CHAPTER 2

Abhidharmic Elements in Gandhāran Mahāyāna Buddhism: Groups of Four and the abhedyaprasādas in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra

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1 Introduction

From the various collections of Gāndhārī manuscripts, an increasing number can be ascribed to the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism. As of now seven early Mahāyāna sūtras have been identified, supplemented by some scholastic texts, which also appear to bear a Mahāyāna character.

The Gāndhārī Mahāyāna sūtras can be divided into two chronologically – and probably also regionally – different groups.1 The more recent one is represented by manuscripts which most likely originate from Bamiyan. According to the paleography of their script and the advanced stage of their orthography and language, they can be ascribed to the later period of Gāndhāran literature, i.e. the third, early fourth century CE. This date is also confirmed by radiocarbon dating. This more recent group comprises fragments of Gāndhārī versions of already known Mahāyāna texts:

Skt. Bhadrakalpika-sūtra (ca. 60 fragments, Schøyen Collection, see Allon and Salomon, 2010: 6f.; Baums, Glass and Matsuda, forthcoming)
Skt. Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra (MS17, see Allon and Salomon, 2010: 8)
Skt. Sarvapunyasamuccayasamādhi-sūtra (MS89, see Allon and Salomon, 2010: 7f.)

The older manuscripts preceding this group were written most likely in the late first, early second century CE. Again this date could be confirmed by radiocarbon dating (for the Prajñāpāramitā cf. Falk, 2011: 20). Although two of these early manuscripts contain texts which can also directly be linked to extant versions of Mahāyāna works, two of them seem to represent texts which are hitherto unknown and have not been transmitted in any of the known Buddhist literary traditions. These texts promise new insights into the formative phase

1 For more details cf. Strauch, forthcoming. See also Allon and Salomon, 2010.
of early Mahāyāna, when texts had yet to be harmonized into authoritative versions. The texts of this second group comprise:

“Bajaur Mahāyāna sūtra” (BajC2, see Strauch, 2010; Strauch, forthcoming)  
Skt. *Sucitti-sūtra (unpublished private collection, see Allon and Salomon, 2010: 11)  
Skt. Pratyutpaṇṇabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi-sūtra (unpublished private collection, see Harrison and Hartmann, 2014: xvi, note 19)

At least two of these four early texts – the “Bajaur Mahāyāna sūtra” and the Prajñāpāramitā – hail, according to reliable records, from the region along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, in the modern-day districts of Bajaur and Dir, i.e. east of the Hindukush range.2

Among these early texts, the Bajaur Mahāyāna sūtra is of special interest. First, it is by far the largest of these early Mahāyāna texts, and the longest text in Gāndhāri known so far, comprising around six hundred lines on a large composite birch bark scroll of about 2 meters length. Second, it belongs to those texts, for which no parallel in another language is known.

The Bajaur Mahāyāna sūtra is part of the Bajaur Collection, which was allegedly discovered in the ruins of a Buddhist monastery near the village Mian Kili at the Dir-Bajaur border. The collection comprises texts of various Buddhist literary genres, such as āgama, vinaya, rakṣā and stotra texts. A considerable number of texts belong to the genre of scholastic literature, some of which have a distinctive Mahāyāna tendency.3 Even non-Buddhist texts such as a rājanīti verse anthology and a loan contract could be identified among the birch barks of the Bajaur Collection.4

The study of the large Bajaur Mahāyāna sūtra is still ongoing. Although the edition still needs some further research regarding certain passages, a more general discussion and summary of its contents will be published soon.5

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2 For the origin of the Bajaur Collection cf. Strauch, 2008; for the Split Collection see Falk, 2011.  
3 The best preserved texts of this group were edited by Andrea Schlosser in her dissertation “On the Bodhisattva Path in Gandhāra – Edition of Fragment 4 and 11 from the Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts” (2013, revised version 2016).  
5 The editing of the text is carried out by Ingo Strauch and Andrea Schlosser within a cooperation between the Chair of Buddhist Studies at Lausanne University and the project “Early Buddhist Manuscripts from Gandhāra” of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, Munich.