

South Asia's First Books

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First Books
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Outline

Problems, Summary, Preliminaries

Example one: Patañjali's *Great Commentary*

Example two: The *Perfection of Wisdom*

Example three: *Saṅgharakṣa's Compilation*

First books in South Asia: Intersecting Problems

- ▶ Manuscript literacy
- ▶ Authorship
- ▶ Textual traditions and institutions

Quick summary

Writing was known in South Asia by **at least** the 3rd century BCE, when we have dozens of inscriptions set up by Aśoka.

(In some parts it was definitely known earlier.)

right:

Aśokan inscription from Amarāvati



Quick summary

But we don't have good evidence for the spread of manuscript literacy, or the use of manuscripts for literary or religious texts, until some time afterwards, probably the 1st c. BCE.

Also: **all** of the vocabulary for manuscripts and writing is borrowed from neighboring languages, either Iranian (*pustaka* “manuscript,” *lipi* “script”) or Dravidian (*masi* “ink”); see Falk (2010).

Quick summary

There are, however, highly developed **textual traditions** by this point, all of which operate on the basis of memory:

- ▶ The **Vedic tradition**: groups of texts, transmitted with extremely high fidelity, by **families** of Brahmins (composed from about 1250 to 350 BCE)
- ▶ The **Jain** and **Buddhist traditions**: groups of texts, transmitted with rather less fidelity, by the monastic community (composed from about 450 to 350 BCE)

Theoretical preliminaries: the scale of context

Two notions of context:

Context₁ or just **context**: that which is necessary to make sense of a **text**

- ▶ could be minimal (linguistic-semantic-pragmatic)
- ▶ could be maximal (cultural, “protocols of reading”)

(This makes **context** complementary to the concept of **text**.)

Contrast context₂ or **situation**: the spatiotemporal parameters in which an encounter with the text takes place (from Konrad Ehlich)

Theoretical preliminaries: the scale of context

There is a **scale** of texts, from those that require a great deal of context, to those that require little.

Alternatively: those that require little context **embed** large parts of their context with themselves.

Books are “prototypically” things that people can just pick up and read, but if they demand a lot of context, their readers are turned back onto other things (institutions for example) for help.

Theoretical preliminaries: the scale of institutions

Because of the strength of existing textual traditions in India, the possibility of “preventive censure” is great:

Thus the moment of birth of a literary work is reckoned from the point of its being set down on paper by its author; and, by analogy, the point at which an oral work is first objectivized, i.e., uttered by its creator, is regarded as the moment of its birth—when in reality the work becomes folkloric fact only at the moment of its acceptance by the community.

Jakobson and Bogatyrev (1966 [1929])

Theoretical preliminaries: the scale of institutions

At the time of the “first books,” there was no “reading public” as such.

Instead, the “first books” have an essentially ambivalent relationship to institutions:

- ▶ they provide the skills (literacy) and the networks by which books might spread
- ▶ but they can also exercise “preventive censure”
- ▶ in particular, there was something like a taboo (I call it **graphophobia**) on the use of **manuscripts**

Theoretical preliminaries: overcoming graphophobia

Writing was (and still is) considered an **imperfect**, **lossy**, and **risky** strategy for preserving teachings compared to robust oral traditions (cf. Plato).

The story that Al-Biruni tells us in the 11th century CE is that a Brahmin named Vasukra in the 9th century or so was the first person to write the Vedas down (at least the first person to **admit** that he had done so), after at least **two thousand years** of oral transmission.

Theoretical preliminaries: overcoming graphophobia

In renunciant traditions (Buddhism and Jainism), there is the additional fact that books should count as **possessions**, which monks and nuns are not supposed to have.

And Jain monks, typically, thought that violence was involved in the use of manuscripts, and (at first) prohibited their use for that reasons.

Both of these traditions did a 180-degree turn and became **graphophilic** by the end of the 1st millennium of the common era, however.

An emic account?

Unlike Professor **Most**, I can't tell you what people in traditional India considered to be the “first book”:

- ▶ there is no widely-accepted narrative
- ▶ as far as I know, there is no narrative whatsoever
- ▶ some people preferred to ignore writing altogether and dismiss it as fundamentally unimportant (especially in the Brahmanical tradition)
- ▶ most people acted as if they thought writing was **always there**

śāntyai vō 'stu kapāladāma jagatām patyur yadīyām lipim
kvāpi kvāpi gaṇāḥ paṭhanti padaśō nāti prasiddhākṣarām
viśvaṁ srakṣyati vakṣyati kṣitim apām īśiṣyatē śiṣyatē
nāgai rāgiṣu raṁsyatē 'tsyati jagan nirvākṣyati dyām iti

Quoted in some 11th-century works on poetics, maybe by the poet
Cittapa (11th century, central India)

May the garland of skulls
belonging to the lord of the worlds
give you peace.
His attendants read out its inscriptions,
stumbling here and there over its words,
not totally familiar with their letters:

“He will create the universe.”

“He will sustain the world.”

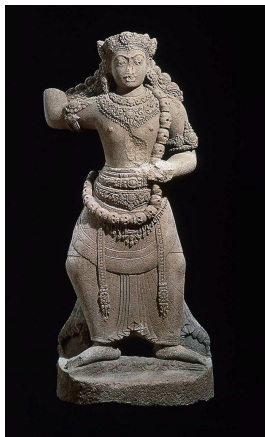
“He will rule over the waters.”

“He will be consumed by snakes.”

“He will be enjoyed among lovers.”

“He will consume the world.”

“He will reign over heaven.”



Mahākāla (Śiva) from East Java, 14th century

MFA Boston

Three case studies

1. *Great Commentary (Mahābhāṣya)* on Sanskrit grammar by Patañjali (ca. 1st c. BCE)
 - ▶ hybrid oral/written text
 - ▶ graphophobic
 - ▶ deliberately linked to institutions
 - ▶ single author (commentator/compiler)
2. *Perfection of Wisdom* (ca. 2nd/1st c. BCE)
 - ▶ graphophilic
 - ▶ deliberately independent of institutions
 - ▶ massive textual variation
 - ▶ no author
3. *Saṅgharakṣa's Compilation* (ca. 2nd c. CE)
 - ▶ single author (compiler/poet)
 - ▶ part of a rapidly-changing institution

Some gibberish

Say you encounter this in a book or manuscript, which you have reason to believe is in Sanskrit:

cuṭū

This is one rule (sūtra) of Pāṇini's *Eight Chapters* (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*), the foundational work of Sanskrit grammar, composed in Sanskrit, but this rule is gibberish.

Some gibberish

This is how these two syllables are translated in S. M. Katre's translation:

[The t.t. IT 2] denotes the [initial 5] palatal and retroflex stops (1.1.69 cU, ʈU) [occurring in the affixes 6 when first introduced in grammatical instruction 2].

Some gibberish

This is to make the point that the *Eight Chapters* are an extreme case of what is in fact rather typical for early Indian texts: even if you were to encounter them in written form, you would have absolutely no idea how to understand them without a *person* to guide you.

The technical/philosophical *sūtra* (in Sanskrit) and the exegetical *nijjutti* (in Prakrit) are like this.

Where and when does the text we're looking at come from? What about the explanation of it?

The *Great Commentary*

We have **no old manuscripts** of these texts. We rely on the later tradition for **everything**.

One representative of that tradition is the fifth-century CE philosopher **Bhartr̥hari**. He seems to say that the study of Pāṇini's grammar was “revived” in the generations before him after some time in which it had disappeared. Its revival was apparently based on manuscripts preserved “in the South.”

This story, based on *Vākyapadīya* 2.476–481, is extremely controversial among scholars.

The *Great Commentary*

Like I said, if you found a manuscript of the *Eight Chapters* on its own, you would never understand it.

The manuscripts that Bharṭṛhari refers to (evidently) are those of Patañjali's *Great Commentary* (*Mahābhāṣya*), on which he wrote a commentary.

Patañjali's *Great Commentary* is (almost) the written equivalent of having a teacher explain Pāṇini's system to you rule-by-rule.

What is included and what isn't?

- ▶ Pāṇini's rules are **not there** (it's presupposed that the student will have already memorized them, without, of course, understanding them);
- ▶ but there are additions and corrections, phrased very much like Pāṇini's rules, attributed to a predecessor of Patañjali named Kātyāyana
- ▶ there is Patañjali's own critical discussion of these additions and corrections
- ▶ there are many examples, maybe traditional, maybe thought up by Patañjali himself
- ▶ there is a good sprinkling of citations from other works, including of course the Veda, other early works of grammar, epic (*Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*), verses of unknown provenance called *bhrāja*, and verses from literary works

The *Great Commentary*

Working backwards, we can (kind of) date the *Great Commentary* to around the 1st century BCE, with predecessors like Kātyāyana, Vyāḍi, Vājapyāyana etc. in the 2nd or maybe even 3rd century BCE.

Pāṇini's *Eight Chapters* itself probably dates from 300–250 BCE.

Again, this is all really controversial, because we have no hard evidence.

So: are these works oral or written?

Oral or written?

Most people would insist on one or the other, but it's clear that they are *hybrid* works.

Pāṇini knew about writing, and might have used it to compose and store the *Eight Chapters*, but he also intended his rules to be memorized and recited orally.

There are features of the *Eight Chapters* which were probably incapable of being represented in the kind of writing available to Pāṇini at the time (nasalization, extra-long vowels, pitch accents, etc.).

Oral or written?

Sanskrit grammar was studied in a largely oral/memorial setting, but manuscripts must have been used on occasion, and texts like the *Great Commentary* are and were probably conceived of as a written record of oral teaching (it is divided up into “daily lessons,” *āhnikas*).

Oral or written?

The **text** becomes a text when it is commented upon (Assmann 2006 [2000]: 104).

The commentary supplies (some of) the **context** needed for understanding the text.

The **book** is the written artefact of this process.

Oral or written?

By encoding (textualizing) the commentary, the book allows the text to be understood **even if** the tradition of oral study and teaching has been broken, as was apparently the case of the *Great Commentary*.

Graphophobia

The *Great Commentary* itself (unlike Pāṇini's *Eight Chapters*) makes no reference to writing or manuscripts, though, and Patañjali imagines Pāṇini reciting the text like a Vedic priest recites a Vedic hymn — with a ritual bundle of grass, not a manuscript, in his hand.

This is a symptom of **graphophobia**.

By the way

Pāṇini's *Eight Chapters* is the total opposite of the “short and mobile” kind of text we’ve heard of in this workshop so far, in that if any of the rules are **dropped** or **put in a different order**, the system will not work at all.

The *Perfection of Wisdom*

One of the earliest manuscripts from South Asia is a first-century CE birch-bark manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*) in the Gāndhārī language.



From Falk and Karashima (2012)

The *Perfection of Wisdom*

Actually, no two *Perfection of Wisdom* texts are exactly the same. The one translated by Lōkakṣēma into Chinese (later 2nd century CE) was more elaborate.

Contrast this with the traditional texts of the Buddhist community, which have rather less variation across Chinese, Sanskrit, Gandhari, and Pali versions.

The *Perfection of Wisdom*

This difference is certainly linked to the **written character** of the *Perfection of Wisdom*, which is (in contrast to many Buddhist texts and all Brahminical texts) perfectly evident in the text itself.

In fact almost all references to the transmission of the teaching in the Gāndhārī version refer to *giving written manuscripts* to other people, not oral instruction.

The *Perfection of Wisdom*

[The merit of one who makes people practice Buddhism] is inferior to that of a good man or a good woman who copies the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*yo prañaparamidaḥ postao*), gives its scriptural rolls to other people (*pareṣu likhaṇa dasatī*), makes them copy it or recites it for them.

Falk (2013: 107), slightly modified
(the formula text is repeated throughout chapter 5)

Escaping preventive censure

[T]he early Mahāyāna texts owe their survival to the fact that they were written down; any earlier texts which deviated from or criticized the canonical norms [...] could not survive because they were not included among the texts which the Saṅgha [the monastic community] preserved orally.

Gombrich (1988: 29)

Escaping preventive censorship

A single manuscript in a monastic library, studied by no one, could be picked up and read, even translated, by a curious browser or visiting scholars.

Gombrich (1988: 41)

“Early Mahāyāna cult of the book”

As identified by Schopen (1975) (also 2010) in a formula found in several texts:

And, sons of good family, on which spot of earth this discourse on dharma would be spoken or revealed or explained or **written** (*likhyēta*) or thought of or declared or recited or **where it would stand in the form of a book** (*pustakagatō vā tiṣṭhēt*) [...] on that spot of earth [...] a caitya is to be made.

Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra (Schopen 1975: 166)

Notional orality

The *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, despite references to their own written character, still present themselves as “heard” discourses from the Buddha and his disciplines.

Relatedly, they remain **anonymous**, since their authority depends on the conceit that they merely report a conversation that happened between the Buddha and his disciplines.

The turn toward writing

In fact I would see this as part of an **explosion** of manuscript literacy around the beginning of the common era, based on:

- ▶ the borrowing of concepts and techniques related to writing from Iranian migrants
- ▶ the commercial production of palm-leaf manuscripts from South India
- ▶ the economic integration of the South with the North
- ▶ the spread of literacy among religious professionals, merchants, and state officials
- ▶ the emergence of a secular literary culture

The turn toward writing

A much-discussed verse in Pali histories of Sri Lanka (dating from the 5th century CE) states that the canonical texts and commentaries of the Buddhist tradition were “put into manuscript form” in the reign of Vaṭṭhagāmaṇī (20s BCE).

*piṭakattayapāliṇ ca tassā aṭṭhakatham pi ca ~
mukhapāṭhēna ānēsum pubbē bhikkhu mahāmati ~
hāniṃ disvāna sattānaṃ tadā bhikkhu samāgatā ~
ciraṭṭhitatthaṃ dhammassa potthakēsu likhāpayum ~~*

Dīpavaṃsa 20.20–21 (Oldenberg 1879: 103)

The “Sarasvatī Movement”

(The term is from Jain 1964: 100–119)



Inscribed figure of Sarasvatī from
Mathurā

The “Sarasvatī Movement”

The inscription (Bühler 1892: 391–392) is one of several dozens that mention Jain monks and nuns at Mathurā, dating to the 2nd century CE. In this case, the donor is a smith named Gōva, but he was urged to make the donation by a monk named **Vācaka Āryadēva**. The word *vācaka* means “reciter”: would he have used manuscripts for this purpose?

It must be pointed out that **all of the inscriptions** are dated to the reign of the Kuṣāṇa kings, mostly Kaniṣka and Huviṣka (127 to about 195).

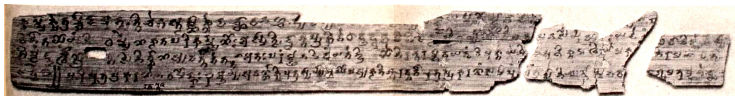
The appearance of single-author texts

Curiously, by the time of the third Kuṣāṇa king, **Kaniṣka** (r. 127–149), we know of a couple of authors (all **Buddhists**) who composed **real books**.

The appearance of single-author texts

These include:

- ▶ **Aśvaghōṣa**, the most famous, because he wrote two long narrative poems (*mahākāvyas*) about the Buddha, and both survive (at least in part) in Sanskrit (also Chinese)
 - ▶ said to have been a contemporary of Kaniṣka
- ▶ **Mātrcēṭa**, the author of several hymns, parts of which survive in Sanskrit (also Tibetan), and a “letter to Kaniṣka” (only Tibetan survives)
 - ▶ said to have declined an invitation to appear before Kaniṣka on account of his old age, so probably a bit older than Aśvaghōṣa



sarvē ॐ || śāriputraprakaraṇē navamō ṅkaḥ 9
°āryyasuvarṇṇākṣiputrasyāryyāśvaghōṣasya kṛtiś
śāradvatīputrapparakaraṇaṁ samāptaṁ [sa]māptāni
cāṅkāni nava + ? gyaṁ anu[ṣṭubhē] ccha ?

The ninth act in the *Play about Śāriputra*. The *Play about Śāradvatīputra*, a work of the Ārya Āśvaghōṣa, son of Āryasuvarṇākṣi, is completed.
... [units of length] are completed.

From an amazing 2nd/3rd century manuscript found in Xinjiang
(Lüders 1911).

Saṅgharakṣa

Saṅgharakṣa is said, in a Chinese translator's preface, to have been a native of Surāṣṭra (Western India) who, in his wanderings, came to Gandhāra (the modern Peshawar region) during the reign of Kaniṣka. He should therefore have been a contemporary of Aśvaghōṣa. I will focus on him, just because there is so little work on him, and because his works only survive in Chinese.

- ▶ *Yōgācārabhūmi* (T. 607 道地經, partly translated by Ān Shìgāo [安世高], 148–180 CE): a Buddhist meditation manual (Demiéville 1951)
- ▶ *Saṅgharakṣa-samuccaya* or *-saṅgraha* (T. 194 僧伽羅剎所集經, translated by Zhú Fò Niàn 竺佛念 and others in 385 CE): *Saṅgharakṣa's Compilation*

Saṅgharakṣa's Compilation

- ▶ The first (?) in a series of works that “excerpted” from the Buddhist *sūtras* to produce a poetic text (others include Aśvaghōṣa's *Adornment of the Sūtras* [*Sūtrālaṅkāra*], the existence of which is still debated, and Kumāralāta's *Garland of Examples* [*Drṣṭāntapañktī*])
- ▶ Combines prose and verse (prose for narration, and verse almost exclusively for reported speech)
- ▶ Largely focuses on the life of the Buddha, but appears to be rather unique

The story of Aśōka

The end narrates a version of the story of Aśōka (阿儻). He was told in a dream to “distribute the relics” of the Buddha.

聞彼城裏有金券書，已見金券有其形像，前世以土惠施見彼相, [...]

He had heard that there was a gold-plate inscription in that city [Rājagṛha], and that they were known to contain a reference to him making a gift of earth in a previous life.

The story of Aśōka

Sure enough, he finds the gold-plate inscription in a “copper box” (銅函), possibly in the *stūpa* previously built by king Ajātaśatru (a contemporary of the Buddha).

The inscription is a “document from Ajātaśatru” (阿闍世王記) — evidently an anachronism — which testifies to the Buddha foretelling the birth of Aśōka.

The story of Aśōka

In that document, the Buddha reports that he was greeted by a child named Vijayamitra (毘闍耶蜜多羅), who is playing in the dirt and offers a handful of dirt to him (in other versions: in the Buddha's begging bowl).

Aśōka then breaks open the seven earlier *stūpas* and redistributes the relics of the Buddha, building eighty-four thousand *stūpas* that are all completed on the same day.

Evidently this is meant to be a lesson to Kaniṣka.

Saṅgharakṣa and Kuṣāṇa-era authors

It is probably not a coincidence that all of the **earliest named historical authors** are associated with the time of the Kuṣāṇa kings, and in fact are said to have had personal connections to those kings.

The Kuṣāṇas were a non-Indian dynasty (their earliest kings spoke Eastern Iranian languages like Bactrian) which established a powerful presence in India, connecting it to the Central Asian world. They were massively **syncretic** culturally, religiously, and linguistically.

Saṅgharakṣa and Kuṣāṇa-era authors

Saṅgharakṣa, Mātrcēṭa and Āśvaghoṣa, the earliest generation of Sanskrit poets whom we know as historical individuals, were all Buddhist monks.

But they were Buddhist monks at a time when North Indian Buddhism was undergoing massive changes, apparently at the direction of, or at least with the support of, the Kuṣāṇa kings, including the transition to Sanskrit as a language of culture and learning (at the cost of Gāndhārī and other Middle Indic languages) and the adoption of manuscript literacy, even within Vinaya traditions like those of the (Mūla)sarvāstivādins.



Thank you!

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