A Note on Skandagupta's Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription, verses 8–12*

Commemorating the Dead

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One of the dear memories I have of Prof Dr Ajay Mitra Shastri is the moment that the doors of the arrival hall of Amsterdam Airport opened and I saw my learned friend leaving the 'nothing to declare' behind him. He came as an invited speaker of the biennial conference of the European Association of South Asian Archæologists, held in Leiden in the summer of 1999. The journey had been a safe one and evidently Ajay was much relieved when he saw a familiar person at the place of landing. A happy smile passed over his face. And I was glad that, finally, I had an opportunity to return some of the kind hospitality that had been bestowed on me every time I had come to Nagpur. Taking its start from a common interest, our relationship had developed from mutual respect to friendship.

Ajay's contribution to the conference, *Sātavāhana-Kṣatrapa Chronology and Art-history*, was a brilliant one, displaying a learning in history, numismatics and epigraphy that only few people can match. To invite my friend had proven to be an excellent idea. For myself he had a surprise in store. When I spoke of the role the archaeological site of Mansar could have played in Vākāṭaka history and had made the conjecture that the temple that the ASI had only just unearthed (MNS 3) could have been Pravareśvara, known from inscriptions, Ajay rose and informed the audience that this conjecture had been confirmed by recently found sealings, which had been brought to him from the site by the excavators for deciphering: they read that very temple's name.¹

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¹ See Kropman 2008.

Plate 75

Sealing (seal impression) found in MNS 3 reading: pravareśvara

After the conference I had the honour and pleasure to be Ajay's host for some more days. The weather was beautiful, we did some sight-seeing and drunk tea in our garden. It was there that we discussed for the first time the idea to organize a joint conference on the Vākāṭakas. Plans were worked out in the years that followed. The conference was scheduled to take place in Groningen in June 2002. On Saturday 12 January 2002 the news reached me that Ajay Mitra Shastri had passed away a day earlier.² The shock was great. Shastri's death meant that Vidarbha had lost one of its great historians, a scholar whose work crowned the famous, learned tradition of V.V. Mirashi and V.B. Kolte. And I had lost a friend.

As a tribute to the eminent savant I present a note on an inscription that is of great importance for our understanding of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka period of Indian history, the *Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta*.

SKANDAGUPTA'S BHITARĪ INSCRIPTION vv. 8–12

This inscription has been published several times:³ by Fleet in CII III (1888), 52–56, by Sircar in SI I, 321–324, by Bhandarkar in CII III (1981), 312–317,

² The conference went ahead, sadly without A.M. Shastri, in Groningen from 6 to 8 June 2002. The proceedings were published in 2004 (Bakker 2004d).

³ See CII III (1981), 312f.

and most recently by Dániel Balogh *forthcoming*. In addition, the inscription has been discussed by several scholars, among whom Chhabra 1963, Mirashi 1982a, Agrawal 1986, 54–66, and Willis 2009, 144–49.

In his *New Light on a Period in Gupta History* Mirashi focused his attention on the verses 4 to 8 and argued that these verses 'refer to three different struggles in which Skandagupta was involved'.⁴ Broadly speaking, I have followed Mirashi's argument,⁵ and I would now like to discuss the concluding part of the inscription, verses 8 to 12, in which the immediate reason of the epigraph is given.

In verse 8, in which Skandagupta's victory over the Hūṇas is reported, the twanging sound of a bow is referred to in a simile that is part of Skandagupta's swagger.⁶ It appears natural that the mentioning of the bow (*śārṅga*) implies Skandagupta, which would mean that his bow is meant.

Verse 9 is nearly completely illegible, but a connection is made in it between Skandagupta's deeds and his father (*svapitūḥ*) Kumāragupta. It should be observed that *kīrtti*, apparently the first word of a compound, could refer to fame or anything that brings fame, e.g. a temple.

The first three syllables of pāda a of the next verse (10) are lost. Fleet and Sircar conjectured *kartavyā* (Bhandarkar *prakāryā*), but an ingenious conjecture was made by Chhabra 1963, 546: *na yasya* (quoted with approval by Agrawal 1986, 63). It gives significance to the double occurrence of the word *pratimā* in the first hemistich—more meaningful, in my view, than the pedestrian 'an image should be made' of Fleet, Sircar, and Bhandarkar—to the effect that, although God Viṣṇu is admittedly transcendent, that is without form (*na yasya pratimā kācīt*), a material image of Him in his manifestation of Śārṅgin can be made. I therefore take the genitive, 'of that wielder of the bow' (*tasya śārṅgiṇaḥ*) in 10b as depending on (*pratimām*) and referring to the deity; the form chosen, that of the archer, implements a comparison with Kumāragupta or Skandagupta (cf. 8b, 8d)—both certainly mighty bowmen to judge by their coinage.⁷ The *pratimām... imām* (10bc) of Viṣṇu-Śārṅgin is the deity installed, whose name, as proposed by Bhandarkar, may have been Kumārasvāmin.⁸

In the *Mahābhārata* Vāsudeva's and/or Kṛṣṇa's bow is called Śārṅga. It is the divine *vaiṣṇava* bow.⁹ Curiously enough, the term or name Śārṅgin does

4 Mirashi 1982a, 70 related the first of this struggles to the *Indore Plates of Pravarasena II*, Year 23 and argued that the 'un-named enemies of the Guptas included the Vākātakas' (cf. above, p. 146 and n. 29 on p. 325).

5 Bakker 1997, 25–28. Cf. Bakker 2006.

6 8d: *śārṅgadhvaniḥ*, read by Fleet as *gāṅgadhvaniḥ*. The correct reading has been suggested by Jagan Nath and was taken over by Bhandarkar and Sircar in their editions.

7 See Kumāragupta's and Skandagupta's Archer Type and Skandagupta's so-called 'King-and-Lakṣmī Type' of gold coins (above, p. 316 and Plate 48).

8 Fleet suggested *yāvadācandratāraṇam*, accepted by Sircar, but rejected by Bhandarkar, who points out that 'if *yāvat* is used, *ā°* is superfluous' (CII III (1981), 315 n. 4.). On top of that, the expression seems to be out of place here.

9 MBh 5.155.6, 9. Cf. MBh 2.2.12, 3.21.18.

not occur in the critical text of either the *Mahābhārata* or the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It does occur, however in the *-passages in the critical apparatus and appendices of the MBh edition as a name of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa.¹⁰ From this it follows that the word Śārṅgin as a name of Vāsudeva is comparatively late, attested only in the later phase of the composition of the epic, that is the 3rd to 5th centuries AD. This agrees well with the evidence of the inscription. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Śārṅgin mentioned in verse 10 is considered to be a form of Vāsudeva, the Bhagavat (v. 12).¹¹

It is clear that in verse 10 Skandagupta is credited with the making of an image of a deity that is known to be a mighty archer and as such reflects the qualities of himself and his father. In view of the fact that the merit of this act is assigned to the deceased father, Kumāragupta, the name suggested for the installed image, Kumārasvāmin, is a plausible conjecture. It has a contemporary parallel in the *Kevala-Narasimha Temple Inscription*, in which the merit of the installation of the deity Prabhāvatīsvāmin is assigned to Kumāragupta's sister, the deceased Vākāṭaka queen, Prabhāvatī Guptā.¹²

The puzzle in v. 11 is to whom/which (the masculine) *enam*, as read by Fleet, Sircar and Bhandarkar, in pāda a refers. It would normally be something that is already mentioned (*anvādeśa*), something that is now being installed at the site (*iha*). It can hardly be anything else but the deity (*devam*), supposedly mentioned in 10d, i.e. Kumārasvāmin. A good suggestion made by Dániel Balogh is to read (feminine) *enām*, which naturally refers to the *pratimā* of the preceding verse. Pādas 11cd add that a village or community (*grāma*) is assigned (*vidhā-*) to the deity (i.e. to the temple and its priests) and that the merit of this deed accrues to Kumāragupta.¹³

This appears to be one of two (*ubhayam*) acts that are performed for the benefit of the father (12cd). Which is the other one? I think we can exclude the erection of the column itself, as proposed by Bhandarkar,¹⁴ since the inscription does not say anything explicit about it. This would leave the following possibilities: 1) the making (*cakāra*) of the image, or, 2) the installation (*pratiṣṭhāpya*) of the image, or, 3) a combination of 1) and 2). The last possibility seems the most plausible one, that is, if we analyse verse 12 correctly.

Verse 11 is a syntactically independent clause: 'having done so and so, he assigned the village/community...'. This suggests that v. 12 is also a syntactically complete clause, consisting of a relative clause (12ab), in which two things

10 MBh 1 App. I No. 114 l. 339, 7.59 *440, 12 App. I No. 6 l. 29, 17.1 *3, 18.5 *30. Cf. Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* 1.46 and *Amarakośa* 1.1.19.

11 Vāsudeva is used synonymously with Kṛṣṇa (sometimes equated with Viṣṇu). It is extremely unlikely that it refers to Rāma.

12 Bakker 1997, 166 v. 21; above, p. 124.

13 The *grāma* is not specified in the legible part of the inscription, but, in view of the use again of the pronoun *enam* in 11c, it has probably been mentioned earlier as well, maybe in v. 9; the place of residence may have been the site where the inscribed column is found, i.e. the present Bhitārī.

14 CII III (1981), 317 n. 4.

are mentioned, and a main clause (12cd). The crux of the verse is pāda b. Fleet and Sircar read '*īyaṃ yaś cātra saṃsthitaḥ*' (with question marks), Bhandarkar (Chhabra and Gai) proposes: '*īyaṃ yaś cātra [saṃskri(ṛ)taḥ]*' (*op. cit.* 316). One would assume that the act of *saṃskṛ*- (consecration) is normally comprised in the ritual of *pratiṣṭhā*- (installation) and plays no role here. *īyaṃ* is significant: it may correspond to *mūrtir* in pāda a, but it stands after the caesura in the next pāda. This means that pāda 12b actually recapitulates the two things that are referred to by *ubhayam* in 12c: 1) this one here (namely, the image), and (ca) 2) 'who/that which is here *saṃ*. . .'. This interpretation takes pāda 12a in apposition to *īyaṃ*. Fleet's and Sircar's reading *saṃsthitaḥ* could be understood as a periphrase of *grāmaḥ*: 'the one who is living here, (i.e. the community)', although it remains slightly unsatisfactory. Willis 2009, 148 f. has reexamined the case in detail and reads *saṃśritaḥ*, which gives the better sense: that which has been 'attached' or 'consigned', viz. to the installed deity.

My comprehensive understanding of the proclamation made in vv. 8–12 is presented in a critical edition and translation of the text in the Appendix.

Concluding remarks on the inscription and the site of Bhitari

To sum up, the purport of the inscription is to proclaim, in addition to Skandagupta's victories on the battle field, that Skandagupta installed an image of Vāsudeva-Śārṅgin, possibly named Kumārasvāmin, a deity who is a great archer and as such reflects the qualities of the emperor and his father. For the maintenance of the image/temple Skandagupta assigns a village or community to the deity, that is to say, he exempts this community from taxes, so that its surplus production from now on may be used for worship of the deity and maintenance of the temple. Both beneficial acts are performed to increase the merit of his deceased father, Kumāragupta.

Finally I would like to draw attention to an important remark made in the Introduction of the 1981-edition of CII III. On page 83 it is observed: 'In fact, Bhitari is studded with so many mounds that it is not impossible that it was the mausoleum or *pratimā-griha* of the Gupta family.'¹⁵ This hypothesis has only partly been corroborated by the excavations carried out by the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, between the years 1968 and 1973, and 1995.¹⁶ A proper assessment of these excavations reported by Vidula Jayaswal (2001), would go beyond the scope of this article. One photograph, taken from the excavator's website,¹⁷ may give an impression of the situation (Plate 76).

15 For the concept of the *pratimāgrha* and memorial temples see below, p. 415 (Bakker 2007a, 19–23).

16 Jayaswal 2001, vii.

17 <https://www.cse.iitk.ac.in/users/amit/books/jayaswal-2001-royal-temples-of.html>.

Above we adduced the parallel example of the foundation of the Prabhāvati-svāmin temple on the Rāmagiri. In discussing this and neighbouring temples on this hill, I have argued that these sanctuaries were erected to transfer merit to the deceased members of the Vākāṭaka family.¹⁸

Plate 76

Bhitari. Pillar with Skandagupta's inscription and adjacent excavation of site 2

I would be hesitant to call these temples 'mausoleums', since they were certainly no tombs or cenotaphs, nor is it at all likely that portraits (otherwise than through metaphor) of the deceased were set up, and maybe even the designation 'memorial' is misleading, but these temples seem to have served some funerary or commemorative function, namely to ensure the salvation of the deceased by means of a transfer of merit.¹⁹ An evaluation of the results of the excavations by Vidula Jayaswal and his team and further research must establish whether or not the site of Bhitari served such aims in Gupta times. I for one conclude with a paraphrase of Skandagupta's words:

अतो मदीयमीमांसा इयं यच्चात्र मुद्रितम् ।
उभयं निर्दिदेशाहं शास्त्रिणः पुण्यवृद्धये ॥

¹⁸ Bakker 1992b and 1997, 30 f., and above, p. 371.

¹⁹ For the phenomenon of merit-transfer see Wezler 1997.

APPENDIX *

Skandagupta's Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription vv. 8–12

text

hūṇair yasya samāgatasya samare dorbhyāṃ dharā kampitā,
 bhīmāvartakarasya śatruṣu śārā -- ∪ -- ∪ -- |
 -- ∪ -- ∪ -- ∪ -- (viracitaṃ) prakhyāpito <dīptimān>,
 na (dyo)ti ∪ na -- ∪ lakṣyata iva śrotreṣu śārīgadhvaniḥ || 8 ||
 (sva)pituḥ kīrtti ∪ ∪ ∪ , ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ |
 ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ , ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ || 9 ||
 <na yasya> pratimā kācit pratimāṃ tasya śārīgīṇaḥ |
 s(u)pratītaś cakāremāṃ <kumārasvāmināmikām> || 10 ||
 iha cain(ā)ṃ pratiṣṭhāpya supratīṣṭhitaśāsanāḥ |
 grāmam enaṃ sa vidadh(e) pituḥ puṇyābhivṛddhaye || 11 ||
 ato bhagavato mūrtir iyaṃ yas cātra (saṃśritaḥ) |
 ubhayaṃ nirdideśāsau pituḥ puṇyāya puṇyadhīr || 12 ||
 iti

8 Śārdūlavikrīḍita 9–12 Śloka (11c na vipulā)

8c *dīptimān*] conj. Bhandarkar : - i ∪ i - Fleet, *dīptidā* conj. Sircar 8d *dyoti* ∪ na
 - ∪] Sircar : *dyo(?)ti* ∪ *nabhī(?)ṣu* conj. Fleet *śārīgadhvaniḥ*] Jagan Nath, Sircar :
gāṇgadhvaniḥ conj. Fleet 10a *na yasya*] conj. Chhabra (accepted by Agrawal) : *prakāryā*
 conj. Bhandarkar, *kartavyā* conj. Fleet, Sircar 10d *su°*] conj. Fleet, Sircar, Bhandarkar :
sa conj. Chhabra, Agrawal *kumārasvāmināmikām*] conj. Bhandarkar (accepted by
 Agrawal and Willis) : *yāvad ācandratārakam* conj. Fleet, Sircar 11a *cainām*] conj.
 Balogh : *cainam* Fleet, Sircar, Bhandarkar 12b *saṃśritaḥ*] Willis : *saṃsthitāḥ* Fleet,
 Sircar, Agrawal

translation

When he (Skandagupta) joined in close conflict with the Hūṇas, the earth was made to tremble due to (the power of) his arms, since he caused a terrible whirlpool among the enemy by ... of arrows; the brilliant ... is proclaimed ..., (which) sounds like the twanging of (his) bow (*śārīga*) in (their) ears. (8)

Of his father ... fame/temple ... (9)

He (i.e. Skandagupta), as he is a celebrated (archer), has made an image of that 'Wielder of the Bow', Śārigin (i.e. Viṣṇu), the One who is (actually) beyond form (*pratimā*)—this (image) here, (which carries the name Kumārasvāmin). (10)

And after this image had been installed by him at this site, he (i.e. Skandagupta), as his orders are well-obeyed, has assigned this village (to the installed deity) for the sake of the increase of his father's merit. (11)

Hence the manifestation of the Lord, this (image/manifestation) here (i.e. Kumārasvāmin) and that which here has been consigned (to it) (i.e. the *grāma*), he (i.e. Skandagupta) has destined both for the merit of (his) father, since he is determined upon merit. (12)

* This Appendix has been added and is not contained in the original publication of 2005.