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ART. XIV.—*Asoka and the Buddha - relics.* By Professor
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OUR oldest authority, the Mahā-parinibbāna Suttanta, which can be dated approximately in the fifth century B.C.,¹ states that after the cremation of the Buddha's body at Kusinārā, the fragments that remained were divided into eight portions. These eight portions were allotted as follows :—

1. To Ajātasattu, king of Magadha.
2. To the Licchavis of Vesālī.
3. To the Sakyas of Kapilavastu.
4. To the Bulis of Allakappa.
5. To the Koliyas of Rāmagāma.
6. To the brahmin of Veṭhadīpa.
7. To the Mallas of Pāvā.
8. To the Mallas of Kusinārā.

¹ That is substantially, as to not only ideas, but words. There was dotting of *i*'s and crossing of *t*'s afterwards. It was naturally when they came to write these documents that the regulation of orthography and dialect arose. At the time when the Suttanta was first put together out of older material, it was arranged for recitation, not for reading, and writing was used only for notes. See the Introduction to my "Dialogues of the Buddha," vol. i.

Droṇa, the brahmin who made the division, received the vessel in which the body had been cremated. And the Moriyas of Pippalivana, whose embassy claiming a share of the relics only arrived after the division had been made, received the ashes of the funeral pyre.

Of the above, all except the Sakyas and the two brahmins based their claim to a share on the fact that they also, like the deceased teacher, were Kshatriyas. The brahmin of Vethādīpa claimed his because he was a brahmin; and the Sakyas claimed theirs on the ground of their relationship. All ten promised to put up a cairn over their portion, and to establish a festival in its honour.

Of these ten cairns, or stūpas, only one has been discovered—that of the Sakyas. The careful excavation of Mr. Peppé makes it certain that this stūpa had never been opened until he opened it. The inscription on the casket states that “This deposit of the remains of the Exalted One is that of the Sakyas, the brethren of the Illustrious One.” It behoves those who would maintain that it is not, to advance some explanation of the facts showing how they are consistent with any other theory. We are bound in these matters to accept, as a working hypothesis, the most reasonable of various possibilities. The hypothesis of forgery is in this case simply unthinkable. And we are fairly entitled to ask: “If this stūpa and these remains are not what they purport to be, then what are they?” As it stands the inscription, short as it is, is worded in just the manner most consistent with the details given in the Suttanta. And it advances the very same claim (to relationship) which the Sakyas alone are stated in the Suttanta to have advanced. It does not throw much light on the question to attribute these coincidences to mere chance, and so far no one has ventured to put forward any explanation except the simple one that the stūpa is the Sakya tope.

Though the sceptics—only sceptics, no doubt, because they think it is too good to be true—have not been able to advance any other explanation, they might have brought

forward an objection which has so far escaped notice. It is alleged, namely, in quite a number of Indian books, that Asoka broke open all the eight stūpas except one, and took the relics away. This is a remarkable statement. That the great Buddhist emperor should have done this is just as unlikely as that his counterpart, Constantine the Great, should have rifled, even with the best intentions, the tombs most sacred in the eyes of Christians. The legend deserves, therefore, investigation, quite apart from its reference to the Sakya tope. And in looking further into the matter I have come across some curious points which will probably be interesting to the readers of this Journal.

The legend might be given in my own words, filling out the older versions of it by details drawn from the later ones. We might thus obtain an easy narrative, with literary unity and logical sequence. But we should at the same time lose all historical accuracy. We should only have a new version—one that had not been current anywhere, at any time, among Buddhists in India. The only right method is to adhere strictly to the historical sequence, taking each account in order of time, and letting it speak for itself.

Now it is curious that there is no mention of the breaking open of stūpas in any one of the twenty-nine canonical Buddhist writings, though they include documents of all ages from the time of the Buddha down to the time of Asoka. Nor, with one doubtful exception, is such an act referred to in any book which is good evidence for the time before Asoka. But in the canonical books there is frequent reference to the man who breaks up the Order, the schismatic, the *saṅgha-bhedako*. And in the passages in later books, which enlarge on this thesis, we find an addition—side by side with the *saṅgha-bhedako* is mentioned the *stūpa-bhedako*, the man who breaks open the stūpas. The oldest of the passages is the exception referred to. It is in the Mahāvastu, certainly the oldest Buddhist Sanskrit text as yet edited, and most probably in its oldest portions older than Asoka. Whether this isolated verse

belongs to the oldest portions of the work is doubtful. It says (i, 101) :

Saṅghañ ca te na bhindanti na ca te stūpa-bhedakā
Na te Tathāgate cittaṃ dūṣayanti kathaṇcana.

We find these gentlemen, therefore—the violators of tombs, tomb-riders—first mentioned in a way that may or may not, and probably does not, refer to Asoka. In the same connection, that is with the schismatics, they are also mentioned in the *Netti Pakaraṇa*, p. 93. The editor of this work, Professor Edmond Hardy, dates it about, or shortly after, the beginning of our era. And he was the first to call attention to the mention in these passages of the ‘tomb-violators’ as a test of age.

The next passage will seem more to the point, inasmuch as it mentions both Asoka and the Eight Topes. It is in the *Asokāvadāna*, a long legend, or historical romance, about Asoka and his doings, included in the collection of stories called the *Divyāvadāna*. These stories are by different authors, and of different dates. The particular one in question mentions kings of the Sunga dynasty, and cannot therefore be much older than the Christian era.¹ The passage is printed at p. 380 of Professor Cowell and Mr. Neil’s edition. The paragraph is unfortunately very corrupt and obscure; but the sense of those clauses most important for our present purpose is clear enough. It begins, in strange fashion, to say, *à propos* of nothing :—

“Then the King [Asoka], saying, ‘I will distribute the relics of the Exalted One,’ marched with an armed force in fourfold array, opened the Droṇa Stūpa put up by Ajātasattu, and took the relics.”

There must be something wrong here. Ajātasattu’s stūpa was at Rājagaha, a few miles from Asoka’s capital. The Droṇa Stūpa, the one put up over the vessel, was also quite

¹ See J.P.T.S., 1899, p. 89.

close by.¹ Whichever is the one referred to, it was easily accessible, and the time given was one of profound peace. Asoka's object in distributing the relics, in the countless stūpas he himself was about to build, is represented as being highly approved of by the leaders of the Buddhist order. What, then, was the mighty force to do?

Then the expression *Droṇa Stūpa* is remarkable. What is probably meant is a stūpa over the bushel (*droṇa*) of fragments (from the pyre) supposed to have been Ajātasattu's share. But it is extremely forced to call this a *Droṇa Stūpa*; and Ajātasattu's stūpa is nowhere else so called. Burnouf thinks² this is probably a confusion between the name of the measure and the name of the brahmin, *Droṇa*, who made the division. The story goes on:

"Having given back the relics, putting them distributively in the place [or the places] whence they had been taken, he restored the stūpa. He did the same to the second, and so on till he had taken the seventh bushel [*droṇa*];³ and restoring the stūpas, he then went on to Rāmagāma."

Here again the story-teller must have misunderstood some phrase in the tradition (probably in some Prakrit or other) which he is reproducing. Asoka did not want to get these relics in order to put them back into the place, or places, they had come from. He wanted, according to the *Divyāvadāna* itself, to put them in his own stūpas. We shall see below a possible explanation. The story goes on:—

"Then the king was led down by the Nāgas into their abode, and was given to understand that they would pay worship [*pūjā*] to it [that is, to the stūpa or the portion of relics] there. As soon as that had been grasped by the king, then the king was led up again by the Nāgas from their abode."

¹ See Yuan Tshang, chap. vii; Beal, ii, 65.

² Introduction, etc., p. 372.

³ *Bhaktimato* is omitted. The discussion of its meaning, irrelevant to the question in hand, is here unnecessary. It is of value for the very important history of *bhakti* in India.

Their abode, of course, was under the sacred pool at Rāmagāma, the stūpa being on the land above. After stating how Asoka then built 84,000 stūpas (in one day!) and distributed the relics among them, the episode closes with the statement that this was the reason why his name was changed from Caṇḍāsoka to Dharmāsoka. Burnouf adds to the confusion with which this part of the story is told through translating (throughout) *dharmarājikā* by 'edicts of the law.' It evidently is an epithet of the stūpas. Can we gather from this any hint as to a possible origin of this extraordinary legend?

There is namely a very ancient traditional statistical statement—so ancient that it is already found in the Thera Gāthā (verse 1022) among the verses attributed to Ānanda—that the number of the sections of the Dhamma (here meaning apparently the Four Nikāyas) was 84,000, of which 82,000 were attributed to the master and 2,000 to a disciple.

Dvāsīti Buddhato gaṇhiṃ dve sahaṣṣāni bhikkhuto
Caturāsīti sahaṣṣāni ye 'me dhammā pavattino.¹

Could it have happened that after the knowledge of the real contents of the Asoka Edicts had passed away, and only the memory of such edicts having been published remained alive, they were supposed to contain or to record the 84,000 traditional sections of the Dhamma? And then that by some confusion, such as that made by Burnouf, between epithets applicable equally to stūpas and 'edicts of the law,' the edicts grew into stūpas? We cannot tell without other and earlier documents. But this we know, that the funniest mistakes have occurred through the telling in one dialect of traditions received in another; and that the oldest form of the legend of Asoka's stūpas is in so late a work that such a transformation had had ample time in which to be brought gradually about.

Such a solution of the mystery how this amazing proposition could have become matter of belief is confirmed

¹ Quoted Sumangala, i, 24.

by our next authority, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (vi, 94–vii, 18), which says distinctly that the number of Asoka's buildings was determined by the number of the sections of the Dhamma. But the legend here is quite different. There is no mention of breaking open the eight old stūpas. The 84,000 vihāras—they are no longer stūpas—are not built in one day; they take three years to build. It is the dedication festival of each of them that takes place on the same day, and on that day Asoka sees them all at once, and the festivals being celebrated at each. This was the form of the story as believed at Anurādhapura in the early part of the fourth century A.D.

The next book, in point of date, which mentions Asoka in connection with the eight original stūpas is Fa Hian (ch. xxiii). The passage runs, in Legge's translation, as follows:—

“When King Asoka came forth into the world he wished to destroy the Eight Topes, and to build instead of them 84,000 topes. After he had thrown down the seven others he wished next to destroy this tope (at Rāmagāma). But then the dragon¹ showed itself, and took the king into his palace. And when he had seen all the things provided for offerings, it said to him: ‘If you are able with your offerings to exceed these, you can destroy the tope, and take it² all away. I will not contend with you.’ The king, knowing that such offerings were not to be had anywhere in the world, thereupon returned.

“Afterwards the ground all about became overgrown with vegetation; and there was nobody to sweep and sprinkle about the tope. But a herd of elephants came regularly, which brought water with their trunks to water the ground, and various kinds of flowers and incense which they presented at the tope.”

¹ Chinese-English for Nāga.

² “It” must be wrong. What he wanted to take away was the relics. Beal translates, “Let me take *you* out,” a more likely rendering, and one that would harmonize with the *Divyāvadāna* legend as given above.

A group of elephants behaving precisely in this way is sculptured on one of the bas-reliefs in the Bharhut Tope (plates xv and xxx in Cunningham).

The pilgrim goes on to say that in recent times a devotee, seeing this, had taken possession of the deserted site.

This will probably represent the tradition at the place itself about 400 A.D., or a few years earlier. For Fa Hian left China in 399 A.D., and when he heard this tale at Rāmagāma it was no doubt already current there. It is good evidence of Rāmagāma having been very early deserted. Incidentally, its distance east of the Lumbinī pillar is given as five yojanas, say thirty-eight miles.

Only twenty or thirty years later is Buddhaghosa's version of the story in the introduction to the *Samanta Pāsādikā*, his commentary on the Vinaya, in the portion edited for us by Professor Oldenberg.¹ The story is well told, but we need not repeat it, as it reproduces the *Dīpavaṃsa* version. In both versions the story is used merely as an explanation of the way in which Asoka's son, Mahinda, came to enter the Order. For it is on seeing the glory of the 84,000 festivals that Asoka boasts of his gift. But he is told that the real benefactor is one who gives his son to the Order; and then he, too, has both his son and his daughter initiated. All this is said to have happened after the ninth year of Asoka's reign had expired. We see there is nothing at all in this version about the original eight stūpas, or rather seven of them, having been broken open.

But Buddhaghosa has another account in the *Sumangala Vilāsinī*, a little later than the last, and in that he introduces an entirely new factor. Here it is not Asoka, but Ajātasattu who gets the relics out of all the eight stūpas (except that at Rāmagāma, which is protected by the Nāgas). This he does (twenty years after the Buddha's death, according to Bigandet, ii, 97) on the advice of Mahā-kassapa, who was afraid—it is not stated why—for their safety. The king agrees to build a shrine for them, but says it is not his

¹ Oldenberg's *Vinaya*, iii, 304 foll.

business to get relics. The therā then brings them all, and the king buries them in a wonderful subterranean chamber. In the construction of this underground shrine Sakka, the king of the gods, or rather Vissakamma, on his order, assists. And it is there that Asoka, after breaking into all the seven stūpas in vain (the Nāgas protecting the eighth), finds the relics.¹ These he takes, and restoring the place where he had found them, establishes them in his own 84,000, not stūpas, but vihāras. It is incidentally mentioned that Rājagaha is 25 yojanas, say 190 miles, from Kusinārā.²

The text of this part of the Sumangala has not yet been published. It will appear in the forthcoming edition for the Pali Text Society; and meanwhile an English version of a very late Burmese adaptation of the Pali can be consulted in Bigandet, ii, 131 foll. The legend is here very well and clearly told, and suggests possible explanations of several of the obscurities and inconsistencies in the oldest version in the Divyāvadāna.

The Mahāvamsa (chap. v), which is again a very little later, gives the episode of the 84,000 vihāras on the same lines as the Dipavamsa, omitting all reference to the breaking open of the stūpas. But it agrees with the Divyāvadāna in stating (p. 35 of Turnour's edition) that this building of the 84,000 vihāras was the reason why the king's name was changed from Asoka³ to Dhammasoka.

The form of the legend, as thus given in almost identical terms by the Dipavamsa and the Mahāvamsa, is no doubt derived by both from the older Mahāvamsa, in Sinhalese, then handed down in the Mahā Vihāra at Anurādhapura, and now lost.

About the same age (412–454 A.D.) is the Chinese work

¹ Is it possible that this idea can lie behind the enigmatic expressions given above, p. 401, from the Divyāvadāna?

² This harmonizes with the distances given in the Jātaka. See my "Buddhist Birth Stories," p. 87.

³ So the text. We ought perhaps to read Caṇḍāsoka.

which Mr. Beal translated in vol. xix of the "Sacred Books of the East," and which he calls a translation of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddha-Carita*. Were this so, it would be of the first importance for our point. But it is nothing of the kind. There are resemblances, just as there would be if two Christian poets had, in different times and countries, turned the Gospels into rhyme with poetical embellishments. There are still closer resemblances, as if a later poet had borrowed phrases and figures from a previous writer. But there are greater differences. Taking the first chapter as a specimen, the Chinese has 126, the Sanskrit 94 verses. Of these, only about 40 express the same thought, and this is often merely a thought similar because derived from the same old tradition. More than half the verses in the Sanskrit have no corresponding verse in the Chinese. More than two-thirds of the verses in the Chinese have no corresponding verse in the Sanskrit. And even when the verses do, in the main, correspond, there are constant differences in the details and in the wording. It is uncritical, even absurd, to call this a translation.

The blunder of dating the *Lalita Vistara* in the first century on the ground of a 'translation' into Chinese of that date, rests on a similar misleading use of the word. We know of no such translation in the exact and critical sense. Twenty years ago (Hibbert Lectures, 198 foll.) I called attention to this. But Foucaux's conclusion is still sometimes repeated as though it were valid. We must seek for the date of the *Lalita Vistara* on other and better grounds. Beal's so-called *Dhammapada* is also a quite different and much later work than the canonical book of which he calls it a version. See the detailed comparative tables *ibid.*, p. 202. Mr. Rockhill, "Life of Buddha," p. 222, says that Beal's Chinese text "could not have been made from the same original" as the Tibetan version of the *Buddha-Carita*.

It was necessary to point this out as the Chinese book has two verses, of interest in the present discussion, which are not in the Sanskrit. If Beal were right we should have

to ascribe them to Aśvaghoṣa.¹ As it is we are in complete ignorance of the real name and author and date of the original of Beal's Chinese book. We must, therefore, take the opinions expressed in the verses referred to as being good evidence only for the date of the Chinese book itself, only noting the fact that they are taken from some Sanskrit work of unknown date. The verses run, in Beal's words :—

“Opening the dāgabas raised by those seven kings to take the Śariras thence, he spread them everywhere, and raised in one day 84,000 towers. (2,297.)

“Only with regard to the eighth pagoda in Rāmagrāma, which the Nāga spirit protected, the king was unable to obtain those relics.” (2,298.)

We see from Yuan Tshang's Travels, Book vi (Beal, ii, 26), that this curious story still survived in the seventh century of our era. It is interesting to notice how the legend had, by that time, become rounded off and filled in. Tshang naturally has nothing of the second Ajātasattu episode. He was never in Ceylon, and we have no evidence that this part of the legend was ever current in North India. But he also drops the absurd detail of the 84,000 stūpas built in one day ; and he fills out the Nāga episode, making a very pretty story of it, turning the Nāga, when he comes out to talk to the king, into a brahmin, and giving much fuller details of the conversation. He mentions also the interesting fact that in his time there was an inscription at the spot “to the above effect.”

Finally, when we come to the Tibetan texts, which are considerably later,² we find an altogether unexpected state of things. We have long abstracts of the account, in the Dulva, of the death and cremation of the Buddha and of the distribution of his relics, from two scholars whose work can be thoroughly relied on, Csoma Körösi³ and

¹ There are six Aśvaghoṣas mentioned in Chinese works quoted by Mr. Suzuki in his translation of the “Awakening of Faith,” p. 7.

² About 850 A.D. : see Rockhill, pp. 218 and 223.

³ “Asiatic Researches,” xx, 309–317.

W. W. Rockhill.¹ According to both these authorities the Tibetan works follow very closely, not any Sanskrit work known to us, but the *Mahā-parinibbāna Suttanta*. Where they deviate from it, it is usually by way of addition ; and of addition, oddly enough, again not from any Sanskrit work, but on the lines of the *Sumangala Vilāsinī*.

However we try to explain this it is equally puzzling. Could they possibly, in Tibet, and at that time (in the ninth century A.D.), have had Pali books, and have understood them? In discussing another point, Mr. Rockhill (p. ix) thinks that the Tibetan author had access to Pali documents. M. Léon Feer has a similar remark ("*Annales*," vol. v, pp. xi, 133), and talks at pp. 133, 139, 143, 221, 224, 229, 408, 414 of a Tibetan text as though it were a translation from a Pali one. And the translations he gives, in support of his proposition, certainly, for the most part, show that the texts are the same.² Strange as it may seem, therefore, it is by no means impossible that in our case also the Tibetan depends on a Pali original, or originals. We have at least good authority for a similar conclusion as to other Tibetan writings. And we now know, thanks to Professor Bendall, that a similar conclusion would be possible in Nepal.³

If, on the other hand, our Tibetan texts are based on Sanskrit originals, the difficulty arises whence, at that date, could the Tibetans have procured Sanskrit books adhering so closely to the ancient standpoint.

Rockhill has not even a word about Asoka ; Csoma Körösi has only a line, added like a note, at the end of the whole narrative, and saying :—

¹ "*Life of Buddha*," pp. 122–148, and especially 141–148.

² M. Léon Feer has not been able always to give volume and page of the originals of these Tibetan texts, often because they had not been edited. It may be useful, therefore, to point out that his

page 145 = *Anguttara*, 5. 108.

„ 222 = *Ang.* 5. 342, *Jat.* 6. 14.

„ 231 = *Ang.* 4. 55 (which gives better readings), *comp.* 2. 61.

„ 293 = *Divy.* 193, *Itiv.* 76.

³ *J.R.A.S.*, 1899, p. 422.

“The King Myā-nān-met (Asoka), residing at Pāṭaliputta, has much increased the number of Chaityas of the seven kinds.”¹

What, then, are the conclusions to be drawn from our little enquiry?

1. That the breaking open of stūpas is not mentioned at all in the most ancient Buddhist literature.

2. That Asoka's doing so is first mentioned in a passage long after his time. This passage is also so curt, self-contradictory, and enigmatic, that we probably have to suppose a confusion arising from difference of dialect. It is of little or no value as evidence that Asoka did actually break open seven of the eight ancient topes.

3. The number of the stūpas he is supposed to have built—84,000—is derived from the traditional number (which is about correct) of the number of sections in the Four Nikāyas, that is, in Buddhist phraseology, in the Dhamma. This suggests a possible origin of the whole of the legend.

4. In any case the eighth, that at Rāmagāma, was untouched. The site of it can be determined within a few miles, as we know, from the passages quoted above, its distance from Rājagaha on the one hand and the Lumbinī pillar on the other; and we have, besides, the details as to distance given by the Chinese pilgrims. There was an inscription there, presumably put up by Asoka's orders. It will be most interesting to see if it lends support to, or could have given rise to, the legend.

5. The greatest circumspection must be used in dating any Indian work by the date of an alleged translation into Chinese. Even when a Chinese book is said to have the same title, and even similar chapter-titles, as a Sanskrit or Pali one, it does not follow it is really the same.

6. The Indian pandits who assisted in the ninth century in the translation of Indian books into Tibetan knew not only classical Sanskrit as well as Buddhist Sanskrit, but also Pali. It would be a great service if Tibetan scholars would

¹ “Asiatic Researches,” xx, 317.

ascertain exactly which Pali MSS. they had. They certainly had the Paritta; and certain Suttantas from, if not the whole of, the Dīgha; and certain Suttas from, if not the whole of, the Anguttara and the Saṃyutta. These books must have been handed down all the time in India; for we know enough of the journey of the emissaries from Tibet to be certain they did not go to Ceylon.

But we must stop. We are here brought face to face with some of the most debated of those larger questions on the solution of which the solution of the problem of the history of Indian thought and literature must ultimately depend. We can only hope in an enquiry like the present to lay one or two very unpolished stones on the foundation of the Dhamma Pāsāda of history, in which the scholars of a future generation will, we hope, have the good fortune to dwell.