Review of Schlosser, A. (2022) Three Early Mahayana Treatises from Gandhara: Bajuar Kharosthi Fragments 4, 6, and 11

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Review

Three Early Mahāyāna Treatises from Gandhāra: Bajuar Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 4, 6, and 11, by Andrea Schlosser. Gandhāran Buddhist Texts, 7. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2022. xx + 317 pp., 15 colour plates, 33 figures, $85. ISBN 9780295750736.

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Mahāyāna Buddhism, as influential as it has been and continues to be over ever-growing areas of the world, surrenders only with reluctance titbits of information about its early origins. Until very recently our oldest textual evidence—and thus virtually by definition our earliest evidence altogether—came from Chinese translations, themselves often extremely difficult to decipher. Only in the past couple of decades has that situation changed significantly, with the discovery of manuscripts from regions around northern Afghanistan, some few containing (without exception highly fragmentary) versions of otherwise known Mahāyāna *sūtra*s in Gāndhārī language and Kharoṣṭhī script, those so far identified including, among others, the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṁmukhāvasthitasamādhi*, the *Samādhirāja*, and large portions of a work parallel to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (see pp. 16–17). While these materials present scholars with their own raft of enormous problems, they come with the advantage of parallel versions, be they in Sanskrit or in Tibetan and/or Chinese translation. Such parallels offer a near-essential point of comparison, a steady pivot around which one can orient oneself in what are otherwise almost entirely mist-covered rough waters.

To tackle texts without any identifiable parallels, available only in highly damaged and fragmentary manuscripts on birch-bark, written in a script which does not, for example, distinguish vowel length, characterized by what might charitably be called idiosyncratic spelling … the list of challenges, in fact, goes on and on: to attempt to edit and interpret such texts is an act of bravery and cannot but be appreciated as a remarkable achievement. It is probably for this reason that earlier publications on the Gāndhārī manuscripts focused primarily on versions of known texts, mostly those paralleled in the so-called Pāli canon, and there is no question that this was the only rational way to initiate the study of texts in the then largely unknown

language that scholars call Gāndhārī. But in recent years as more and more discoveries arrive, and as the field has begun to firmly establish itself, with scholars working in Seattle, Munich, Sydney and elsewhere, it has become possible to build on the solid foundation-stones laid by earlier contributions. Andrea Schlosser set herself the unenviable task of editing, interpreting and translating three related fragmentary materials which are entirely devoid of any known parallels (save on the level of occasional phrases), and this—despite the aid of both published and unpublished prior results—must account for the sometimes seemingly pervasive uncertainty which infuses almost every page of the work of this cautious scholar.

Much of the present book was first presented in the author's 2014 PhD dissertation (Berlin), published online in 2016 under the title *On the Bodhisattva Path in Gandhāra*. What is published now more formally is enlarged and polished, and also contains newly identified materials. It consists of an introduction (pp. 3–26), a physical description of the sources (27–48), detailed considerations of palaeography (49–65), orthography (67–74), phonology (75–97) and morphology (99–108), followed by a transliteration of the fragments (109–18), a reconstruction and translation, on facing pages (120–51), and extremely detailed annotations (153–263), themselves amply footnoted. Finally, a transcription of the very poorly preserved Bajaur fragment 19 (265–66), without translation, is followed by references (267–88), and an invaluable word-index to Gāndhārī forms (289–317). The volume closes with a set of unpaginated photographic images of the manuscripts, a simple glance at which can only reinforce the impression of the lionhearted courage and audacious daring of the author in undertaking to study these materials.

It is no criticism of the author to say that this is a book for specialists. The results of her extremely judicious consideration of seemingly all possibilities have led to a work that is full of rich observations, but that cannot be easily read. The introduction is certainly the most accessible portion of the volume, yet I wonder whether readers without some familiarity with Sanskrit and perhaps even Gāndhārī would be able to comfortably work through it. It is here that the author most directly offers her assessment that the texts under examination represent some stage of something that might be termed 'proto-Mahāyāna', although the author's rationale for the term is a bit problematic, I feel: she accepts it (p. 10) 'since the designation Mahāyāna is not mentioned in the text itself and most probably at the time of its composition was not yet established or widely used'. But proto- anything cannot but be a teleological designation, and the author struggles to explain where her texts sit in a continuum between Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna, in part precisely because it survives in such a fragmentary shape. The status of the Mahāyāna is a topic much discussed by scholars, and one can certainly understand both the reasoning and the appeal of classifying texts as early, or even proto-, Mahāyāna, but the author's attempts to locate what seems to amount to a

monothetic definition of the latter seem to me probably untenable (see Silk 2002).

It is entirely understandable that, in the face of the minutiae of her comprehensive treatment of the precious evidence, the author also wishes to extract large conclusions, such as (p. 13) that 'the proto-Mahāyāna bodhisattva path in the early first centuries—at least in the place in Gandhāra where these texts were produced—was primarily concerned with meditation and withdrawal from the senses. The path, as illustrated in these scrolls, is the practice of *prajñāpāramitā* as a means to let go, in the sense of giving up any attachments to the world.' Yet even granting that we can know the overall tenor of the texts from which only the here-edited fragments survive, this is still to identify the entirety of Gandhāran Mahāyāna (assuming that there is such a thing) with concerns extracted solely from these texts, and it grants no consideration to other visions that might be contained in other known but not-yet-edited texts, not to mention sources from elsewhere (such as those preserved in early Chinese materials) that might likewise focus on other central themes. We must confess, of course, that every scholar wants their particular topic to be vital, central and to open up new vistas, but every journey starts with a single step; I think we must be content—and the author should be proud and self-assured to know—that (to horribly mix metaphors) we have here a very solid brick in the growing edifice that will over time become a towering structure, showing us the shape of Buddhism in ancient Gandhāra. Those interested in the history of Indic languages, in the specifics of Gandhāra, in earlier Buddhist literature as a whole and in particular in the earlier periods of Indian Mahāyāna, will profit greatly from this excellent and careful volume.

REFERENCE

Silk, J. A. 2002. 'What, if Anything, is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications.' *Numen* 49 (4): 355–405. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852702760559705