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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 *piṣṭapeṣana*, as an Indian *paṇḍit* 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

^{*} This is the slightly revised version of a lecture given at the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies on 21st October 2008.

¹ The funeral of the Buddha is of course duly mentioned by P. V. Kane: *History of Dharmaśāstra*. Vol. IV. Poona 1973, p. 235. — A. Bareau: *Les récits canoniques des funérailles du Buddha et leurs anomalies: Nouvel essai d'interprétation*. BEFEO 62. 1975, p. 151-189 = *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapīṭaka et les Vinayapīṭaka anciens III. Articles complémentaires*. Paris 1995, p. 405-443 contains only a few and marginal remarks on the position of the Buddha's cremation in ancient Indian culture mostly following and (wrongly) contradicting E. Waldschmidt: *Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha*. *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philologisch-historische Klasse. Dritte Folge* Nr. 29, 20. Göttingen 1944-1948.

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 a 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 languages³. For, in 1851, when Monier Williams’ dictionary appeared, the word “prestige” still had its old meaning “deception” following Latin *praestigia* 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 Hindī, 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 budhasi dhammasi saṃghasī ti gālave ca pasāde ca* “I (Aśoka) respect and have faith in the Buddha, his teaching, his community⁴.” This

³ J. Feldhoff: „Prestige“, in J. Ritter (Ed.): Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Band 7. Darmstadt 1989, p. 1307f.

⁴ Aśoka of course does not use *gaurava*, but the eastern Middle-Indic form *gālava*, cf. E. Hultzsch: The Inscriptions of Asoka. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum I. Oxford 1925, p. 172 Calcutta-Bairat “B”; on the geographical site of Bairāt and on literature on this edict: H. Falk: Aśokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source Book with Bibliography. Monographien zur Indischen Archäologie, Kunst und Philologie Band 18. Mainz 2006, p. 106-108.

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 friend 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,

⁵ Cf. „Bestattung“ in: Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike, hg. von H. Cancik und H. Schneider. Altertum Band 2: Ark-Ci. Stuttgart 1997, p. 591.

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 *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* 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 Rome⁷. 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 Kaniṣka 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 years⁸ or, to quote an example from Vedic literature Mahidāsa Aitareya lived 116 years⁹.

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

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

⁸ *ayyakā ... vayo anuppattā vīsavassasatikā jātiyā*, SN I 97,4.

⁹ *ṣoḍaśaṃ varṣaśataṃ 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. Formanek and S. Linhart. Vienna 1997 [rev. : ZDMG 148. 1998, p. 438 foll.], p. 37-63; 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 vieillir, éd. par A. Montandon. Paris 2004, p. 69-91.

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 volume¹⁰.

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 cremated¹¹. 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 destroyed¹²: 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 tree near the site of a cremation¹³. 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*¹⁴.

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.

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 *Harṣacarita*, cf. H. T. Bakker: *Monuments to the Dead in Ancient North India*. IJ 50. 2007 [2008], p. 11-47, particularly p. 11 foll.

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

¹³ W. Caland: *Die altindischen Todten- und Bestattungsgebräuche*. Amsterdam 1896, § 58. Important material from Purāṇas and from gazetteers is collected in the regrettably unpublished PhD thesis by Gillian Evison: *Indian Death Ritual*, submitted at Oxford in 1989, cf. JPTS 15. 1990, p. 142 note 2; cf. also, e.g., Marcelle Saindon: *Cérémonies funéraires et postfunéraires en Inde: La tradition derrière les rites*. Québec 2000 [rev.: BEI 19. 2001, p. 386-389].

¹⁴ *Manimakhalaī* (*The Dancer with the Magic Bowl*) by Merchant-Prince Shattan translated by A. Daniélou. 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 dead¹⁵, sometimes luckily with inscriptions. Two well known examples may be recalled here: The “galleries of the ancestors,” if it may be called thus, at Nānāghāt and at Māṭh. Both are collections of statues of rulers, of the Śātavāhanas at Nānāghāt, and of the Kuṣāṇas at Māṭh, which both survive only in a ruined state¹⁶. 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 (Κητεύς) died in battle, as the Greek historian Diodoros reports¹⁷. 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 *dharmaśāstra* that pregnant women are excluded from the *satī* rite — Diodoros also reports that the army of Κητεύς 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

¹⁵ Cf. *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 sepulchral pile” (E. B. Cowell, F. W. Thomas 1897).

¹⁶ O. v. Hinüber: Die Palola Ṣāhis. Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzzauber. Mainz 2004, p. 171 and G. Fussman: The Māṭh *devakula*. A new approach, in: Mathurā. The cultural heritage ed. by D. Meth Srinivasan. Delhi 1989, p. 193-199.

¹⁷ Diodori Siculi bibliothecae 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)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... τᾶνδρός), 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 Kuṣāṇas, 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 onwards¹⁹.

¹⁸ Plutarch: *Moralia: Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* 821.

¹⁹ A survey can be found in Bh. Shelat: *The Memorial Stones (Pāṭiyā) Inscriptions: The Cultural Heritage of Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch*, in: *Script and Image. Papers on Art and Epigraphy. Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference Vol 11.1*. Ed. by A. J. Gail, G. J. R. Mevissen, R. Salomon. Delhi 2006, p. 185-216. Neither the Sui Vihār inscription (CII Vol. II,1 p. 140) nor the „Daulatpur *yaṣṭhi* inscription“ (V. V. Mirashi: *The Daulatpur inscription of the reign of Caṣṭana: Year 6, JOIB 28,2. 1978/79, p. 34-37*) listed by Shelat p. 192 foll. are erected in memory of a person. On the Sui Vihār inscription St. Konow

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/| rājño Cāṣṭanasa Ysāmotikaputrasa rājño Rudradāmasa Jayadāmaputrasa
2/| varṣe dvipaṃcāse 50 2 phaguṇabahulasa dvitiya va 2 Madanena Sīhīlaputrena
bhagīniye Jeṣṭavīrāye 3/| Sīhaladhita Opaśatisāgotrāye laṣṭi uthapita*

“In the year 52 of King Caṣṭana, the son of King Ysāmotika, [and] of King Rudradāman, the son of Jayadāman²², in the dark half of the month Phālguṇa, on

correctly states: “So far as I can see, the *yāthi* 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 Mūlavāsara 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/| rājño mahākṣatrapasa sāmī Rudrasenasya 2/| varṣe 100 20 2 vai(śākha)bahule pacamyā 3/| imaṃ silalaṣṭi Vāñījakasya putrena 4/| pratiṣṭhāvītaṃ datta (va)maś ca hi (juhū)*; to the right side, written vertically *vāñījakasya*. There are no gaps at the end of the lines as suggested by Gadre.

²⁰ R. D. Banerji: The Andhau Inscriptions of the Time of Rudradaman. EI XVI 1921/1922, p. 9-27, cf. P. V. Kane: History of Dharmasāstra IV, as note 1 above, p. 255.

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 Opaśatigotra.”

The second and third steles bear the same inscription by the same Madana for his brother Ṛṣabhadeva, the son of Siṃhila, and, as the editor translates, for his wife. However, the inscription does not necessarily say or mean only that. For Yaśadattā, the daughter of Sihamīta (Siṃhamitra?) of the Śenikagotra²³, is called a “novice” (*sāmaṇerī*) and in addition also *kuṭumbinī* meaning both “family member” and “wife²⁴”. 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 family²⁵.

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 epidemic²⁶.

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

²³ Neither the Śenika- nor the Opaśati-gotra is mentioned in J. Brough: The early Brahmanical system of *gotra* and *pravara*. A translation of the Gotrapravaramañjarī of Puruṣottama-Pañḍita. Cambridge 1953.

²⁴ /2/ ... *Yaśadattāye Sihamītheadhitā śenikasagotrāye sāmaṇerīye* /3/ *Madanena Siḥilaputrena kuṭubiniye laṣṭhi uthāpitā*, EI 16. 1921/22, p. 24.

²⁵ On *samaṇakuṭimbika* in a Theravāda text cf. JIABS 18.1. 1995, p. 28; on the *kuṭumbi-śrāmaṇera* Gopaka, IJ 47. 2004, p. 312 foll. Similar expressions are Pāli *muṇḍakuṭimbika*, Sv 83,24 as a sarcastic expression and *muṇḍo gṛhapati*, Gilgit Manuscripts III 2, p. 140,13,18, with the equally sarcastic Pāli *muṇḍagahapati*, Vin IV 91,20; on the Mūlasarvāstivādinaya cf. G. Schopen: Deaths, Funerals, and the Division of Property in a Monastic Code, 1995, in: G. Schopen: Buddhist Monks and Business Matters. Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India. Honolulu 2004, p. 91-121 = 473-502, particularly p. 484 = 103.

²⁶ An early reference to an epidemic in the village Nādikā 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 century²⁷.

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 ago²⁸ went unnoticed, perhaps due to the unfortunate failure to translate inscriptions in the last volumes in Epigraphia Indica: /1/ *mahārājasa asamedhayājisa anekahiraṇṇakoḍigosa*/2/*tasahasahasatasahasapadāyisa svāmi-Siri-Caṇṭamūlasa* /3/ *pasuṇhāya mahārājasa svāmi-Siri-Vīrapurisadatasa* /4/ *suṇṇhāya mahārājasa svāmi-Siri-Ehavalā-Caṇṭamūlasa* /5/ *pattīya raṇo Vāsīṭhīputasa Ikhākūnaṃ Siri-Ruḍa*/6/*purisadatasa mātūya mahādevīya mahākhatapadhūtūya Baha*/7/*phalasaḡotāya Siri-Vaṇṇamabhaṭāya saṃvacharaṃ ekkāraṃ* 10 /1 /8/ *vāsāpakhaṃ pathamaṃ* 1 *divasaṃ aṭhamaṃ* 8 *sagaḡatāya chāya* /9/ *khambho*

“The memorial pillar of Siri Varmabhaṭṭā, 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-Cantamūla, the mother of King Vāsīṭhīputta of the Ikṣvāku family, Siri Rudrapurisadatta, the chief queen (*mahādeviyā*) and daughter of a Mahākṣatrapa of the Gotra Bahaphala²⁹, 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,

²⁷ V. V. Mirashi: A Pillar Inscription of Mahākṣatrapa Rupamma from Pawni, EI 37. 1967/8, p. 200-203, p. 202f.

²⁸ D. C. Sircar: Two inscriptions from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa, EI XXXIV 1960/61 [1987], p. 17-22.

²⁹ This *gotra* is not mentioned in the Gotrapravaramāñjarī, 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 guess³⁰. 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 ceremony³¹ and preceded by perhaps even sumptuous funeral rites.

Furthermore, other members of the same dynasty of the Ikṣvākus erected *chāyākhambhas*. The most important among them is perhaps the one erected by Vīrapurisadatta for his father, the first king of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, Vāsiṭhīputta Caṃtamūla, together with his deceased chief queen Anantasiri and 28 other women³². After the title of King Vīrapurisadatta and the date, the text continues:

13/ ... divasa bitiya. sagagatasa 14/ raṃṃo ... (titles) ... 16/ ... sāmi-Siri-Caṃtamulasa saha d[ā]rāhi matāhi mahādeviḥi Anatasiriya 17/ Khaṃdasiriya ... (25 names) ... 12/ Kaṃnhasiriya Sivanāgasiriya abhatarikāḥi³³ ca 13/ Sarasikāya Bhūsumalatāya ca chāyāthabho

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

³⁰ On chronology see J. Cribb: Early Indian History, in: M. Willis (ed.): Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India. London 2000 [rev.: R. A. E. Coningham, South Asian Studies 17. 2001, p. 223 foll.; O. v. Hinüber, IJ 44. 2001, p. 367-370; R. Salomon, JAOS 124. 2004, p. 199-201]; A. M. Shastri: Sātavāhana – Kṣatrapa Chronology and Art History, in: South Asian Archaeology 1999. Groningen 2008, p. 341-351.

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

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.

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. *ābhyantarika* 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 mahādeviḥi* as written in the inscription, D. C. Sircar follows J. Ph. Vogel and supplies *sah[o]darāhi matāhi mahādeviḥi* 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 wives³⁴ 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 sources³⁵. 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 *vīrakals* “hero stones” for warriors who died in battle³⁶. Again, we have no information about any ceremonies possibly and probably accompanying the erection of this monuments. Other stones commemorate Saṭīs, 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 *cai[t]y[aka]* in honour of his queen³⁷. This could have been similar to the mysterious buildings otherwise

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 'nvāroruhuh patnyāś catasrah patīlokagāh*, Mhbh 16.8.24, and many others follow: Mhbh 16.8.71 foll.

³⁶ S. Settar, G. Sontheimer: Memorial Stones. A study of their origin, significance and variety. Dharwar 1982 ; K. Rajan: South Indian memorial Stones. Thanjavur 2000.

³⁷ P. B. Desai: Sangsi Memorial Inscription, EI 28. 1949/50, p. 129-133.

called *aiḍūka* in Purāṇic literature, which were discussed at some length by Hans Bakker recently³⁸.

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 King Muṇḍa. King Muṇḍa 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 longer³⁹”. 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

³⁸ See note 11 above.

³⁹ AN III 57,21-58,23; *tena hi samma Piyaka Bhaddāya deviyā sarīraṃ āyasāya teladoṇiyā pakkhipitvā aññissā doṇiyā paṭikujjatha yathā mayaṃ Bhaddāya deviyā sarīraṃ cirataraṃ passeyyāma*, AN III 57,28-58,3. The translation follows E. M. Hare (trsl.): The Book of Gradual Sayings III. London 1934, p. 48. — On the Chinese parallel cf. Bhikkhu Pāsādika: The Ekottarāgama Parallel to Aṅguttaranikāya III, 57-62 (V.50) Translated from the Chinese Version, in: Jaina-Itihāsa-Ratna. Festschrift für Gustav Roth zum 90. Geburtstag. Indica et Tibetica 47. Marburg 2006, p. 397-406.

dejected⁴⁰. 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 work⁴¹”.

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 queen⁴². 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 Mahāparinibbānasuttanta of the Dīghanikāya, provides many details, which will be examined in the following according to the Theravāda tradition, which is the oldest⁴³. A comparison with the versions found in other Buddhist schools which have come

⁴⁰ On the marks of old age cf., e.g., SN V 216,16-24 and Suśrutasaṃhitā I 35,29; on the harbingers of death AN I 138,22-27. Further: L. Alsdorf: Bemerkungen zum Vessantara-Jātaka. WZKSO I. 1957, S. 50 = Kleine Schriften. Wiesbaden ²2001, p. 319.

⁴¹ *tena hi samma Piyaka Bhaddāya deviyā sarīraṃ jhāpetha thūpañ c’assā karotha. ajjatagge dāni mayaṃ nhāyissāma c’eva vilimpissāma bhattaṃ bhuñjissāma kammante ca payojessāma*, AN III 62,26-29.

⁴² A *matakabhattaṃ* 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 Mahāsāṃghika(-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 Bareau⁴⁴.

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 Vinayaṭiṭaka and elsewhere. And, lastly, it is the by far most detailed report on a funeral⁴⁵. This can be substantiated first by a brief look at the text to recall the most important features of this well known story.

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, Dhṃ-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.

⁴⁴ André Bareau: Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtraṭiṭaka et les Vinayaṭiṭaka anciens: I. De la quête de l'éveil à la conversion de Śāriputra et Maudgalyāyana. 1963 ; — II: Les derniers mois. Le parinirvāṇa et les funérailles, tome 1 (1970), tome 2 (1971). Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 53, 77 ; — III: Articles complémentaires, as note 1 above.

⁴⁵ O. v. Hinüber: A Handbook of Pāli Literature. Berlin 1996, § 60, cf. § 32.

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 force⁴⁶. 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, Sāvatti, Sāketa, Kosambi or Bārāṇasi, D II 169,11 foll. as suggested by Ānanda at the beginning of the Mahāsudassanasuttanta⁴⁷, which was created only in order to justify the choice of the place of the *nirvāṇa*. In some traditions the Mahāsudarśanasūtra is even incorporated into the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra 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 Brahmas or among people including ascetics and Brahmins, gods and men, where the Tathāgata could give up his body for the eighth time⁴⁸." 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

⁴⁶ *āyusaṃkhāraṃ ossaji*, DN II 106,22, cf. *jīvitasamkhāraṃ adhiṭṭhāya*, DN II 99,10.

⁴⁷ On Kusinārā as a possible place of the prehistoric cremations: G. Schopen: Immigrant Monks and the Proto-historical Dead: The Buddhist Occupation of Early Burial Sites in India. 1996, in: Buddhist Monks and Business Matters, as note 25 above, p. 360-381, particularly p. 361f.; on Islamic monuments built over stūpas cf. C. Servan-Schreiber, JAS 280. 1992, p. 401.

⁴⁸ *na kho pañāhaṃ Ānanda taṃ padesaṃ samanupassāmi sadevake loke samārake sabrahmake sassamaṇabrāhmaṇiṇiṃ pajāya sadevamanussāya yattha tathāgato atṭhamaṃ sarīraṃ 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*⁴⁹. 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 from 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-wool⁵⁰, 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*⁵¹.”

⁴⁹ *kathaṃ mayama bhante tathāgatassa 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 cakkavattissa sarīraṃ ahatena vatthena veṭhenti, ahatena vatthena veṭhetvā vihatena kappāsena veṭhenti, vihatena kappāsena veṭhetvā ahatena vatthena veṭhenti. etena upāyena pañcahi yugasatehi rañño cakkavattissa sarīraṃ veṭhetvā ayasāya teladoṇiyā pakkhipivā aññissā ayasāya doṇiyā paṭikujjetvā sabbagandhānaṃ citakam*

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 times⁵⁴. 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 literature⁵⁵ there are only few and very remotely

karivā rañño cakkavattissa sarīraṃ jhāpentī, catumahāpathe rañño cakkavattissa thūpaṃ karontī. evaṃ Ānanda rañño cakkavattissa sarīre paṭipajjanti, DN II 141,32- 143,7.

⁵² *cattāro 'me Ānanda thūpārahā. katame cattāro? tathāgato arahaṃ sammāsambuddho thūpāraho, paccekabuddho ... tathāgatasāvako ... rājā cakkavattī thūpāraho, DN II 142,13-17.*

⁵³ On the meaning of *paccekabuddha*: O. v. Hinüber: Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick. 2001 § 248; cf. E. Lamotte : Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna. Tome II. Louvain 1949, p. 1068-1070 ; Tome IV. 1976, p. 1842 ; L. Schmithausen : Heilsvermittelnde Aspekte der Natur im Buddhismus, in : Raum-zeitliche Vermittlung der Transzendenz hg. von G. Oberhammer und M. Schmücker. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Sitzungsberichte, 665. Band. Vienna 1999, p. 229-262, particularly p. 248 foll.; Th. Oberlies, IJ 47. 2004, p. 360.

⁵⁴ John S. Strong: Relics of the Buddha. Princeton 2004, p. 106 note 21.

⁵⁵ The relevant material is collected and carefully evaluated by J. Brockington: The

comparable descriptions of cremations of kings, who are not called *cakravartins*.⁵⁶

In a well known paragraph from the Rāmāyaṇa the corpse of Rāma's father Daśaratha is also preserved in sesame oil⁵⁷. 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 preserved⁵⁸, 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 Rājagṛha, where Bharata and Śatruḡha 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

Sanskrit Epics. Handbuch der Orientalistik. Zweite Abteilung. Indien. 12. Band. Leiden 1998 [rev.: N. J. Allen, JRAS 9. 1999, p. 445foll.; S. Lienhard, OLZ 94. 1999, column 556-560; O. v. Hinüber, WZKS 46. 2002, p. 268foll.], p. 226 foll. (Mahābhārata), 435 foll. (Rāmāyaṇa).

⁵⁶ 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 *cakadhara gutacako pavatacako* in formula (4+4+5), Shashi Kant: The Hāthīgumphā Inscription of Khāravela and the Bhabru Edict of Aśoka. Delhi ²2000, p. 22 line 17.

⁵⁷ Even the wording is very similar to that of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta: **tailadroṇyām atha amātyāḥ saṃveśya jagatīpatim**, Rām II 60.12 compare *cakkavattissa sarīraṃ ... ayaśāya teladoniyā pakkhipivā*, DN II 142,2.

⁵⁸ *na tu saṃkalanāṃ rājño vinā putreṇa mantriṇaḥ / sarvajñāḥ kartum iṣus te tato rakṣanti bhūpatim*, Rām II 60,13. — This procedure of preservation was evidently well known and is occasionally described also in the Śrautasūtras: P. V. Kane: History of Dharmaśāstra IV (as note 1 above), p. 233 with note 539 referring to the Sātyāśāḍha-Śrautasūtra and to the Vaikhānasa-Śrautasūtra, ed. W. Caland 1941, repr. 1993, p. 312: XXXI 23: *deśāntare mṛtasya sarīraṃ tailadroṇyām avadhāya śakaṭenāharet*. Further: H. H. Wilson: The Vishnu Purana. A system of Hindu mythology and tradition transl. from the original Sanscrit. 1840. repr. Calcutta 1972, p. 310, note 2 refers to the Kāśīkhaṇḍa for the preservation of corpses, cf. *Nimer api taccharīram atimanoharagaṃdhatailādibhir upasaṃskriyamānaṃ naiva kledādikaṃ doṣaṃ avāpa sadyo mṛta iva tasthau*, Viṣṇu-P 4,5,13.

person⁵⁹. Afterwards, the dead Daśaratha is placed on a bier, brought to the bank of the river Sarayū and cremated⁶⁰.

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 procession⁶¹. Sumptuous gifts are also mentioned in the rather detailed description of the cremation of Pāṇḍu, who is brought to the cremation ground on a cart clad in rich clothes. Immediately before the cremation, however, Pāṇḍu's corpse is wrapped in white cotton cloth put on the funeral pyre and sprinkled with ghee⁶².

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 *uddhṛtam tailasamkledāt sa tu bhūmau niveśitam, āpītavarnaavadanaṃ prasuptam iva bhūpatim*, Rām II 70,4.

⁶⁰ *śibikāyām athāropyā rājānaṃ ... ūhuh 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 *dhanavisargārtham dīnānāthajanasya*, text 1812*, see preceding note, 42.

⁶² Pāṇḍu's cremation is described in Mhbh 1.118,5-30; *athainaṃ deśajaiḥ śuklair vāsobhiḥ samayojayan / āchannaḥ sa* (i.e. Pāṇḍu) *tu vāsobhir jīvanṇa iva nararṣabhaḥ / śuśubhe puruṣavyāghro mahārhaśayanocitaḥ*, Mhbh 1.113,20; *ghṛtāvasiktaṃ rājānaṃ saha Mādryā ... samadāhayan*, Mhbh 1.113,21 foll.; cf. Rāvāna's cremation as described in Appendix 69 to Rām VI: *sauvarṇaṃ śibikāṃ divyām āropyā kṣaumaavāsanaṃ / rāvānaṃ*, Rām VI 99,41 with App. 69,10. — The preparations for the cremation of Daśaratha are described in text 1812*, as note 60 above: *śibikāsthaṃ mahārājānaṃ alamkṛtya vidhānataḥ / vāsasā ca mahārheṇa samācchādya susaṃvṛtam / avakṛtya ca mālvena divyadhūpena dhūpitam / gandhapuṣpaiḥ surabhībhiḥ parikṛtya ca sarvaśaḥ / uvāhotkṣipya śibikāṃ ...*, 29-33 and *tām citām pṛthivīpālam āropyā kṣaumaavāsasam*, 63; similarly it is said in the description of Bhīṣma's cremation: *chādāyamāsatur ubhau kṣaumair māllyaiś 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 clothes⁶³. 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 Bhagavatiśūtra⁶⁴. 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 way⁶⁵: “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 by a thousand men, and to proceed through the streets of Sāvattī, proclaiming that the *jīna* Gosāla Mañkhaliputta, the last *tīrthaṅkara* of the twenty-four *tīrthaṅkaras* of this *Avasarpinī* had passed away⁶⁶. 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 a public event. The Buddha himself has

⁶³ But cf. preceding note.

⁶⁴ Viyāhapaṇṇattisutta (Bhagavatisutta) ed. by B. J. Doṣī. Jaina-Āgama-Granthamālā IV, 2. Bombay 1978, p. 725 (XV.108), cf. J. Deleu: Viyāhapaṇṇatti (Bhagavai). The Fifth Anga of the Jaina Canon. Introduction, Critical Analysis, Commentary and Indexes. Bruges 1970, p. 218.

⁶⁵ A. L. Basham: The Ājīvikas. A Vanished Indian Religion. London 1951, p. 64.

⁶⁶ According to the understanding of the Ājīvikas, Makkhali Gosāla was the true *tīrthaṅkara*, 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 music⁶⁷.

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 cremate 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 Makuṭabandhana. 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 there⁶⁸. However, if the instructions given by Makkhali Gosāla to carry his dead body through Sāvatti 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.

⁶⁷ DN II 159,16-23; cf. *tūryaghoṣais ca vividhaiḥ stuvadbhiḥ cābhinanditam / patākābhiḥ ca citrābhiḥ sumanobhiḥ ca citritam / utkṣīpya śibikāṃ*, Ram II App I 69,11-13 said of Rāvaṇa

⁶⁸ As it is said, e.g., of Rāvaṇa: *dakṣiṇābhimukhāḥ*, Rām II, App. I 69,14.

When the Mallas arrive at the Makuṭabandhanacetiya 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 Buddha⁶⁹, 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 *teladoṇī* only until Mahākassapa arrives to preserve the corpse, what has been observed long ago⁷⁰.

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 Rāvaṇa 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 irrelevant⁷¹. It is

⁶⁹ *Mahākassapo ... citakaṃ padakkhiṇaṃ katvā pādato vivarivā bhagavato pāde sirasā vandi*, DN II 163,27-29.

⁷⁰ The Buddhists themselves seem to have had some difficulties with the *teladoṇī*. 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.

⁷¹ This changed considerably in later times as shown by G. Schopen: On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure. Monastic Funerals in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya. 1992, in: Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India. Honolulu 1996, p. 204-237.

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 too soon the Sugata entered *nirvāṇa*, by far too 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 obscure⁷². 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 fire⁷³.

⁷² *sarīrāni sattāhaṃ santhāgāre sattipañjaraṃ karitvā dhanupākāraṃ parikkhipivā*, DN II 164,20 foll.

⁷³ *rathāṃś ca mṛditāṃś tatra nānāpraharaṇāni ca | citāḥ kṛtvā ... narādhipān ... dāhayāmāsūr*, Mhbh 11,26,29. This is similar to a prescriptions of the Āśvalāyana-Gṛhyasūtra (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 Veṭhadīpa that is Viṣṇūdīvīpa, 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 away⁷⁴.”

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. — *anhākam gāmakhette parinibbuto*, DN II 166,1.

for himself⁷⁵. 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 *stūpas* with relics (*sarīrathūpa*), one *stūpa* built over the pot as number nine and one *stūpa* built over the ashes as number ten. Thus it was in the days of yore”: *evaṃ etaṃ bhūtapubbaṃ*, an unusual, unique, solemn and meaningful conclusion of the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta⁷⁶.

The many ways, in which this spectacular funeral was interpreted in modern times, will not be repeated here⁷⁷. 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 *stūpa* was excavated at Kusinārā, the modern Kasia, it does not date back to the time of the Buddha⁷⁸. There are rather ancient archaeological remains found in Rājagṛha or Vaiśālī, but, here too,

⁷⁵ DN II 166,3-167,20.

⁷⁶ *iti aṭṭh’assa sarīrathūpā, navamo kumbhathūpo, dasamo aṅgārathūpo. evaṃ etaṃ bhūtapubbaṃ*, DN II 167,19-21 ; cf. *evaṃ etaṃ tadā āsi*, SN I 36,5*.

⁷⁷ All important aspects are aptly summed up and discussed in a comprehensive manner by John Strong: The Buddha’s Funeral, in: The Buddhist Dead. Practices, Discourses, Representations ed. by B. J. Cuevas and J. I. Stone. Honolulu 2007, p. 32-59.

⁷⁸ On the relevant evidence cf., e.g., H. Härtel: Archaeological Research on Ancient Buddhist Sites, in: H. Bechert (Ed.): The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Dritte Folge Nr. 189. Göttingen 199 [rev.: A. K.

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 Lumbinī⁸⁰: *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

Narain, *JlABS* 16.1. 1993, p. 187-201; R. Gombrich, *GGA* 246. 1994, p. 86-96; J. W. de Jong, *IJ* 37. 1994, p. 66-71; L. Cousins, *JRAS* 6. 1996, p. 57-63; A. Wurm, *WZKS* 42. 1998, p. 193 foll.; D. Seyfort Rugg, *BSOAS* 62. 199, p. 82-87], p. 61-89.

⁷⁹ It is tempting to think that Piprāhvā might be identical with Pippalivana 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

⁸¹ *abhijānāmi ... pitu Sakkassa kammante sūāya jambucchāyāya nisinno ... paṭhamam jhānaṃ upasampajja 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 Mahāyānamahāparinirvāṇasūtra 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

⁸² H. Habata: Die zentralasiatischen Sanskrit-Fragmente des Mahāparinirvāṇa-Mahāsūtra. 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 collected⁸⁴”.

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 *saṃgha* 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 Pippalivana.

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 Mūlasarvāstivādinaya 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.

⁸⁴ *yāvataṃ Ānanda ariyaṃ āyatanam yāvataṃ vaṇippatho idaṃ agganagaraṃ bhavissati Pāṭaliputtam putabhedanam*, 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 Malla 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 Veṭhadīpa, even the Moriyas of Pippalivana. 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, Sāvattthi, 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 Vaikhānasaśrautasūtra, and, consequently, was a well known method to preserve corpses. Finally, Makkhali Gosāla was carried through Sāvatti 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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