Endangered by Man-eating Witches: 
a Fragment of the Simhalavādāna from the Turfan Finds*

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The adventurous life of the merchant Sīphala, as depicted in the various versions of the Simhalavādāna, has time and again attracted the attention of scholars. The first encounters with the story date back to a time when Buddhist Studies in Europe were still in their infancy, and it appears that once again the famous Eugène Burnouf was the first to study avadānas preserved in an Indian language1. Many others were to follow, among them Professor Ji who, in connexion with his study of the aorist as a means of ascertaining the age of Buddhist texts, touched upon one of the two versions preserved in the Mahāvastu2. In recent years, two excellent studies have appeared, which focus on representations of the story in art, but also contain surveys of the many different versions3. As can be gathered from this great number of versions, the story was popular not only with scholars, but, as will be shown in the following, this tale of a calamitous sea voyage was also enjoyed by people living in the sandy deserts of Central Asia.

As catalogue number 1424 in Volume V of the Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden (SHT), a fragment is published, the contents of which are described as the adventures of travelling merchants, and it is tentatively attributed to the Supriya- or the Maitrakanyaka-avadāna4. A closer study of this fragment, however, revealed it to belong to a version of the Simhalavādāna5. Several parts of the plot — sea voyage, encounter with beautiful maidens — are shared by all three Avadānas, and others — shipwreck, horse as saviour — by at least
two of them, but only in the Sirphalävadäna do the seductive maidens turn out to be man-eating witches. They strictly forbid the newly stranded merchants to take a certain road leading south to a magic city of iron, where they keep earlier victims stored. These features help to identify the Turfan fragment; line 2 of the verso side evidently contains the beginning of the prohibition, and line 4 a reference to the road leading to the south.

The story to which the fragment belongs is not available in Sanskrit. The translations of the Mülasarvästiväda-Vinaya, however, preserve two versions closely related to the text of the fragment. The first is found in the Bhaisajyavastu; in the end, the Buddha is identified with the flying horse acting as saviour, and the leader of the merchants is clever (shok pa mkhas pa'i ral bzin can zig), but still nameless. In the second version, contained in the Vinayavibhaizga, the focus of the story has shifted from the horse to the leader of the merchants, now named Sirphala, who is none other than the Bodhisatva. Having been incorporated into the Diyaavadana, the beginning and the latter half of this second version is also preserved in Sanskrit. Therefore, as an aid in understanding the context of the Turfan fragment and as the basis of its identification, the transcription will be followed by the Tibetan version of both the corresponding passages.

**Cat. No. 1425**

recto

1 // + + + + + [va]nt[i] sma | tešam karmavipāke
2 // + (dar)ś(a)[n](i)[y] [ra]pr(ā)śādikās tā evam āhu e[tu] //
3 // + | alayanānām layanam advīpanāṃ dvīpa
4 // pānagṛh(ā)ṇ(i)va]strāghāṇi āramaramanāniyā

verso

1 // + + saṃkhaśilā [pravādaṃ] rajatāṃ jātarūpam āśmargbho mu
2 // + + (kriḍa)ta ramata paricārayata mā vacaḥ kaś cit supra
3 // (paricāra)yaṃti | tešam tatra kriḍatāṃ ramaṭāṃ paricā[ra]
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'di dag ni khyod46 kyi za s ky a khaṅ pa daṅ | skom g y a khaṅ pa daṅ | g os kyi khaṅ pa daṅ | g nas m al g y a khaṅ pa daṅ | kun dga'44 ra ba dga' bar gyur ba dag dañ | nags tshal dga' bar gyur ba (R 418a) dag dañ | rdziṅ bu dga' bar gyur ba dag dañ |

'dzam bu'i45 glin pa' rin po che maṅ po 'di lta ste | nor bu dag dañ | mu tig dag dañ | bai ḏu46 rya (N 257b) dag dañ | (D 177b) man sel dkar po dag dañ | byi'7 ru dag dañ | dūn dag dañ | gser dag dañ | rdo'i sniṅ po dag dañ | spug dañ | pad ma52 rā ga dañ | dūn54 g'yas su 'khyil pa dag lags kyis55

khyed46 cag tshur spyon bdag cag dañ lhan cig rtse ba dañ | dga'55 ba dañ | dga' mgur spyod par mdzod cig | khyed cag las 'ga' yāṅ sīn tu56 myos par gyur35kyaṅ lho lam du 'gro bar mi bya'bo zes zer ro ||

bcom ldan 'das kyi dge sloṅ dag nas 'di lta ste | skyes pa la bud med kyi gzugs ji ltar chags par 'gyur ba dañ | rgyags par 'gyur ba dañ | 'dod par

kyed tshur spyon | bdag cag dañ lhan cig47 rtsed mo bgyi | dga' bar (L 390a) bgyi | dga' mgur48 spyod par bgyi59 | khyed cag las43su yāṅ smyos kyaṅ lho phyogs kyi lam du ma bžud cig |
After the shipwreck, the merchants float on the sea, and, due to the ripening of their former deeds (line 1 of the fragment; restore to karmavipaśceta) are driven southward by a gale from the north. They are washed ashore on the island inhabited by the witches, who appear as beautiful women (line 2) and invite the castaways to come (line 2) and stay with them, since they are without husbands or protectors, helpless and so forth (line 3; correct to adviṣṭanāya and cf. note 84 for the probable restoration). Besides that, they have other entertainments to offer, among them rooms for food, drinks and robes, lovely gardens (line 4; in Tibetan also sayanagṛhaṇi or sayandasaṅgharaṇī is included after vastragarhaṇi) and a variety of precious stones (line 1 verso; restore to the Diyaśāvādana cliché cited in note 84). Finally, the merchants are invited to amuse themselves with the women (line 2), and only then are they warned that nobody, even in a state of total drunkenness, is allowed to wander towards the south (line 2). The merchants do not decline the invitation and duly amuse themselves (line 3). After a certain time of amusement (line 3; restore to paricitrayatā), the leader of the merchants becomes curious and wonders why these women have forbidden them to take the road to the south (line 4).

A comparison of the Sanskrit and the Tibetan texts immediately shows that two sections of the Vinayaśīvāhāga version are absent from the text of the fragment and from the Bhaiṣajyavastu. First, the missing part of line 2 recto does not leave room enough to include the description of a certain useful device owned by Rākṣasas. According to the Vinayaśīvāhāga, there are two flags, one of them foreboding luck, the other misfortune. Thus, the fluttering of the former notifies the witches of the nearing arrival of the shipwrecked merchants, and only then are they necessitated to transform their appearance. Equally absent is the long quotation from the word of the Buddha, which in the Tibetan and the Chi-
nese versions follows after the warning against going south. On the other hand,
the Turfan fragment in length and wording agrees very well with the version
preserved in the Bhāṣaṇīyavastu, where the leader of the merchants is still
unamed. Therefore, with due caution, one should probably label the fragment as
belonging to a cycle of stories, of which the Sinphalāvadāna is the best known
version. Of course it is tempting to identify the Rākṣasīṣūtra referred to in the
Dīvyavādāna, with the text preserved in the Madhyamāgama (cf. note 3), obvi-
ously referred to in the Chinese translation of the Bhāṣaṇīyavastu (cf. note 6),
and to wonder if the fragment could perhaps be related to this work. However,
the title of the Madhyamāgama version is “Sūtra about the merchants in search of
wealth”, and its wording is close to, but not identical with, the Sanskrit frag-
ment (cf. T 26, vol. 1, p. 642b10—18). Although the story agrees with the
fragment in many details, there is no mentioning of karmavipaśa (line 1 of the
fragment), nothing which corresponds to the passage partly preserved in line 3
of the fragment, and no reference to any children being born as a result of the di-
versions (the continuation of line 3 verso). As long as these differences cannot be
ascribed to a (partly purified?) Chinese translation, it remains difficult to accept
the Madhyamāgama as a possible source of the fragment.

As regards the quotation, although fitting the context, it unnecessarily in-
terrupts the course of the story, the more so, since quotations of this kind do not
conform to the literary style of the genre69. Most likely it is a later interpolation,
as already suspected by Dieter Schlingloff 88, peculiar to the version on which both
the Tibetan and the Chinese translations of the Vinaya-vibhāṣa are based. It
should be noted, however, that the passage contained in the Chinese translation
is longer68. In both cases, the quotation does not reflect on the badness of wom-
en, as is suggested. There can hardly be a moral judgement involved — and if
so, it would be difficult to restrict it to females — when the Buddha states that
he does not perceive any other bodily form as attractive and bewitching for a man
as the body of a woman. This observation serves to explain why the merchants
climb ashore and start to divert themselves with the women. If the reading
brhod, “deceived, bewitched”, of the Derge edition is more than a misprint for
the graphically very similar brjod of the other editions, it might even hint at a
possible explanation of the origin of the interpolation, namely a gloss which be-
came incorporated in the text.

The statement itself probably goes back to the Sūtrapiṭaka, as is shown by a
close parallel found in the Aṅguttaranikāṭya. Therī it is reported that a mother
and her son, both members of the order, were spending the rainy retreat in
Sāvatthi (AN II 67ff.). On regularly meeting each other desire arose, which fi-
nally resulted in incestuous intercourse. The monks related the events to the
Buddha, and he declared:

Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aśaṁ ekarūpaṃ pi samanu-paśāmi evaṃ ra-jaṇiyaṃ evaṃ
camaniyaṃ evaṃ maḍaniyaṃ evaṃ bandhaṇiya evaṃ muceṣṭhanti evaṃ
antarāyakaraṃ anutta-saṃdhiyoṣa adhigamāya, yathāyidam
bhikkhave iṣṭhīraṇaṃ (AN II 68, 8—13).

“Monks, I see no other form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so
binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace
from effort — that is to say, monks, as a woman’s form” (AN (transl.) II
56).

The teaching of the Buddha would not justly be called the Middle Way if this ob-
servation remained unbalanced by its pendant, and indeed there is another short
sutta in the Aṅguttaranikāṭya which contains a similar statement immediately fol-
lowed by its counterpart; Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aśaṁ ekarūpaṃ pi samanu-paśāmi
yam evaṃ purisaṃ cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhīti yathāyidam bhikkhave
iṣṭhīraṇaṃ (AN I 1, 9—11) against Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aśaṁ ekarūpaṃ pi samanu-paśāmi
yam evaṃ iṣṭhīya cittaṃ pariyādāya tiṭṭhīti yathāyidam bhikkhave
purisaṇaṃ (AN I 2, 10—12).

If a cutting remark on the nature of women is sought in the story, one has
to turn to a later part of the Sinphalāvadāna version preserved in the
Vinaya-vibhāṣa and the Dīvyavādāna. After his successful escape back to
Jambudvīpa, Sinphala is followed by the Rākṣa with whom he had been amus-
ing himself. She appears in the form of a young woman claiming to be his desert-
ed wife and is accompanied by a magically conjured child closely resembling Sin-
hala. When she fails to win back Sinphala, she first turns, in a clever attempt at
insisting social pressure, to his parents and then to the king of the country, all
of whom attempt to persuade him to take her back. 

*

Sarvā eva striyā rākṣasyaḥ,

“Every woman is a witch”, thus his parents and the king rather unperturbedly observe, when Siṃhala tells them that the striking beauty is in reality nothing but a Rākṣasī in disguise. Upon his refusal, they react quite differently, and this is nicely described in the story; while the old parents immediately lose their interest and turn her out, the king remains less indifferent to the beautiful girl’s fate. Not heeding Siṃhala’s warning, he seizes the opportunity to enrich his harem and soon meets his doom, as is to be expected.

Notes:

1. Thanks are due to Professor Dieter Schlingloff, München, who stimulated this paper and kindly put his materials at my disposal. — Abbreviations follow the Akkurzungsverzeichnis zur buddhistischen Texte, Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen 1949, p. 257f. (= J. Xianlin, Selected Papers on the Languages of Ancient India, Beijin 1982, pp. 250–252).


"fundan", which might belong to the same cycle of stories. It is written in a mixture of Sanskrit and Middle Indian and is rather difficult to understand, but evidently preserves the part where a flying being offers to take someone to Jambudvīpa. Contrary to all the other Buddhist versions, the saviour is not a horse, but a yakṣa called Bharuka, which re- 


8. Divy p. 524, 19–20. A full translation including also this abbreviation is found in Schlingloff, Studies, pp. 257–263.

9. For details concerning size, script, etc., of the fragment see SHT V, p. 253. A few misreadings and misprints in the transcription presented there are tacitly corrected here.

— The following symbols are used: // for breakage, [] for damaged letters, () for restored letters, and + for missing Akṣaras.

10. To keep footnotes to a minimum, graphcal variants like byedo for byed do and variants concerning the use of the Đāṇḍa are not mentioned.

11. Derge edition (D) vol. 8 = ṇa, fol. 176b6–177b6; Lhasa edition (L) vol. 7a, fol. 250a6–251b4; Narthang edition (N) vol. 8 = ṇa, fol. 274a2–276a2; Peking edition (P) vol. 43, p. 208=vol. te, fol. 164b5–164b4; Tog Palace ms. (R) vol. 7=ja, fol. 417a3–418b3.

12. 'pho'i'os R.

13. la deest N.

14. ša medial LN.

15. ni deest R.

16. sku NPR.

17. gis deest P.

18. lam LN.

19. 'das N.

20. Derge edition (D) vol. 2 = kha, fol. 234a1f. = 235b1; Lhasa edition (L) vol. kha, fol. 389b1–390a5; Narthang edition (N) vol. kha, fol. 432a6–433a4; Peking edition (P)
84. See Kāraṇḍavyūhā ed. Vaidya, pp. 285, and Mahāvastu (Mvu) 68. Closest to the text as preserved in lines 2 recto — 2 verso of the fragment, however, comes a stereotyped passage occurring several times in the story of Supriya, the main difference being that Supriya travels alone (cf. SHT V, p. 254, note 1), cf. Divy 116, 1-9 (also 114, 26 — 115, 5 and 117, 29 — 118, 9 with minor variants) to evam dhūḥ | etu mahāśārthavāḥ svāgataḥ mahāśārthavāhamāhām avāsanāḥ svāminiḥ bhavāpatiśvānāḥ paṭi alayānānāḥ layao 'dvī pānām 'dvī aro 'yāmānām 'aro 'yāmānām trān 'parīyānām parīyāsam imāni ca te 'nāgghānāmi pānāghrāhī castra nagghāhī layao 'yāmānām 'aro 'yāmānaḥvāhāyāmi vānaramāyāyāmi puṣkariṇiṇiramaṇāyāmi ca Jambu-dvī-pānām ranānā tad yathā maṇḍya muktā vaidūryāvanāhāśiḥ pravādy ārya-jātārya-pam āśi-magargo muṣṭragalo lohitākā dāksiṇāvāḥ ētāni ca tvām ca śāśvāhi hṛdānāh kriṣṇānaya paricīrayat. The singular ētu in the Turfan fragment is probably influenced by versions like the one cited above. If the text of the manuscript originally agreed with this passage, the lines can be calculated as containing 45 to 60 akṣaras depending on the punch hole.

85. Correct to mā vah kai cā and probably restore to supramatteḥ according to im tu māyas par gyur in the Vinayavibhaṅga version, cf. Mvu 71,1-2 api tu pramattehi pi āryaputraeṣu nāgaraṣya dāksiṇāya mārgaṇḍa no gontaraṇaḥ.


87. There are exceptions; cf. the stanza in the second version of the Sīhla story in the Mahāvastu (Mvu 266,13-14), which is spoken by the Buddha. Close parallels to this verse focusing on kohika, lōkha, dosa and moha respectively are found in the Aṅguttaravākṣaya (AN IV 96,22 — 23) and the Itivuttaka (It 84).


89. While the Tibetan text corresponds to T 1442, vol. 23, p. 888b4 — 5, the quotation continues until b10, including the recommendation of āṣubhābhāvanā as a remedy.