Cremated like a King: The Funeral of the Buddha within the Ancient Indian Cultural Context

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Much has been written about the nirvāṇa of the Buddha, and consequently, it seems hardly possible, if not outright impossible, to present something even modestly new on this topic, or to avoid a piṣṭapesāna, as an Indian paṇḍita would say. There is, however, an aspect of the funeral of the Buddha slightly neglected, it seems, and consequently worth while pursuing, and that is the context of this, as it seems at first, rather unusual cremation within the culture of ancient India1. Therefore the cultural context of the funeral of the Buddha will be investigated beginning with a brief look at his prestige,2 and then proceeding to traces of other

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2 The idea to take up this topic came from an invitation by Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Munich, to talk on the “prestige of the Buddha” as part of his interdisciplinary research project “Formen von Prestige in Kulturen des Altertums: Grabritual und Totenkult – Prestige im Kontext von Bestattungsbräuchen.” The lecture was held at Munich on 24th January 2008 under the title “Bestattet wie ein König — verehrt wie ein Gott. Das Ansehen des Buddha im Spiegel des Nirvāṇa.”
funerals in ancient India in general and on memorial buildings, which are also confirmed by sources from classical antiquity. Returning to India, the investigation will be continued by concentrating on how deceased persons are commemorated, rarely even in inscriptions, more often in literary sources, in Buddhist texts in general, particularly in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta itself, in the Hindu epics, and finally in Jaina sources on the Ājīvikas. After this lengthy but necessary introduction, the account on the funeral of the Buddha will be examined in detail and the question asked how far this description might correspond to any historical reality. For this purpose, it is necessary to look at the literary form of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta as well as its position in ancient Indian literary history. This will be followed by a rather daring attempt to date parts of the text. The last step will include a discussion of possible historical memory preserved in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta.

It is useful to begin with a very brief look at the prestige the Buddha enjoyed, because that explains to some degree the very exceptional way in which his funeral was performed or, more cautiously, in a seemingly exceptional way. For, it will turn out that it is perhaps not so much the funeral itself, but rather the description which is so unusual and exceptional as the by far the most detailed account of any such event surviving from ancient India.

If the “prestige” or “respect” of a person in an different, in this particular case a non-European culture, is to be examined, the first step should always be a check, whether or not the respective concept, “prestige” in this particular case, is current in the culture to be investigated, that is in India, in order to avoid a the well known traps when transferring a concept from one culture to another without proper adjustment.

So the first and very simple question to be asked is: How is “prestige” expressed in Sanskrit? The answer can be found of course in any English-Sanskrit dictionary. However, here, a small surprise is waiting. When looking up the word “prestige” in the English-Sanskrit dictionary by Monier Monier-Williams written during the early nineteenth century, not at all to help Sanskritists in their studies in
the first place, but to assist Christian missionaries to translate the bible into Sanskrit, strange translations of the word “prestige” are met with, such as Sanskrit māyā, māyāśakti or indrajāla etc., that is words translating into English as “illusion” or “deception.” On the other hand, a counter-check in Vaman Shivram Apte’s “The Student’s English-Sanskrit Dictionary” yields, as expected, Sanskrit gaurava as the equivalent of English “prestige.” This puzzle is easily solved by tracing the history of the word “prestige” in European languages 3. For, in 1851, when Monier Williams’ dictionary appeared, the word “prestige” still had its old meaning “deception” following Latin præstigia attested since the 2nd century BC for the first time in one of the comedies of the Roman author Plautus in his Captivi “the Captives”. However, after two millennia of stable semantics, the meaning of the word “prestige” suddenly started to change beginning from Napoleonic times and developed into the meaning well known from modern European languages such as English, French, German etc., which all share the same semantic development. This is reflected in Apte’s Dictionary, which appeared 33 years later than Monier-Williams’ in 1884. This, then, is an urgent warning to be careful when using concepts and much more so when transferring them between cultures.

On the other hand, gaurava still current in Hindi, continues the meaning found already in old Indian texts more than two millennia ago.  

Thus Aśoka says in one of his minor edicts, the one from Bhābrā (or Calcutta / Bairāt), when he wishes to recommend the study of certain texts to Buddhist monks: hamā budhāsi dhāmmasi samghasī ti gālave ca pasāde ca “I (Aśoka) respect and have faith in the Buddha, his teaching, his community4.” This

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example shows that the Buddha did indeed enjoy — quite unsurprisingly of course — a considerable prestige at the time of Aśoka. However, it shows also that gaurava or gālava expresses, in a certain contrast to the word “prestige” also the “respect” created in other persons and directed towards the one person who enjoys prestige.

Earlier, at the time of the Buddha’s death, prestige certainly was as much the reason for his spectacular funeral, as it was for other persons, mythological or historical, in India and elsewhere.

In stark contrast to India there is a long tradition of well documented funerals of men of exceptional prestige in western literature. The first and almost classical instance of such a funeral are the games in honour of one of the heroes in the Homeric epics, Patroklos (Πάτροκλος), the intimate friended of Achilles (Ἀχιλλεύς) after his death in battle described in the 23rd book (Ψ) of the Iliad. Much later many noblemen in ancient Rome received a magnificent public funeral reflecting the high esteem of their compatriots they enjoyed while they were alive⁵.

In India, where, in contrast to the Islamic world, the culture of ancient Greece and Rome was never received, things are quite different, as always. While we are extremely well informed about history and daily life including funerals in the ancient world of Europe, in Greece and Rome, or in China, very little is known from India⁶ during the same period in contrast to the wealth of data on religion, mythology or philosophy. A comparative look at ancient Rome and ancient India brings this into profile: Very often not only the year, even the day,

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⁶ Very detailed research based on careful reading of texts in comparison with archaeological data can bring to light much more about daily life than presently known. In contrast to the more or less useful, but mostly regrettably superficial “cultural studies,” the close reading of texts such as, e.g., the Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya by G. Schopen and other approaches mentioned in O. v. Hinüber: Everyday Life in an Ancient Indian Buddhist Monastery. ARIRIAB 9. 2006, p. 3-31 will continue to be most successful.
and sometimes even the time during that day is known, on which Cicero gave a
certain speech before the senate or before the people of Rome. From India, we
have not the least information about the year in which an important ruler such as
Aśoka was born, nor do we know about the date of his death. Consequently we do
not have any idea about the length of his life. The same is true in the case of
Kaniśka as a ruler over an empire of prime importance for world history.

For in India the life spans of only two persons living in pre-Christian times
have come down to us: The Buddha, who lived for eighty years, and Mahāvīra,
who died at the age of 72. In contrast, we do know, what is rather typical to the
Indian tradition, that the healthiest of all monks during the time of the Buddha, the
monk Bakkula is supposed to have died at the mature age of 160, while the
grand-mother of King Pasenadi died at the rather early age of 120 years or, to
quote an example from Vedic literature Mahidāsa Aitareya lived 116 years.

Before this background, it is not particularly surprising, that there is only a
very slim tradition on actual funerals surviving from ancient India. It is, however,
again very typical for the Indian tradition that a lot is known about the theory of
the rituals for the dead. For, there is, as usual, no lack of normative texts on this
topic. The dharmaśāstras describe in such a great detail how the corpse has to be

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7 Cf. “Marcus Tullius Cicero” by M. Gelzer, W. Kroll, R. Philipppson, K. Büchner in:
Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft. Stuttgart 1939, column
881 foll. on the coniuratio Catilinae.

8 ayyakā ... vayo anuppattā vīśavassasatikā jātiyā, SN I 97.4.

9 śoḍaśaṁ varṣaśataṁ jīvati, ChUp III 16.7. — On different stages of life ending with 120
years cf. G.-J. Pinault: Tocharo-Turcica, in: De Dunhuang à Istanbul. Hommage à James
Russell Hamilton (Silk Road Studies V). Turnhout 2001, p. 245-265 quoting from the
Maitrisimit (p. 247). On the life span and aging in India cf. A. Wezler: Old Age and the
Elderly in Ancient and Mediaeval India, and O. v. Hinüber: Old Age and Old Monks in Pāli
Buddhism, both in: Aging. Asian Concepts and Experiences Past and Present ed. by S.
65-78; Les âges de la vie dans le monde indien, éd. par Chr. Chojnacki. Lyon 2001; N.
Balbir: Lexique et représentations de la vieillesse : Du sanskrit au hindi, in : Les mots du
prepared for cremation and which rituals must be executed after a cremation is performed that P. V. Kane gave up describing them comprehensively stating that otherwise he might have easily needed to write an extra volume\textsuperscript{10}.

Even if no literary text in ancient India describes magnificent funerary games like Homer’s Iliad does, there is some, but not much information in Indian literature about how kings, nobles or important men, mythological or historical, were cremated\textsuperscript{11}. Therefore it is useful to look into a different direction searching for sources other than literature. The hope to find consolation in the archaeological evidence is almost immediately destroyed\textsuperscript{12}: Bones or ashes thrown into a river don’t leave very significant traces for later archaeologists to discover. The same is true for the bones deposited at the foot of a the tree near the site of a cremation\textsuperscript{13}. This underlines the extreme importance of cemeteries with funeral monuments and particularly their inscriptions for historical research both so sadly and almost completely absent from ancient Indian culture. A rare exception is some sort of cemetery with monuments and even inscriptions commemorating the dead, which is mentioned in the Manimekhalai\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{10} On funeral rites: Kane: Dharmaśāstra, as note 1 above, Vol. IV, p. 179-551: “A separate volume would have to be written for the purpose of setting out all the variations . . .”, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{11} The death and cremation of Prabhākaravardhana, the father of Harṣavardhana, is related at the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth chapter in Bāṇa’s Harśacarita, cf. H. T. Bakker: Monuments to the Dead in Ancient North India. IJJ 50. 2007 [2008], p. 11-47, particularly p. 11 foll.

\textsuperscript{12} On prehistoric burials see Purushottam Singh: Burial practices in ancient India. Benares 1970 and H. Bakker as in the preceding note.


\textsuperscript{14} Manimakhalā (The Dancer with the Magic Bowl) by Merchant-Prince Shattan translated by A. Deniélov. New York 1989, p. 25.
Nevertheless, even in India the deceased were not simply forgotten. Nor do they survive exclusively in literature, but very occasionally there are also memorial monuments erected for the dead\textsuperscript{15}, sometimes luckily with inscriptions. Two well known examples may be recalled here: The “galleries of the ancestors,” if it may be called thus, at Nānāghāṭ and at Māṭh. Both are collections of statues of rulers, of the Sātavāhanas at Nānāghāṭ, and of the Kuṣāṇas at Māṭh, which both survive only in a ruined state\textsuperscript{16}. Still, both are clearly commemorative monuments, however without any reference to a funeral. For nothing at all is known about how and by whom exactly these monuments were built, used, or, for our purposes more important, if and how their use was inaugurated. At any rate, it seems safe to assume some sort of solemn inauguration in honour of the deceased kings, because non-Indian sources, in this particular case two ancient Greek authors, support such an assumption.

During the year 316 BC the Indian general Keteus ( Killed in battle, as the Greek historian Diodoros reports\textsuperscript{17}. Thereupon, not only a struggle begins between his two wives about the honour to be cremated with their deceased common husband — in the end, the younger wife prevails, because the older wife is pregnant, and this is in accordance with the relevant prescriptions found in the dharmāśāstra that pregnant women are excluded from the satī rite — Diodoros also reports that the army of Killed in battle circumambulates the pyre three times. This sounds like an Indian custom and is an important, if extremely vague hint that the soldiers in this way participate in a public funeral to honour their esteemed and popular leader. Even if these rites were performed outside India they were

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. \textit{sudhānicayacite citācaityacihne}, Harṣacarita 241,8 (ed. A. A. Führer. 1909) = Chapter 6, p. 36,8 (ed. P. V. Kane 21965) „a monument in brick had been set up on the sepulcral pile” (E. B. Cowell, F. W. Thomas 1897).


\textsuperscript{17} Diodori Siculi bibliothaecae historicae quae supersunt XIX 33 foll.
performed for an Indian general.

Moreover, another ancient Greek author, this time Plutarchos (ca. 45-120 AD), recalls the funeral of the famous King Menandros (Μενάνδρος), who ruled Baktria (ca 150-130)\(^\text{18}\) in a paragraph well known to students of Indian culture. Menander is the only Indo-Greek king present also in Indian literature under the slightly distorted name Milinda. Plutarchos is a bit vague in his information on Menandros, whom he scarcely seems to know. After Menandros died during a campaign, different cities perform a common funeral, unfortunately without Plutarchos elaborating on this point: “They performed a funeral” (ἐποιήσαντο κηδείαν 821E) is almost all he says, but still it is an important hint, again to public participation in the funeral. And we learn that after the cremation and before a memorial monument was erected (μνημεῖα ... τάνδρος), a conflict arose, avoided only with some effort, about who was the owner of Milinda’s / Menandros’ ashes. This seems almost to echo a well known detail from the report on the funeral of the Buddha.

Indeed, these particular memorial monuments erected for Menandros are known only from literary sources. Memorial monuments for individual persons, not for a whole dynasty such as those mentioned for the Śātavāhanas or the Kuśāṇas, are extremely rare in ancient India and there is no such inscription from early times. Where and how kings were cremated during the time of the Buddha is unknown. Only occasional stray finds tell something about the memory of historical persons being preserved in inscriptions. These memorial inscriptions become more frequent only from Gupta times onwards\(^\text{19}\).

\(^{18}\) Plutarch: Moralia: Praecepta gerendae rei publicae 821.

The oldest inscriptions of this type date from AD 130 (Śaka 52). It is a series of four inscriptions all erected on the same day and commemorating the death of four members of one and the same family. Almost nothing is known about the original site of these commemorative monuments, because the stone slabs were brought by the then Diwan of the princely state Kutch, who was a collector of antiquities, to his “engineering department” in Bhuj, the then capital of Kutch some time before 190620. Therefore the respective stone slabs, which bear these inscriptions, supposedly standing on top of a small hill once, probably a tumulus, are without any proper archaeological context, which, of course, is extremely regrettable and most annoying, but also fairly common.

The text of the inscriptions runs as follows21:

1/ rājñī Cāṣṭanasā Ysāmotikaputrasa rājñī Rudrādamasa Jayādamaputrasa
2/ varṣe dvipaṃcāśe 50 2 phauṇabahulasā dvitiya va 2 Madanena Sihilaputrena bhaginiye Jeṣṭavirāye /3/ Sihaladhita Opaśatisāgotrāye laṣṭi uthapita

“In the year 52 of King Cāṣṭana, the son of King Ysāmotika, [and] of King Rudrādaman, the son of Jayādaman22, in the dark half of the month Phālguṇa, on

correctly states: “So far as I can see, the yaṭhi was raised by Nāgadatta himself and was not a memorial raised over him. Why it was put up, I am not able to say” (CII Vol. II,1, p.140). The reading of the Mālāvāsa inscription (Shelat p. 193) as published by A. S. Gadre: Important Inscriptions from the Baroda State. Baroda 1943, p. 3 is very far off the mark. This can be corrected to a certain extent by comparing the plate in: A Collection of Prakrit and Sanskrit Inscriptions Published by the Bhavnagar Archaeological Department. Bhavnagar, p. 23, (cf. JRAS 1890, p. 652; 1899, p. 380 foll.) 1/ rājñī mahākṣatrapaśa sāmi Rudrasenasya /2/ varṣe 100 20 2 vai(sākha)bhule pacamyā /3/ imaṃ silaṣṭi Vānijakasya putreṇa /4/ pratiṣṭhāvitaṃ datta (va)maṣ ca hi (juhū); to the right side, written vertically vānijakasya. There are no gaps at the end of the lines as suggested by Gadre.


21 Single damaged or supplemented akṣaras are usually not marked as such in the following.

22 This is the likely interpretation of the text, cf. R. Salomon: The Kṣatrapas and Mahākṣatrapas of India, WZKS 17.1973, p. 5-25, p. 20.
the second day, a stele (laṣṭhi) was erected by Madana, the son of Siṃhila, for his sister Jeṣṭavīrā, the daughter of Siṃhila of the Opaṣatigotra.”

The second and third stelae bear the same inscription by the same Madana for his brother Rṣabhadeva, the son of Siṃhila, and, as the editor translates, for his wife. However, the inscription does not necessarily say or mean only that. For Yaṣadattā, the daughter of Sihamīta (Siṃhamitra?) of the Šenikagotra, is called a “novice” (sāmaṇerī) and in addition also kuṭumbinī meaning both “family member” and “wife”. Consequently, she is a member of that rare group of Buddhist ascetics called kuṭumbi-śrāmaṇera as one Gopaka is in a Maitraka inscription, and, more important, this is the first female Buddhist (?) renouncer living a worldly life in a family.

Thus poor Madana seems to have lost a part of his very near relatives, sister, brother, and his “family member” at the same time, and one is inclined to think of some calamity such as a war or an epidemic.

In the fourth inscription of this set, a novice (śrāmaṇera) called Treṣṭadatta of the Opaṣatigotra and consequently most likely also a relative of Madana and his deceased relatives, honours the memory of his son also called in a remarkable

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26 An early reference to an epidemic in the village Nādiṅā is found in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta, DN II 91,26-92,11 ≠ SN V 356,22-28, cf. also below.
coincidence also Ṛṣabhadeva.

While these unique stone slabs are called laṣṭhi in these inscriptions from Gujarat, the term chāyākhabha or chāyāstambha seems to be preferred for memorial stones further south, where it is attested since the 2nd century. A very unusual and really unique chāyāstambha was erected in memory of a queen in about 280 AD. This inscription, which was edited about two decades ago went unnoticed, perhaps due to the unfortunate failure to translate inscriptions in the last volumes in Epigraphia Indica: 1/1 mahārājasa asamedhayājīsa anekahiramnakodigosvaltasahasahalasatasahasapadāyisa svāmi-Siri-Camtamūlasa 1/3 pasunhāya mahārājasa svāmi-Siri-Vīrapurisadatasa 4/3 sunṃnhāya mahārājasa svāmi-Siri-Ehavala-Camtamūlasa 5/6 pattīya raño Vāsiṭhīputasa Ikhākūnaṃ Siri-Rudal6/purisadatasa mātīya mahādeviṣya mahākhatapadhūṭīya Bahal7/phalasagotāya Siri-Vaṃṃbhāṭṭāya saṃvacharaṃ ekkāraṃ 10 1 8 vāsāpakhaṃ pathamaṃ 1 divasaṃ athamaṃ 8 sagagatāya chāya 9/9 khambhō

“The memorial pillar of Siri Varmaḥāṭṭā, the granddaughter-in-law of the great king, who performed a horse sacrifice, who donated several ten millions of gold, hundred thousand cows and hundred thousand acres of land, the Lord Siri Cantamūla, the daughter-in-law of the great king and Lord Siri Vīrapurisadatta, the wife of the great king and Lord Siri Ehavala-Camtamūla, the mother of King Vāsiṭhīputta of the Iksvāku family, Siri Rudrapurisadatta, the chief queen (mahādeviṣyā) and daughter of a Mahākṣātra of the Gotra Bahaphala, who ascended to heaven in the eleventh year in the first half month of the rainy season on the eighth day.”

This memorial was erected by the pious son Rudrapurisadatta for his mother,

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29 This gotra is not mentioned in the Gotrapravaramaṇjarī, cf. note 23 above.
a Kṣatrapa princess from western India. It is very unusual that the date of the death is indicated, most likely in regnal years, and consequently it is impossible to calculate it exactly. About 280 AD therefore is no more than a more or less likely guess\textsuperscript{30}. No other date of a death seems to occur in any Indian inscription before the end of the first millennium. The age of his deceased mother is not indicated by Rudrapurisadatta, nor is anything said about a funeral. However, it may be assumed that the erection of the stele should have been accompanied by some ceremony\textsuperscript{31} and preceded by perhaps even sumptuous funeral rites.

Furthermore, other members of the same dynasty of the Ikṣvākus erected chāyākhambhās. The most important among them is perhaps the one erected by Vīrapurisadatta for his father, the first king of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, Vāsiṭhīputta Caṃṭmūla, together with his deceased chief queen Anantasiri and 28 other women\textsuperscript{32}. After the title of King Vīrapurisadatta and the date, the text continues:

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{... divasa bītiya. sagagatasa /4/ raṇīno ... (titles) ... /6/ ... sāmi-Siri-Caṃṭamulasahada[rāhi matahi mahādevihi Anatasiriya /7/ Khandasiriya ... (25 names) ... /12/ Kaṃnhasiriya Sivaṇgasiṣiriya abhatarikāhi\textsuperscript{33} ca /13/ Sarasikāya Bhūsumalatāya ca chāyāthabho}
\end{verbatim}

So far, a crucial part of this inscription was misunderstood due to a wrong


\textsuperscript{31} On modern ceremonies on the occasion of the erection of memorial stones see : Bh. Shelat, as note above 19, p. 186 foll.

\textsuperscript{32} D. C. Sircar: More Inscriptions from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa, EI 35. 1963/64, p. 1-36, particularly p. 3 foll.; only the relevant parts of the inscription are quoted.

\textsuperscript{33} At last two women are called abhatarikā, which is a title of uncertain meaning: “intimate female friend” “concubine” is a likely guess by D. C. Sircar, EI 35, p. 3, 21. The other possible meaning “female guard of the harem”, cf. skt. ābhyanṭarika quoted from an inscription by V. S. Apte: The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary, revised edition. Poona 1957, seems to be ruled out by the context.
and unnecessary emendation. For, instead of *saha darāhi matāhi mahādevihi* as written in the inscription, D. C. Sircar follows J. Ph. Vogel and supplies *sah[o]darāhi matāhi mahādevihi* and understands “by his sisters, mothers, chief queens.” Consequently, he has to divide the list somehow by punctuation: “There seems to be a punctuation ...” (p. 3). According to the plate accompanying the inscription this is rather unlikely. Moreover, understanding *matāhi* as “mothers” poses two serious problems, the plural and the form, which should be *mātūhi* or the like. However, reading the text as it stands makes perfect sense “together with his wives” the deceased chief queens.” If this interpretation is correct, this would be the first attested instance that a king was cremated together with his harem, a custom otherwise known only from mostly later literary sources. This, again points to much more than a simple funeral, but again, no information survives.

There are considerably more funeral monuments in South India beginning in about the middle of the first millennium, the so called *vīra*kals “hero stones” for warriors who died in battle. Again, we have no information about any ceremonies possibly and probably accompanying the erection of this monument. Other stones commemorate *Satīs*, women who choose to be cremated with their husbands.

Quite singular is the inscription found near Bombay (Kolhapur) written in about 500 AD by a king, whose name is lost, but begins with Pu[. This inscription is accompanied by the picture of his wife Hālīdevī, who died in her youth (*ajaran*), on the funeral pyre, and informs us that King Pu[ built a *ca[ti]ya[aka]* in honour of his queen. This could have been similar to the mysterious buildings otherwise

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34 Monier-Williams quotes *dārā*, f. from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa; *dārāhi* seems to be a writing mistake.
35 Cf. H. Bakker, as note 11 above, p. 11. — Kṛṣṇa is cremated together with his four wives: *tato 'nvāruruhuḥ patnyāś catasrah patilokagāḥ*, Mhbh 16,8,24, and many others follow: Mhbh 16.8.71 foll.
called "caityaka" in Purāṇic literature, which were discussed at some length by Hans Bakker recently\textsuperscript{38}.

It is remarkable that so many women are mentioned in these inscriptions, and, first of all, that in the last inscription quoted, the term for a funeral monument is "caityaka." The word "caitya" is of course much older and is used already in the Buddhist canon, but not as a funeral monument, which is designated by "thūpa" or "stūpa." For, a "thūpa" is built for a woman again, who is one of the very few persons whose death and funeral are mentioned in a canonical Buddhist text as having occurred during the life time of the Buddha. This woman is again a queen.

A paragraph in the book of the "Fives" in the Aṅguttaranikāya tells the death of Queen Bhaddā, the wife of Kind Munḍa. King Munḍa is so deeply immersed in sorrow that he does not bathe, does not take care of his body, does neither eat nor work. He even gives order to his treasurer Piyaka: "I beg, friend Piyaka, to place the body queen Bhaddā in a vessel made of iron and filled with sesame oil and cover it over with another iron vessel, so that we shall see her body longer\textsuperscript{39}.

Piyaka executes the order and preserves the body of the queen. However, Piyaka is also deeply concerned about the mental state of his king and therefore suggests that the king should see the wise Buddhist monk Nārada.

Nārada instructs the king about the impermanence of the world that all things are subject to decay, and that it is necessary to accept the fact of death and rebirth, that old age necessarily brings the well known discomforts: Food is no longer tasty, the body grows increasingly ugly, work slows down, and, moreover, that our enemies rejoice if they see us in that deplorable state, while our friends are

\textsuperscript{38} See note 11 above.

dejected. After receiving this comfort, King Muṇḍa orders: "Burn now, friend Piyaka, the body of queen Bhaddā, and build a stūpa for her. Henceforth now we will bathe and anoint ourselves, eat food and go about our work."  

Nothing is said about any ceremony accompanying the erection of the stūpa or the enshrinement of the bones. Of course there must have been the usual rites for the deceased and possibly a meal in honour of the queen. Whether or not there were any celebrations in public remains as unclear as usual.  

Before the background of this scarce knowledge on funerals preserved in ancient Buddhist literature, the description of the death and of the funeral of the Buddha can be regarded as really unusual and astonishing. For, the account on the end of the life of the Buddha as preserved in an individual text, the Mahāparinibbānasutta of the Dīghanikāya, provides many details, which will be examined in the following according to the Theravāda tradition, which is the oldest. A comparison with the versions found in other Buddhist schools which have come

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41 *tena hi samma Piyaka Bhaddāya deviyā sarīraṁ jhāpetha thūpaṁ c’assā karotha. ajjatagge dāni maṇḍhā yāvissāma c’eva vilimpissāma bhattaṃ bhunjīssāma kammante ca payojīssāma, AN III 62,26-29.*  
42 *A matakabhatta* is mentioned in Ja I 166,8,19, which seems to correspond to the meal mentioned in Caland: Bestattungsgebräuche, as note 13 above, § 82.  
43 During the past decades the age of the Theravāda tradition has been thrown into doubt occasionally, not rarely in a rather general and sweeping way. However, wherever it is possible to use comparatively hard arguments that is to say linguistics, it becomes soon more than obvious that it is possible to dig considerably deeper into the past here than in any other tradition. Even though the old Pāli texts are created out of an Buddhist Middle Indic, and, consequently, nowhere preserve, but at best reflect the language of the earliest Buddhism, they contain the earliest redaction of Buddhist texts, linguistically near to the Aśokan inscriptions at Girnar, followed by the Mahāśāṅghika(-lokottaravāda) and of course the Dharmaguptaka texts in Gāndhārī. This concerns first of all the age of the redaction, which also protects the content. On the other hand, revisions such as a change of language, e.g., from Middle Indic to Sanskrit, always opens the opportunity to introduce new concepts. In
down to us in Sanskrit or in Tibetan or Chinese translations is not intended, because the relevant material and its interpretation is easily accessible in the work by André Bareau\textsuperscript{44}.

The Mahāparinibbānasuttanta is an unusual text in many respects. It is the only one in the Tipiṭaka that concentrates on a historical event, the death of the Buddha. Seen in the broader context of ancient Indian literary history, it is at the same time the first attempt to create a really long and structured text in contrast to the long and badly structured collections of many small subtexts found, e.g., in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas or in the realm of Buddhism in the Vinayapiṭaka and elsewhere. And, lastly, it is the by far most detailed report on a funeral\textsuperscript{45}. This can be substantiated first by a brief look at the text to recall the most important features of this well known story.

In this context it is remarkable that new concepts sometimes found their way only into the Theravāda commentaries, while they still could be included in canonical scriptures of other traditions, which points to a rather early closure of the Theravāda canon, cf. N. Baba: Growth of scriptures. Doctrinal expressions in the Sanskrit or Chinese Āgamas as compared with the Pāli Texts (under preparation); some examples are quoted by Bhikkhu Bodhi, JPTS 29.2007, p. 69, 73; G. Schopen, ibidem, p. 128; K. R. Norman, Dhp-trsl (2000) on verse 66; U. Roesler, IJ 51. 2008, p 2; D. Boucher, review of A. Glass: Four Saṃyuktāgama Sūtras. 2007. Bulletin of the Asia Institute NS 18. 2004 [2008], p. 191a; O. v. Hinüber, Everyday Life, as note 6 above, p. 20 note 53 (on vihārasvāmin cf. also R. Salomon, IT 13. 1986/6, p. 284) etc. Therefore, T. W. Rhys Davids and H. Oldenberg were not at all wrong in their judgement when pointing out the comparatively high age of the Theravāda tradition, which, however, does not mean that all old material is preserved only there, and that all other tradition are necessarily recent in each and every respect, but only that the roots of the Theravāda tradition reach much deeper into the soil here and there than elsewhere, cf., e.g., O. v. Hinüber: Hoary Past and Hazy Memory. On the History of early Buddhist Texts. JIABS 29.2. 2006 [2009], p. 193-210.


At the end of his last journey, which began on the mount Gijjhakūṭa in Rājagaha, the Buddha finally reaches Kusinārā to enter nirvāṇa after he had given up his vital force. Kusinārā was such a small place that the Buddhists felt obliged to give detailed reasons why the Buddha choose to enter nirvāṇa there, and not in one of the prominent cities of his time such as Campā, Rājagaha, Sāvatthi, Sāketa, Kosambi or Bārāṇasi, D II 169,11 foll. as suggested by Ānanda at the beginning of the Mahāsudassanasuttanta, which was created only in order to justify the choice of the place of the nirvāṇa. In some traditions the Mahāsudarānasutta is even incorporated into the Mahāparinirvānasutta and not a separate text as in the Theravāda tradition. According to this text, Kusinārā once was under the name Kusāvati the capital of the cakkavattī Mahāsudassana, who, of course, was no other person than the Buddha himself in a previous birth. And the Buddha answers Ānanda’s question by pointing out this and that he dies at this place for the eighth time now: “I do not see, Ānanda, the place in the world with the gods, the Māras, the Brahmās or among people including ascetics and Brahmins, gods and men, where the Tathāgata could give up his body for the eighth time.” That is, Kusinārā is indeed, according to the understanding of the Buddha himself, the only place where he could possibly die.

In the Mahāsudassanasuttanta the correspondence between the Buddha and a cakravartin is already emphasised, a correspondence which later pervades the whole life story of the Buddha. As it is well known, the future Buddha as a mahāpuruṣa has a choice from the time of his birth to either follow a worldly

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46 āyusaṁkhāraṁ ossaji, DN II 106,22, cf. jīvitasamkhāraṁ adhitthāya, DN II 99,10.
48 na kho panāhaṁ Ānanda taṁ padesaṁ samanupassāmi sadeva ke loke samārake sabrahmake sassamaṇabrāhmaṇayā pājāya sadevamanussāya yattha tathāgato aṭṭhamaṁ sarīrāṁ nikkhipeyya, DN II 198,28-199,3.
career as a ruler of the world or the spiritual path of a Bodhisattva and finally of a Buddha.

This correspondence between a worldly ruler and a spiritual leader is very much present in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta. After the Buddha lies down under the twin sāl trees to die, the monks were not sure what to do with the corpse of the Buddha after he had entered nirvāṇa. The Buddha prescribes that no monk, but only laymen that is pious Kṣatriyas, Brahmins or householders should take care of the veneration of the corpse that is of the funeral rites. As the Buddha does not give any specific description of what exactly they are supposed to do, Ānanda has to repeat his question only to hear the laconic and unclear answer that the corpse of a Tathāgata should be treated in the same way as that of a cakkavattin. That does not help, because neither Ānanda nor any other monk has the slightest idea about how a cakkavattin is to be cremated. And indeed, only the Buddha describes the respective procedure, while all other texts surviving form ancient India are silent on this point.

This then is the procedure how to cremate a cakkavattin according to the rules given by the Buddha: “They wrap the corpse of the cakkavattin in an unused cloth. After it is wrapped in an unused cloth, they wrap it in cotton-wool, after it is wrapped in cotton-wool, they wrap it in an unused cloth. After having wrapped the corpse of the cakkavattin in this way by using (cloth) of a length of five hundred yards, it is placed into a vessel made of iron and filled with sesame oil and covered over with another vessel made of iron. Then they erect a pyre from scented wood and cremate the corpse of the cakkavattin. At a cross road they erect a mound (stūpa). In this way they deal with the corpse of a cakkavattin.”

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49 kathā mayaṃ bhante tathāgatatassa sarīre paṭipajjāma, DN II 141,18.
50 The exact meaning of vihata is doubtful, cf. D. Schlingloff: Cotton-manufacture in Ancient India. JESHO 17. 1974, p.81-90, particularly p. 89.
51 rañño ānanda cakkavattissā sarīraṃ ahatena vatham eṃ vethenti, ahatena vatham eṃ vetheti, vihatena kappāsenā vetheti, vihatena kappāsenā vethēvā ahatena vatham eṃ vethenti. etena upāyena pāricahi yugasatehi rañño cakkavattissā sarīraṃ vethēvā ayasāya teḷadoniyā pakkhipitvā aṇḍissā ayasaḷā doniyā paṭikujjēvā sabbagandhānaṃ citakaṃ
And the Buddha adds that only four groups of persons deserve such a monument that is a stūpa\(^52\): a perfectly enlightened Buddha, a Buddha who reached enlightenment by lucky circumstances (paccekabuddha)\(^53\), a disciple of a Buddha, and finally a cakkavattin can be honoured by a stūpa, which keeps their memory alive in people, who, by looking at the stūpa purify their thoughts and thus reach heaven after their death. Interestingly, queen Bhaddā was also commemorated by erecting a stūpa over her bones, but did not really deserve that honour according to the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta.

Whether a king considered as cakravartin in ancient India really was cremated according to this description remains unknown due to the total absence of sources. One point, however, can be checked. What happens if a corpse is cremated in the way as suggested in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta? The answer was found by John Strong, who simply enquired at a crematorium and asked an undertaker of our times\(^54\). Cremating a corpse in such a closed metal coffin would have the expected, but most undesirable consequence that the heat converts the oil into gas and consequently the cakravartin explodes. If, on the other hand, the vessel is opened, a most unattractive gross mess of oil, fat and bones is the result.

In ancient Indian epic literature\(^55\) there are only few and very remotely

\(\text{karivā raño cakkavattissa sarēraṃ jhāpentī, catummahāpathe raño cakkavattissa thūpaṃ karontī. evāṃ Ānanda raño cakkavattissa sarēre paṭipajjanti, DN II 141,32-143,7.}
\(\text{cattāro 'me Ānanda thūpārahā, katame cattāro? tathāgato araham sammāsambuddho thūpāraho, paccekabuddho ... tathāgatasāvako ... rājā cakkavattī thūpāraho, DN II 142,13-17.}


\(\text{The relevant material is collected and carefully evaluated by J. Brockington: The} \)
comparable descriptions of cremations of kings, who are not called *cakravartins*.

In a well known paragraph from the Rāmāyanā the corpse of Rāma’s father Daśaratha is also preserved in sesame oil. Moreover, as in the story of queen Bhaddā’s death, the ministers are taking care of the corpse of the king. However, Daśaratha’s corpse is not treated in this particular way, because he is considered to be a *cakravartin*, but, as it is said very clearly, because the corpse should be preserved, again as in the story of queen Bhaddā. For the ministers hesitate to cremate Daśaratha’s corpse as long as no prince is present. Consequently they send a messenger from Ayodhyā to Rājagrha, where Bharata and Śatrughna are living. Once Bharata arrives in Ayodhyā, the corpse is removed from the oil. The conservation was successful and Daśaratha’s face is pale like that of a sleeping

Kings, who call themselves *cakravartin* seem to be mentioned but rarely in inscriptions. The first king who may have considered himself a *cakravartin* was most likely Khāravela during the first century BC, because he calls himself at the end of his inscription *cakadharo gutacako pavatacako* in formula (4+4+5), Shashi Kant: The Hāthigumpha Inscription of Khāravela and the Bhabru Edict of Aśoka. Delhi 2000, p. 22 line 17.

Even the wording is very similar to that of the Mahāparinibbānasutta: tailadronyāṁ *atha amātyoḥ sanveṣya jagatipatim*, Rām II 60.12 compare cakkavatissa sarīraṁ ... ayasya *teladoniyā pakkhipitvā*, DN II 142,2.

person. Afterwards, the dead Daśaratha is placed on a bier, brought to the bank of the river Sarayū and cremated.

When the deceased king is carried to the cremation ground together with his sacrificial fires, Bharata lavishly distributes gold, silver and precious clothes to the people most likely standing along the way taken by the procession. Sumptuous gifts are also mentioned in the rather detailed description of the cremation of Pându, who is brought to the cremation ground on a cart clad in rich clothes. Immediately before the cremation, however, Pându’s corpse is wrapped in white cotton cloth put on the funeral pyre and sprinkled with ghee.

Daśaratha’s pyre, which is built from precious woods such as pine trees and devadārus, is lit while verses from the Sāmaveda are recited (Rām II 70,18). Then, the women arrive in chariots or palanquins at the place of the cremation. After the appropriate rites and sacrifices all return to the city. On the thirteenth day after the cremation Bharata visits the cremation ground to perform rites of purification (Rām II 71,4foll.). These rites are described in very few verses interrupted time

59 uddhṛtaṁ talaśankledāt sa tu bhūmau niveśitam, āpītavarnavadanaṁ prasuptam iva bhūpatim, Rām II 70,4.
60 sībikāyām athāropya rājanaṁ ... īuḥ paricārakāḥ, Rām II 70,14. — Many details of the cremation are only mentioned in a parallel text of Rām II 70 referred to the notes in the critical edition: text 1812* at the end of Rām II 70.
61 dhanavisārgārtham dinānāthajanyasya, text 1812*, see preceding note, 42.
62 Pându’s cremation is described in Mhbh 1.118,5-30; athainaṁ deśajaiḥ śuklair vāsobhīḥ samayojayan / āchannah sa (i.e. Pându) tu vāsobhir jīvann iva nararsabhah / śūubhe puruṣavyāghro mahārhaśayanocitaḥ, Mhbh 1.113,20; ghṛtāvastatm rājanaṁ saha Mādreyā ... samadāhayan, Mhbh 1.113,21 foll.; cf. Rāvaṇa’s cremation as described in Appendix 69 to Rām VI: sauvarṇam śibikāṁ divyāṁ āropya kṣaunavāsanan / rāvaṇan, Rām VI 99,41 with App. 69,10. — The preparations for the cremation of Daśaratha are described in text 1812*, as note 60 above: sībikāstham mahārājam alamkṛtya vidhānataḥ / vāsasā ca mahārhaṇa samācchādya susāmvrtam / avakirṇya ca mālāyena divyadhūpena dhūpitam / gandhapuṣpataḥ surabhībhiḥ parikṛtya ca sarvasaḥ / uvāhotkṣipya śibikām ..., 29-33 and tāṁ citām prathivāpām āropya kṣaunavāsasam, 63; similarly it is said in the description of Bhīṣma’s cremation: chādayamāsatur ubhau kṣaumair mālaiś ca kauravam, Mhbh 13,168,12.
and again by long and sentimental lamentations by all present except the wise minister Vasiṣṭha. No memorial building is mentioned nor are particular festivities. Only gifts are distributed.

In spite of similarities, something different is described in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta. It is remarkable that Daśaratha is neither cremated in his vessel filled with oil, as the Buddha seems to prescribe, nor is he wrapped in specific clothes. Pāṇḍu, however, is wrapped in white cloths.

Finally, a unique reference to a cremation is perhaps comparable to the one of the Buddha. Very near in time and space is the cremation of one of the rivals of the Buddha, of Makkhali Gosāla briefly mentioned in a Jaina text, the Bhagavatīśūtra. Like the Buddha, Makkhali Gosāla the founder of the Ājīvika sect, instructed his disciples about his funeral in the words of A. L. Basham in the following way: “They were to bathe his body in scented water, anoint it with sandal paste, array it in a rich robe, and bedeck it in all his ornaments. They were then to mount it on a bier drawn be a thousand men, and to proceed through the streets of Sāvatthi, proclaiming that the jina Gosāla Maṇkhaliputta, the last tīrthāṅkara of the twenty-four tīrthāṅkaras of this Avasarpiṇī had passed away. After this his body was to be cremated.” On the other hand, there is no detailed tradition about Mahāvīra’s cremation, except that it took place at Pāvā.

Returning to the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta now, the question arises in which way the monks follow the instructions given by the Buddha after his death, and how the actual procedure relates to the epic accounts.

First, the death of the Buddha is an public event. The Buddha himself has

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63 But cf. preceding note.
66 According to the understanding of the Ājīvikas, Makkhali Gosāla was the true tīrthāṅkara, and not Mahāvīra.
information about his imminent death sent to the Mallas living in Kusinārā, and they come together with their families to venerate the Buddha for one last time. The Mallas are, however, not present at the moment of the *nirvāṇa*. Only monks, but no nuns, and gods witness the death and hear the last words of the Buddha. After his death the gods Brahma Sahampati and Śakra recite a verse, as do the monks Anuruddha and Ānanda. The monks still at the beginning of their spiritual career burst into lamentations, the others ponder the impermanence of all living beings. Anuruddha and Ānanda spend the rest of the night in conversation on the teaching of the Buddha. In the morning they send again a messenger to the Mallas to inform them about the death of the Buddha. Thereupon the Mallas bring incense and wreaths, musicians and as a matter of course five hundred yards of cloth and proceed to the place of the *nirvāṇa*. There they venerate the corpse of the Buddha with the objects, which they carried, with dance, songs and music.

When they finally resolve to cremate the Buddha, they perceive „Today it is too late, to cremate the corpse of the Lord. Tomorrow we shall cremated the corpse of the Lord.” In this way they spent six days. When they finally make up their minds to cremate the Buddha and bring the corpse to place south of the city, they are unable to lift the corpse, because, as Anuruddha explains, it is the wish of the gods that the Buddha is carried through the city, into the city by the northern gate, across the city and out of the city by the eastern gate to be cremated near the *cetiya* called Makuṭābandhana. This is very unusual, because the deceased should be brought out of the city normally as quickly as possible and to the south, the well known direction of the dead to be cremated there. However, if the instructions given by Makkhali Gosāla to carry his dead body through Sāvatthi are remembered, this could have been not so unusual as it seems when comparing the rites customary for the deceased, if the deceased was an unusually important man.

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67 DN II 159,16-23; cf. *tūryaghoṣaiḥ ca vividhiḥ stuvadbhiḥ cābhīhitam / patākābhīś ca citrābhīś samanobhiś ca citriṣam / utṣipya śibikāṃ*, Ram II App I 69,11-13 said of Rāvana

68 As it is said, e.g., of Rāvana: *dakṣinābhimukhāḥ*, Rām II, App. I 69,14.
When the Mallas arrive at the Makutabandhanacetiya they ask: “What next?” Then Ānanda passes on to them what the Buddha had told him, and the Mallas act according to the instructions given by the Buddha before his death. They did bring the necessary cloth in anticipation, because the deceased were customarily cremated in white cloth as it is known also from epic literature. However, the Mallas are unable to set fire to the pyre. Again Anuruddha explains that it is the wish of the gods that Mahākassapa, the most prominent monk after the death of the Buddha, should venerate the feet of the Buddha, before the pyre could be kindled. Mahākassapa arrives, uncovers the feet of the Buddha\(^{69}\), who seems to lie on a bier now as usual during cremation, and then the pyre ignites by itself. This, at the same time, further confirms that the Buddha was put in the teladonī only until Mahākassapa arrives to preserve the corpse, what has been observed long ago\(^{70}\).

This is the by far most detailed description of a cremation, which we have from ancient India, even in comparison to the descriptions of those of Pāṇḍu or Rāvana preserved in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa respectively.

The unusual activities of the Mallas are striking, while the monks remain inactive. This is not only in accordance with the instructions given by the Buddha, but also concurs with the customs of early Buddhism, where, in stark contrast to late Vedic practice, rites for the dead seem to have been almost irrelevant\(^{71}\). It is

\(^{69}\) Mahākassapo ... citakaṃ padakkhinam katvā pādāto vivarivā bhagavato pāde sīrasā vandi, DN II 163,27-29.

\(^{70}\) The Buddhists themselves seem to have had some difficulties with the teladonī. This can be seen in images from Gandhāra, particularly if Mahākassapa venerates the feet of the Buddha sticking out of the vessel: I. Kurita: Gandhāran Art I. The Buddha’s Life Story. Tokyo 2003, plate 506. Other images show the Buddha wrapped in cloth, it seems (ibidem plates P 4-II, 495, 494-499). An opened vessel burning might be shown on plate 505.

further remarkable that there are festivities for seven days after the Mallas had started to lament in a way similar to the relatives and servants of Daśaratha. The Mallas cry and beat their breast, tear their hair, shed tears, fall and roll on the ground and saying: “By far too soon the Lord entered nirvāṇa, by far to soon the Sugata entered nirvāṇa, by far to soon the eye of the world is obscured” (D II 159,10). However, this is almost nothing compared to the lengthy and tearful laments described in epic literature.

After Daśaratha is cremated, the Rāmāyaṇa reports only that Bharata visits the site of the cremation in order to perform some ritual of purification. This is quite different from the Buddhist description.

As a matter of course there are, as necessary in ancient India, numerous miracles during the cremation. The gods are present, and the cremation is in itself a miracle. For, the skin, flesh, sinews and fat burn completely without any remains, just like ghee or sesame burns. At the end of the cremation the fire is extinguished by a gush of water coming down from heaven. In addition, the Mallas pour scented water into the fire to extinguish it (DN II 164,4-19).

The relics are brought into their assembly hall by the Mallas, and, as the text says, they were surrounded by a cage of spears and a wall of bows. The significance of this strange remark, which is found only in the Theravāda version and stands isolated in ancient Indian literature remains obscure. Perhaps one particular feature of a description of the cremation of those 1,660,020,000 warriors dying in the final battle of the Mahābhārata performed on the battle field could be rather remotely compared, because here weapons and broken chariots are thrown into the fire.

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72 sarīrāṇī sattāhaṁ santhāgāre sattipaṇjāramaṁ karivā dhanupākāraṁ parikkhipitvā, DN II 164,20 foll.
73 rathāṁ ca mṛditāṁ tatra nānāpraharanāni ca / cītāḥ kṛtvā ... narādhipān ... dāheyaṁāsur, Mhbh 11,26,29. This is similar to a prescriptions of the Āśvalāyaṇa-Grhyasūtra (ed. by A. F. Stenzler, AKM p. 118, IV 2.17-22) that the bow of a deceased Kṣatriya should taken from his hand, broken and thrown into the fire.
In the assembly hall the relics are also venerated by dancing, singing, music, wreaths and incense.

These truly remarkable festivities did not remain unnoticed. News spread that the Buddha died and incite the desire in different persons to secure a share of the relics of the Buddha, who was widely recognized as a great spiritual authority. Thus, when the king of Magadha, Ajātasattu hears: “The Lord entered nirvāṇa in Kusinārā” he immediately sends a messenger to the Mallas conveying his request to them: “The Lord was a Kṣatriya. We are also Kṣatriyas. We deserve a share in the relics. We will build a stūpa for the Lord and hold a festival.” Messengers from other sides follow. The Śākya of Kapilavastu base their request on the fact that the Buddha was their most prominent relative. The Licchavis of Vesālī, which was one of the favorite places of the Buddha, the Buli of Allakappa, whoever they were, the Koliya of Rāmagāma and the Mallas of Pāvā point out their status as Kṣatriyas in the same way as Ajātasattu did, to underline their requests. An anonymous person stands alone in his request, a Brahmin from Veṭṭhadīpa that is Viṣṇūdvīpa, who says: “The Lord was a Kṣatriya, I am a Brahmin. Therefore I claim my share of the relics.”

The Mallas of Kusinārā, however, when confronted with all these requests, quietly but firmly refuse with the brief words: “The Lord entered nirvāṇa in the area of our village. We are not willing to give any part of the relics of the Lord away.”

Before a real quarrel over the coveted relics starts, a Brahmin named Doṇa appears on the scene and admonished all present to deal with this matter in a peaceful way. For, as he points out our Buddha taught peace and it is not right that a quarrel should arises over the relics. The relics, he suggests, should be distributes and stūpas built in many places. Therefore, he offers his good services in the distribution, and all parties involved agree. Doṇa then divides the relics by eight and keeps the pot (kumbha), which was evidently used to collect the relics,

74 DN II 164,24-166,2. — amhākam gāmakhette parinibbuto, DN II 166,1.
for himself\textsuperscript{75}. The vessel made of iron is been forgotten and had disappeared.

Once all relics are distributed, the Moriyas, that is the Mauryas, of Pipphalivana arrive to request their share, but they have to be content with the ashes.

The account ends by stating: “Thus there were eight \textit{stūpas} with relics (\textit{sarīrathūpā}), one \textit{stūpa} built over the pot as number nine and one \textit{stūpa} built over the ashes as number ten. Thus it was in the days of yore”: \textit{evaṃ etāṃ bhūtāpabbaṃ}, an unusual, unique, solemn and meaningful conclusion of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta\textsuperscript{76}.

The many ways, in which this spectacular funeral was interpreted in modern times, will not be repeated here\textsuperscript{77}. A most difficult question, however, arises if an attempt is made to evaluate the possible factual correctness of what is said in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta. After what was said earlier on the sources available about funerals of outstanding personalities in ancient India, both worldly and spiritual, the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta stands alone among literary and epigraphical sources as a unique text even though the very few lines on Makkhali Gosāla’s funeral show some similarities. Therefore, a check of the possible veracity of this account is of considerable importance, and, of course, difficulty.

Certainly one would love to have the account of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta confirmed by archaeology. Although a \textit{stūpa} was excavated at Kusinārā, the modern Kasia, it does not date back to the time of the Buddha\textsuperscript{78}. There are rather ancient archaeological remains found in Rājagrha or Vaiśālī, but, here too,
evidence does not go back as far as the time of the Buddha. Even an extremely old stūpa would need an inscription referring to the Buddha to be useful evidence. An inscription of that type was discovered at Piprāhvā⁷⁹, dated, however, in about three centuries after the nirvāṇa. Of course there is the earlier equally well known Aśokan inscription from Lumbini⁸⁰: idha budhe jāte writes Aśoka almost repeating a phrasing used in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta, when the Buddha suggests visits to places, which were important in his career, and to commemorate him as a spiritual teacher by thinking: “idha tathāgato jāto,” D II 141,4.

If it is intended to delve deeper into the past, it is only the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta that can be used as a source, if the attempt is made to estimate how near in time or how far removed from the events related in the account of the Buddha’s funeral this text could be considered, or, in other words, how far and if it is perhaps possible to consider the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta as a mirror of what really happened.

It is a matter of course to underline that the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta is not even remotely the same as a modern factual report, which tries to describe an event as exactly as possible. A report of that kind was totally alien to any author as a literary category in ancient India. Moreover, a Buddhist author could make use only of the literary forms current and available during his times that is a sūtra, a vinaya text or an epic that is verses. To preserve the teachings of the Buddha in form of a discussion or of an instruction given by the Buddha, a Buddhist author would consequently use a sūtra, and he would do so even to tell a story such as the

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⁷⁹ It is tempting to think that Piprāhvā might be identical with Pipphalivana mentioned in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta. However, there are many problems connected to this assumption, which are difficult to overcome.

⁸⁰ The place name Lumbinī is already referred to in the Suttanipāta, when the birthplace of the Buddha is pointed out: bodhisatto ... jāto Sakyānaṃ gāme janapade Lumbineyye, Sn 683.

one about the untimely death of queen Bhaddā and the reaction of king Muṇḍa, only to relate this to Buddhist teachings on the impermanence of all living beings. The author or authors of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta proceeded and had to proceed in a similar way, when they wanted to commit the *nirvāṇa* to memory: they used the form of a *suttanta* as an obvious choice, even though they certainly did envisage some sort of report as underlined by the unusual concluding sentence: “Thus it was in the days of yore.” At the same time they ventured to create the first really long and coherent text in ancient India.

Besides these considerations on the literary means available at the time, it is important to recall that otherwise very little, in fact only some few sentences, which one might be inclined to consider as historical memory have come down to us concerning the life of the Buddha. Perhaps the Buddha himself only rarely mentioned details of his life as a Bodhisattva to his monks during his lifetime, and he did so only if these related in one way or the other to his teachings or to his teachers. Moreover, the famous meditation of the Bodhisattva under the *jambū* tree as a child while he watched his father working related in the Mahāsaccakasuttanta of the Majjhimanikāya may be mentioned here⁸¹.

This changes dramatically once the end of the life of the Buddha is concerned. For the death of the Buddha as the founder of the Buddhist *saṃgha* was an event of huge consequences for the then contemporary Buddhists, and an event certainly witnessed by many monks and deeply penetrating into the collective memory of the *saṃgha*. In contrast, the *bodhi*, which was certainly of prime importance for Buddhism and Buddhists, was not witnessed by any future monk, and consequently no collective memory could spring up from this event.

Although there were witnesses present at the *nirvāṇa* mythological features abound in the description of the death of the Buddha, because at that time no religious person could possibly die without accompanying miracles, and at the

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⁸¹ *abhijānāmi ... pitu Sakkassa kammante sītāya jambucchāyāya nisinno ... pathamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajjā viharitā, siyā nu kho eso maggo bodhāya*, M I 246, 31-35.
time after the Buddha’s death, no text describing the career of the founder of any
religion could have possibly found acceptance without miraculous features.

This cultural environment should not be lost sight of, if the attempt is made to
trace possible historical memories preserved the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta and thus to
use its content for the study of ancient Indian culture. First, there was a rather
large group of witnesses besides the Buddhist monks, there were also the
inhabitants of Kusinārā, who were not only present, but actively participated in
the cremation, if we may take the text at face value. It is, however, evident that
there are certainly superimposed features such as the unavoidable miracles and the
comparison to a cremation of a cakkavattin in order to meet the expectations of
the audience of the time. It should be equally clear from the very beginning that it
would have been difficult, if not impossible, to alter basic facts in the account of
the Buddha’s death such as the site of the death or persons present such as
Anuruddha or Ānanda, but not Mahākassapa well known to a probably rather
large number witnesses.

Besides these rather general considerations, there is the much more difficult,
however also much more important question of the date of the creation of the text.
For the nearer in time the formulation was to the event described the greater the
likeliness to expect true historical memory, the lesser the margin of possible
alterations of facts. Only if there is a rather long distance in time, the story could
be completely rewritten as in the so called Mahāyānamahāparinivāṇasūtra
created centuries later, long after the nirvāṇa. In this text, suddenly Ānanda is
absent when the Buddha dies, but nuns are present82: Both is glaring contradiction
to the uniform old canonical traditions.

Dating texts composed in ancient India is notoriously problematic, even if the
situation is comparatively “comfortable” concerning the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta83. For

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Indica et Tibetica 51. Marburg 2007, p. 4 foll. § 1.2 foll. (on nuns); p. 101 § 24.13 (on Ānanda).
83 This is and the following is discussed in detail in: Hoary Past and Hazy Memory, as
note 43 above.
a historical event, the foundation of Pāṭaliputta, is related in a well known paragraph at the very beginning of the text, where the Buddha makes the following prediction during the reign of Ajātasattu: “As far as there are settlements of the Aryas, Ānanda, as far as there are trading routes, this will be the first city Pāṭaliputta, a place where customs are collected”.84

Now we can make use even of the supernatural faculties of the Buddha, when he observes the foundation of the future city and predicts that it will be a place of commerce. No mention is made in this prediction *ex post* of a capital of a powerful empire such as the one of the Mauryas, nor of any support received by the Buddhist *sangha* from Aśoka. It is all the more important and meaningful that no mention is made of Pāṭaliputta as the capital of the Maurya-empire, because the Mauryas are indeed referred to at the very end of the same text, when the relics are distributed as mentioned above.

The result of the efforts made by the Moriyas to secure a share of the relics is rather meagre and disappointing, which points to a time before the ascent of the Maurya-dynasty. Later redactors very obviously considered this episode as fairly embarrassing and consequently cancelled it when transforming a middle Indic text into the Sanskrit. The Mauryas disappear from the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra altogether, and a *pippalāyana māṇava*, a young Brahmin of the Pippalāyana gotra is introduced to replace also the obscure Pipphalivana.

On the other hand, Buddhists did indeed like to mention their benefactors in their texts, if the Aśoka-avadāna in the Divyāvadāna ultimately derived from the Mūlasarvāstivādavinaya is recalled, or the reference to Kaniṣka in the same Vinaya.

Therefore, it may be justified to conclude that this is a very old part of the text, dating back to a time, when Pāṭaliputta was a town of commercial, but not yet of political consequence that is before Candragupta.

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84 *yāvatā Ānanda arīyaṁ āyatanaṁ yāvatā vaṇippatho idaṁ agganagaram bhavissati Pāṭaliputtaṁ puṭabhedanaṁ*, DN II 87,33-88,1.
Now, if it is kept in mind that it is likely that the Buddha died in about 380 BC, there is a bracket of approximately 60 years between the event and the text formulated, if one dares to be so explicit. If this is not altogether wrong, it does not seem impossible that the composition of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta was indeed controlled, at least to a certain extent, by the collective memory of the second, at best third generation of monks after the nirvāṇa. Details of this historical memory could be the list of partly unique names of those person who died in what seems to have been an epidemic at Nādikā (D II 91,24foll.), which also points at a very old memory, as do the many names of villages mentioned in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta. The same may be true for the obscure name of the last meal of the Buddha or for the name Subhadda as the last monk ordained personally by the Buddha, or, lastly, for the meeting with a former disciple of Āḷāra Kālāma, who died many decades ago, the Mallā Pukkusa, who could have been a fellow disciple of the Bodhisattva (DN II 130,1).

Furthermore, a closer look at the distribution of relics reveals that, besides well known names such as Ajātasattu, the king of Magadha residing at Rājagaha, the relatives of the Buddha or the inhabitants of Vesālī, unique and completely obscure names are met with such as the Buli of Allakappa or the anonymous Brahmin from Vethadīpa, even the Moriyas of Pipphalivana. They are all known only from this very paragraph. It is striking, if the Mahāsudassanasuttanta is compared once again, that only one of the important cities named there — Campā, Rājagaha, Sāvatthi, Sāketa, Kosambi or Benares — sent for relics that is only Ajātasattu from Rājagaha claimed his share. If the places and persons trying to get their share of the relics were purely imaginative and free invention, the list should look quite differently.

All this can be summed up in the following way: With a little bit of optimism it can be assumed that the core of the report as given in the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta is not totally different from what happened at the death of the Buddha.

As pointed out more than once, the description of the nirvāṇa as an ancient Indian funeral is unique in more than one respect. This, however, may be due first
of all to the paucity of sources. For, as far as funeral and cremation as such are concerned, many important details seem to be unique only at a first glance. However, after comparing different non-Buddhist sources, these very details are also found there, though not coherently described in one single text but scattered over many individual literary works. Thus, the white cloth, in which the corpse is wrapped, reoccurs in the report of Pāṇḍu’s cremation, and the simple fact that the Mallas bring these white cotton cloths with them without being asked to do so indicates that this was a custom current at the time. Putting the corpse into a vessel filled with sesame oil is met with again in the Rāmāyaṇa before Daśaratha’s cremation and mentioned in the Vaikhānasārautaśūtra, and, consequently, was a well known method to preserve corpses. Finally, Makkhali Gosāla was carried through Sāvatthi after his death as the Buddha was through Kusinārā. Moreover, the way in which this part of the ceremony is described in both sources point to an exceptional honour.

Consequently, it is not so much the content which is exceptional, but the form of the coherent and detailed description and this certainly enhances the importance of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta as a major and most probably also largely trustworthy source for the cultural history of ancient India.

As pointed out at the beginning, this is the most detailed description of a cremation, which has come down to us. This does not seem to be due to an incidental tradition, or to accidental loss of other early texts. On the contrary, the Buddhists show themselves in this area again as great innovators in ancient India, as they do in things great and small, when creating the Buddhist system of monastic law or allowing begging bowls made of metal. In the same way, the Buddhists created a new form of text, an account of a historical event, a first attempt of “historical” writing, which is quite different from early non-Buddhist literature. If seen in this light, the unique position of this text is confirmed not only in the realm of culture and religion, but also in the literary history of ancient India, where no other source is aiming at some factual accuracy in the same way, in presenting so many details that allow in manner unprecedented in ancient India
to follow the funeral of a highly esteemed and respected holy man such as the Buddha.

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