

Possible Iranian Origins for the Śākya and Aspects of Buddhism

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This article explores the plausibility of Michael Witzel's speculation that the Śākya tribe might have Iranian origins, or at least Iranian connections. Circumstantial evidence suggests that ideas associated with Iran and Zoroastrianism appear in north-east India, especially amongst the *śramaṇa* groups, and in particular amongst Buddhists, but not in the Brahmanical culture. Whereas Buddhism is frequently portrayed as a response to Brahmanism, or, especially by Buddhists, as ahistorical, Witzel's suggestion gives us a new avenue for exploring the history of ideas in Buddhism. This essay attempts to show that, at the very least, possible connections with Iran deserve more attention from scholars of the history of ideas in India and especially Buddhism.

Introduction

In 2010 Harvard Indologist Michael Witzel¹ commented, on the Indo-Eurasian_Research online forum, that we should treat the Śākya as an early incursion of Scythians (known in Sanskrit as Śaka, and in Iranian as Saka) who brought with them many ideas related to Iranian culture and/or Zoroastrian religion. He had made the same suggestion earlier on the INDOLOGY list (Witzel 2002), and had in fact published some of the evidence for this proposition in Witzel (1987,

¹I'm grateful to Professor Michael Witzel for generously corresponding with me and allowing me to steal his idea. He said "expect resistance". Thanks also to readers of earlier drafts who helped me to improve it considerably and encouraged me to pursue the idea in the face of resistance.

1989, 1997).² To date, however, he has not given this idea a full treatment which would allow us to really assess its merits.

In his Indo-Eurasian_Research post Witzel identifies a number of features of the Śākya which appear to support the identification, for example: tribes such as the Śākya are largely absent from the Vedic literature and, where they are noticed, their customs are “strange”, but they are at the forefront in Buddhist texts, suggesting a late migration into the Bihar region; the name Śākya appears to be cognate with Śaka; the existence of burial practices in Magadha that are similar to those in Central Asia; incest marriages; and post-mortem judgement of actions of the body, speech and mind triad.³ Drawing on research from a variety of disciplines including philology, historical linguistics and archaeology as well as climate science and genetics, this article considers whether each feature identified by Witzel could have come from Iran and then examines the possible route for transmission from Iran to India. In conclusion I explore what significance this might have for our understanding of the history of ideas—particularly Buddhist ideas—in India.

Sibling Marriage

In several places, particularly the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (D.i.92) and its Theravāda commentary, the progenitors of the Śākya are related to King Okkāka: “The Śākya regard King Okkāka as their ancestor” (Walsh 1995: 114). In the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* the king banishes his elder brothers from his kingdom and they make their home on the slopes of the Himalayas. But they can find no one suitable to marry, so they take their own sisters as wives, and these incestuous relationships give rise to the Śākya. And it is this sibling marriage that Witzel identifies as an Iranian trait.

The Pāli name Okkāka is usually identified with the Sanskrit Ikṣvāku, a Kosalan king. I have not been able to trace the original identification of Okkāka and Ikṣvāku, but the *Mahāvastu* (Mv) substitutes Ikṣvāku where the Pāli has Okkāka (e.g. Mv 1.348). As Jones says, “The story here given, with some differences in nomenclature, follows pretty closely that in the Pāli texts” (1949: 293, n.7). However, in Mv the brothers marry a half-sister born of a different mother.⁴ Geiger’s *Pāli Grammar* points out that the names Okkāka and Ikṣvāku are not simple ana-

²Witzel (personal communication, 2012) says that the idea goes back at least to Jarl Charpentier in the 1920s, and perhaps even earlier.

³Witzel also mentions some other features, but I have not been able to follow these up.

⁴Jones notes this in his translation along with a note on the Sanskrit text (1949: 296).

logues: “[Okkāka] is in fact derived from Ukkāka (**ukkhu* side-form of *ucchu*). The analogical influence of Okkāma also had some effect” (1994: 8; §10, n.3). Note that P. *ukkā* = Skt. *ulkā* ‘firebrand, torch’ (cognate with *volcano*). Sanskrit *ikṣu* = Pāli *ucchu* and means ‘sugarcane’. The Pāli commentary on the *Ambatṭha Sutta* derives the name Okkāka from *ukkā*, saying that when he spoke light came from his mouth like a torch (*ukkā yiva*). (DA i.258).⁵ Rather than invent a hypothetical intermediary (viz. **ukkhu*) it would be more straightforward to take *okkāka* at face value as a secondary nominal derivative: *ukkā* + *-ka* (with *vṛddhi*); and consider that Mv *substitutes* the name Ikṣvāku for Okkāka rather than *translating* it. That is to say that the names are not analogues but refer to two different people; and that by the time and place of the composition of Mv the Śākyas were more closely assimilated to Kosala and it was politic to identify with a Kosalan ancestor. I suggest that the connection with Ikṣvāku was invented for prestige, and is not found in the Pāli texts.

Given the prejudice against incest in later Buddhist writing (Silk 2008a: 263–4), it is remarkable that this detail of the Śākyas arising from an incest union was preserved. It is an example of what New Testament scholars call the *Principle of Embarrassment*: “When an author reveals, in the course of a discussion, something that is quite unflattering to the group or the position that he or she represents, there is a high degree of probability that the statement has a basis in fact” (Nattier 2003: 65).

Witzel suggests that this story of incest marriages reflects a memory of Iran. Jonathan Silk confirms that this was indeed an Iranian custom: “there is good evidence for this practice called *xʷaētuuadaθa*, so-called next-of-kin or close-kin marriage” (Silk 2008b: 444). The extent of this practice before the Sassanian period is unclear, and much debated by scholars of Zoroastrianism and Iranian history. By the Common Era Buddhists were condemning Iranians for this practice in their texts, e.g. in the *Dharmarucy-avadāna* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*; and similar condemnations were made by their Greek neighbours and by the Chinese at a later date (Silk 2008b: 445). Note that in Herodotus (iv.5–6) a story of the founding of the Scythians also involves a younger brother taking the throne in precedence of his elder brothers, though it does not involve an incest marriage (Waterfield 1998: 236–7).

⁵ *tassa kira rañño kathanakāle ukkā viya mukhato pabhā niccharati, tasmā taṃ “okkāko”ti sañjānimsūti* (DA 1.258)

All this is to take the origin story of the Śākya as history. In cosmogonic myth incest is quite common. For example, in BU 1.4 *ātman* in the likeness of a man (*puruṣa*) realises he is alone and splits into husband and wife. When he attempts to have sex with her, she flees because of the incest taboo. Indeed, where there is a single progenitor or couple then incest of their children is inevitable. Christian myth glosses over the fact that the children of Adam and Eve must have committed incest in order to populate the earth. However, the story in the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* doesn't read like creation myth.

In the version of the Śākya origin story recorded in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (the Theravādin commentary on the Dīgha Nikāya), there is some evidence that cross-cousin marriage occurred in the Śākya and Koliya clans (Emeneau 1939: 222). In addition, there are extensive genealogies in the *Mahāvamsa* that show cross-cousin marriages (Trautman 1973: 158–160). A cross-cousin marriage is one in which a boy would marry his mother's brother's daughter, or a girl would marry her father's sister's son. This is one of the preferred matches in South India amongst the Dravidian-speaking peoples. Good (1996) has been critical of the idea that cross-cousin marriage is the only, or most preferred, Dravidian kin relationship, and shows that other marriage matches are made. Be that as it may, cross-cousin marriage is a feature of Dravidian kinship, and the Brahmanical law books (the *Dharmasūtras*) make it clear that cousin marriage is forbidden for Aryas. (Thapar 2010: 306).

The perception then is that if the Buddha's family practised cross-cousin marriage, they cannot have been Aryas, and were likely Dravidians. The idea seems to go back at least to 1923, when A.M. Hocart tried to use observations from the genealogies of Śākya and Koliyas to explain the relationship between the Buddha and Devadatta (Emeneau 1939: 220).⁶ Already in 1939 Emeneau saw the main flaw in this reasoning: the earliest sources we have for cross-cousin marriage are Theravāda commentarial texts written in the 5th century CE in Sri Lanka. To a great extent they reflect the society of 5th century Sri Lanka. Furthermore, there is no corroborating evidence from the *suttas* or *Vinaya* that cross-cousin marriage took place at all, and very little genealogical information.

Cross-cousin marriage is not unknown in Nepal.⁷ However it seems unlikely that present day cross-cousin marriage has any bearing on the time of the Buddha. Of the groups which practice cross-cousin marriage that I could lo-

⁶cf. Ray (1994: 162 ff.), who points out inconsistencies in the portrayal of Devadatta.

⁷My thanks to Richard Gombrich for pointing this out.

cate, the Bhalara moved to the far west of Nepal from Rajasthan in the 14th century (Cameron 1998); while the Tamang speak a Tibeto-Burman language and originate from Tibet (Fricke 1990; 1998). Further in the case of the Bhalara the adoption of cross-cousin marriage is related to the necessity for in-caste marriage within a very small population.

The obvious conclusion, then, is that when the authors of the *Mahāvamśa*, and the commentaries upon which the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* was based, sat down to compose a genealogy for the Buddha they used familiar figures from the old texts, but arranged them in a way which seemed natural to them: in other words, they unselfconsciously modelled the Buddha's family on their own.

Burial

Witzel (2010) notes that Buddhist *stūpas* “are similar to the *kurgan* type grave mounds of Southern Russia and Central Asia.” *Kurgan* is a Russian word meaning ‘barrow’, and they are described as “tumuli or round burial mounts” (Werner 1987: 503). *Kurgan* mounds begin to dot the steppes as early as the fifth millennium BCE and continue into medieval times. The early mounds contain the first wheeled wagons found in this region (ca. third millennium BCE) and evidence of domesticated horses, along with many other artefacts. The frequency of mounds in time seems to coincide with peaks in nomadic cattle-herding peoples, and one of these peak periods was the early Iron Age (ca. 800 BCE – 400 CE) (Morgunova & Khokhlova 2006). The *kurgan* mounds, however, are *burial* mounds, and the occupants were not cremated.

The *Annual Report of the Architectural Survey of India* 1906–7 notes that the earliest form of *stūpa*, possibly pre-Buddhist, such as those found in Lauriya and Pakhri in Bihar, seem to have consisted of earth piled up around a central wooden pillar (in Przulski 1935: 205–6). Note that this kind of *stūpa* is not identical to the *kurgan*, and appears to be similar only in being a rounded burial mound.

These early *stūpas* were different from the various types of Vedic monuments for the dead called *śmaśāna* (cf. Bakker 2007). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB 13.8.1.5) considered round *śmaśāna*⁸ to be associated with *asuras* (“demons”) as against the orthodox square memorials of Brahmins (Witzel 1997: 312). Still, they were not associated with either earlier Indian, or Vedic culture. *Stūpas* were

⁸In later Sanskrit this is the normal word for a charnel ground, where corpses were cremated or simply abandoned.

elaborated over time, but retained the rounded shape of the mound within their overall plan. Jean Przyluski speculated that the elaborate *stūpas* of the 2nd century BCE coincide with the arrival of Central Asians in India, on the basis of their similarity with *kurgans* (1936: 204–209).

Several early 20th century authors noticed the similarity of *stūpas* and *kurgan* mounds, e.g. H.G. Rawlinson: “...relic-worship, and its concomitant the *stūpa*, are quite un-Indian. Gautama belonged to the Sakya clan: were they an early offshoot of the Sakas, the Sacæ or Scyths, who, as we know, followed the Aryans from time to time into India in successive waves? The word *stūpa* signifies a ‘barrow,’ or ‘tumulus,’ a Sanskrit name for a Scythian object ... [the] Sanchi Stupa, with its elaborately carved stone railing, is very probably the lineal descendent of the rude earthen mound covering the tombs of the Scythian chieftains on the Central Asia steppes...” (1913: 201–2).⁹ More recently a direct connection between the *kurgan* and *stūpa* has been proposed by Karel Werner (1987, 2002).

This is not our strongest evidence. The suggestion of a connection appears to rest solely on the similarity of shape, which could easily have evolved by chance. And note that the *kurgan* typically contained bodies, not ashes. That the ŚB saw the *stūpa* as demonic only tells us that it was not sanctioned by Late Vedic society, and this leaves open many possibilities. The location of primitive mounds in Bihar, and not elsewhere, might be consistent with the late migration of Śākyas. However, if this were the case we would expect to find such mounds in Rajasthan from an earlier period. Since the early Bihar mounds are simple constructions of piled-up earth, perhaps they did not survive; or perhaps they did, but have not been found, because archaeology in India is far from comprehensive.

Body, Speech and Mind

In her 1926 essay *Man as Willer*, Caroline Rhys Davids¹⁰ notices that the division of the person into body, speech and mind (*kāya, vāca, citta*) for moral pur-

⁹See also Przyluski (1935, 1936), who cites several more examples, though some of these authors are negatively linked to Orientalism.

¹⁰Rhys Davids only mentions the connection in passing, however, and presents it as an established fact without references or examples. The observation does not occur in Rhys Davids (1924), but it was included when the book was substantially revised (1936: 271). The observation also appears in Rhys Davids (1932). I can find no reference earlier than Rhys Davids (1926). The idea seems to originate with her.

poses, so central to Buddhist morality is also important in Zoroastrianism.¹¹ The triad *humata*, *hūxta* and *hvaršta* in Avestan (i.e. good thought, good speech and good deeds) is said to “encapsulate the ethical goals of Zoroastrianism” (Boyce 2004), and occurs in the earliest Iranian texts, such as the *Avesta* and the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*.¹² In the latter, which may well have been composed by Zoroaster, we find the following:

“We are those who welcome the good thoughts, good words, and good acts which, here and elsewhere, are and have been realized. We are not those who denigrate good (things).” (Boyce 2004)

This moral outlook becomes central in Zoroastrianism, and is still important as a focus and a unifying factor for Zoroastrians today. Rhys Davids notes that the triad is not found in other early Indian texts. Jan Gonda’s survey *Triads in the Vedas* does not mention this set in pre-Buddhist texts, though he does find it in the *Manusmṛti* (12.10f), where it is referred to as “*tridaṇḍa* ‘the threefold control (over oneself)’, viz. over speech, thought, and body” (Gonda 1976: 211).

If this is not a Buddhist borrowing from Zoroastrianism then it is an extraordinary coincidence.

Karma and the Afterlife

Witzel also notes that the idea of deeds being weighed after death was not a Vedic concept. “This was first an Egyptian, then a Zoroastrian and Iranian concept. It is connected with the idea of personal responsibility for one’s action (*karma*)” (Witzel 2010).

The Egyptian form of this idea can be found in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The heart of Ani the scribe, recently deceased, is weighed in a balance, with the law—represented by a feather, or sometimes the goddess Maāt—on the other side. Ani is found to be righteous: “there hath not been found any wickedness in him; he hath not wasted the offerings in the temples; he hath not done harm by his deeds; and he uttered no evil reports while he was upon earth” (Budge 1895: 258).

¹¹My attention was drawn to this connection by Ratnaprabha in a comment on my blog (<http://jayarava.blogspot.com> 20 June 2008). He pointed to a mention of it in Sangharakshita (1984: 34–35). Sangharakshita recalls noticing the connection while reading the Zoroastrian *Gathas*. (Personal Communication 19.1.12.)

¹²The equivalent Sanskrit terms – *sumata*, *sūkta* and *suvrata* – exist, but not as a set, and not with the moral implications.

He is then led into the presence of Osiris (and becomes one of the gods). Note his actions are divided into bodily and spoken, but not (yet) mental. Had Ani's heart been heavy, i.e. if he had not been righteous, he would have been given over to Āmemet, the devourer of the dead.

Similarly, in Zoroastrianism the dead are judged on their actions during life:

“...the soul's fate depends solely on the sum of the individual's thoughts, words, and acts, the good being weighed against the bad, so that no observances should avail it in any way.” (Boyce 1994)

For Zoroastrians, therefore, one's afterlife destination depends on one's actions in life. Technically none of the usual rites and rituals (e.g. the *śrāddha* or funeral rites of the Brahmins) could do anything about it; however, “human weakness (including the force of natural affections) and human illogicality enabled [Zarathustra's] followers to maintain this doctrine while at the same time performing many rites for the departed soul's benefit.” (Boyce 1994).

Gananath Obeyesekere (2002) outlines how this type of thinking results in a bifurcation of the afterlife. Heaven and Hell are necessary consequences of the ethicization of eschatologies:

“There can no longer be a single place for those who have done good and those who have done bad. The otherworld must minimally split into two, a world of retribution (‘hell’) and a world of reward (‘heaven’).” (Obeyesekere 2002: 79)

However, good and bad can be defined in many ways. In India the process can be seen in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, which propose different destinations for those who know about the five fires (*pañcāgni*), those who only practise the ordinary Brahmanical rituals, and those who do neither (BU 6.2, 5.2–10; cf. CU 8.1–2). There is no hell here, though rebirth as a worm, insect or snake might have been hinting at a very unpleasant afterlife. In fact the idea of hell appears as if from nowhere in Vedic thought.¹³

In Buddhist eschatology one's afterlife destination is linked to one's conduct (*karma*) of body, speech and mind. Karma and rebirth are ethicised, and the afterlife becomes very elaborate, with five or six domains of rebirth, and heaven and hell subdivided into many layers.

¹³cf. Brown (1941), Bodewitz (2002), Stausberg (2009).

Some Buddhist texts do present stories of judgement in the afterlife that are reminiscent of Zoroastrianism, and even of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. For instance, the *Devadūta Sutta* (M iii.178) tells how after death a being who has behaved badly might be reborn in hell (*niraya*); there they will be seized by the guardians of hell (*nirayapālā*), dragged before King Yama and cross-examined about their evil conduct of body, speech and mind. Unable to account for themselves, they are then condemned to horrific tortures, which are graphically described, and it is emphasised that “as long as that evil action is not destroyed, he does not die.”¹⁴ And until he dies, he cannot be reborn in another realm.

When it is read in the light of a possible connection to Zoroastrianism, the *Devadūta Sutta* seems to take on a new significance. Particularly the role of Yama as judge and torturer seems to fly in the face of impersonal *karma*.

It is speculative, but we could see the Buddhist theory of karma as the result of Zoroastrian-style ethicization of conduct, with its effects on afterlife destinations, applied to the Indian-style rebirth eschatology. The result is a distinctive eschatology and morality.

Two or More Cultures

Having considered some of Witzel’s suggested parallels we must now turn to the problem of how ideas from Iran might have been transmitted into the areas associated with Buddhism, and seemingly not, in most cases, to the intervening Brahmanical culture. We’ll begin by setting the scene.

Within the last decade the history of India in the first millennium BCE has been substantially revised, although a consensus on the details is still emerging. An appraisal of each theory is beyond the scope of this article, but most scholars now agree that by the beginning of the first millennium in Upper Ganges Valley, in the area of the Yamuna-Ganges Doab, there existed the Kuru-Pāñcāla ‘state’. It was village-based rather than urban, and dominated by the Kuru tribe. It was in this region that the Ṛgveda was compiled, and the elaborate *śrauta* rituals were developed. The legends of the Mahābhārata are probably based on historical events in this region.

Witzel (1987, 1989, 1997), Bronkhorst (2007) and Samuel (2008) have all described a second, adjoining cultural complex, made up of several small states in the Central Ganges Valley. It was within this second region that Buddhism, Jain-

¹⁴*na ca tāva kālaṅkaroti yāva na taṃ pāpakammaṃ byantīhoti*. My translation.

ism and other Śramaṇa religions emerged. This Central Region was not initially or fundamentally Vedic, but it was Indic language speaking. Kuru-Pañcāla Brahmins, after some initial reluctance, began migrating into the Central Region ca. 800 BCE, so that Brahmins feature in early Buddhist texts but do not dominate them. There were probably influences from Chalcolithic cultures in the Vindhya Hills, Maharashtra, and the Northern Deccan, and possibly some Tibeto-Burman influence as well, though the nature and extent of this influence is sketchily understood at best. The Central Region also saw the beginnings of the second urbanisation of India, with cities such as Kāśī (Vārāṇasi), Śrāvastī and Rājagṛha being founded in the 7th or 6th century BCE.¹⁵ These dates are still vague and often based on current guesses for the date of the Buddha rather than firm archaeological facts (and those guesses have shifted forwards by a century since most of the archaeology was reported). During the lifetime of the Buddha the Central Ganges plain kingdoms Kosala and Magadha were both aggressive militaristic states that were expanding their territory.

Deshpande (1979, 1995) supports the idea of two cultures on the basis of historical linguistics. There were east-west differences in Indo-Aryan dialects, with the eastern dialects thought to have broken away from the Indo-Iranian slightly earlier; this suggests at least two waves of linguistic change in India, associated presumably with two waves of immigrants.

Genetic studies do not yet have the resolution required to shed light on this problem. They do show migrants from the steppes of Central Asia, who were probably speakers of Indo-Iranian or Indo-Aryan languages, but these migrants must have been few in number and mostly male (Sengupta et al. 2005, Carvalho-Silva et al. 2006, Reich et al. 2009, Majumder 2010). This leaves us to explain the dominance of Indo-Aryan social customs, languages and technology in Northern India in terms other than overwhelming numbers or conquest. It is not clear that we have a satisfactory answer to this question.

Amidst the larger-scale political developments of the first millennium BCE, the Śākyas emerge as a marginal people living in the foothills of the Himalayas at the northern edge of the Central Ganges Region. They were absorbed into the Kingdom of Kosala by the end of the 5th century BCE. Tribes such as the Malla, Vṛjī, and in all likelihood the Śākyas, seem to be late entrants to this area. They are mentioned in the Pāli, but not in the late Vedic texts, which leads Witzel to propose that they only appeared in the region between the Late Vedic and Early

¹⁵See Berchert 1992.

Buddhist periods (Witzel 1997), i.e. between about 1000 BCE and 500 BCE. As we will see, they brought with them a number of features foreign to existing cultures in the Ganges Plain.

Śākyas and Śakas

The Scythians were cattle-herding nomads of the Eurasian Steppes who at different times ranged from 110 to 30 east and between about 40 and 50 north, or from present-day Tuva to the Black Sea. The Steppes were inhabited by a number of pastoralist and agrarian groups, but mobile cattle herding became the dominant lifestyle in the early Iron Age. The Scythians are distinguished by their domestication of horses, their nomadic cattle-breeding lifestyle, their burial mounds, and a fine artistic tradition featuring animal images. Their material culture is described in detail in Davis-Kimball et al. (1995).

Many authors follow the Buddha's contemporary, Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BCE), in referring to the tribes encountered near Europe, especially in the area north of the Black Sea, as *Skythai* (Gk. Σκύθαι) or *Scythian*, and the tribes of the Central Asian Steppes, to the east of the Caspian Sea, as *Sakai* (Gk. Σάκαι) or *Sacae*. In Iranian the Sakai are known as Saka, and in Sanskrit as Śaka. This suggests that Śaka/Saka/Σάκαι represents what they called themselves. Both Scythian and Śaka are used rather loosely, however, and both can refer to any steppe-dwelling people. Scythian is often used as a broader term that includes the Śaka as a subgroup, which is how I will use it.

The Scythians did not use writing; however, the scholarly consensus is that they spoke Indo-Iranian languages (Yablonsky 1995, Forston 2010). On the basis of material culture, particularly *kurgan* or burial mounds, Carbon 14 dating shows three main periods of Scythian history (Alekseev 2001):

- 9th – 7th centuries BCE: pre-Scythian and Initial Scythian phase
- 7th – 6th centuries BCE: early Scythian phase
- 5th – 3rd centuries BCE: classical Scythian phase

The Scythians were important players in history during the Achaemenid Empire, which corresponds to the early and classical phase. Several different groups of them are recorded both in the royal inscriptions of King Darius (ca. 521–486 BCE) and in the *History* of Herodotus. Most of the pre-Scythian burial mounds are in the east of Central Asia near present-day Tuva and Mongolia, but in the 9th

century there was a rapid expansion west, probably prompted by changes in the climate (Davis-Kimball et al. 1995, van Geel 2004). However, even at this early stage the one which most concerns us the Scythians seem to have wandered across the whole of Eurasia (Alekseev 2001, 2002). The Sakai of Herodotus' narrative, who lived on the Eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, went on to become rulers of parts of Iran, Afghanistan and Gandhāra in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, but after that began to fade from history.

For Witzel the similarity of the names Śaka and Śākya is no coincidence. Both appear to derive from the root $\sqrt{śak}$, 'to be able, strong or powerful'. Śākya is probably a derivative form meaning 'related to, or descended from, the Śakas' (cf. MW sv. Śākya). The names Śākya and Śaka are probably cognate, however the underlying meaning is 'powerful', and it is not unlikely that two disparate groups might refer to themselves as 'the powerful', or even be given that epithet. In the *Ambatṭha Sutta* the Śākyas are described as fierce, harsh, touchy and argumentative (*caṇḍā*, *pharusā*, *lahusā* and *bhassā*) (D i.90–1), which could be consistent with descriptions of steppes tribes in Herodotus; but we need to keep in mind that in Witzel's account they had arrived in India centuries before the Buddha and had been thoroughly assimilated. The similarity in names is not enough to identify the Śākyas with the Iranian Sakas. We need to start looking more closely at why we might consider the Śākyas to derive from the Śakas. I'll begin by looking at the idea that the Śākyas arrived in India relatively late.

Migration in the 9th century

Michael Witzel notes that in Vedic texts associated with the eastern Ganges plain, none of the various tribes that populate the Pāli texts are found. The Sakya, Malla, Vajji, Licchavi, Naya, Kālāma, Buli, Moriya and Vesali are all missing from the *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka* texts. By contrast, Pāṇini knows the Mallas and the Vṛjīs as tribes of the Panjab and Rajasthan respectively. Some of the Mallas must have remained behind, as Alexander's ambassadors met people called "Malloi" (Witzel 1997: 310). Witzel reasons that these tribes must have arrived in India and migrated eastwards in the space between the composition of the late Vedic texts and the lifetime of the Buddha, i.e. between about 1000 and 500 BCE (Witzel 1997: 312).

The fact that the Śākyas are not mentioned until the Buddhist period may be explained in other ways. They may have been indigenous to the area though this raises the question of where they got an Indic-language name, since the indige-

nous people most likely spoke an Austro-Asiatic language. They may have been an early wave of the Indic-speaking peoples. However, these explanations don't explain how the Śākya came into contact with ideas such as dividing the person into body, speech and mind for moral purposes, which is so very like the Zoroastrian idea.

Witzel's time frame for the migration of non-Vedic tribes eastwards is still very broad, but we can narrow it down. Asko Parpola (2002) has independently put forward a very similar hypothesis. Parpola is concerned with the Pāṇḍavas, and by combining archaeological and textual evidence he comes to the conclusion that a group of Iranians, generically called Pāṇḍu or 'pale', entered India around 800 BCE via the Indus Valley. Some of the Pāṇḍus went north to become the Pāṇḍavas of the *Mahābhārata*, but the main part of Parpola's argument has the Pāṇḍus continuing to migrate southwards down the west coast and eventually becoming the first Indo-European speakers in Sri Lanka (Parpola 2002: 362–4). A possible weakness of this argument is that Sinhalese is usually considered an Indic rather than an Iranian language. However, Parpola suggests that the Pāṇḍavas "quickly adopted the earlier local culture and language", and we assume the proto-Sinhalese Pāṇḍu did the same. Here we might compare the Pāṇḍavas with the 10th century Norse migrants to Normandy, who rapidly adopted French language and customs. Furthermore, the Pāṇḍavas' newly-won positions were "legitimised with fabricated genealogies that made them a branch of the earlier ruling family" (Parpola 2002: 370).

Making something of an intuitive leap, Parpola adds: "Another successful group was the family to which the Buddha belonged: the Śākya, too were Pāṇḍus, ultimately of Śaka origin, as their name reveals" (Parpola 2002: 370). Parpola's date of ca. 800 BCE for the beginning of this migration is well within Witzel's time frame.

As it happens, climate scientists have proposed that an abrupt climate shift "towards increased humidity caused by a decline of solar activity" allowed for a dramatic expansion of Scythian culture around 850 BCE (van Geel et al. 2004a, 2004b; also Chambers et al. 2007). The shift probably happened rapidly, within perhaps a decade, and also led to "a dryness crisis" caused by weak monsoon intensity in north-west India after 850 BCE (van Geel et al. 2004b). Van Geel et al. also note that "aridity forced people to shift from sedentism to sheep/goat pastoralism" (van Geel et al. 2004b: 276), while Gupta et al. suggest that changes in crops grown would also result from climate change and may explain the use

of millet, lentils, chick peas etc. (Gupta et al. 2006: 1086). At the same time, Megalithic people were moving from South India into the Deccan with iron and horses, and “they were probably responsible for the end of the Chalcolithic culture in this region” (van Geel et al. 2004b: 276). Asko Parpola, however, sees the megaliths of South India as a product of the Pāṇḍus moving south (Parpola 2002: 362).

Another possible vein of evidence is suggested by Thomas Hopkins’s claim (in Samuel 2008) that the Central Ganges culture had similarities to the Malwa culture. The Malwa were one of several Chalcolithic societies which flourished in the Northern Deccan, Maharashtra and Gujarat during the second millennium BCE. A feature of these cultures is that they, like the Indus Civilisation, ceased relatively abruptly. “A drastic change in the climate occurred around 1000 B.C., when increasing aridity set in. This probably led to desertion of the vast majority of Chalcolithic settlements” (Dhavalikar 1984: 155). The final desertion occurred around 700 BCE. It may be that the more recent and precise date of 850 BCE applies here as well, and that the collapse of Chalcolithic cultures in the Deccan mirrors the conditions faced by the Mallas, Vṛji and Śākya.

The 9th century BCE change in climate also corresponds roughly with the change from bronze to iron. It also corresponds to the compilation of the R̥gveda into a collection (Deshpande 1979: 240). Climate change data which can be accurate to within decades may be an increasingly useful tool in establishing the chronology of ancient Indian cultural changes. The date of 850 BCE for this abrupt change fits the date proposed by Parpola, and this in turn lends support to Witzel’s conjecture. Whether or not the Śakas were really Pāṇḍus, as Parpola suggests, we could at least imagine that a sharp reduction in monsoon intensity, combined with pressure from outside India in the form of vigorous and expanding tribes of steppe nomads, may have caused the migrations of the Mallas and Vṛjis that are reasonably well attested.

Other Sources of Iranian Influence

Against this picture we need to recall that the Achaemenid Empire claimed or controlled territory as far east as the Indus River from the late 6th century BCE until Alexander of Macedon invaded in 331 BCE. The extent and duration of this control is still a matter of debate, but according to Herodotus the satrapy of Hinduś

was the largest in the Empire.¹⁶ There were many potential vectors for Iranian and Mesopotamian ideas to find their way into India, with political and trade ties. We might note, for instance, that Indian writing systems, first the Kharoṣṭhī script and later Brāhmī-Lipi, seem to be based at least in part on the form of Aramaic writing used by Achaemenid administrators. The word *lipi* ‘writing’ itself is a Persian loan word (Salomon 1999: 65). A late Pāli tradition describes princes being sent to Taxila for education, and Taxila was the main Achaemenid city in Gandhāra. Another point made by Samuel, based on Hopkins’ unpublished book, is that the first use of coins in India is related to trade contacts between the Achaemenids and the Central Gangetic region (Samuel 2008: 50).

According to David Pingree, Babylonian astronomy began to be introduced into India via an Iranian intermediary, and this cannot have happened before the Achaemenid Empire conquered both Mesopotamia and Gandhāra (Pingree 1963: 231). However, some years later he says “the influence of the astronomy of [Mesopotamian text] *Mul.Apin* upon Vedic texts composed shortly before 1000 and about 500 BC can be clearly discerned” (Pingree 1998: 127). For instance, the *Jyotiṣavedāṅga* (ca. 5th century BCE) contains a calendar which is similar to Babylonian astronomy (Pingree 1963: 231). Pingree also noticed that a list of divination techniques found in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* is almost identical in form and content to Mesopotamian divination manuals *Šumma ālu* and *Enūna anu Enlil* (Pingree 1991, 1998). That the *sutta* forbids the monks from using these types of divination suggests that they were actively practised in North-East India. The likelihood is that they were spread to India in Iranian recensions by the Achaemenids (Pingree 1991: 379). The precision of the memory, combined with the story of *Barlaam & Ioasaph*, is suggestive to Stephanie Dalley: “This is the best evidence we have for Chaldean scholars living far abroad as experts and tutors in royal courts...” (Dalley 1998: 39). The evidence to support the presence of Chaldeans in India at the time is sketchy at best, and of course the idea of the Buddha’s father being a king is inaccurate. Dalley seems to be overreaching the evidence here.¹⁷

The point made by Gérard Fussman in his 2009 Gonda lecture is relevant: “We may also suppose that the non-Vedic characteristics of some early Indian

¹⁶Though Waterfield (1998) notes that this may be a misreading.

¹⁷The story of Barlaam & Ioasaph (Woodward & Mattingly 1983) is supposedly based on a Jātaka story, but the surviving versions are so heavy with Christian accretions that identifying Buddhist elements is scarcely possible.

conceptions are not necessarily borrowings from the indigenous Indian peoples the Āryas vanquished or assimilated, but Āryan ideas which never found a place in the Vedas” (Fussman 2009: 8).

Significance

Ideas have histories. And yet Buddhist narratives of the historical uniqueness of the Buddha accept that the Śākya Sage produced a number of ideas and practices with no apparent history. The last two decades have seen several attempts to create histories for some of the Buddha’s ideas, but these attempts are, almost inevitably, mostly with reference to Vedic culture. We know so very little about Indian social history outside the Vedic milieu before Buddhism that other comparisons are scarcely possible. Where there is textual evidence before ca. 500 BCE it is *all* Vedic; and archaeology has provided precious little help to date. Bronkhorst (2007) has attempted to turn the accepted chronology on its head and made the Buddhists directly influential on the Upaniṣads, but whether this revision is credible remains to be seen. Both Bronkhorst (2007) and Gombrich (2009) have argued that Buddhists must have been influenced by their Jain contemporaries, but as Gombrich (2009: 45) says, “Our evidence for early Jainism is distressingly meagre and difficult to evaluate”, and “In fact much of our best evidence for early Jainism comes from [Buddhist] texts in Pāli.” Some historians have criticised the use of Pāli texts in reconstructing Buddhist history (Walters 1999: 247–249), so their use in reconstructing a different and competing religion must be doubtful at best.

Even if the new ideas of Buddhism had their origin in a single individual, that individual existed in a cultural context, grew up in a family, and absorbed ideas and attitudes from parents, peers and teachers. Buddhism emerges from an apparently diverse cultural milieu, in which the Śākya tribe had been conquered by a dynamic and culturally distinct neighbour, and other major political changes were going on.

The ideas and practices associated with the Śākyas and early Buddhists essayed above do show some similarity to Iranian or Zoroastrian ideas or practices. The weakest link is the similarity between *stūpas* and *kurgan* burial mounds. Despite the conviction of some of the authors cited, this connection seems tenuous at best. However, the incest marriages which mark the founding of the Śākya clan according to the Pāli Canon are more suggestive, especially in light of the hostility to the practice by later Buddhist authors. Sibling marriages are familiar in Iran; and we understand that such a story is likely to have survived only if it has

a grain of truth. The strongest argument for a link to Zoroastrianism is the division of actions into body, speech and mind. That this idea developed in Iran and the Central Ganges plain independently would be a wild coincidence. Other aspects of eschatology are suggestive. The idea of post-mortem judgement for everyday actions, let alone being judged by a god, is not a part of Vedic eschatology in BU or CU, but is central to Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Particularly, the idea of a realm of punishment seems to be missing from Vedic eschatology but is prominent in both Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.

I think most historians would accept that during the period under consideration that the border between India and Persia was blurred rather than sharp, both in geographical and cultural terms – just as the distinction between Pakistan and Afghanistan is today. Other potential sources of Iranian influence exist, but they do not have the same explanatory power as the Śākya/Śaka connection because they are more or less contemporary with the Buddha. Simple geography suggests that contact between India and Iran would have occurred in the Western regions of India, i.e. the Indus Valley, and the Upper Ganges Region, but as far as I am aware there is no great influence of Iranian culture on Vedic culture. Because Witzel's theory includes a late migration into Eastern India from a non-Vedic part of Western India, it provides a vector for carrying the ideas around the Kuru-Pañcāla state and directly into the Central Ganges Region.

While this is an argument from circumstantial evidence, I hope I have shown that the evidence, such as it is, makes a connection between the Śākyas and Iran at least plausible. If this thesis is correct, then some features of Buddhism are actually cultural features of the Śākya tribe preserved from an earlier period of living in Iran. It still allows for the Buddha as visionary and innovator, and it does not deny the influence of Brahmins and Jains, but it broadens the cultural pool from which he might have drawn his ideas. If the argument is accepted, which remains to be seen, then it obviously has some interesting implications for the study of the history of India and early Buddhism.

Over the last two decades or so an increasingly rich and complex account of Indian history before the Common Era has emerged. Buddhism has come to be seen as involved in a dialogue with the surrounding cultures and as drawing ideas and practices from them. Perhaps it was this dialogue with so many competing ideologies that helped Buddhism to free itself of tribal ties and become a religion which appealed to anyone? What is really interesting about Witzel's Iranian origin theory for the Śākyas is that it may allow us to see the Buddha as a product of his

own culture. If Witzel's thesis is correct, and I think it certainly merits serious consideration and further investigation, it suggests that figures like the Buddha and Mahāvira may have been the culmination of a process rather than its genesis. That process was the assimilation of a tribe, or tribes, who arrived in north-east India in the late 9th century BCE, and brought with them ideas and practices from Iran and Zoroastrianism.

Abbreviations

BU	Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad.
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
D	Dīgha Nikāya
Gk.	Greek
M	Majjhima Nikāya
MW	Monier-Williams Sanskrit English Dictionary
Mv	Mahāvastu
RV	R̥gveda
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
Skt.	Sanskrit

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