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The Dharmasetu: A Bridge between Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Cambodia, South India and Java?

BY AMANDINE WATTELIER-BRICOUT · PUBLISHED 19/01/2024 · UPDATED 23/01/2024

On 8th and 9th of January 2024, the workshop “At the ‘Margins’ of the Indic World: Connections, Innovations and Archaisms from Nepal to Bali” organized by [Andrea Acri](#) and [Nina Mirning](#) took place in Paris.

**At the 'Margins' of the Indic World:
Connections, Innovations, and Archaisms from Nepal to Bali**

This workshop is devoted to the theme of so-called 'centres and peripheries' of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis or Indic World. More specifically, papers will engage in comparative approaches of aspects of the textual (both manuscript and epigraphic), artistic, and religious cultures of Nepal (and the wider Himalayan region/the Tibetan plateau) and Southeast Asia (in particular Java and Bali). Topics include connectivity between the Himalayan region and Southeast Asia and/or China; the comparative study of epigraphy and manuscript cultures from Nepal and maritime Southeast Asia; and the Tantric religious paradigms of the Hindu and Buddhist practitioners from the Kathmandu Valley and Bali.

Conveners:

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WORKSHOP

**At the 'Margins' of the Indic World:
Connections, Innovations, and
Archaisms from Nepal to Bali**

Monday 8th January 2024: 14:00–17:30 CET
Tuesday 9th January 2024: 9:00–12:00 CET
Paris

This event gave me the opportunity to present some preliminary results of my research project BESTOW (Benedictive and Exhortative Stanzas, a Thread of Officially uttered Words). My talk entitled “Dharmasetuḥ, a Bridge between Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Cambodia, South India and Java: Exploring the Use of a Sanskrit Stanza in Epigraphical Records” focused on a well-known stanza numbered 117 in the list of final stanzas established by Sircar (1965), which reads as follows:

*sāmānyo 'yaṁ dharma-setur nṛpāṇāṁ kāle kāle pālaniyo
bhavadbhiḥ |
sarvān etān bhāvinaḥ pārthivendrān bhūyo bhūyo yācate
rāmacandraḥ||*

Rāmacandra¹ begs repeatedly to all these future kings: “this bridge of Dharma which is common to all the kings, you always must protect it!”

This stanza is also inscribed with slight variations on a Javanese stone inscription dated 700 śaka (778-779 CE) issued by the Śailendra dynasty, the Kalasan inscription. ² In his edition, Long (2014, 76) asserts on the basis of seven epigraphical sources and

of one verse of the *Skandapurāṇa* that there are testimonies of this stanza from ancient India, Campā and Nepal. This statement was a perfect starting point to explore the 'margins' of the Indic world, so as to track connections, innovations, and archaisms from Nepal to Java.

If this stanza is indeed present from these two 'peripheral' regions, many questions arise: what is the native region of this stanza? Does its use reflect an archaism or, on the contrary, an innovation? Does it confirm a connection between Nepal, Bengal and Java, as the similarity of the writing on the Kalasan inscription with those issued by the Pāla dynasty or Nepalese manuscripts would seem to indicate? Does the geographical distribution of this stanza shed any new light on the native region of the Śailendra dynasty?

First I questioned the occurrence of this stanza in Nepal since, even if it is found in the edition of the extensive *Skandapurāṇa*, I was unable to find it in the edition of the 'original' *Skandapurāṇa* (Bhaṭṭarāī 1988).³ Although I cannot confirm the presence of this particular stanza in Nepal, my initial forays into the Nepalese epigraphic corpus have enabled me to discover that some donations end with imprecatory stanzas found in Sircar's list.

Then, to provide an accurate picture of the dissemination of the stanza 117, I have gathered its occurrences from the bibliographical references given by Sircar (1965) and from the DHARMA Database. For now, I have found this stanza in 78 epigraphical records. For each testimony, I have collected the approximate date and place of issue, the identity of the issuer, the obedience of the donation, and the reading of the stanza. From this collection, it can be stated that this stanza is not only found in the records of the Pāla and Śailendra dynasties, but also in records of many other dynasties, such as the Rāṣṭrakūṭa, Eastern Cālukya, Somavaṃśin or Bhañja. Its presence is attested from 778 to 1218 and its geographical distribution includes the following areas: Andhra Pradesh, Bangladesh, Bihar, Cambodia, Gujarat, Java,

Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

This collection of epigraphical attestations of this stanza shows three particularly striking facts.

First, whereas the use of this stanza is well-attested in India, its earliest testimony is outside of India, in a Javanese inscription whose content does not refer to the epic hero Rāma/Rāmabhadra.⁴ The three earliest Indian testimonies available today appear about thirty years after and originate from Gujarat, West Bengal and Maharashtra.⁵ In all three, Rāma is the speaker.

Second, stanzas whose meaning is close to the stanza 117 are found in another Javanese inscription⁶ and in seven Cambodian inscriptions.⁷ In these testimonies from 'peripheral' areas, the speaker is the issuer king and Rāma is not mentioned.

Third, three of the Pāla inscriptions share a common wording with the Kalasan inscription, not found in any of the other testimonies.⁸ But all these inscriptions date from the twelfth century.

Thus, I observe that the peripheral testimonies of the stanza 117 seem to be freer in their wording and do not refer to the epic. As these testimonies are among the earliest, they could represent an innovative discourse or an adaptation of a stanza to their own context. Whereas it is possible to assert a connection between the Pāla dynasty and Java based, on the similarity of the script and common wording, one wonders about the origin and the direction of this connection. The location of the earliest Indian testimonies gives no clear indication about the origin of the Śailendra dynasty.

The slideshow of my presentation is available [here](#).

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1. The alternative reading *rāmabhadraḥ* for *rāmacandraḥ* is very common. [↵]
2. One can read the following text in the lines 11-12:

sarvān evāgāmināḥ pārthivendrān
bhūyo bhūyo yācate rāja-siṃhaḥ |
sāmānyo yan dharmma-setur narāṇām
kāle kāle pālaniyo bhavadbhiḥ ||

The Lion among Kings again begs all future kings among kings, without exception, that this universal Dharma-causeway for humans, is to be maintained by you in every age! (trans. A. Griffiths)

For the editions of this inscription, see Brandes (1886), Bhandarkar (1887), Bosch (1928), Sarkar (1971), Sircar (1983) and Long (2014). [↵]

3. As the critical edition of the 'original' *Skandapurāṇa* is still under progress (six volumes are already available), it was necessary to check in Bhaṭṭarāī's *editio princeps*. [↵]
4. The earliest testimony is the Kalasan stone inscription dated 700 *śaka* (778-779 CE). Surprisingly, the name Rāmabhadra is not recorded in the critical edition of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (Baroda, 1960-75) available on the GRETIL, not even in Southern recension. [↵]
5. Sīsavai Grant of Govinda III (807 CE, see Mirashi 1935), Indian Museum Plate of Dharmapāla, year 26 (Dharmapāla ruled between 770s–810s CE, see Bergaigne 1893) and Baroda copper plate Inscription of Rāṣṭrakūṭa Karkkarāja II (812 CE, see Salomon 1998, 284-86). [↵]
6. The Śrī Saṅgrāmadhanamjaya inscription from the former *desa* Kēluran 704 *śaka* (782-784 CE, see Long 2014, 85-101). [↵]
7. K. 324, K.327, K.331, South and North doorjambs of East door of the Northern tower of the first row of Prasat Lolei, 815 Śaka and K.280, K.281,

K.282, K.283 Thnal Baray, southeast, northeast, northwest, southwest corners, 9th century, see Bergaigne 1893. [[↵](#)]

8. These three inscriptions are Rajibpur Plate of Gopāla IV, year 2 and Madanapāla (see Furui 2015), Rajibpur Plate of Madanapāla, year 22 (see Furui 2015), Manahali Plate of Madanapāla, year 8 (see Vasu 1900). [[↵](#)]



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