptions. The syntax is ambiguous, however, and the words 'for respect towards all beings' and 'for attainment of *nirvāṇa*' are juxtaposed asyndetically, with the only verb *hotu* at the very end. Hence, it does not seem syntactically impossible, or altogether unnatural, to regard the attainment of *nirvāṇa* as here relating to all sentient beings<sup>6</sup>.

2) There perhaps existed no problem, at least in the view of the installer-dedicator. For Śrāvakayānists may hold that all sentient beings are able to attain *nirvāṇa* (of the kind classified scholastically as that of the Śrāvaka, perhaps along with an *anuttara-jñāna* distinct from *anuttara-budhajñāna*)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> This is the way some previous translators of the Kalawān inscription have understood its final portion (see n. 2 above), but not Konow who translated 'may it be for the obtainment of *Nirvāṇa*' without connecting this phrase with 'all *sattvas*'.

It may be noted that a question concerning exactly to whom the hoped for attainment of the *amuda dhatu* (Skt. *amṛta-dhātu: nirvāṇa*) is relatable arises also in interpreting line 12b of the inscription of Senavarma, ruler of Oḍi (dated to no later than the middle of the 1st century CE; see below). See O. von Hinüber, *op. cit.*, p. 37, who has observed (*op. cit.*, pp. 47-48) that it is not certain whether, when speaking in his inscription of the *amuda dhatu*, Senavarma was aiming for *nirvāṇa* for himself alone or for all beings; v. Hinüber adds that the (unclear) context suggests the latter interpretation. In the inscription referred to above (n. 4) of Ajitasena, the father of Senavarma, the reference to *nirvāṇa* apparently concerns the dedicator alone.

<sup>7</sup> What the view of the *ācārya* mentioned in the inscription might have been we do not know.

Compare Pali *sambodhiparāyana* (Skt. *sambodhiparāyaṇa*). Several references are found in *PTSD*, s. u. *sambodhiparāyana*, and in *Nāṇatiloka, Buddhist dictionary*, s. u. *bodhi*. Concerning the identity or difference of the liberation (*vimukti*) of the Śrāvaka and the *buddha*, as well as of their path (*mārga*) and *yāna* and also of their *jñānas*, see the theses no. 43 of the Sarvāstivādins, no. 22 of the Mahīśāsakas, and no. 2 of the Dharmaguptakas in: A. Bareau, *Les sectes bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule* (Paris, 1955). See also P. Jaini (ed.), *Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāṣṭi* (Patna, 1959), p. 205 f. (on *nirvāṇa* of the Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Bodhisattva or Buddha), and p. 358 f. (on the three *bodhis*); and W. Rahula, *Zen and the taming of the bull* (London, 1978), p. 71 ff.; L. de La Vallée Poussin, *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, vol. v (Louvain, 1925), pp. 267-8 (on the soteriological implications of the *avyākṛtavastu* concerning whether the world has an end); and D. Seyfort Ruegg, *Théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra*, Part ii (on universal Awakening, the *ekayāna*, and whether *saṃsāra* has an end). — The precise interrelationship in the history

3) The installer-dedicator of the relic being a lay-follower (*upāsikā*), she might possibly have been quite unaware of the doctrinal issue raised by a reference to *nirvāṇa* as a universal goal for all *sattvas*.

4) There is in fact no problem here because, within Vinaya schools there were to be found not only Śrāvakayānists but also Mahāyānists. As is known, the word *nikāya* may denote either a dogmatic school of the Śrāvakayāna or a Vinaya school. (The residence of both Śrāvakayānists and Mahāyānists in the same place is known from the seventh-century account by Hsüan-tsang<sup>8</sup>.) Here in the Kalawān inscription, the reference to Sarvāstivāda may very well reflect the second usage of the word (despite the dogmatic content of the name 'Sarvāstivāda'). In the history of Buddhism, the Vinaya of a Śrāvakayānist Nikāya has in fact been used by Mahāyānists (those of Tibet for example have adopted the Vinaya of the Mūla-Sarvāstivādin school).

On the basis of what is written in the Kalawān inscription, it is scarcely possible to establish conclusively and without a shadow of doubt which of the aforementioned considerations are the most pertinent, and which may be preferable in the present context. In general, what is known from the history of Buddhism would incline one to attach importance to the fourth point. But there is no absolute certainty here.

In summary, the view that *all* sentient beings are to attain *nirvāṇa* as a universal goal being characteristic of Mahāyānist thinking, if the Kalawān inscription, dated as it has been to 77/78 CE (?), is to be considered one of the very oldest known inscriptional attestations of the idea, it does not seem that, *per se*, the reference in it to Sarvāstivāda need inevitably constitute an insuperable obstacle in the way of regarding the inscription as providing evidence for (proto-)Mahāyāna<sup>9</sup>. And the find-spot of the

of Buddhist thought between *śrāvaka-nirvāṇa*, *sambodhi*, and *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* is perhaps not as clear as could be wished. On *sambodhi* compare also n. 12 below. As for the *anuttara-jñāna*, it has on occasion been specified as being the *anuttara-buddhajñāna* (in the above-mentioned Govindnagar inscription and then later).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. our 'Aspects of the study...', p. 31 and p. 50 n. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Together perhaps with line 12b of Senavarma's inscription. See n. 6 above, and below.

Beside the *ekayāna* or One-Vehicle theory of universal Awakening (*[sam]bodhi*) according to which all *sattvas* are sooner or later to attain buddhahood, there has existed in Mahāyānist thought a form of the *triyāna* or Three-Vehicle and triple *gotra* doctrine

Kalawān inscription would then confirm that the north-western part of the subcontinent was at this quite early time a hearth of Mahāyāna-type thinking. The problem of the syntactic construction of the final portion of the inscription does, however, leave room for uncertainty as to just what stage of Buddhist thinking may be reflected in it. A similar problem arises also concerning the mention of the attainment of the *amṛta-dhātu* in Senavarma's inscription, also in Gāndhārī, dated to no later than the middle of the first century CE.

Depending on just how it is to be understood, then, the Kalawān inscription might be regarded as possibly bearing witness to a line of Mahāyānistic thinking (perhaps even one on the way to developing the universalist soteriology of *tathāgatagarbha* teaching according to which all sentient beings without exception are to attain buddhahood). On this depends in turn whether this inscription — together perhaps with Senavarma's —

according to which *sattvas* are divided into three determinate 'lineages' (*niyatagotra*), each with its own distinct, and 'expressed', spiritual 'gene', these three being the *gotra* of the *buddha* or *bodhisattva*, that of the *pratyekabuddha* and that of the *śrāvaka* (whose goal in principle is arhatship rather than buddhahood); these three *gotras* then conduce to different goals. In addition, there was recognized an undetermined (*aniyata*), 'unexpressed', *gotra*, which is capable of developing into one or the other of the three *gotras* and of finally attaining one or the other of the three distinct forms of liberation just mentioned. It would be idle to speculate about which of these main theories was statistically and demographically predominant in earlier Mahāyāna; it may indeed be the case that this question is unanswerable on the basis of the available documentation. At all events, among Mahāyānists, the *ekayāna* theory of universal Awakening became very widely spread among Mādhyamikas, the *triyāna* theory being held by some Yogācāra-Vijñānavādins. But at the time of the earlier inscriptions discussed in this paper — i.e. just before Nāgārjuna, the source of the Madhyamaka school, and previous to Asaṅga, the source of the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda — these two directions within Mahāyāna had presumably not yet crystallized into two distinct schools of thought. The *tathāgatagarbha* theory is a particular form of the *ekayāna* theory teaching the universal Awakening and final buddhahood of all *sattvas*. But it has to be clearly recognized that the characteristic images and metaphors of the constituted *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as we now know it have not been employed in the early inscriptions under discussion. Still, several inscriptions on the one side and on the other the *tathāgatagarbha* and *prakṛtiśthagotra* doctrines do have in common the notion of a *dhātu* as a precious relic-deposit of the *tathāgata* in a *stūpa*, which it sanctifies and enlivens, and as the precious spiritual element or matrix of the *tathāgata* which is present in all sentient beings and enables them ultimately to attain buddhahood. Concerning some of the many images and metaphors used in the *gotra* and *tathāgatagarbha* teachings, see D. Seyforth Ruegg, 'The meaning of the term *gotra* and the textual history of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*', *BSOAS* 39 (1976), pp. 341-63; and on the idea of *dhātu* and the values of this word, see 'Aspects of the study...', p. 27 n. 36.

constitutes the earliest known inscriptional evidence of what can be described as Mahāyāna-type thinking, or whether the somewhat later Hidda inscription from near Jalalabad dated to the year 28 of the Kuṣāṇa era — which refers to the requisites for the *nirvāṇa* of all sentient beings (*sarvasattva*)<sup>10</sup> — is still to be regarded as providing the earliest known inscriptional evidence of the kind for Mahāyāna<sup>11</sup>.

It seems in any case advisable to retain S. Konow's rendering (see n. 6) where nothing has been added in brackets by the translator, reserving interpretation for the annotation and commentary. The ambiguity and uncertainties noted above confirm once more how difficult it may be to cite an inscription as conclusive evidence for doctrinal or religious development in Buddhism<sup>12</sup>. It is also necessary to keep in mind that in many a case there is no neat, clean and abrupt break between (proto-)Mahāyāna and what preceded it: often we have to do with continuing development rather than with total discontinuity.

<sup>10</sup> See S. Konow, *Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions*, p. 158, and *EI* 23 (1935-36), pp. 35-42; cf. 'Aspects of the study...', pp. 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> If the Kalawān inscription is to be regarded as attesting Mahāyāna-type thinking, it would further contribute to reducing any possible 'non-alignment' between our Indian-language documentation and the Buddhist sources in Chinese concerning the earlier history of Indian Mahāyāna. On such non-alignment see G. Schopen, 'The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese looking-glass', *EB* 32 (2000), pp. 1-25.

<sup>12</sup> Concerning the problem posed by the mention in Aśoka's Rock Edict VIII of his departure for *sambodhi*, see our 'Aspects of the study...', p. 14 n. (cf. n. 7 above).

Many centuries later, in the colophon of a Gilgit manuscript of the *Samghāṭasūtra* dedicated by Queen Devaśirikā, we read: *anuttarāṃ vimalavirajanirmmalavuddhabodhi(ṃ) spr̥ṣatu*: (see O. von Hinüber, 'Die Kolophone der Gilgit-Handschriften', *StII* 5/6 [1980], p. 69; id., *Die Palola Śāhis*, p. 25). In this case (unlike the cases cited in n. 5 above where the beneficiaries are all sentient beings), the attainment of the supreme *buddhabodhi* is wished for by the dedicator for herself (and perhaps for her entourage).