

Our earliest sources on Buddhism thus unanimously agree on some of the most basic teachings of Early Buddhism *per se*, and they also show us that they were found in the Bactria-Gandhāra region at the end of the fourth century BC.

The traditional analysis of the rise of the Mahayana claims that the bodhisattva ideal, or Bodhisattvayāna, arose out of 'popular' Buddhist practices and beliefs of non-monastic laymen and laywomen, in India. However, little or no evidence has ever been found to support such a connection, and the idea has lost favor. Recently, Schopen and Boucher have presented arguments, based on textual evidence, that the bodhisattva ideal actually arose among rustic Forest-dwelling Śramaṇas, who objected to the abuses of the monks living comfortably in town, often with wives and slaves, no different than any lay householder. The rustic Śramaṇas called for a return to the pure Buddhism of the Buddha himself when he was still a *bodhisattva* 'one with a mind bent on enlightenment', as they saw themselves.<sup>82</sup> This particular strand of the Mahayana thus seems to have developed out of the reformist movement.

It is significant that the Bodhisattvayāna, Madhyamika, and Pure Land traditions, which ended up being included among the constituent elements of "Mahayana", appeared on the Central Asian frontiers of India and China around the second century AD in connection with the expansion of the Central Asian empire of the Kushans.<sup>83</sup> These three pre-Mahayana traditions appear to have developed there as a result of contact with ancient, similar Central Eurasian beliefs and recently introduced Zoroastrian beliefs. The same region is also the home of the *vihāra*, the Buddhist monastery, which is earliest attested at exactly the same time as the appearance of the above-mentioned elements of the later Mahayana, the first to second centuries AD.<sup>84</sup> That is, the *ārāma* or *saṅghārāma* existed earlier in India, but it was in architectural form and function (and probably all other details) nothing like what we think of as a *vihāra*,<sup>85</sup> or fully developed Buddhist monastery,

which was introduced via the Kushans to both India<sup>86</sup> and China and therefore could have developed only in Central Asia.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, the development of the rustic Śramaṇas' path into the Bodhisattvayāna in Central Asia was matched by the urban Śramaṇas' development of their communal dwellings into true monasteries, much as suggested long ago by Marshall.<sup>88</sup>

As mentioned above, it would seem that the Śramaṇas' differentiation by lifestyle was at least partly seasonal in origin. In the earliest period they practiced seasonal "rustic" dwelling, wandering in the wilderness in the dry season, and "urban" dwelling communally in *ārāmas*, which were originally, according to tradition, purely temporary shelters necessitated by the monsoons. The development of this seasonal difference into two permanently distinctive year-round lifestyles therefore could not have taken place in the monsoon zone. It must have happened after Buddhism expanded outside the Indian subcontinent into Central Asia, where there was no monsoon and Śramaṇas could live outside all year-round. The two permanent types of śramaṇa practice thus appear to have evolved in Central Asia.<sup>89</sup>

In any event, the two kinds of Śramaṇas were certainly in place as distinct types in Gandhāra no later than the end of the fourth century AD, when Megasthenes visited and learned about them. Therefore, from the beginning of the strictly historical, textual attestation of Buddhism—which begins with Pyrrho and Megasthenes—the two types already existed in what linguists call "complementary distribution". The more ascetically inclined, who were perhaps also less socially inclined and more dedicated to pursuing their own enlightenment, favored the solitary, eremitic "rustic" ideal, according to which they had to fend for

<sup>82</sup> See Dutt (1962) for discussion and plans.

<sup>83</sup> The Central Asians' own word for it was not Sanskrit *vihāra* or a Prakrit form of that word, but rather Aramaic *dēra*, which is the source of the word for 'monastery' in Chinese, Jurchen, Korean, and Japanese, as well as in many Middle Eastern languages. See Beckwith (2014).

<sup>84</sup> See above in this chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps careful archaeological and palaeoclimatological work could throw some light on the development of the two types of Śramaṇa practice. The theory appears to be supported by the relative lateness of Forest-dwelling monks (*Āraṇīkas* or *Āraṇīyavāsins*) in Sri Lanka, where they are attested in the chronicles only from the tenth century (Tarnish 1984: 56–57).

<sup>82</sup> Schopen (2005: 16); Boucher (2008).

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Halkias (2012: 12–15 and the very pertinent endnotes).

<sup>84</sup> Beckwith (2014).

<sup>85</sup> See Beckwith (2012c) for the later development of the *vihāra* as a monastic college, and the growth of Buddhist scholasticism in Kushan Central Asia—mainly Bactria and

themselves, because in the wilderness between the urban centers there was no one from whom they could beg food or clothing. The less ascetically inclined, more social Śramaṇas gravitated to a pre-monastic ideal, in which they were provided with shelter, and—being in urban areas with many other people—they could beg for their food and clothing, or were provided with it by pious donors. The rustic Śramaṇas could achieve greater success on the path to enlightenment, as *bodhisattvas* in the original sense of the Buddha himself, and they achieved a reputation for saintliness, so that they were more highly honored by Buddhists as a whole. The urban Śramaṇas, who lived together in a sizeable group in any climate, maximized their ability to learn from each other and to pass on what they learned to following generations.

Not only in Megasthenes' report, but throughout recorded history, the Forest-dweller Śramaṇas seem to have been consistently valued more highly than the Town-dweller Śramaṇas. Nevertheless, some of the greatest teachers of Buddhism actually belong to the 'urban' category. Not surprisingly, then, the later development of the full-blown Mahayana tradition was also accompanied by the adoption of a primarily urban-type monastic tradition, including the Central Asian monastery,<sup>90</sup> though not to the exclusion of the rustic ideal, which continued to exist.

It has recently been noted that the Forest-dweller ideal might have been just that, an ideal, which was only rarely followed in actual practice. Certainly, despite their ideal, many of its purported practitioners too eventually adopted the *vihāra*, so that there came to be a distinction between "Forest *vihāras*" and "Town *vihāras*", and in some instances—at least in the stories—the monks from the Town *vihāras* were the ascetics, while those from the Forest *vihāras* were spoiled by luxury. The Vinaya, the source of many such stories, also contains other critical, belittling remarks about Forest-practitioners or monks of any kind who were serious about meditating and achieving enlightenment.<sup>91</sup> If one considers that the Vinaya is, essentially, the Buddhist monastic

code, that is, a kind of law code, and its authors were therefore lawyers and administrators, it is hardly surprising that such people—who were by their own descriptions pragmatic, worldly centered, politically inclined individuals—disliked intellectuals, mystics, and holy men, even though the lawyers and political administrators could hardly have been unaware of the fact that the stated purpose of the *vihāra*, the institution they governed, was to house intellectuals, mystics, and holy men. Nevertheless, all this does not mean that laymen, and other monks, agreed with such views, it means only that *some* of the authors of the Vinaya had such views. According to standard historiographical analysis, the negative remarks in the Vinaya are classic examples of the criticisms, restrictions, and prohibitions of a legal code revealing what people are really doing. In this case, the strongly worded criticisms and sharp, sarcastic remarks of the Vinaya authors constitute irrefutable evidence not only that some monks looked down on the Forest-dwelling monks and their ideal, but also that some monks really were practicing that ideal even at the time these Vinaya texts were finalized.

The dichotomy between the two Buddhist practitioner lifestyles (and to some extent the tension between them) has continued down to the present day. Although the number of Forest-dwellers has at times dwindled to a handful, their tradition has survived. The two approaches to Buddhist practice are found in all of the major living Buddhist traditions—there are none in which only "rustic" practitioners are known, and none in which only "urban" ones are known.

Returning to pre-monastic early Buddhism, we may note again that Megasthenes' account of the Śramaṇas in Strabo does not contain a section that explicitly describes their philosophical-religious views. However, careful analysis of Strabo's section on the "philosophers" of "India" as a whole makes it possible to ascribe the strictly Early Buddhist views recorded by Megasthenes to two distinctive approaches: a conservative and elitist group, versus a more popularly oriented group.

The system ascribed to the "more elegant and refined" Śramaṇas appears to include *Dharma* (Greek *eusebeia* 'piety'), honoring and praying to "the divine one"<sup>92</sup> on behalf of the kings, the practice of strenuous

<sup>90</sup> It seems likely that the spread of the monastery from Central Asia coincided also with the introduction of the early Mahayana tradition, even though the later Central Asian *vihāras* were predominantly non-Mahayana.

<sup>92</sup> Perhaps already the Buddha, but in any case not "God" (*ho theos*), belief in whom is explicitly mentioned. In contrast, in Megasthenes' account of the Brāhmanas

unmoving yoga 'meditation', and knowledge about "the causes of things". The latter point may sound odd, but not for Buddhism, with its highly distinctive central teachings about causation. The teaching, generally speaking, must go back to the Buddha himself, since without it one can hardly make much sense out of his logic.<sup>93</sup> Pyrrho too taught about the causes of *pathē* 'suffering, passion' and a way to be *apatheōs* 'without suffering' and thus achieve *ataraxia* 'calmness, nirvana'. Megasthenes' description of the Śramanas also accords closely with the descriptions of Pyrrho's wandering, his physical yoga,<sup>94</sup> and his unmarried celibacy.<sup>95</sup>

The "popular" system ascribed to "other" Śramanas includes—presumably in addition to the above practices and beliefs—expertise in funeral rites and teaching about good and bad karma and its consequences for rebirth in Heaven or Hell.<sup>96</sup> The approach of this group of Śramanas is thus apparently identical to that of King Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi<sup>97</sup> in the genuine Major Inscriptions of the Mauryas, which were erected only two or three decades after the visit of Megasthenes.

It is significant that Megasthenes does not say that the Śramanas were vegetarians. This suggests a Buddhist explanation for Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi's law prohibiting the *killing* of animals. Accounts of the Buddha's death from food poisoning say he had eaten spoiled pork, but this does not mean he was not a vegetarian from the Buddhist point of view. The explicit directions concerning vegetarianism are actually that Buddhists should not intentionally *kill* any sentient being (human or animal), which is what the law of Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi expressly prohibited.<sup>98</sup> It is specifically anti-Brahmanist, because the Brahmanists

needed to perform ritual blood sacrifices. In his First Rock Edict the king actually uses the Brahmanist *technical* terms for "ritual slaughter (*ā-labhi*) and offering (*pra-hu*) for the ritual killing of animals,"<sup>99</sup> making it absolutely clear that the Brahmanists were the specific target of the law. The teachings of the second group of Śramanas thus apparently included *ahimsā* 'not killing' (literally, 'not injuring').

At the time of Pyrrho, Megasthenes, and Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi, Buddhism existed, but it was not called "Buddhism", nor does it seem likely that the Buddha himself was personally worshipped, though he was venerated.<sup>100</sup> The *saṅgha* is not mentioned because the *saṅgha*, as an organized or regularized type of community that had a clear monastic rule, did not yet exist. Buddhist practitioners were known as Śramanas, as they apparently were from the Buddha's day on, and as they were called into the Middle Ages.<sup>101</sup> Their teachings were above all about *Dharma*, which is translated into Greek in the fragmentary texts of the Mauryan inscriptions from Afghanistan as *eusebeia* 'piety', which is mentioned also in Megasthenes' account. The 'Forest-dwelling' or rustic Śramanas were considered to be more moral, or pious, than the 'physician' or 'Town-dwelling' Śramanas. The version of the Dharma taught by the "popular" group of Śramanas held that pious behavior in this life would be rewarded in the next life in Heaven; that is to say, good people would be *reborn* in Heaven, not on Earth, thus indicating belief in karma, karmic retribution, and rebirth among some Buddhists.<sup>102</sup> This is explicitly mentioned not only in Megasthenes' account but, repeatedly, in the Major Inscriptions of Devānāmpriya Priyadarśi.

<sup>99</sup> Olivelle (2012: 183n26).

<sup>100</sup> The *Chuangtzu* refers, at about the same time, to the highly respected—but also not yet worshipped—founder of Taoism, Lao-tzu ~ \*Gautama (q.v. Chapter Three). Cf. above on Megasthenes' mention of the Forest-dwellers venerating "the divine one", which could perhaps refer to an already deified Gautama.

<sup>101</sup> At some point in late Antiquity or the Middle Ages the Jains began to copy the Buddhists and say that they too had Śramanas, as well as many other once uniquely Buddhist features, such as *vihāras*. In modern times this has become endemic, causing much confusion about the early history of both Buddhism and Jainism. See the discussion of this problem in the Preface.

<sup>102</sup> It is now generally believed that salvation for such people was to escape *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth. This is, however, problematic. Indians are traditionally thought by scholars to have believed in rebirth already long before the time of the Buddha, and

<sup>93</sup> However, the scholarly consensus about the fully developed treatment of *pratyasamupāda* (dependent origination, or dependent causation; the arising of *dharma* 'things' in dependence upon conditions, etc.) is that it developed long after the Buddha's lifetime. It seems most likely to have developed as part of Normative Buddhism.

<sup>94</sup> The ancient testimonies specifically mention his tolerance of extreme pain; such toleration was a characteristic of early yoga. See below.

<sup>95</sup> The ancient testimonies on Pyrrho are silent about whether he did or did not practice vegetarianism.

<sup>96</sup> This follows from the comment that these Śramanas teach the people about "Hades" in order to urge them toward piety and holiness.

<sup>97</sup> The Mauryan ruler traditionally identified with "Aśoka", see Chapter Three.

to have perhaps contributed the idea to another Greek historian, Megasthenes. But...

What else did the Dharma teach? Neither Megasthenes nor the inscriptions tell us directly. Fortunately, however, Pyrrho does. The most important single element of the Early Buddhist teachings, known as the *Trīḍṣaṇa*, or 'three characteristics' (of *dharma*s 'things'), was a slap at authentic, attested Early Zoroastrianism and attested Early Brahmanism.<sup>109</sup> He taught that *pragmata* 'matters, affairs'—including people—do not have their own innate self-identity (Skt. *anāman*, Greek *adiaphora*). This denies the Zoroastrian and Brahmanist belief in the soul—explicitly mentioned twice in Strabo's account<sup>104</sup>—and suggests that the only connection between a person in this life and a person born in another life was the good done in this life, the "merit" repeatedly mentioned by Devānāpriya Priyadarśi, and perhaps also the causation mentioned by Megasthenes in his section on the Śramaṇas. Although as noted above he remarks that *some* Śramaṇas preach about the afterlife ("Hades") to try to influence people to be good, clearly other Śramaṇas taught the *Trīḍṣaṇa* and other more challenging things, as study of Pyrrho's thought reveals, and as is partly recorded by Megasthenes as well. The approaches of the two different groups of Śramaṇas thus appear to represent *two distinct Buddhist sects* in the process of formation.

That brings us back to Pyrrho. Both he and Megasthenes visited northwestern India, mainly Gandhāra, but Alexander—and perhaps his court—apparently campaigned as far east as Magadha, though not all the way to Pāṭaliputra. Their reflections of the Buddhism—or rather, "Buddhisms"—they encountered are fully compatible, but there is much more depth to what is reflected in Pyrrhonism, including some

However, it seems highly doubtful that these ideas existed in India much before the time of Buddha. Even traditional Normative Buddhist accounts indicate that what motivated Buddha to set out on the difficult path leading to his enlightenment was his perception of sickness, old age, and death—or, simply, death—without any suggestion of the ideas of rebirth or samsara. Belief in karma and rebirth is now generally thought to have appeared at about the same time as Buddhism. See the Prologue for discussion of its clear Early Zoroastrian source.

<sup>103</sup> I.e., the forms of these belief systems attested in contemporaneous or nearly contemporaneous texts.

<sup>104</sup> Strabo XV, 1, 59. An additional passage that does *not* go back to Megasthenes—as Strabo explicitly tells us—might not represent actual Indian beliefs: "And writers mention similar opinions of the Brachmanes about the seed and the soul, as also several other opinions of theirs. And they also weave in myths, like Plato, about the immortality of

apparently isolated practices and comments in the ancient testimonies best explained as artifacts of Pyrrho's Buddhism, which clearly belongs to the more "elegant" variety.

Pyrrho's radically new *philosophia* taught about *causes*, specifically, the causes of *pathē* 'suffering, passion' and a way to achieve *apatheia* 'passionlessness; without suffering' and *ataraxia* 'undisturbedness, peace', exactly as Buddha had taught before him. Pyrrho also taught that because nothing has its own logical self-identity, our inductive and deductive faculties cannot tell us whether conflicting ethical matters are just or unjust, good or bad, or true or false "absolutely".

Like the Buddha, Pyrrho taught that his way was not easy: one needed to struggle against *pragmata* ('conflicting') matters, affairs, events' with both the body and the mind. Accordingly, he practiced a mild form of asceticism, including early yoga-meditation. Timon and others repeatedly refer to Pyrrho as being "uniformly unmoved", and Diogenes Laërtius remarks that he withstood extreme pain, such as from caustic remedies or surgery on a wound, without even frowning.<sup>105</sup> These descriptions accord perfectly with the account of the Śramaṇas by Megasthenes and other early Greek witnesses, as well as with what is believed to be the general thrust of early Indian yoga-meditation.<sup>106</sup>

Pyrrho, and also his student Philo of Athens, were both observed "babbling" to themselves.<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know what exactly they were saying, or why, but when asked what he was doing, Pyrrho replied that he was "practicing to be virtuous."<sup>108</sup> Could they have been saying something in another language?<sup>109</sup>

Pyrrho was celibate. He also "would withdraw from the world and live in solitude, rarely showing himself to his relatives,"<sup>110</sup> and

<sup>105</sup> D.L. IX, 67. Cf. Clayman (2009: 40), who like Bett (2000) suggests Pyrrho may well have learned this "indifference" to pain from the Indians.

<sup>106</sup> Bronkhorst (1986).

<sup>107</sup> Pyrrho, in D.L. IX, 64, Καταληγῶν δὲ ποτε καὶ αὐτῷ λαλῶν καὶ ἐρωτῶν τὴν αἰτίαν ἐφ' ἧν μελετᾶν χρηστὸς εἶναι. Philo, in D.L. IX, 69.

<sup>108</sup> Bett (2000: 94n67) discusses this from the point of view of a possible violation of Pyrrho's own philosophy, but as he notes, it does not have to be taken that way. Cf. the discussion of Hume's "sceptical solution" in Chapter Four.

<sup>109</sup> Most Greeks thought foreign languages sounded like "babbling". Pyrrho liked Homer and frequently quoted him (Bett 2000: 82), but Homer's works were practically sacred in ancient Greece, and well known; no Greek would ever have referred to some-

frequently went off wandering. These practices accord with the wandering, solitary life of the Early Buddhist 'Forest-dwelling' Śramaṇas, according to tradition and later practice. The mention of "withdrawing from the world" and family reflects the stereotypical Buddhist expression "to leave the family", which means in practice "to become a Buddhist ascetic practitioner" (in Pyrrho's day, a *śramaṇa*; later, a *bhikṣu* 'monk'). It is mentioned again, with a full description of what it entailed, in the later account of Buddhist monks in Porphyry's *De abstinentia*, discussed below.

Although Pyrrho himself practiced asceticism for long periods away from people, Timon, his most important disciple, remained a layman. He went off wandering sometimes with Pyrrho, but he was married, he lived in the city, and he had children. We know that he taught his son Xanthus medicine, and Diogenes Laërtius remarks, "This son was a man of high repute."<sup>111</sup> Although Pyrrho's ascetic "rustic" path ultimately did not survive in Greece, Timon's "urbane" path did survive, and was practiced by other physicians into Late Antiquity, as attested by Sextus Empiricus, our most important source on Late Pyrrhonism. In this way, and by his introduction of the Problem of the Criterion, Pyrrho had a lasting effect on European thought, as discussed in Chapter Four.

#### ON THE MEANING OF ŚRAMAṆA IN PREMODERN SOURCES

Until fairly recently, the traditional meaning of *śramaṇa* was clear and uncontested, at least outside India: it meant 'Buddhist practitioner', and later 'Buddhist monk'. Unfortunately, its meaning has become unclear due to the frequent, wholly unjustified misinterpretation of the word in numerous works based on late attempts to project this or that non-Buddhist system—most frequently Jainism—back to the days of the Buddha, or even earlier. It has thus been widely claimed that there were *other* ascetics in the Buddha's day (or even before him) and in Early Buddhism who were also called *śramaṇas*. The word has

therefore been mistranslated, by too many, as "ascetic". Although such views are based on historically unreliable Indian accounts composed and written down many centuries later, they are followed now by most modern Indologists.<sup>112</sup>

Nevertheless, all of the *dated* or *datable* accounts of Indian religious-philosophical beliefs (most of which are in foreign sources), from Antiquity well into the Middle Ages, use the word *śramaṇa* (also spelled *samṇa*, *samāna*, *ṣamaṇa*, etc.) to refer specifically and exclusively to Buddhist practitioners,<sup>113</sup> often explicitly in distinction to Brahmanists. The distinction is earliest made in the account of Megasthenes. The same distinction is made in the Major Inscriptions of the Mauryan period, both in the Brahmi script versions as well as those in Kharoṣṭhi script and in Greek. The Major Inscriptions repeatedly mention the dichotomy between Brāhmanas and Śramaṇas or Śramaṇas and Brāhmanas, who are mentioned together in most of the inscriptions. The two are explicitly referred to as "sects", and in several instances the existence of other unnamed "sects" is mentioned.<sup>114</sup> This is explicit in the Prakrit versions of the synoptic inscriptions. The fragmentary Greek version of the Thirteenth Rock Edict from Kandahar also says, "And the King further considered that those living there, as many *Brāhmanas*, *Śramaṇas* and others debating the *dharma*, should keep in mind what are of interest to the King."<sup>115</sup> The expression "others *debating*" the Dharma<sup>116</sup> explicitly means, in Greek, "members of other sects".<sup>117</sup>

<sup>112</sup> The idea was promoted already in the early nineteenth century by Colebrooke, who is quoted at length in a footnote by McCrindle (1877: 105n1). There continue to be many arguments in support of this view, e.g., "Like Buddhism, Jainism was born in Greater Magadha. The Jina and the Buddha are supposed to have been contemporaries, and there are indeed early buddhist text [*sic*] that mention Mahāvīra's demise. The two movements were aware of each other's existence, and there are good reasons to believe that they influenced each other. This influence was, as far as the earliest period is concerned, largely unidirectional: there is for this period much more evidence for jaina influence on Buddhism than the other way round" (Bronkhorst 2011: 130); cf. Bronkhorst (2009).

<sup>113</sup> See further below in this chapter.

<sup>114</sup> See the discussion of the Mauryan inscriptions in Chapter Three.

<sup>115</sup> Halkias (2013), q.v. for the Greek text.

<sup>116</sup> As Halkias (2013: 86) notes, the text uses Greek *eusebeia* "piety" to translate *dharma* (Pali *dhamma*).

<sup>117</sup> The inscription's οἱ . . . διαρριβοντες means "the debaters; the sectarians (members

<sup>111</sup> D.L. ix, 109–110, citing "Sōtion in his eleventh book", referring to Sotion of Alexandria, a second century BC doxographer who is one of Diogenes Laërtius's most important

Finally, where the "Seventh Pillar Edict" on the Delhi-Topra pillar mentions the sects, it gives them in the way they are mentioned in the Major Rock Edicts—that is, "Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas", occasionally adding "and other sects", with two notable exceptions. It reads, "Some (*Mahāmātrās*) were ordered by me to busy themselves with the affairs of the *Samgha*; likewise others were ordered by me to busy themselves also with the Brāhmaṇas (and) Ājivikas; others were ordered by me to busy themselves with the Nirgranthas [Jains]; others were ordered by me to busy themselves also with various (other) sects; (thus) different *Mahāmātrās* (are busying themselves) specially with different (congregations)."<sup>118</sup> It is notable that this inscription explicitly mentions the Buddhists, using the term *Samgha* for the expected *Śramaṇa*, showing explicitly that the inscription is the product of a much later age. By using the term *samgha* 'the community of Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns (*bhikkhunīs*)'—referring specifically to Buddhist practitioners who resided in monasteries under a monastic rule (however primitive)—the inscription shows that the term *śramaṇa* had already passed out of common usage to refer to Buddhist practitioners. It is now known that organized monasteries (*vihāras*) did not exist anywhere—at least, outside of Central Asia—before the Kushan period, and were introduced to India quite suddenly in the first century AD. The earlier *ārāṇas* were very primitive affairs and do not begin to suggest an organized conception of Buddhism.<sup>119</sup> The new monastic ideal contrasts very sharply with the earlier ideal, going back to the time of the Buddha himself, of the solitary, wandering "forest" Śramaṇa and of the less ascetic, but still solitary, "urban" Śramaṇa, as described by Megasthenes. It must also be stressed that in none of the Major Inscriptions of the Mauryas is the term *śramaṇa* used in the generic sense "ascetic". The term used throughout the Major Inscriptions that is regularly translated by Hultzsch as 'ascetic' is *pauvrita-* (Sanskrit *pravrajita-*), which actually means 'wanderer, homeless one'. The word *śramaṇa* is never used in

ancient texts of any kind as a generic with the meaning 'ascetic' used for practitioners of any and all traditions.<sup>120</sup> It meant specifically and only 'Buddhist practitioner'.

However, a recent study argues that there is one exception to the rule that *śramaṇa* always means 'Buddhist practitioner' in non-Indian texts.<sup>121</sup> The putative example is a passage from the fragmentary Greek account of India by the Syriac writer Bardaisan (Bardesanes) of Edessa (AD 154–222) quoted by Porphyry (AD 234–ca. 300) in his *De abstinentia*, a book promoting vegetarianism.<sup>122</sup> Porphyry's account of the Indians begins with a very brief introductory remark in which he notes that the Indian religious thinkers are divided into two kinds, the *Brachmanes* or 'Brahmins' and the *Samanaiōi* or 'Śramaṇas', followed by his discussion proper, which includes a section on the *Brachmanes*, a section on the *Samanaiōi*, and a section on the ancient Indian sect that practiced suicide by fire, the Gymnetae. The article claims that the word *samanaiōi*—an Aramaic-Greek hybrid plural<sup>123</sup> of *samana*, a Prakrit form of *śramaṇa*—refers in this account to Jain monks, not Buddhists. It is further contended that the third section of the account, in particular, reflects Jainism, not Buddhism. It is thus necessary to discuss the argument in some detail.

To begin with, it must be remarked that even in the third part of Porphyry's account there is nothing specifically Jain in it except the general idea of planned suicide, and that is described as being by fire,

<sup>120</sup> It is also not so used even in more recent ones. The word *śramaṇa* occurs once in the *Āṅguyāka Brāhṃaṇa*, a text on a Brahmanist practitioner who meditates in the forest. This is an isolated occurrence, and an obvious imitation of the Buddhists' Forest-dweller *śramaṇa*, yet it has been taken as "proof" that there were *śramaṇas* before the Buddha, and so on. The *Āṅguyāka Brāhṃaṇa* is undated and undatable to any such early period, and cannot prove anything about it. Bronkhorst (1986) has already shown that another such "early" Brahmanist text, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, is later than Buddhism and imitates it.

<sup>121</sup> Deeg and Gardner (2009).

<sup>122</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinentia* IV, 18.1–3. It is often noted that the text is also to be found in Stobaeus, *Eclogae* I, 3.56 (Wachsmuth and Hense 1884: 1.66–70), but the references therein to Indians have nothing to do with the section on the Śramaṇas in Porphyry's *De abstinentia*, and do not even mention any form of the word *śramaṇa*.

<sup>123</sup> Winter (1999: 115) remarks that the ending *-aiōi* of the Greek form *Samanaiōi* is basically a Greek rendering of the Aramaic plural ending *-aijā*, seen in many names of groups in the Near East.

<sup>118</sup> "Seventh Pillar Edict" (Delhi-Topra), line 25, text and translation by Hultzsch (1925: 132, 136), q.v. for a clear rubbing. On the spuriousness of this text (as a Major Mauryan inscription) see Appendix C.

<sup>119</sup> Pointed out already by Marshall (1951). As noted above, Schopen has established that the Vinaya does not reflect Early Buddhism, as once thought, but very late Norma-

which all scholars, including the authors, note is very un-Jain. The other details are in general very un-Jain also, as the authors themselves remark in several instances, and there are many other un-Jain things elsewhere in the account. Moreover, the term *Samanaioi* is used *only*<sup>124</sup> in the second section of Porphyry's account, which is from Bardaisan, who regularly repeats the word *Samanaioi* throughout the section. It is an absolutely clear, unambiguous description of a day in a Normative Buddhist monastery. This ought to be conclusive on its own, but there is more, and it decisively rules out all speculation.

The third section—the part the authors contend is more similar to Jainism than to Buddhism—was taken by Porphyry essentially word for word from Josephus's book *Bellum Iudaicum* 'The Jewish War', and originally had nothing whatsoever to do with the account of the *Samanaioi* in Bardaisan.<sup>125vii</sup> The third section describes the ancient Indian Gymnetae sect, which has been wrongly considered by most scholars to belong to the Śramaṇa sect, despite the fact that its followers are never called Śramanas.

The Josephus passage describes this distinctive ancient "Indian" sect of people, men and women, who were so eager to enter the next life that they often committed suicide, typically by burning themselves alive on a funeral pyre. As noted above, Strabo describes them and calls them the Gymnetae 'the Naked ones'. The best-known Classical accounts of them focus on Calanus, who joined Alexander the Great's court when the Greeks were in Gandhāra, accompanied him back to Pasargadae in Persia, and committed suicide there in the presence of Alexander and many others. This sect is thought to be unknown in Indian sources (all of which are *many* centuries later than the Greek sources), despite attempts to find it in them. It is quite clear that they were a non-Buddhist sect—a numerically very small one according to comments in

the earliest sources—which died out before the end of Late Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages, at which time the Indians began to write something very roughly approximating history.<sup>126</sup>

Unlike the third section, the second section—the immediately preceding paragraph in Porphyry's text—is indeed from Bardaisan, who does use the term *śramaṇa*, in the form *samanaioi* (a Greek form of the Aramaic plural of Prakrit *śramaṇa* ~ Sanskrit *śramaṇa*) to refer to the people he describes, who are certainly Buddhists.<sup>127</sup> In fact, Bardaisan very strikingly repeats the word *samanaioi* "Śramanas" *five times* in that short paragraph, which is unambiguously about life in a Buddhist monastery,<sup>128</sup> and he stops repeating the word *samanaioi* at the point where the content no longer describes anything recognizably Buddhist.<sup>129</sup> Bardaisan's text quoted by Porphyry clearly describes a monastery and its inmates, monks, both late developments typical of Normative Buddhism. In the much earlier account by Megasthenes, he describes Śramanas, the 'ascetic practitioners' of *Early* Buddhism, who were not "monks" and did not have monasteries,<sup>130</sup> so the term for 'Buddhist' in foreign sources had already become fixed as *śramaṇa* or a variant of that word. Half a millennium later, the term *samanaioi* "Śramanas" in Bardaisan still unambiguously refers specifically and only to *Buddhist* practitioners.

<sup>126</sup> See above in this chapter on the similarities and differences between this sect and the Pre-Pure Land sect.

<sup>127</sup> Winter (1999: 120), though unaware that the third part of Porphyry's section on the Indians has been taken from Josephus, nevertheless correctly identifies the *Samanaioi* of Porphyry with Buddhist monks, and explains the Syriac intermediary form, which comes from Bardaisan. He also cites an interesting Zoroastrian inscription relevant to the identification of the word *śramaṇa* as the term for the practitioners of a particular religion: "Auf Gleiches weist auch die Verwendung des Terminus in der Inschrift des Kartir, eines zoroastrischen Oberpriesters, . . . wo *smny* neben der Brahmanen, Juden, Judenchristen u. a. also Opfer der Religionsverfolgungen aufgelistet werden."

<sup>128</sup> Deeg and Gardner (2009) admit this in their discussion of the second part of Porphyry's text (which they clearly did not realize is unconnected to the third part).

<sup>129</sup> In fact, just at that point the text explicitly mentions Brahmanists and the section taken from Josephus begins.

<sup>130</sup> The term *śramaṇa* retained its original meaning in the Indian context even after the development of Normative Buddhism. This semantic conservatism may be the reason for the shift to the use of *bhikṣu* "monk" and *bhikṣuṇī* "nun" when Buddhist practitioners

<sup>124</sup> That is, leaving aside the mention of the *Samanaioi* in the introductory section.

Porphyry describes the Brachmanas, followed by the *Samanaioi*, and refers to both explicitly by name in their respective sections. In the third section, on the Indian Gymnetae sect, he does not mention them by name, nor does he explicitly distinguish them from the other Indian thinkers he describes. He also does not mention that he has taken his material from more than one source. This unclarity has led to modern scholars' misinterpretations.

Another mistaken argument about *Śramaṇa* has been made on the basis of a passage in Clement of Alexandria (mid-second to early third century AD),<sup>131</sup> in which a long “laundry list” of examples of religious practitioners among different peoples is given, including the “Indians” and others in their vicinity. Clement mentions the *Samanaioi*, the “philosophers” of the Bactrians, meaning the Kushans (who in his day ruled Central Asia and northern India);<sup>132</sup> the *Brachmanai* and *Sarmasai*,<sup>133</sup> including an account of the Forest-dweller (*Hylbioi*) subtype of the Sarmanai, in a passage specifically dependent on Megasthenes’ account;<sup>134</sup> and unnamed “people in India who revere *Boutta* ‘Buddha’ like a god because of his remarkable sanctity.”<sup>135</sup>

The argument—already made by Colebrooke in the early nineteenth century and noted by McCrindle in his translation of the fragments of Megasthenes later in the century—is that the last-named group were Buddhists, while the Sarmanai were Jains and others.<sup>136</sup> In fact, the text allows no such conclusion. Clement simply lists all “Indian philosophers” of any kind that he has found in his reading, and clearly has no

idea that any of them are or are not the same as any others, because he is absolutely neutral on the point.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, it must be stressed that the three types (including the Kushans) in the “Indian” category belong to three different sources and at least two different periods.

An additional problem with the view that there were many other kinds of *śramaṇas* at the time of the Buddha is that it requires these putative other traditions to have *ceased* using the term not long after the Buddha’s lifetime (or at any rate before the testimonies of Megasthenes, the Major Inscriptions of the Mauryas, the early Chinese translations, and the medieval Islamic sources, which contain no examples of such putative non-Buddhist uses) and then, after a hiatus of over a millennium, to have resumed using the term. That is of course absurd. They clearly began using the term for their own practitioners only after it had become well established as a term for Buddhist practitioners, and after Buddhism had become widespread and extremely influential in India.<sup>138</sup>

A recent discussion of the Greek sources by Wilhelm Halbfass presents the typical position to the effect that *śramaṇa* refers to all kinds of ascetics. It then asks, “does Megasthenes mention Buddhism at all?”<sup>139</sup> The answer, citing scholars’ confusion and creative attempts to overcome the resulting problem, is again negative. Yet the author asks further,

<sup>137</sup> The attempt of McCrindle to interpret the last statement in Clement’s account as “ambiguous”, so that the last example could alternatively refer directly to the previous one, is not correct. The text is not ambiguous, but it also does not tell us one way or the other if the *Boutta* worshippers had anything to do with the Sarmanes. Unfortunately, Clement does not identify his sources.

<sup>138</sup> One must also take into account the fact that in several other attested instances new Buddhist-like religious systems developed—including in China, Tibet, and Japan—through the adoption of many of the trappings, practices, and beliefs of the Buddhists by people who seem to have differed from them originally. The results—“religious” Taoism, Bon, and Shinto, respectively—vary in their degree of difference from Normative Buddhism in the respective countries. Bon is unattested in any form during the Tibetan Empire (Beckwith 1987/1993: 2012a), not to speak of even earlier, despite claims to that effect in traditional Bonpo texts. From its earliest attestations in actual religious texts (ca. tenth century AD), it is what may be called a variant form of the early Rnyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, which dates to the same period (Robert Mayer, p.c., 2011).

<sup>139</sup> Likewise, modern Taoism is a system very similar to Chinese Buddhism, and Shinto is a system similar to Japanese Buddhism.

<sup>131</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I, xv, 71, 3–5 (Stählin 1906: 2:45–46): Φιλοσοφία τοίνυν, πολυωμελής τι χορήγία, πάσαι μὲν ἡκίμασε παρὰ βαρβάρους κατὰ τὰ ἔθνη διατάχματα, ὅτερον δὲ καὶ εἰς Ἑλλάδας κατήλθεν. Προέστησαν δ’ αὐτῆς Αἰγυπτίων τε οἱ προφῆται καὶ Ἀσσυρίων οἱ Χαλδαῖοι καὶ Ἰταλῶν οἱ Ἀρυῖοι καὶ Σαρματαῖοι Βάκτρον καὶ Κέλτων οἱ φιλοσοφίσαντες καὶ Περσῶν οἱ Μάγοι (οἱ μαγεῖαν ἀπικνουμένοι γῆν) Ἰνδῶν τε τὴν γένεσιν, ἀστέρος αὐτοῖς καθηγούμενου εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν ἀπικνουμένοι γῆν) Ἰνδῶν τε οἱ γυμνοσοφισταί, ἄλλοι γὲ φιλόσοφοι βάρβαροι. ἄριστον δὲ τούτων τὸ γένος, οἱ μὲν Σαρματαῖοι αὐτῶν, οἱ δὲ Βροχμῆται χαλούμενοι. καὶ τῶν Σαρματῶν οἱ Ὀλβίοι προσαρροπούμενοι οὔτε πόλεις οὔτε στρατὸς ἔχουσιν, δένδρων δὲ ἀμφιένυννται φλοιοῖς καὶ ἀκρόφορα στρούνα καὶ ὄσπρη τὰς χερεὶ πηνοῦσιν, οὐ γάμον, οὐ παρθοτοίαν ἔχουσιν, ὅσπερ οἱ νῦν Ἑκκατηνταχίδου μενοῖ. εἰσι δὲ τῶν Ἰνδῶν οἱ τοῖς Βούττα πετιόμενοι παρὰ γυέλμασιν. ὃν δὲ ὑπερβολὴν σεμνότητος ὡς θεὸν τιμῇσιν.

<sup>132</sup> Clement’s spelling *Samanaioi* here derives specifically from Bardaisan’s Syriac works, and so too does his identification of the Bactrians with the Kushans (whose proximal homeland was indeed Bactria).

<sup>133</sup> Modern editors’ correction of the extant manuscripts of Strabo, which all have “Garmen-”, is due primarily to Clement’s text. The fragmentary Greek version of “Asoka’s” Thirteenth Rock Edict from Kandahar also has the expected S-. See the discussion above in this chapter.

<sup>134</sup> The information is most probably from Megasthenes’ *Indica*, though whether Clement took it directly from Megasthenes or indirectly from another source is unclear.

<sup>135</sup> This passage, which is unique to Clement, contains the earliest reference to the name *Buddha* in any Western source.

But how do we account for Megasthenes' own apparent silence concerning Buddhism, in view of the fact that he visited Pāṭaliputra and should, if we accept the traditions about this city, have noticed conspicuous Buddhist monuments and, moreover, have heard about Buddhist life and thought? Dible says that for Megasthenes the Buddhists were still too insignificant to be mentioned separately ("... während für Megasthenes, also vor Aśoka, die Buddhisten noch keine Rolle in Indien spielten, die ihre eigene Erziehung gerechtfertigt hätte").<sup>140</sup> However, this would be rather strange—"chose étrange," as Henri de Lubac notes<sup>141</sup>—if indeed, Buddhism had already been alive and growing, and enjoying the patronage of various rulers in this area, for a period of two centuries. Could it really have been that inconspicuous and insignificant that Megasthenes either overlooked it or, provided that he heard about it, chose not to mention it at all?<sup>142</sup>

Halbfass unfortunately then disregards his perceptive observation and buries it in a mass of speculation buttressed by the citation of other similar works.

In short, few, if any, scholars have carefully read and thought about the contents of Megasthenes' account on the one hand, and on the other hand at least considered the possibility that Buddhism might have changed somewhat over the many centuries of its existence, such that what Megasthenes describes must be earlier forms of Buddhism different from the forms of Buddhism attested many centuries later.

The remarkably unanimous testimony of all non-Indian sources, most of which are far earlier than the actual dates of any Indian sources, is that the term *śramaṇa* meant exclusively 'Buddhist practitioner' in all early languages in which it is attested,<sup>143</sup> including Chinese 沙門 (Mandarin *shāmén*),<sup>144</sup> Sogdian *šmn-* (*šaman-*), Khotanese *ṣṣamaṇa*, and

<sup>140</sup> Dible (1964: 63); that is, "because for Megasthenes, that is before Aśoka, the Buddhists did not yet play any role in India that would have justified reference to them."

<sup>141</sup> Lubac (1952).

<sup>142</sup> Halbfass (1995: 205).

<sup>143</sup> Mayrhofer (1976: 3:387–388) cites the use of *śramaṇa* "in den buddh. Bereich und indirekt nach dem Westen", giving the examples cited here, among others; note that the usual Tokharian A stem is *šmn-* (Poucha 1955: 337–338). Cf. Winter (1999: 120n486).

<sup>144</sup> This is perhaps the most frequently used among a number of different early Chi-

Tokharian B *šamāne*, Tokharian A *šāman*.<sup>145</sup> Usages by other religious traditions in India are not datable in any scientific way to a period earlier than at least a half millennium after the Buddha's death around the middle of the first millennium BC.

Observations by foreign visitors and the usage by the ruler Devanāmpriya Priyadarśi in the authentic Major Inscriptions of the Mauryas in the early third century BC agree that there were Brāhmaṇas, Śramaṇas, and "other sects". That unambiguously means that the followers of the "other sects" could not be Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas. Moreover, the so-called Seventh Pillar Edict on the Delhi-Topra column refers to the Jains and Ājīvīkas as *pāsandā* ('philosophical-religious) schools, sects', not as *śramaṇas*. All foreign sources too are unanimous in saying the Śramaṇas were specifically Buddhist practitioners, as shown above. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Śramaṇas in Early Buddhism and in all dated early historical sources were Buddhists, based on the unusually consistent, clear evidence, versus the lack of any reliable, dated evidence whatsoever in support of the idea that the word *śramaṇa* ever referred to "sects" or "ascetic practitioners" in general in Antiquity. At some time in Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages—if not even later—the Jains and other non-Buddhist religious practitioners in India adopted the word to refer to their own ascetics and projected themselves back to, or beyond, the time of the historical Buddha.<sup>146</sup> Because in the Kushan period (at the earliest), or later, the Buddhists had to defend themselves from the criticism by the Jains and others, and because by the time all this happened Buddhism had become largely

<sup>145</sup> Adams (1999: 649).

<sup>146</sup> Modern scholars' confusion about the word *śramaṇa* appears to be due above all to the Jains' creative attempts to assert their chronological and other priority over the Buddhists. As noted above, these efforts are strikingly similar to the attempts of modern Bon adherents to do the same thing. No actual hard evidence, textual or other, has ever been produced to support such claims in either instance. See the very careful comments of Mette (1995), who, though evidently pro-Jain, essentially admits that Buddhism seems to be in all respects earlier than Jainism. The Jains cannot be demonstrated to have even existed before the date of the "Seventh Pillar Edict of Aśoka", which is traditionally treated as the last part of the Delhi-Topra pillar inscription, but is an obvious late addition to the existing inscriptions on that monument; as noted above, the addition dates to the Normative Buddhist period, evidently under the Kushans. See Appendix C for detailed

monastic, the Buddhists included references to the founders of the other religious-philosophical traditions as contemporaries of the Buddha so that they could show how the Buddha was superior to them in wisdom and in every other way and thus defeated them. The idea of linear chronology has long been thought to have been absent in early India, and certainly there is no evidence of any conception of history *per se* there until well into the Middle Ages, so the Buddhists did not realize that by placing their opponents in the traditional Normative Buddhist background of Saka-Kushan period Magadha they were in effect legitimizing claims that the other religions' followers would eventually make. Scholars have been misled by this far too long. There is absolutely no evidence for the usage of the word *śramaṇa* by any non-Buddhist traditions in sources actually attested and dated to Antiquity through the early Middle Ages. The other traditions adopted the term—and much else—from Buddhism, in the Saka-Kushan period or later times.

This is not an isolated point. There is also no evidence for the existence of the term *bhikṣu* 'Buddhist monk' (or its Prakrit analogues) before the appearance of Normative Buddhism several hundred years after the Buddha's lifetime, suggesting that there was something that distinguished those who were so named from those who were called *śramaṇas* in the earlier sources. Furthermore, there is no indication of anything like a *sangha* 'community of monks' in Megasthenes' account, his use of the term *śramaṇa* contains no suggestion that the Buddhist practitioners he describes were anything at all like "monks" *per se*, and it has already been demonstrated that there were no monasteries, and no monastic code either.

The logical conclusion to be drawn is that during the period reflected in the teachings of Pyrrho and the account of Megasthenes, the late fourth century BC, and still in the early Mauryan period, there was not yet a *sangha*, nor monks, nor monasteries, nor a Vinaya, nor full divinization of the Buddha. These all appeared as essential elements of Normative Buddhism, which flowered in the Saka-Kushan period,<sup>147</sup> when the old solitary ascetic ideal was replaced (though not

completely) by the communal, organized monastic ideal, which was then projected back to the time of the Buddha. However, this was not done consistently or thoroughly, so that an older picture of Early Buddhism is sometimes preserved side by side with the newer picture of it.

#### THE ANCIENT INDIAN GYMNETAIE SECT AND EARLY BUDDHISM

The Indian philosophical-religious teacher best known in Classical sources is Calanus, who met the Greeks when Alexander of Macedon invaded Gandhāra. He joined Alexander's court and went with him to Pasargadae in Persia, where he committed suicide in 323 BC, despite Alexander's pleas that he not do it. His chosen method was to cast himself onto a funeral pyre, as did several others noted in the West, apparently with the aim of going to Heaven in the quickest, most direct way possible.<sup>148</sup> This made a powerful impression on the Greeks.

The Buddha says not a word about God or about Heaven and going there, he rejects the idea of inherent personal identities (including the "soul"), and he talks about *nirvāṇa* instead, Pyrrho's *ataraxia*—calm, undisturbedness—here on earth, in this life. Buddha and Pyrrho say one should have "no views" and just rely on *custom* and the *phenomena*, which is what people actually do anyway. Timon says, "The phenomena<sup>149</sup> are omnipotent wherever they appear."<sup>150</sup> The Late Pyrrhonists and the Neo-Pyrrhonians say the same thing. But if we choose phenomena, what are we *not* choosing? The converse of phenomena is "non-phenomena". The "non-phenomenal world" would be either the one in our minds (problematically conceived of as distinct from "the world") or the world of God—which is also problematically distinct from "the world". So the Buddha,

<sup>148</sup> Many Chinese and Japanese Buddhist monks committed suicide by burning themselves to death, from medieval to recent times, as shown very thoroughly and clearly by Kleine (2006), but the participants' motivations, which Kleine discusses, do not appear to have anything in common with those of Calanus and the other followers of the ancient Gymnetae sect.

<sup>149</sup> In Greek *phainomenon* 'the apparent, that which appears', see the following note.

<sup>150</sup> Timon, *Indidmoi*, quoted in D.L. IX, 105: ἀλλὰ τὸ πανόθενον πάντη ὁφέει οὔτερον ἔστιν; text from Hicks (1925: 2:516–517), who translates it memorably, "But the ap-

<sup>147</sup> Although the Vinaya texts are all dated or datable only to the fifth century AD, as pointed out by Schopen (2004: 94), they are chronologically layered texts. It seems likely that the earliest layers date back perhaps as far as the Saka-Kushan period, but not

and Pyrrho following him, and two millennia later Hume once again, were actually reacting against one or another theistic system.<sup>151viii</sup>

This would explain the apparent problem of the “missing God” and related elements in Normative Buddhism. If the missing element were put back in, one would have a monotheistic Central Eurasian Culture Complex belief system, with the God of Heaven, the Lord and his co-mitatus, suicide of the latter on the death of their lord, and rebirth for them all in Heaven. This must seem rather close to the sect of Calanus, but the Gymnetae cannot be identified with any known Buddhist group. In the Greek sources the sect’s followers are never called *Śramanas*, they go naked, and suicide makes absolutely no sense in nontheistic “elite” Early Buddhism, which is openly devoted to achieving a satisfactory life on earth. However, there are similarities between the ideas of the Gymnetae and “popular” Early Buddhism, including the system described in the Major Inscriptions of Devānāpriya Priyadarśi. That raises the question of theistic elements or trends in attested Early Buddhism.

The earliest historically attested theistic Buddhist sect is Pure Land. The sect first appears in the *Pratyūpanna Samādhi Sūtra*, which was translated into Chinese between AD 178 and 189. This is a text radically different not only from Early Buddhism but even from the putatively “early” Normative Buddhist texts of the Pali Canon and the Gāndhārī documents, which mostly date to approximately the same period. Pure Land obviously distinguishes its teachings from something else that it strongly rejects—namely, attested Early Buddhism—in quite the same way that attested Early Buddhism, including its Pyrrhonian offshoot, distinguishes itself sharply from theistic belief systems. It is thus no surprise that the followers of Pure Land and other related sects eventually came to call themselves, collectively, *Mahāyāna* ‘the Great Vehicle’, in explicit contrast to what they derisively called *Hīnayāna* ‘the Little Vehicle’.

The early Pure Land Buddhism of the *Pratyūpanna Samādhi Sūtra* apparently (and effectively) has God (Amitābha), Heaven (Sukhāvatī), and rebirth in Heaven. For a Central Eurasian, all of these are comfortable old Central Eurasian Culture Complex ideas, and for a Persian,

they are (not coincidentally) comfortable old Early Zoroastrian ideas too. Yet the text does explicitly reject antilogies,<sup>152</sup> so it openly accepts the Early Buddhist teaching of *anātmā* (‘things have) no (inherent) self-identity’, Pyrrho’s *adiaphora*, and along with it the teaching of impermanence: Amitābha is actually, explicitly, not an eternal being. Several of the characteristic features of early Pure Land are mentioned in Megasthenes’ description of the unnamed Pre-Pure Land sect inserted into the description of Brahmanism in the received text of Strabo, as discussed above.

Perhaps first there was the religious belief system of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, which reencountered the related system of Early Zoroastrianism when the Achaemenid Persian Empire conquered Central Asia. Zoroastrianism introduced the idea of the absolute opposition of the Truth and the Lie. Then the Buddha reacted against absolutist-perfectionist distinctions and eternalism in general. When the Pre-Pure Land sect developed, it restored God (as Amitābha or another “Buddha”, depending on the text) and rebirth in Heaven, while nevertheless retaining the *Trīśaṣṭana* teaching of *anātmā* (philosophically expressed as the invalidity of antilogies) and the teaching of *anitya* ‘impermanence’, as well as the teaching of *duḥkha* ‘uneasiness’.

Although the Pre-Pure Land sect was clearly not the same as the non-Buddhist sect of Calanus, in Megasthenes’ day it was evidently not yet thought of as strictly Buddhist either. His description of Pre-Pure Land, as preserved in Strabo, is in the section explicitly devoted to Brahmanism, despite the explicit Pre-Pure Land belief in the invalidity of antilogies, and thus in *anātmā*. But the Brahmanists worshipped a creator God and believed in an afterlife, so it is not totally unreasonable for the Pre-Pure Land sect to be described there. The Pre-Pure Land sect is therefore, perhaps, still to be distinguished from Buddhism in the very earliest sources.

However, most of the features of Pre-Pure Land are elements of the system called the *Dharmā* in the Major Inscriptions of King Devānāpriya Priyadarśi, a mere half century after Megasthenes. It thus appears that Pre-Pure Land became a minimally Buddhist sect,

<sup>151</sup> See Chapter Four for detailed analysis. On the possibility that he was reacting

<sup>152</sup> The most famous Pure Land rejection of antilogies is in the “longer” *Sukhāvatīyūta*

"proto-Pure Land", by the time of that king. The features of this system are discussed further in Chapter Three.

When the Pure Land we know is first attested in the late second century AD, it includes several modified absolutist-perfectionist features, but it is nevertheless still a fully Buddhist sect, regardless of the contradictions.

All of this is remarkably similar to the religious aspects of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex and its core sociopolitical-religious element, the comitatus.<sup>153</sup> The main focus of the comitatus was Heaven.<sup>154</sup> Its young aristocrat warrior members needed to associate themselves with a Lord to make sure they got to Heaven, because a real Lord had Divine ("sacral") ancestral blood, and swearing an oath or vow to be "friends" with him in this life and the next ensured rebirth in Heaven. That the comitatus and the Lords would, for whatever reason, go to Heaven, explains the persistence and strength of the comitatus system.<sup>155</sup> It is thus not surprising that the practice of burial at the stupas of Buddhist holy men<sup>156</sup> closely parallels the Central Eurasian practice at the burial mounds of political lords, most famously among the Scythians.

The earliest Pure Land sutras, including the very first one translated into Chinese, tell us that the Pure Land is the paradise of Amitābha in the West—meaning the western sky, up in Heaven, but of course also located above or over Central Asia, which was to the west of early China. Pure Land thus reflects, in part, earlier pre-Buddhist Central Eurasian Culture Complex teachings and practices of Central Asia. Buddhism per se continued to develop its own "reformed" Early Buddhist teachings and practices in Central Asia and in India. Eventually,

a merger of the two in Central Asia produced developed "Buddhicized" Pure Land, which spread to both India and China under the Kushans.

Mahayana may thus have developed partly under the influence of native Central Eurasian-type beliefs accommodated to Buddhism.

The Buddha's insight on *anātman* negates the theism of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, Zoroastrianism, Brahmanism, and some of the Pre-Pure Land beliefs attested in Megasthenes. By the time full-blown Pure Land per se is attested in Chinese translations in the second century AD, it is a kind of Normative Buddhism. Enough of Buddhism had been adopted by "Old Believers" of pre-Buddhist Pre-Pure Land such that they had become essentially indistinguishable from those followers of Early Buddhism who had adopted many of the absolutist elements rejected by the Buddha. Followers of the resulting Mahayana tradition said that they were Buddhists too, though of course a better, more evolved kind. Along with the merger some very old practices—in particular the tradition of the wandering ascetic Forest Śramāṇas—were revitalized,<sup>157</sup> and followers of the *Mahāvāna* 'the Great Vehicle' claimed the moral high ground as the ultimate "renouncers".

<sup>153</sup> Beckwith (1984; 2009: 1–28). Much written on the comitatus continues to be uninformed and problematic.

<sup>154</sup> Beckwith (2011a).

<sup>155</sup> Beckwith (2009: 12–26). Unfortunately, it is rarely said precisely where the "home" to which they would return upon death was. The major Early Old Tibetan historical texts—the Zhol Inscription and the *Old Tibetan Annals*—tell us that the ruler, the *bisampo*, came from *gnumgyi lha* 'the God of Heaven (*gnam*)', but when he died, they say he *gungdu gsegs* 'went to Heaven (*gung*)'. For an early attempt to explain this terminological discrepancy, see Beckwith (2011a), which must be modified to make it clear that there was only one God of Heaven (cf. Beckwith 2010a).

<sup>157</sup> Boucher (2008).