MISCELLANEOUS COMMUNICATIONS

THE LAST WORDS OF ASOKA

I have been, after Professor Bühler, the most strenuous upholder of the view that the number 256 in the final clause of the inscription which we have in various versions at Rūpnāth, Sahasrām, Brahmagiri, and other places,¹ denotes years: and I have maintained, with him, that the context marks them as the years elapsed from the death of Buddha to the time when Aśoka made the pronouncement which was published in this record. It would, then, be only proper, in the event of its ever being proved that that view is in any way wrong, that I should be one of the first to admit the fact. And it is with pleasure that I compliment Dr. F. W. Thomas on having settled otherwise, in his article “*Les Vivāsah d’Aśoka*” published in the *Journal Asiatique*, May–June, 1910, pp. 507–22, the real literal meaning of a passage which has been a subject of so much dispute for more than thirty years.² He has shown, from the Sahasrām text, that the passage in question does not mention the death of Buddha, and that it speaks, not of years, but of “256 nights”, *duve sapamṇā-lāti-satā*, i.e., as he has told us, *dvē śatpañchāśē rātri-śatē*, during which Aśoka was away from his home. To this explanation I gladly subscribe. And, while we might imagine circumstances in which the meaning would be 256 nights and only nights, still, with Dr. Thomas, I cannot doubt that what was really intended here is “256 nights and days”:

¹ Among the Mysore texts, the important one is that on the Brahmagiri hill; not that at ‘Siddapur’, i.e. Siddāpura, which has suffered much damage.

² As regards an appearance of delay on my part, I may say that I first heard of Dr. Thomas’ article on the 3rd September, and saw it a few days later.

as he has said, in the determination of absence from home 'it is the night that counts.'

Dr. Thomas' case, however, has not stopped there. On that basis, coupled with the point that in a passage near the beginning of the same record mention is made, not of a period of 'six years and somewhat more', but of 'one year and somewhat more', he has adopted the view that the record is one of the earliest (instead of being, as I have claimed, the very latest) of the pronouncements of Aśoka. And he has ended his article by saying:—'It is almost superfluous to remark that all the chronological constructions which have been founded on the supposition that the number 256 contains the indication of a date are without substance and without support.'

Now, on the two points together, Dr. Thomas' results do upset three of the details in the chronology from B.C. 235 onwards, the 30th year after the anointment of Aśoka to the sovereignty, which I laid out in this *Journal*, 1909. 28: I no longer hold that it was in the 30th year that Aśoka was converted to Buddhism, and that it was in the 33rd year that he formally joined the Buddhist Saṃgha, and that the pronouncement in which we are interested was made by him after spending about a year in religious retirement. But they do not affect in any way the rest of my chronology, which is based on the distinct statements of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, more accredited now than ever, that Aśoka was anointed to the sovereignty 218 years after the death of Buddha and reigned for 37 years. And, while I am now inclined to think, subject to full consideration, that the opening clauses of our record, which refer to the time at which Aśoka became a Buddhist, may allude, and can be translated so as to allude, to an event which occurred at an early period in his career, it is still certain that the record itself does not belong to that period.

My case still is (and I hope to make the soundness of it clear now to everyone) that, after his reign of

thirty-seven years, Aśoka abdicated, and went to spend his remaining days in religious retirement on the hill Suvarṇagiri (Sōnagiri in the Patṇā District, Behār);¹ and that this record contains his latest pronouncement, his last formal statement if not actually his dying words, — uttered there in his retreat 256 years after the death of Buddha, and reduced to writing and published by the high officers of the province which included the hill,— in which he applied himself to expanding the topic of the last words of Buddha:² “Work out your salvation by diligence!” And I will develop my case as follows:—

The 256 days³ during which Aśoka was away from his home cannot be taken as the sum of detached absences of a day, a few days, or more, at a time: they can only denote a continuous absence of that duration. And I think that I am right in saying that Dr. Thomas himself, whose article now under consideration contains his second treatment of this detail, has still, as on the first occasion, viewed this point in this light; his position being that Aśoka issued this proclamation while he was on a religious tour, as opposed to the hunting-expeditions of his predecessors.

That Aśoka was away from his home for these 256 days is stated in the record by derivatives from the verb *vivas*, which has been defined by Dr. Thomas, from instances of its use adduced by him, as meaning ‘to go away from one’s home, to live or dwell somewhere else or apart, to live a retired life or in solitude’,⁴ but has been applied by

¹ For my identification of this hill, and regarding its position, see this Journal, 1909. 998. We can perhaps point to the actual abode, subsequently appropriated by the Jains as a cave-temple, in which Aśoka ended his days: see this Journal, 1908. 498.

² See this Journal, 1909. 1015 f.

³ I use the word ‘day’ in its customary sense of the civil day, the entire day composed of the daytime and the night.

⁴ S’en aller de chez soi, loc. cit., p. 516. line 16: vivre autre part, ibid., line 4 from the bottom: vivre dans l’isolement, ibid., last line: demeurer autre part, p. 517, line 14.

him in this case as meaning 'to be travelling, to make a tour'.¹ But, even if we should grant that anything in the shape of a royal tour could be continued in India for so long a time as eight and a half months (which is practically impossible),² is it the case that the verb *vivas* could have the meaning in which he has applied it? I think not. The instances adduced by Dr. Thomas to illustrate its actual use distinctly involve the idea, not of moving from place to place, but, in amplification of the meaning of the simple verb *vas*, 'to dwell', of dwelling away from home at a particular place or in a certain condition. They connote no idea of motion at all; except, of course, in so far as that, in order to dwell away from home, a man must first go away from home. And it is only in contravention of the rule which he has laid down³ that Dr. Thomas has "taken" for *vivas*, though he has not "found" it, the meaning 'to travel, to go on tour'. I reject that meaning, and claim that the derivatives from *vivas* used in this record show that Aśoka had been dwelling away from home for 256 days always, after the journey by which he reached it, in some particular place.

The record does not tell us, in so many words, where Aśoka was residing during these 256 days. But the Brahmagiri and Siddāpura texts have a preamble which introduces Aśoka's address in these terms:—"From Suvannagiri, in the name of the Prince and the High Ministers,⁴ the High Ministers at Isila are to be asked whether they are in good health, and are to be thus

¹ Être en voyage; s'en aller faire un tour; p. 518, lines 1, 2.

² See this Journal, 1908. 819. A continuous period of eight and a half months must include either the hot weather or the rains, or parts of both of them.

³ Loc. cit., p. 515:—"In the present state of our Sanskrit and Pali studies, it seems no longer sufficient to "take" a word in such or such a meaning: what is wanted is to *find* them used in those meanings."

⁴ On the expression *vachanēna*, 'by a speech of, by the words of, in the name of (so-and-so)', see, fully, this Journal, 1909. 996.

informed : 'Dēvānāpiya issues an injunction.'” This preamble shows, as Dr. Thomas has observed,¹ that Aśōka's pronouncement, contained in this record, was not published from his capital (Pāṭaliputra, Patnā). It shows that it was sent out from the hill Suvarṇagiri. And this indicates, with sufficient clearness, that that is where Aśōka was in residence when he made the pronouncement, and had been residing up to that time. The preamble further shows that the record was framed, as well as published, by the high officers of the province which included Suvarṇagiri. And they or their secretary added the final clause, which says in the Sahasrām text :—“And this address (*was composed or delivered*)² by him (Dēvānāpiya) dwelling apart two hundred and fifty-six nights after going apart : (*in figures*) 200 (*and*) 50 (*and*) 6.”³

Also, the record does not tell us, in so many words, what Aśōka had been doing during his residence of 256 days at the hill Suvarṇagiri. Nor, while it represents him as issuing an injunction to other people that they, likewise, should dwell apart anywhere within the limits of their districts, does it explain to them, in so many words, how they, too, were to occupy themselves in such a life. Something has plainly to be supplied, to supplement the use of *vivas* here. The Buddhist books, however (and it is always to be borne in mind that this is a Buddhist record), give ample information as to what was to be done by people who, as they put it, had passed from the house-life into the houseless state and were dwelling apart in that state. And, supplying from those

¹ Loc. cit., pp. 517-8.

² The Rūpnāth text has *kaṭe*, 'made': the Brahmagiri text has *sāv[ā]p[ī]te*, 'caused to be heard'. The Sahasrām text omits one or the other of these words.

³ The question whether this clause was uttered by Aśōka or was added by the officials, is not of any vital importance. But the absence here and in the other texts of the word *mayā*, 'by me', points strongly in the direction that the clause is not a part of Aśōka's address.

sources a term which is found used with *vivas* in one of the first instances adduced by Dr. Thomas, I venture to claim that the verb, as employed in any such record as this one, was understood at once, even without having any specific term attached to it, as meaning that the persons in connexion with whom it was used either were to adopt, or had already adopted, the condition of *brahmacharya*, dwelling away from home and engaged solely in the observance of a religious life.¹

So far, then, we have arrived at the point that Aśoka, when he made the pronouncement published in this record, had been residing for 256 days at the hill Suvarṇagiri, engaged solely in leading a religious life. But what ancient Indian king could adopt such a course as that, and either keep or recover his sovereignty? Alongside of all this, however, we have the well-established fact, that it was a not infrequent custom of ancient Indian rulers to end their careers by abdicating and withdrawing

¹ We are perhaps accustomed to associate the idea of *brahmacharya* specially with Brāhmaṇa boys or youths, living in the house of a religious teacher, studying the scriptures, and observing chastity. But the Buddhists recognized a *brahmacharya*, practised in solitude, of adult members of their order. The term is found freely in at any rate the Suttanipāṭa, where Professor Fausbøll has translated it sometimes by "juvenile chastity", sometimes by "chastity, a chaste life", but usually by "a religious life". And for a very clear definition of the sense in which it was used by the Buddhists, showing exactly what it connoted to them, I may cite a passage at the end (text, p. 15) of another division of the same work, the Kasibhāradvājasutta, quoting the words of Professor Fausbøll's translation in SBE, 10. 14 f. :—"Then the Brāhmaṇa Kasibhāradvāja [a new convert just made by Buddha] received the pabbajjā from Bhagavat, and he received also the upasampadā; and the venerable Bhāradvāja having lately received the upasampadā, leading a solitary, retired, strenuous, ardent, energetic life, lived after having in a short time in this existence by his own understanding ascertained and possessed himself of that highest perfection of a religious life [*brahmachariya-pariyōsānam*] for the sake of which men of good family rightly wander away from their houses to a houseless state. 'Birth had been destroyed, a religious life had been led [*vusitam brahmachariyam*], what was to be done had been done, there was nothing else (to be done) for this existence,' so he perceived, and the venerable Bhāradvāja became one of the arahats (saints)."

to spend their remaining days in religious retirement: see, for instance, this Journal, 1909. 983 f., where I have cited the historical case of the great Western Ganga prince Nalambāntaka-Mārasimha, and the traditional literary instance of Milinda, Menander.¹ And we have also the indication which is given by the existence of the preamble to the Mysore texts of our record. As I have said before now, why do we find this preamble attached to those texts, and not to the texts which we have from Northern India?: and why does it run in the name, not of Aśoka, but of the officials at Suvarṇagiri? Because, in communicating the pronouncement to a foreign power, a formality had to be observed which was not necessary in publishing it in the Maurya territory; and because Aśoka was not the reigning king at the time. In all the circumstances, it is surely clear that Aśoka ended his career by abdicating and passing into religious retirement, and that he was in seclusion, if not already dead, when this address was published.

Finally:—Why was Aśoka's address delivered on a particular night, the 256th? The answer is plain. He was anointed to the sovereignty about seven months after the end of the year 218 after the death of Buddha.² He reigned for 37 years. That takes us on to about seven months after the end of the year 255. Then, apparently having installed and anointed his grandson Daśaratha in his place,³ he abdicated and passed into religious retirement. And the 256 days during which he lived in

¹ For another literary instance, that of the kings of Allakappa and Vethadīpa, see Buddhaghōsha in the place mentioned by me in this Journal, 1906. 899, note 2. So also Bhaddiya, a king of the Sakya in the time of Buddha, renounced the world: Vinayapitaka, Chullavagga, 7. 1. 3, 4. From Jain literature we may note the statements about Saṃjaya and various other rulers: SBE, 45. 85–7. The literary instances are, no doubt, in many cases imaginative: but they help to prove the prevalence of the custom.

² See my table in this Journal, 1909. 27.

³ See this Journal, 1908. 485, 497.

retirement carry us well on to after the end of the year 256. The agreement in the figures is no accidental coincidence. It is one the possibility of which was foreseen from not long before the time when it might happen, but which could only occur in a certain happy contingency. And we can well realize the eagerness and anxiety with which the event was awaited as the days passed, the time for it drew nigh, and the prospect of its happening increased. The address was delivered by the royal recluse to members of the Order gathered round him in quiet on the 256th night of his withdrawal from the world, because, by living through that night, he was completing in his retirement one day for each complete year that had elapsed since the death of the founder of the faith the permanence of which he sought to ensure.

In short, so far from the position being that the number 256 does not contain even the indication of a date, it expressly dates the record in a most interesting and ingenious manner. My point still stands: practically, though not in actual words, the record is dated 256 years after the death of Buddha. And my case, stated on pp. 1302-3 above, is made good.

J. F. FLEET.

A THIRD NOTE ON THE RUPNATH EDICT

The *Journal Asiatique* for May-June, 1910, contains an article by Dr. Thomas, on the date portion of the Rūpnāth and cognate edicts of Aśōka (pp. 507-22), which solves in a very ingenious and convincing manner the much-debated question of the enigmatical number "256". None of the scholars who hitherto dealt with this problem had recognized, as Dr. Thomas has done now, that the key is supplied by the Sahasrām text. In the expression