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Aśvaghoṣa. *Life of the Buddha.* Translated by Patrick Olivelle. Clay Sanskrit Library Series. New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2008. lv + 497 pp. $22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6216-5.

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Patrick Olivelle is well known to South Asianists as the author of numerous important studies of ancient Indian language, religion, and society, in addition to excellent and now widely available translations of Brahmanical and classical Hindu texts, including the early *Upaniṣads*, the *Pañcatantra*, and the key *dharmaśāstras* or legal texts. In this contribution to the Clay Sanskrit Library series, he brings his extensive knowledge of the classical Indian context along with his experience and skill as a translator of Sanskrit texts to bear directly on Buddhist materials in a new, readable translation of the *Buddhacarita*.

This epic life of the Buddha, produced by the Brahmin-born poet-monk Aśvaghoṣa in Kuṣāna (northwestern) India during the first or second century CE, was and is a landmark both of Sanskrit poetry (specifically *kāvya*) and of Buddhist biography. The earliest surviving example of *kāvya* literature, it was imitated and criticized for centuries by later Indian poets, while later biographers throughout the Buddhist world likewise took it as foundational. Buddhist biographers often reproduced/entrenched Aśvaghoṣa's many innovations, including such subsequently stock features as the bodhisattva's imperial destiny, the literal pleasure palace built to entrap him–and indeed the construction of a single biographical narrative that begins with the birth of the bodhisattva and concludes with the Buddha's funeral and the distribution of his corporeal relics.

Not surprisingly, given its status, much effort has been made to provide scholars with the Sanskrit text of *Buddhacarita*, and to give students and the interested public access to it through translation. Already at the end of the nineteenth century, E. B. Cowell produced an edition (1893) and then a translation (as part of the much-reprinted *Buddhist Mahâyâna Texts*, first published in 1894 as volume 49 of the *Sacred Books of the East*) based on three Sanskrit manuscripts that had found their way into European collections by that time. Despite Cowell's collaborating with many of the greatest Orientalists of his day, much of the work remained obscure to him due to the inadequacies of these manuscripts–not only the mistakes that abounded in them but also the fact that they were missing some sections of the first half and the entire second half of the Sanskrit text. Then in 1909 a previously unnoticed Nepalese manuscript came to light, and in 1924 it was brought to England and "rotographed" as the basis for a new edition and translation, by E. H. Johnston, first published together in Lahore in 1936.[1]

Johnston showed that the newly available manuscript was centuries older than, and indeed the source of, all three of the manuscripts that Cowell had used. Johnston's manuscript lacked the same parts of the Sanskrit text that were missing from Cowell's manuscripts, but even working from an imperfect rotograph–and aided by various more recent scholarly works as well as by extant translations of the *Buddhacarita* into Chinese and Tibetan (Johnston learned the "smattering" of each "requisite for comparing the translations in those languages with the Sanskrit original"[2])–Johnston was able to produce a critical edition of the Sanskrit that made possible an accurate translation of what survived, which he supplemented with summaries of the Tibetan and Chinese to fill in the gaps in the Sanskrit original.[3] Complete with a critical apparatus consisting in extensive introductions and notes full of original insights into and speculations about the text, its authorship, its intertextual location, its manuscript tradition, and the wide history these subjects encompass, Johnston's "monumental work," as Olivelle notes, "stands as the solid foundation on which contemporary scholars build" (p. l).

Johnston rendered Cowell's work, text and translation alike, largely obsolete; Olivelle, in contrast, has largely left Johnston's Sanskrit text intact. This has been transliterated according to the somewhat quirky Clay Sanskrit Library style, making it partly accessible to nonspecialists unlikely to be able to read the *devanāgari*

script that Johnston employs; for those who do read Sanskrit it is valuable now to have the text and translation together, on facing pages (they are in separate volumes in the case of Cowell, and in separate sections of Johnston's volume). But Olivelle has not returned to the manuscripts or the Chinese and Tibetan translations, and does not reproduce the extensive textual apparatus in Johnston's edition; Olivelle's translation, less literal than Johnston's, will not replace the latter as a "pony" for working through the Sanskrit. Thus Johnston's work will remain, as Olivelle recognizes, one that "no student or translator of the *Buddhacarita* can ignore" (p. l).

Yet Johnston's driving concern was to produce a translation merely as "'a pedestrian affair, designed to be read with the text and to explain its meaning, not to transmute its spirit and literary quality into an alien tongue"' (p. l).[4] Olivelle (who adds "[transmit?]" after "transmute" in the quotation) takes this up as a challenge and attempts "to convey the literary spirit of the text ... within the limits of [his] ability, while maintaining accuracy" (p. l). Johnston's "pony" is great for reading the Sanskrit, less so for reading the *Buddhacarita* in English.

There is no doubt that Olivelle has achieved his goal. Where overall Johnston is literal to the point of clumsiness, and clear at the expense of readability, Olivelle's new version, in English verse, is more beautiful and poetic than anything that has come before. To give a random but concrete example, here is a passage (13:35-37) from the moment when Māra unleashes his army on the newly awakened Buddha, first as rendered by Johnston:

35. Some stood trying to frighten him, their many tongues hanging out flickering, their teeth sharp-pointed, their eyes like the sun's orb, their mouths gaping, their ears sticking up stiff as spikes.

36. As they stood there in such guise, horrible in appearance and manner, he was no more alarmed by them, or shrank before them than before over-excited infants at play.

37. Then one of them, wrathfully turning his gaze on him, raised his club; then his arm with the club became immovable, as was Puraṁdara's of old with the thunderbolt.[5]

Olivelle's version of the same passage reads:

They stood there trying to frighten him -
some with multiple tongues
dangling and quivering,
some with sharp and pointed fangs,
some with eyes like the sun's orb,
some with gaping mouths,
some with ears upright like spikes.

As they stood in such guise,
dreadful in form and mien,
the great seer was no more alarmed
or frightened of them
than of little children ebullient as they play -

then, one, his eyes rolling with rage,
lifted up his club at the sage,
but the hand holding the club froze,
like Puran-dara's hand of old
that was holding the bolt (p. 387).

The word choice is virtually identical, especially in 13.35, but Olivelle's versified version, losing nothing, is certainly more pleasing to the eye and the ear. Simply structuring 13.35 as a poem seems to make the frightening images more vivid; the rhyme and quasi-meter in 13.37 hint at the sort of care that Aśvaghoṣa took to exploit Sanskrit's rich repertoire of literary ornaments and styles.

The manner in which Olivelle conveys this "literary spirit" varies from verse to verse. In places (e.g., 4.66-4.71), he imitates the original meter quite closely, but in others he adopts some other meter (especially iambic pentameter, e.g., 4.64-65), or breaks from meter altogether. Often the quatrains become quintains or sexains. The literary ornaments are those of modern English as much as ancient Sanskrit poetry, and their employment does not necessarily correspond to the ornamentation of the verse being translated (13.37, for example, does not contain rhyming couplets or a concluding short line). Yet even if there is thus some inconsistency in how he does so, Olivelle manages consistently to produce an accurate translation that reads like poetry in English; his readers are not allowed to forget that the *Buddhacarita* is beautifully lyrical, and are encouraged to experience the sorts of things (if not the very things) that Aśvaghoṣa took such skill to craft, verse by verse: meter (and alternations therein), wordplay, repetition, alliteration, inversion, rhyme, and above all poetry's special kind of clarity. This is a remarkable achievement given the complexity of Aśvaghoṣa's composition, not to mention the gulf that separates Sanskritic from modern English poetic sensibilities. Stylistically the present translation is such a vast improvement over Johnston's that for some purposes anyway–such as undergraduate classes or study and enjoyment of the text by nonspecialist readers–it probably does render Johnston's obsolete.

And there are other virtues to recommend this new translation, too, especially to nonspecialists. Olivelle supplies his readers with an excellent glossary, for ex-

ample, which makes it a simple thing to learn that Purandara (as referred to in the above passages) is "an epithet of Indra," and that Indra, in case the reader lacks any background at all in Indian religions, is in turn "the king of the gods, also called Shakra especially in Buddhist literature" (pp. 471, 468). Johnston's work, in contrast, includes no glossary, and while his note to 13.37 does reveal that "Puraṁdara" is one of Indra's epithets, it does so too cryptically to help someone with no background; the identification is buried in an inconclusive discussion of the possible mythological event to which this verse apparently refers (Olivelle makes his own suggestion about this as a note to 13.38). Olivelle's glossary further provides textual references to the terms it includes–beyond common ones like "Indra" (and the whole range of less-well-known Brahmanical and classical Hindu figures mentioned by the poet). The glossary, like the *Buddhacarita* itself, is especially rich in botanical terms, and Olivelle provides some useful details about particular trees or flowers to aid our grasp of Aśvaghoṣa's imagery. It is supplemented by an extensive general index of themes and words (which incidentally also includes "Puran-dara," directing the reader back to 13.37). Olivelle's notes likewise valuably point readers to details about and sources for the text's many allusions to Sanskritic mythology, doctrines, and practices. Though much of this material is available in Johnston's notes too, Olivelle's notes are consistently more concise and digestible than Johnston's (and Olivelle is of course able to cite more recent editions of the Sanskrit texts).

Olivelle also provides an excellent introduction, situating the poet and the poem in their respective histories and providing readers with two important analytical angles, polemical and doctrinal. He succinctly details the nature of Aśvaghoṣa's intervention in the theistic culture of classical India, which involved simultaneously championing Buddhist views as improvements upon theistic ones, and justifying those views on the basis of theistic precedent. Olivelle recognizes that *dharma* is central to this polemic (something Johnston amazingly seems to have missed; cf. Olivelle, p. xliii), and breaking with his own standard practice he therefore leaves the term consistently untranslated. The introduction details and labels six different usages of *dharma*, so fundamental to both Buddhist and theistic thinking, inviting readers to track Aśvaghoṣa's subtle and complex treatment of the idea. The introduction also offers an original argument for dating the poet in the second rather than the first century CE, based on parallels Olivelle discerns to the text of Manu, which is conventionally dated to the second century. That argument may prove controversial, but I am glad to see it reopen what I think remains an important question for us, namely, that of the date (and thus the historical location) of the poet, thus highlighting the intertextuality that is so central to the *Buddhacarita* (and to the interpretation thereof).

Close comparison of Olivelle's with Johnston's work does more, then, than recommend the improved translation and associated tools to nonspecialists. In addition to sharing nonspecialists' pleasure in reading this lively translation, specialists will also benefit from such back and forth between the newer and the older works, in ways that are not always marked but that become obvious when the two are read side by side. To continue with the example from above, readers who want to pursue Johnston's note to 13.37 (on the mythological precedent for Aśvaghoṣa's reference to "Puraṁdara") will benefit from considering the suggestion Olivelle makes in his note to 13.38; they will still benefit, though, from the references in Johnston's index to the other occurrences of the epithet (4.72, 9.45) that are lost in Olivelle's translation (in both instances, the epithet is glossed as "Indra," and as a result neither Olivelle's glossary nor his index directs readers to them, even though, at least at 9.45, the Vedic meaning of the epithet, "Shatterer of Cities," may be relevant to interpreting the passage). Similarly, differences in translation can encode differences in interpretation of the Sanskrit itself (and Olivelle does sometimes indicate when this is the case, e.g., his note to 9.21; other notes make explicit why Olivelle's translation diverges from Johnston's). Likewise, Olivelle's focus on *dharma* is an important supplement to Johnston's understanding of the poem, just as Johnston's focus on poetics is an important supplement to Olivelle's. So for specialists as well as nonspecialists, this new look at the *Buddhacarita*, in a compact, well-produced, and inexpensive volume, is a great contribution indeed.

Notes

[1]. For further details, see E. H. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita, or Acts of the Buddha* (Lahore: 1936; repr. Delhi: Motilal, 1992), v-xi. Parts of the critical text appeared earlier, beginning with Johnston's contribution of Cantos I-VIII to the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April 1927.

[2]. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita*, vi.

[3]. In Cowell's edition, this non-Sanskrit material is the translation of a summary made by a Nepalese scholar named Amṛtānanda, the Residency pandit under Brian Hodgson, when he copied the old manuscript in 1830 (see Johnston, *The Buddhacarita*, viii-ix for a discussion of the physical evidence of the scholar's actual use of the lat-

ter!); in Johnston's edition this is replaced by Johnston's own verse by verse synopsis of what he thinks the original must have contained, based on his reading of the Tibetan and Chinese translations taken together; in this new version under review this missing material is supplied through Olivelle's summaries of Johnston's reconstructions (p. li).

[4]. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita*, v.

[5]. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita*, 195.

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