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NOTE ON THE SO-CALLED “VAGABOND” STANZAS OF K. 235

Dominic Goodall

Ashley Thompson’s translation has brought to my attention the carefully crafted and erudite article of Au Chhieng on the so-called “vagabond” stanzas CXXIX and CXXX of the famous Sdok Kak Thom inscription (K. 235). Since Au Chhieng’s article is here being republished in English, this short note revisiting one of his conclusions seems in order. His article as a whole is full of worthwhile observations, for instance on the way in which a passage of Sanskrit poetry, in spite of a strong stanzaic tendency, actually holds together because, for instance, of a cohesive skein of allusions. In other words, while some readers of the inscriptions, thirsty for historical “facts” and impatient with the flowers of Sanskrit rhetoric, have tended to criticise their overall compositional weakness, and to lay this weakness at the feet of a predilection for composing in discrete stanzas, each of which must be read separately, Au Chhieng emphasises countervailing features that promote cohesion. (For another, textural, device that weaves a series of stanzas together, see Salomon “Concatenation in Kālidāsa and Other Sanskrit Poets.”) Nonetheless, Au Chhieng’s principal conclusion, namely his proposal to relocate stanza CXXIX in between stanzas LXXVIII and LXXIX, seems to me not tenable.

Instead of rehearsing and then quibbling with all the various translations that have been proposed over the decades (for K. 235 is perhaps the most discussed of all the inscriptions of the Khmer corpus), I shall begin simply by setting down my own. The stanza in question, which is, I believe, a job-description and does not describe any individual, reads:

K. 235, CXXIX. rājahotā yatīndro vā devasaṃrakṣane 'rhati
 śīlaśrutiguṇair yuktaḥ kulī vā dharmmatatparah

A chaplain of the king (*rājahotā*), or (*vā*) a prince among ascetics (*yatīndrah*) is worthy (*arhati*) of protecting the gods [of this foundation] (*devasaṃrakṣane*). Or (*vā*) [he may be] of good family (*kulī*), devoted to [religious] duties (*dharmmatatparah*), endowed (*yuktaḥ*) with the virtues of good conduct and erudition (*śīlaśrutiguṇaiḥ*).¹

The instances of “or” (*vā*) make it extremely improbable that this describes Jayendravarman, as Au Chhieng argues. For why would one describe him (or indeed any known individual) as *either* a chaplain of the king *or* a prince among ascetics? Furthermore, the use of the present-tense verb *arhati* (“is worthy of”) suggests that this is a general statement about worthy candidates for the rôle of head and protector of a religious foundation. Since the stanza is thus about the future of an establishment, it fits perfectly beside a curse pronounced upon those who might damage that establishment, which is indeed what we find in CXXX, the stanza beside it.

If this is indeed the sense of CXXIX, you may ask, then why have the various published translations missed it?² Presumably they simply did not expect such a sense because they did not recognise it from parallels. Parallels, after all, are of such enormous assistance when reconstructing the sense of any written utterance that we are often lost without them. But there is in fact a parallel in an almost equally famous inscription, but a parallel which again has alas not been interpreted correctly.

Stanza XXXIX of K. 842, the foundation inscription of Banteay Srei, is again a provision

¹ Éric Bourdonneau (correspondence with myself and Grégory Mikaëlian of 4.viii.2020) has pointed out to me that, given that the context is the future protection of the foundation, one might expect *śruti* instead to refer to a capacity to listen and gather information. The word is a noun from the verbal root *śru*, “listen, hear,” but conventionally used for “scripture” — usually Vedic, but also Śaiva —, or for “learning in scripture,” hence the translation “erudition” above. In support of an alternative interpretation, Éric Bourdonneau adduced the description of the future head of the foundation (*kulapati*) given in the Khmer text of K. 842, the foundation inscription of Banteay Srei. He emphasised that the head is described as “someone who listens to what is happening” (*stāp vartamāna*, “qui écoute ce qui se passe/les nouvelles”) and underlined the importance of such a characteristic in a *kulapati*, suggesting that this should be taken into consideration for the understanding of *śruti*.

Having taken it into consideration, I must conclude that I am not persuaded by it. To understand *śruti* in this compound and in this context to mean anything other than “scriptural learning” (whether Vedic or Śaiva) would fly in the face of very broadly established Sanskrit usage. If the Khmer passage were in the same inscription, it would strengthen somewhat the case for doing so. But it is not in the same inscription. Furthermore, while it is certainly true that pronouncements in Khmer and in Sanskrit from the same corpus should be examined together in the expectation that they should harmonise, nonetheless the Khmer text of many an inscription very often simply gives different information from what is found in the Sanskrit.

² I have checked those of Cœdès and Dupont, “Les inscriptions de Sdōk Kāk Thom, Phnom Sandak et Prāḥ Vihār,” Bhattacharya, *A Selection of Sanskrit Inscriptions from Cambodia*, Sak-Humphry, *The Sdōk Kak Thom Inscription (K. 235): With The Grammatical Analysis of the Old Khmer Text*, Sak-Humphry not only omits to translate both instances of the particle *vā*, but also relocates st. CXXIX in accordance with Au Chieng’s suggestion, so that it becomes st. LXXVII *bis* (Sak-Humphry, *The Sdōk Kak Thom Inscription...*, 76–77). Given how much ink has been poured over K. 235, it is conceivable that I have missed a translation that does in fact reflect the purport identified here, but it is clear at least that the well-known translations do not.

for the future. It comes after a sequence of three stanzas stipulating how the foundation is intended to function in the future, and it is immediately followed by a peroration of five stanzas including exhortations for the protection of the foundation and a curse upon those who misuse it.

K. 842, XXXIX. yo mataḥ kamvujendrasya śaivācāryyo ’graṇīr guruḥ
tadadhīnam idan devakulaṃ rakṣyaṃ yathāvidhi

This (*idam*) temple-foundation (*devakulam*) should be placed under the command of one (*tadadhīnam*) who is highly regarded³ (*mataḥ*) by the king of the Kambujas (*kamvujendrasya*), a Śaiva ācārya, a prominent (*agraṇīh*) guru.⁴ It should be protected (*rakṣyaṃ*) in accordance with the rules (*yathāvidhi*).⁵

Setting these two stanzas side by side — the second of which is actually to be found identically in two further inscriptions, thus making four instances —⁶ enables us to recognise a pattern that we might reasonably expect to find elsewhere in some other large foundations. We know that the concluding stanzas of an inscription typically include curses and benedictions respectively for those who foster or damage an institution. We know that they may also include long exhortations for protection, often explicitly addressed to future kings (see, for instance, the

³ When construed with a genitive, *mata* has this sense. For another instance of this usage in the Khmer corpus, see K. 151, st. II, discussed in Goodall, “Nobles, Bureaucrats or Strongmen? on the “Vassal Kings” or “Hereditary Governors” of Pre-Angkorian City-states: Two Sanskrit Inscriptions of Vidyāviśeṣa, Seventh-century Governor of Tamandarapura (K. 1235 and K. 604), and an Inscription of Śivadatta (K. 1150), Previously Considered a Son of Īśānavarman I,” 54, fn. 37.

⁴ Under the influence of st. CXXIX of K. 235, I was inclined to supply the particle *vā* (“or”) here, which could be implicit, since the point, here too, is to stipulate that a suitable candidate be appointed in the future by listing various qualifying factors. For it is again a sort of job-description, but one that focusses on ideal qualifications rather than on projected tasks. Éric Bourdonneau (correspondence of 4.viii.2020), however, has pointed out to me that the Khmer text (K. 842, line 22) speaks of the *kulapati* as being both a *rājaguru* and a *śaivācārya*. This means that no *vā* need be supplied, unless it was intended that any future head of the foundation should be both highly regarded by the king and either a Śaivācārya (which, given what we know about Yajñavarāha, probably meant one who had received both a salvific Saiddhāntika *dikṣā* and consecration as an *ācārya* of the Śaivasiddhānta) or a prominent guru (in which case he would no doubt still need to be a Māheśvara, a devotee of Śiva, or an adherent of some other branch of Śaiva professional religion).

⁵ Cœdès’ translation (*Inscriptions du Cambodge* I, 155) of this stanza seems entirely off the mark and does not reflect the structure of the verse: “Il porte le titre de maître (*śaivācārya*) et de premier guru du roi des Kambuja ; que ce sanctuaire qui relève de lui soit gardé selon la règle.” (“He bears the title of master and of foremost guru of the king of the Kambujas; may this sanctuary that depends on him be protected according to the rule.”)

⁶ It is clear from an examination of EFEO estampage n. 791 that the Banteay Srei stanza, rather damaged, appears also as st. XXXII of K. 662 (of which only the first 7 stanzas have been published, in Cœdès, “Études Cambodgiennes: 24. Nouvelles données chronologiques et généalogiques sur la dynastie de Mahidharapura.”), and as st. XII of K. 619/K. 620 (EFEO estampages n. 524 and n. 525), where it was misunderstood by Finot, “Inscriptions d’Añkor,” 55, in this way: “Lui qui porte le titre de professeur de çivaïsme et de premier guru du roi du Cambodge, ce sanctuaire qui relève de lui doit être gardé selon la règle.” We may assume that Cœdès, when translating K. 842, allowed himself to be led into error by Finot’s mistranslation of this stanza of K. 620, since the two interpretations are similar, and since it seems unlikely that Cœdès would have arrived independently at the same misunderstanding just from studying the Sanskrit wording.

perorations of K. 528 and K. 806 and K. 1320). We know also that they may further include guidelines for the future functioning of the foundation. Now we can see that in amongst these guidelines there may be mention of potential appointees. Not as closely parallel, but still broadly similar in that they prescribe by whom and how the foundations are to be run, but more in terms of expected tasks than required virtues, are the job-descriptions given for the numerous foundations of Yaśovarman (see, for example, K. 95, st. XLV).

There is thus no need to move st. CXXIX of K. 235 from beside its companion st. CXXX, which formulates a curse, for it is of a type that, just like curses and benedictions, is not out of place in a conclusion that speaks of the future of the foundation.

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