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Johannes Bronkhorst. *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India.* Handbook of Oriental Studies Series. Leiden: Brill, 2007. xix + 414 pp. $182.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15719-4.

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According to standard textbook histories of ancient India, Hinduism, or at least some similar form of Brahminism, was the dominant religion rejected by the Buddha, who, in response to the class privileges and rituals of the Brahmins, formulated a "new" Dharma. This understanding of the cultural and intellectual background to early Buddhism is firmly rejected in Johannes Bronkhorst's *Greater Magadha*. Countering a view he believes is "largely mistaken," Bronkhorst instead proposes that Buddhism originated in the non-Vedic culture of "Greater Magadha," an area he defines as "roughly the geographical area in which the Buddha and Mahāvīra lived and taught. With regard to the Buddha, this area stretched by and large from Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala, in the north-west to Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha, in the south-east" (pp. xi, 4).

The basic evidence for this alternative cultural history is outlined in the introduction. Bronkhorst first draws attention to early Brahmanical sources on the *āryāvarta*, "domain of the Aryas," i.e., the area in which Vedic culture and religion flourished. According to Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (ca. 150 BCE) and the *Baudhāyana* and *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtras*, this area extended as far as the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā rivers. Earlier evidence from the *Śatapatha* and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇas* suggests that Vedic Brahmins considered their neighbors to the East barbarous and inferior for linguistic reasons, while the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* further states that the "demonic" (*āsurya*) people of the East constructed round "sepulchral mounds," a distinct funerary practice later adopted by the Buddhists (pp. 4-5).

The remainder of the book builds on this evidence for geographical, linguistic, and cultural differences by attempting to reconstruct the distinct culture of Greater Magadha. Compelling evidence for a distinct culture is cited in part 1 ("Cultural Features of Greater Magadha"): Bronkhorst's studies of the Jains and Ājīvikas are persuasive, and his survey of ancient medicine shows that the empirical approach of the *Āyurveda* was derived from the cultural region of Greater Magadha, rather than a Vedic source. When considered against the extensive evidence for a Vedic culture steeped in magic, curses, and spells, one feels convinced that "there was indeed a culture of Greater Magadha which remained recognizably distinct from Vedic culture until the time of the grammarian Patañjali (ca. 150 BCE) and beyond" (p. 265).

Persuasive as this is, Bronkhorst also argues that the ideas of karma, rebirth, and liberation originated within Greater Magadha. This is problematic, however, because these ideas are stated in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*–texts usually assigned to the sixth or fifth century BCE, early enough to suppose an origin within the sphere of Vedic religion.[1] To show that this was not the case, Bronkhorst must therefore argue that these *Upaniṣads* are not so old, and that they borrowed from an alien source. This he does in part 3 ("Chronology") and part 2 ("Brahmanism vis-à-vis Rebirth and Karmic Retribution") respectively, the implication being that the ideas were a late borrowing from Greater Magadha.

A further argument reinforcing both points is stated in chapter 1, section1, and chapter 2, section A.3, of part 1. Bronkhorst here argues that Upaniṣadic teachings on the self differ from the general understanding of the self in the Vedic tradition, and that spiritual praxis in the early *Upaniṣads* is similar to that described in early Jain texts. Both points suggest that the early *Upaniṣads* belonged to the same, basic religious culture as that described in early Jain texts, i.e., that of Greater Magadha. While much that Bronkhorst says on all these points recommends reconsidering the received wisdom (especially regarding the textual history of the Vedas), the argument that the early *Upaniṣads* were late, with key ideas being

borrowed from a separate source, is not entirely convincing.

Bronkhorst's most important argument against the pre-Buddhist antiquity of the *Upaniṣads* is based on points regarding the textual history of the important *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa* (that is, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, chapters 3-4). He claims that this text was known to the grammarians Kātyāyana and Patañjali as a separate work–the "*Brāhmaṇa* of Yājñavalkya"–and that Patañjali dated it to the time of Pāṇini, i.e., the mid-fourth century BCE. These considerations, Bronkhorst argues, indicate that the text's passages on karma, rebirth, and liberation postdate the Buddha.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, the evidence from Kātyāyana and Patañjali does not suggest that the *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa* was composed in the mid-fourth century BCE.[2] All Bronkhorst proves is that this text was known and accepted within orthodox circles at this point; but this gives no reason to doubt that it was composed before this, as, indeed, its setting in the pre-Buddhist kingdom of Videha suggests. (Bronkhorst struggles to make sense of this fact [p. 237n35].) Bronkhorst's rigorous analysis suggests, rather, that this most important part of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is very old but initially circulated outside the Vedic *āryāvarta*. If so, there is no reason to doubt that it was an important source for the ideas of karma, rebirth, and liberation.

Further evidence cited by Bronkhorst (chapter 2, section A.3, "The Early Upaniṣads") does not suggest that the early *Upaniṣads* borrowed these ideas from a non-Vedic source. The oldest Upaniṣadic passages on karma, rebirth, and liberation are found in the account of two paths by which the dead man goes: either to Brahman/the gods, from which there is no return, or to the ancestors, from whom a return to this world is inevitable (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.3-10). Although both passages attribute the ideas to the *kṣatriya* Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, it is surely odd that a Brahmanical borrowing of an alien idea would be admitted outright. Furthermore, Bronkhorst goes to great lengths to show that these passages took much trouble to present "the doctrine of rebirth and karmic retribution in a Vedic garb" (p. 120). But if so, why give the game away by owning up to a borrowing from a non-Brahmanical source at the outset?

These difficulties are resolved, however, as soon as we realize that nothing alien has been borrowed at all. Bronkhorst admits that there is "no explicit mention of karmic retribution" in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* passage, and that even the section on karma in the *Chāndogya* passage is kept entirely separate from the teaching on rebirth and liberation (pp. 115, 121). In fact, the latter, brief section on karma (*Chāndogya Upaniṣads* 5.10.7)–which states that pleasant action leads to a good rebirth, whereas unpleasant action leads to the opposite–is quite clearly a later addition to a teaching that otherwise has nothing to say about karma. Bronkhorst further admits that both passages develop older Vedic ideas about the "journey which presumably links one existence to the next," and that the idea of rebirth might not be alien to the Vedic tradition after all (p. 121).[3]

This leaves us with the idea of liberation as the only unprecedented aspect of these teachings. And yet both the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* passages indicate that liberation is an eternal, heavenly sort of existence with–or in the worlds of–Brahma and the gods. This could easily be explained as a development of Brahmanic ideas: it is not difficult to imagine some Vedic thinkers turning away from the old idea of circulation between the ancestral and human worlds, and instead proposing an esoteric means of reaching the eternal abode of the gods. Although Bronkhorst claims that a non-Vedic doctrine of karma, rebirth, and liberation has been "dressed up so as to look Vedic," there appears to be nothing else besides the Vedic veneer (p. 120).

Bronkhorst's argument that the idea of "karmic retribution" has no predecessor in the Brahmanic tradition is also doubtful. He claims that a borrowing is indicated by the fact that at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.13, Yājñavalkya takes Ārtabhāga to one side to explain the idea of the rewards of good and bad deeds in private. But this could merely indicate that the idea was a new development at the time, i.e., a secret teaching or "*Upaniṣad*" rather than a non-Vedic borrowing. This prospect is firmly rejected when Bronkhorst considers Herman W. Tull's theory of a Vedic origin of karma (*The Vedic Origins of Karma* [1989]). But this argument–that there is no such thing as "bad" ritual karma–overlooks the late Vedic belief in different levels of ritual purity; a major concern of the *Dharma Sūtras*, for example, is the ritual means of eradicating pollution (e.g., by fire, water, or Vedic mantras). This shows that pollution was believed to inhere in a person, and if so it is easy to imagine the Vedic belief that this could affect a person's fate after death. The simple ethicization of this notion of karmic purity or pollution could easily have led to the formulation of the classical karma doctrine.

Apart from his arguments about karma, rebirth, and

liberation, greater continuity can be established between late Vedic speculation and the early *Upaniṣads* than Bronkhorst allows. In chapter 2, section A.3 ("The Early Upaniṣads"), Bronkhorst claims that the *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa*'s philosophy of an inactive, immutable self differs from the Vedic correspondence between self and cosmos; his argument is that the *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa* "distinguishes itself from these other Upaniṣadic passages in that the correspondence of the self with the macrocosm plays no role in it" (p. 129). But this is simply incorrect. At numerous places Yājñavalkya identifies the individual self with the cosmos, for example at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.8.9-11, where he states that the "imperishable" upon which all things are "woven back and forth" is identical with the inner perceiver. Rather than being borrowed from the speculative world of Greater Magadha, the *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa's* notion of an "immutable self" reflects the fact that the Brahmanic composers of this text emphasized the microcosmic rather than macrocosmic aspect of the pantheistic essence.

In chapter I, section 1, Bronkhorst also proposes an origin in Jain-related circles for the meditative methods that the early *Upaniṣads* state led to the realization of the self. Since I have dealt with the same evidence and argument elsewhere, I will only repeat my earlier conclusion that extreme physical asceticism played no more than a superficial role in the tradition of meditation recorded in the early *Upaniṣads* and *Mokṣadharma*. There is no suggestion that practices such as starving to death were valued in this early yogic tradition, which I think can be called the "meditative mainstream."[4]

Even if the notions of karma, rebirth, and liberation developed within the Brahmanical tradition, as seems likely, it does not mean that the concept of Greater Magadha is entirely misconceived. Regardless of the origin of these ideas, it can hardly be doubted that a distinct religious culture based on them emerged in and around the kingdom of Magadha. An overwhelming amount of evidence suggests that this rival to Vedic India dominated the growing urban civilization of the eastern Gangetic plains during the early Buddhist period, without any significant contribution from orthodox Brahminism.

The *Vinaya* and *Sutta* portions of the Pāli canon, for example, contain only five references to Brahmins who received land grants from the kings of Kosala and Magadha, and only seven references are made to Brahmanic settlements in the same region.[5] Even a text such as the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, which Bronkhorst argues is late, describes how the Brahmin Ambaṭṭha arrived in Kapilavatthu only to become an object of ridicule to the local Śākyas.[6] This evidence suggests that Brahmins were an oddity in the early Buddhist period, and thus that Vedic culture played little role in the imperial civilization established by the Mauryas.

But this does not mean that Brahmanism was entirely absent from the region of Greater Magadha. The *Yājñavalkya-kāṇḍa* suggests the existence of a small but influential school within the region of Videha-Kosala, and thus the orb of the Magadhan cultural region, in the late Vedic period. Situated in non-Vedic territory, at a time of great social change, the Brahminic thinkers of this circle would have developed their ideas in isolation from the Vedic mainstream. It is even possible this school also became a haven for ascetic and speculative traditions attested as far back as the late *Ṛgveda*.[7]

Whatever the case, there is a strong case that the ideas of karma and liberation from rebirth emerged in this unorthodox school, and then eventually triggered the culture of world renunciation, asceticism, and meditation. If so, it would seem that the peculiar religious culture of Greater Magadha was an unintended consequence of the early Videhan kings' attempt to legitimize their rule through the Vedic tradition. From the Vedic perspective this Sanskritization went wrong, for it resulted not in the establishment of Vedic orthodoxy beyond the *āryāvarta*, but rather an unorthodox counterculture of renouncers and philosophers.

Eventually, of course, the classical Indian civilization that emerged under the Guptas combined the priestly ritualism of the Brahmins with the asceticism and rationalism of Greater Magadha. But this amalgamation of originally separate cultures (see pages 267-268) was, in fact, a Brahmanization of an originally non-Vedic order. It would seem that the Brahmins ultimately succeeded in preserving Vedic culture–and their elite status–by absorbing the renunciant culture of Magadha, thus creating the rich mix that was to become "Hinduism." In *Greater Magadha*, Bronkhorst has certainly succeeded in conceptualizing an alternative history of ancient India, even if the cultural origins of Greater Magadha were perhaps much closer to the Vedic mainstream than he allows.

Notes

[1]. See Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

[2]. Alexander Wynne, "The Buddha's Skill in Means

and the Genesis of the Five Aggregate Teaching," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3rd. series, 20 (April 2010): 191-216, esp. 207-209.

[3]. Bronkhorst cites Gananath Obeyesekere's recent book *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformations in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[4]. Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 98. See also pages 57-64.

[5]. See *Dīgha Nikāya* I: 87, 111, 126, 223; *Majjhima Nikāya* II: 164; *Dīgha Nikāya* I: 86, 126, 234; *Dīgha Nikāya* II: 262; *Majjhima Nikāya* I: 284, 400; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V: 352; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I: 180; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III: 30, 341; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* IV: 340; and *Udāna* 78. References are to the volume and page numbers of Pali Text Society editions.

[6]. *Dīgha Nikāya* I: 90.

[7]. See Alexander Wynne, *Mahābhārata Book Twelve: Peace*, vol. 3, *The Book of Liberation* (New York: New York University Press/JJC Foundation, 2009), xviii-xxvii.

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