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## Review of Bronkhorst, J. (2011) Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism

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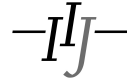
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## Book Reviews



### Johannes Bronkhorst

*Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. viii, 296 (Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 2, South Asia 24). ISBN 978-90-04-20140-8. €119,00 / US\$169,00

Johannes Bronkhorst [JB] is a prolific scholar, one full of ideas, often new and original. While much of his attention has focused on grammar, in fact little of ancient Indian culture seems foreign to him. The recent festschrift in his honor (*Devadattīyam*, Peter Lang, 2012) at more than 850 pages recognizes, even in its sheer bulk alone, the weight of his contributions; the forward by the editors and the brief introductory remarks of Jan Houben tell something of JB and the breadth of his scholarship. What they do not quite capture is his good humor, warmth and enthusiasm, which those who have met him cannot help but appreciate and enjoy. This gusto and passion pervades his scholarship as well.

In 2007, JB published *Greater Magadha* (Brill), a work which offers the hypothesis of a great divide between the Vedic and brahmanical western heartland and the eastern cultural area JB, on the model of Richard Salomon's 'Greater Gandhāra,' dubs 'Greater Magadha.' This work—which has, to my mind, yet to be critically assessed to the degree it clearly deserves—serves as the basis for *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, a work in which JB attempts to demonstrate that Buddhism arose in a non-brahmanical environment, only later falling under its 'shadow' (a metaphor the book itself however nowhere explicitly explores), such that in the end their domains of action are largely, although of course not entirely, separate.

JB is a scholar of very seductive ideas, big ideas, ideas which cannot fail to incite us to rethink what we assume we know. And this book, with its consideration of the Sanskrit language and brahmanization, the divorce between brahmanical social status and the 'religion' of brahmanism, the question of Buddhist access to political power in the absence of an alternative to brahmanical ide-

ologies of power, the place of patronage, and much more, provides stimulation in abundance. A number of big hypotheses are put forward about the fundamental circumstances which shaped what became at the very least the intellectual world of ancient India, although the connections between this intellectual world and the world of money and political power are here explored much more than is usual in conventional intellectual histories. The result is a set of sweeping hypotheses about the factors and forces which led to the development of both brahmanical and Buddhist traditions, and their embedding in the political (and in the case of relic and stūpa worship, physical) landscape. One cannot fail to be impressed and in some degree seduced, if only by JB's evident delight and absolute self-conviction. But one wonders—or at least I do—whether familiarity with the sources upon which JB bases his hypotheses might not, rather more often than is comfortable, reveal them to stand on unstable sand. This does not in and of itself invalidate the creative impetus JB's work offers, of course, but it does call into question the evidential viability of the picture he attempts to paint, a picture which, it must be said, often gives the impression of having been fast sketched on the basis of a flash of inspiration, perhaps without sufficient reflection or attention to what the data actually support. This 'speed dating' approach is visible also in the repetitions and false starts with which the book is peppered.

One often encounters in the pages of *Shadow* expressions which one—or again, I, at least—would hope the author would not, upon reflection, defend, but which in the end do seem to reveal a set of assumptions with which he started, and which inform—although inconsistently—what follows. An example is found on p. 9, where we read (my emphasis) “It goes almost without saying that a number of those converts [to Buddhism—JAS] brought along with them some other beliefs and practices, *some of which did not agree with the vision of Buddhism's founder.*” This expression does not seem to be a mere slip, for the very next paragraph reads:

It is one thing to know that the buddhist canon contains a mixture of authentic and non-authentic buddhist practices and ideas, it is something different altogether to determine which are authentic and which are not. However, our acquaintance with the ideas and practices of other currents in Greater Magadha allows us to do so: Ideas and practices that are both rejected and recommended in the buddhist canon and that correspond to the cultural and religious features of Greater Magadha should be considered borrowings into Buddhism. On the other hand, ideas and practices that are not contradicted in the ancient canon may be accepted as authentic. We thus follow the general rule that the teachings

that the ancient discourses ascribe to the Buddha can indeed be ascribed to him. Only where there are reasons to doubt the authenticity of a certain teaching, for example because it contradicts other canonical statements, should we deviate from this rule.

As I understand him, what JB says here (and said already in his “Die buddhistische Lehre,” *Der Buddhismus 1*, W. Kohlhammer, 2000: 31–32, in English in *Buddhist Teaching in India*, Wisdom, 2009: 8) is that anything not unique to Buddhist articulations and contradicted in (other?) Buddhist texts is ‘inauthentic’, having been borrowed into Buddhism from elsewhere. Moreover, the Buddhist texts *as we have them* present the genuine teachings of the Buddha (as a human teacher?), unless there are contradictions. If statement A in a Buddhist text contradicts statement B, which one is ‘inauthentic,’ or is it that both are? How are we to decide? And why would JB be interested in questions of authenticity in the first place? He tells us directly (p. 10): “It will be clear that our initial purpose to understand Buddhism in its original context leads to a methodological principle that may help us discover the original teaching of the Buddha.” Not all readers will find this a coherent scholarly aim. Nevertheless, much of the rest of the book demonstrates that JB doesn’t consistently believe the principle he seems to articulate here (demonstrating that he contradicts himself, and is thus himself not authentic?).

I suggested above that familiarity with his sources reveals that JB sometimes misunderstands or misrepresents them, or at least that other understandings seem possible. As an example, on p. 15 JB refers to the first Rock Edict of Aśoka, and quotes (in English) the expression “Here no living being must be killed or sacrificed.” He goes on:

The form “must be sacrificed”—*prajūhitavyam, pajohitaviye*, etc.—is derived from the verbal root *hu* “to sacrifice, offer oblations”, whose connection with the vedic sacrifice is well-known. The first Rock Edict, then, forbids the Brahmins to carry out sacrifices in which animals are killed. This edict, it may be recalled, was hewn into rock at at least nine different places scattered over the whole of Aśoka’s empire. The prohibition to sacrifice living beings had therefore more than mere local significance.

In his note JB refers to the editions of Hultzsch 1925 (whose translation he quotes), Bloch 1950 and Schneider 1978. To quote Gīrnār for the sake of convenience, the line in question reads *idha na kimci jīvam ārabhitpā prajūhitavyam na ca samājo kattavyo*. Hultzsch offers a note for the word *idha* (in other versions *hida*), ‘here,’ ‘viz. ‘in my territory.’” Bloch, however, is more cautious: “‘Ici’,

c'est à-dire au palais royal? plutôt peut-être aux endroits où l'édit est affiché." Discussing the same term in the context of the fifth Rock Edict, K.R. Norman ("Lexical Variation in the Aśoka Inscriptions," reprinted in *Collected Papers* [Pali Text Society], 1990, p. 135) writes: "Aśoka proclaimed that he had ordered certain operations to be carried out 'Here (*hida*) and in the outlying cities (of the empire).' The scribe at G[irnar] recognised that the word *hida* he received in his exemplar did not refer to *his hida*, i.e. Girnar, but to Aśoka's *hida*, i.e. Pāṭaliputra. He accordingly replaced *hida* by *Pāṭalipute*." I am not sure that the meaning of 'here' in the first Rock Edict and the fifth must necessarily be the same, nor do I know whether anyone has studied the term *idha/hida* in Aśoka's usages, but what is most important at present is not exactly what is meant at Girnar (does it speak of the issuing capital, of Girnar in general, of the sacralized spot on which the emperor's words are inscribed in stone, or someplace else?) but how JB has used this inscription. The move that JB has performed in the passage quoted above is perhaps little more than an abbreviation: he notices that the inscription is found in multiple spots, assumes the 'here' in each case to refer to the location of the edict, and thus concludes that the prohibition applies in multiple locations. In a step that is found more than once in the book under review, however, what could have been a slightly incautiously general formulation becomes, within a matter of pages, a general rule; JB tells us on p. 27 that "we have seen that Aśoka also forbade animal sacrifices." The sole justification for this—to my mind *prima facie* extremely unlikely—claim is nothing other than the passage just discussed. While it remains unclear what was intended by the domain of the 'here' where sacrifice was forbidden, there is no reason to assume that it extended over the breadth of Aśoka's empire (leaving aside the question of just what sort of authority could actually be exerted over vast domains in premodern times; recent work on empire stresses that power was not exerted universally or evenly over far-flung regions).

On p. 35 JB asserts that the *Assalāyana sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya "was composed after the invasion of Alexander," because it refers to the Greeks. The conclusion may indeed be correct, but other reasoning seems possible. In *Greater Magadha* (p. 209) JB makes explicit his logic. However, as Anālayo, for instance (*A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Dharma Drum Publishing, 2011: 552n116), recently points out, the term Yauna appears already in an inscription of Darius I (522–486 BCE). Anālayo also refers to Cs. Töttösy ("The Name of the Greeks in Ancient India," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 3: 301–319), according to whom the term Yona was already taken over in Indic at the end of the sixth century BCE, and further quotes Sircar ("The Yavanas," in *The History and Culture of the Indian People 2: The Age of Imperial Unity*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1953: 101–102) making the same point. It is only

to be expected that, even in Eastern India, there was a significant awareness of other peoples, and perhaps especially of their differing social structures, and thus there is no particular reason to hang the dating of any particular text on its mere inclusion of reference to the Greeks. As I just noted, however, JB may ultimately be correct here, but since much of what he argues about the development of Buddhist ideology hinges on the dating of certain materials, it is important to examine his arguments for the chronology of his sources. I am not competent to judge what he says about many of his other sources, including grammatical works and so forth, but as noted above, the way in which he sometimes deals with evidence I am more familiar with does invite caution.

Enthusiasm has some side effects. The haste, and consequent carelessness, with which JB evidently sometimes works is demonstrated by his discussion of the five 'sciences' of the Buddhists. JB begins (p. 117): "Buddhist texts mention five sciences (*vidyāsthāna* or *sthāna*). An enumeration occurs under verse 11.60 of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* (Sūtrāl(B) p. 70 ll. 10–11): *pancavidharṇ vidyāsthānam | adhyātmanavidyā hetuvidyā śabdavidyā cikitsāvidyā śilpakarmasthānavidyā ca* | 'Science is fivefold: the science of the self, the science of logic, the science of words, the science of medicine, and the science of arts and crafts(?)'." He then goes on "The precise range of each of the five sciences is not in all cases equally simple to determine. ... The science of the self looks at first somewhat surprising in that most Buddhists reject the very existence of a self; perhaps it would be more correct to translate 'science concerning oneself'. It seems plausible that it covers much of what we would call buddhist philosophy, which concerns the inner constitution of the person, and competes with brahmanical philosophies that do centre on the nature of the self." JB has, however, misunderstood the term *adhyātmanavidyā*, which refers to Buddhism as such, and has nothing at all to do with 'the self' (this reflecting the very old confusion between *ātman* as 'self' and as a reflexive pronoun). In fact, what is more, this category is the subject of the entire second part of a book listed in JB's bibliography: 'Science religieuse et sciences séculières en Inde et au Tibet: *Vidyāsthāna* Indo-bouddhiques et *Rig gnas* Indo-Tibétains,' constituting pp. 93–147 of David Seyfort Ruegg's *Ordre Spirituel et Ordre Temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet* (Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 1995). There on p. 101 we find it quite clear stated that "A côté de la première des "sciences", celle qualifiée d'"intérieure" et représentant spécifiquement l'enseignement du bouddhisme au sens propre ...."

From another point of view, it is probably not haste but the utter conviction of his own ideas that leads JB a number of times to turn cautious postulations, within a number of pages, into established facts. On p. 129, it is "the most plausible explanation" that the Buddhists turned to Sanskrit because "they needed

to defend their interest at the royal courts.” On p. 137 this has become “We have seen that this massive change from Middle Indic language to Sanskrit appears to have been connected with Buddhism’s dependence upon the brahmanized royal court,” but by the next page we read: “It may ... be useful to recall the reason why the Buddhists of that part of the subcontinent had turned to Sanskrit: they depended upon royal support and had to plead their cause at court.” Eight pages have sufficed to transform supposition into fact.

Sometimes JB just seems to be sloppy, as he is when he repeats material already discussed. This probably also explains a statement such as (129n82) “It would be interesting to know whether Vinaya texts were, on average, translated into Sanskrit later than dogmatic texts.” If JB is assuming that the Vinaya texts we now have in Sanskrit—the Mūlasarvastivāda Vinaya above all—were once in another linguistic shape and later rewritten, he gives no reason to believe so, and I know of none. It is certainly true that a large amount of material was evidently composed in Middle Indic and later Sanskritized, and the continuing studies of Gāndhārī texts are only expanding our understanding of this process. It may also be that by this brief reference JB is alluding to the process of Sanskritization of the Prātimokṣa rules themselves, but if so, his use of the expression ‘Vinaya texts’ is at best incautious. But it seems to me also possible that JB simply was not as cautious as he might have been.

The lengthy third part of the book deals with relics, and while there is much to say here as well, I have no doubt gone on long enough. I have learned much from JB’s book, as I do from all his publications, and he has led me to ask many new questions. But I am also wary: my awareness of the fragility of some of what JB asserts so categorically makes me cautious about accepting those parts of his data I cannot myself control. While JB’s passion can carry one along, his reasoning sometimes also bends more toward the enthusiastic than the logical, something exemplified by an expression in the last paragraph of the book (p. 245): “Are we to conclude from the preceding reflections that Buddhism was doomed from the beginning in the Indian subcontinent? Such a conclusion would of course go well beyond what we can legitimately infer from the historical evidence.” In his fascinating *Historians’ Fallacies* (Harper, 1970: 12–13) David Hackett Fischer speaks of the fallacy of metaphysical questions, the first example of which is the Civil War historians’ “Was the War inevitable?” With this in mind we can easily see that it is not that our historical evidence does not allow us to conclude that Buddhism was “doomed from the beginning;” it is that this way of thinking about history is fundamentally wrong. As I rather suspect that JB also would hold, unless one would want to adopt a hard-cord Hegelian or Marxian view, this is simply not how the world works. Among JB’s greatest gifts is his boundless energy and creativity. It would be a pity if he were to suppress

that. But more consideration for what is not, after all, trivial detail would greatly enhance the reliability of his work, and thus aid him toward his evident goal of persuading us that his revision of the history of ancient India is preferable to the received model.

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