

5. The Kanishka – Satavahana Legend Revisited

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Abstract

All these stories thus share the same peculiar feature, a quarrel over an imprint on a cloth. Again, at least one of the two principal characters may be the same in all the legends. Two refer to the name Kanishka-one stating its variant Kanik-and the third mentions the King of Kashmir, a phrase by which a monarch called Kanishka, cited in the Rajatarangini, could have been denoted. The name king Satavahana is expressly referred to by one legend and indicated by another. The existence of these possible areas of contact indicates that the legend may have a definite historical core. There seems to be no doubt that such legendary stories and myths which exist in one form or another for such a long period as a popular narrative in significant writings of their era were all inspired by a historical fact.

Key Words: *Legend, Myth, Historical Core, Chinese translation, Al Beruni, Mujmmal ut Tawarikh*

There was story in the Yu yang tsa tsu¹ which was composed by Tuan Ch 'eng-che in c. A.D. 860.² This book, written in 20 chapters, contains inter alia important notices on foreign countries. In chapter XI of this work occurs a story about Kanishka. H. Huber was of the opinion that the author borrowed this story from the accounts of the embassies of Wang Hsuan-tz 'u to India. In favour of such an observation Huber cited the instance of the author's reference in chapter VII to an Indian scholar, in the company of the King of Magadha, brought to the capital of China by Wang Hsuan-tz 'u.³ It should be remembered that this story is not known to occur in any Chinese treatise ascribable to a period earlier than that of Wang Hsuan-tz. There are definite testimonies, to the currency of similar stories in India only after the period of Wang Hsuan-tz 'u'.⁴ Moreover, he is known to have narrated

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some other stories about a king called Kanishka.⁵ Huber pointed out, that at least on one occasion Tuan Ch 'eng-che used the information supplied by Wang Hsuan-tz 'u. Hence it is probable that the story with which we are concerned was brought by Wang Hsuan-tz 'u from India, and was later incorporated by Tuan Ch 'eng-che in his Yu yang tsa tsu.

The story itself is as follows: 'Formerly there reigned in Gandhara (Kan-to) a worthy and shrewd king; his name was Kanishka.⁶ He led his armies against all nations; none resisted him. Once, during his campaign in India (T 'ien-chu)⁷, some one presented him two very fine fabrics. He kept one (for himself), and bestowed the other on his queen. The queen clothed herself (with it), and came before the king. Now on the fabric, just over the breast of the queen, appeared the imprint of a hand in saffron (colour). At the sight of this the king grew angry, and demanded of the queen 'what does the robe, put on by you, signify, and what does the mark of a hand convey?' The Queen said to him 'this is the same cloth which the king has given me.' Furious, the king demanded an explanation from his treasurer, who replied to him 'a piece of this stuff always carries this mark. And the king ordered the merchant, (who) had sold (the cloth to the buyer who had presented it to the king), to appear (before him). The latter (i. e. the merchant) said, 'in South India reigns king Satavahana. Every year he accumulates, one upon the other, fine fabrics brought to him as taxes; he imprints his hands, wetted in saffron, on these stuffs, and this imprint penetrates through all the pieces. In whatever way a man may put on one of these cloths, the mark of the hand will appear on his back; and (it appears) over the breast if it is (worn by) a female.' The king ordered the personnel of his retinue to put on (the pieces) themselves, and it (was) as the merchant had said. The king cried out, 'I (won't) sleep or (take) rest before I cut off the hands and feet of King Satavahana'. And, he despatched a messenger to South India to demand the hands and feet of king (Satavahana). On the arrival of the messenger, king Satavahana and his minister spoke to him falsely that 'we have a good king who has the name Satavahana; but this is not an actual king; nevertheless, the power and the supreme authority are in the hands of us, the ministers.' On (hearing) that, the king (i.e. kanishka) ordered his cavalry and elephants to go down to the South, against the kingdom of (king) Satavahana. The inhabitants concealed king (Satavahana) in an underground cave; and then cast in gold (a statue of) a man which went to meet the invader. But Kanishka recognised the forgery, and, relying on the strength of his previous merits, he cut off the arms and the legs of the man (i.e. the statue) of gold. At the same moment fell off the two arms and (the two) legs of king Satavahana, hidden in the cave.

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Similar stories about rivalry having been caused by the appearance of a certain imprint on merchandise are also preserved in some early medieval texts. To this category should belong the well-known Persian work called the *Mujmal ut Tawarikh*.⁸ The chapter in which the story in question occurs seems to contain a chronicle of the Sind region. It originally belonged to a book written in the 'Hinduani language'. The latter was translated into Arabic and Persian. The translation into the latter language was done in 417 A.D. Though the date of the original Indian text is not known,⁹ there is no doubt that the story concerned originated before the date of its translation into Persian, i.e. A.D. 1026. This story speaks of a king called Hal, i.e. Hala. It appears from the context that Sind was included in his dominions.¹⁰ His country exported fine cloths stamped with the impression of one of his feet. The king of Kashmir became furious on seeing the impression on the garment worn by his queen. On hearing from the merchant, who had sold the cloth, that the stamp was an impression of one of Hala's feet, he (the king of Kashmir) swore to cut off that limb of Hala. So the king of Kashmir marched against king Hala. The latter was alarmed. He played a trick by placing an elephant in front of the battle field. When the soldiers of the king of Kashmir advanced, flames burst out from it and burnt many of them. So the king of Kashmir was compelled to sue for peace, at the conclusion of which he was given many presents by Hala. In order to fulfil his oath the former cut off the legs of an image of wax, and then returned to his country.¹¹

Certain similarities between these two stories may be noticed. The Chinese story is earlier than the Persian; and in the latter it is possible to find an echo of the former. In the king of Kashmir we may recognise Kanishka, for Kanishka is recorded in the *Rajatarangini* as the king of that country.¹² Hala appears in the Puranic lists as the name of an Andhra (Satavahana) monarch.¹³ It is, however, not necessary to conclude that this particular Satavahana king is intended here. It should, however, be noted that there is no evidence of the Satavahana occupation of the whole of Sind. Nevertheless, at least their temporary political or military success in some areas in or near Sind is sure. It is not impossible that the memory of such an association was in course of time distorted enough to appear as indicating the Satavahana authority over the whole of the Sind region.

A similar story was narrated in Al Biruni's *Tahqiq-i- Hind*, mainly based on materials collected from A.D. 1017 to 1030 and written sometime in or before his death in 1048.¹⁴ According to Al Biruni, this legend was related by the people. It refers to King Kanik, the builder of the vihara of Purushwar (i.e. Peshawar). The king of Kanoj (or Kauauj) presented him with a fine piece of cloth. On

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this, however, was imprinted one foot of a man. Kanik took it as an insult. He led his army against the king of Kanoj. As the latter was not strong enough to resist the invasion, his minister played a trick. The minister, however, purposely misled the army in the desert. Scarcity of water seems to have caused great inconvenience to Kanik's army. Kanik now realised the minister's mischief. However, he procured sufficient water for his troops by thrusting his spear into the desert. The minister then thought that it would be futile on his part to play any further trick on such a powerful monarch. He requested Kanik to pardon the king of Kanoj. Kanik set him free and told him that his master had already received his deserved reward. Then Kanik returned. The minister also went back to his master, only to learn that the latter's hands and feet had fallen off exactly when Kanik thrust his spear into the desert.¹⁵

Kanik, the builder of the vihara of Peshawar, is obviously Kanishka I, to whom this act of merit seems to have been ascribed by epigraphic as well as literary sources.¹⁶ As Al Biruni heard this narrative much later than the latest possible date for the origin of the legend concerning similar exploits of a king also called Kanishka, it would be fair to suppose that the story-teller of Al Biruni's age had the latter story in mind, but referred to the king of Kanauj in place of king Satavahana. Probably by the time of Al Biruni the name Satavahana was comparatively unfamiliar, whereas Kanoj or Kanauj was too well-known a city in contemporary India.¹⁷ to be excluded from any current interesting historical legend.

All these stories thus share the same peculiar feature, a quarrel over an imprint on a cloth. Again, at least one of the two principal characters may be the same in all the legends. Two refer to the name Kanishka-one stating its variant Kanik-and the third mentions the King of Kashmir, a phrase by which a monarch called Kanishka, cited in the Rajatarangini, could have been denoted. The name king Satavahana is expressly referred to by one legend and indicated by another.

These considerations tempt one to suggest that all these legends evolved out of a common prototype. And since the Chinese one is the earliest attested (c. 650 A.D.), it itself is the original legend or at least is likely to be closer to the original than either of the other two. Since this Chinese version deals with the rivalry between Kanishka and King Satavahana, the original story, if it is not the Chinese one, may also have dealt with the same monarchs.¹⁸ It appears that a story concerning the rivalry between a monarch called Kanishka and King Satavahana was current in North India from a fairly early period (at the latest from c. A.D. 650). It no doubt contained, as did many legends having a

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historical basis, some miraculous and fictitious elements, such as dismembering of enemy's body by cutting off parts of a gold statue, etc. Different modified forms of this legend were later adopted by subsequent writers of early medieval times. These alterations were the results either of deliberate distortions by story-tellers and writers to suit their own ends, or of gradual, but natural, corruptions of legends, or of both. Nevertheless, the very existence of these modifications indicates that the original story, concerning the rivalry between a ruler called Kanishka and king Satavahana, was popular in North India. Nevertheless, when a popular story corroborates information already gathered from reliable contemporary sources, the central theme of that legend may be accepted as having some historical basis. Kanishka, the central figure of the Chinese legend, may also have been the first Kushana monarch of that name. The expression Satavahana is known to have been used as the appellation of a royal family¹⁹ as the personal name of one or two members of that dynasty,²⁰ and as signifying the surname of one of its rulers having a separate forename. Hence it may mean a scion of the Satavahana family, having this or a separate surname as his personal name.

The Kushana monarch Kanishka I's rule of at least 23 years probably began in A.D. 78.²¹ Of the 24 known regnal years of the Satavahana king Gautamiputra Satakarni should be placed in the last quarter of the 1st century A.D. It may also have been possible that he did not cease to rule before the first decade of the 2nd century A.D. On the other hand, his son and successor, Vasishthiputra Pulumavi, ascended the throne sometime in the closing years of the 1st century A.D. or in the first decade of the 2nd century A.D. He was the sovereign head of the Satavahana state for at least up to sometime of the 24th year of his reign and thus also for the greater part of the first quarter of the 2nd century A.D.²² These hypotheses suggest that either Gautamiputra Satakarni was the Satavahana contemporary or both he and his son Vasishthiputra Pulumavi were the Satavahana contemporaries of Kanishka I. Hence, if there is any historical core of the Chinese legend, the last mentioned king clashed either with the father or with the son. There are indeed areas of possible contact between Kanishka I and the Satavahanas. The Nasik inscription of the year 19 of Vasishthiputra Pulumavi describes Gautamiputra Satakarni as one "who crushed down the pride and conceit of the Khatis" (Khatiya- dapa-mana-madana).²³ In this connection we may refer to another passage of the above mentioned Nasik epigraph. It describes him as the lord, inter alia, of the Parichata (mountain), and of Aparanta, Kukura, Suratha, Akara and Avanti.²⁴ The Parichata or Pariyata "corresponds to the portion of the modern Vindhya range west of Bhopal, together with the Aravalli mountains."²⁵ Aparanta or

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Aparanta may have included North Konkan and the Nasik and Poona districts.²⁶ For the Junagadh inscription of c. A. D. 149-150 refers to Kukura in addition to mentioning Anartta, comprising generally North Kathiawad and thereabouts,²⁷ and Surashtra, including at least South Kathiawad. In fact, Suratha or Surashtra of the Nasik record may denote, inter alia, the whole of Kathiawad. Gautamiputra Satakarni's rule in the Aravalli region, North Konkan and nearby territories, and also in South Kathiawad (definitely a part of Surashtra), implies his authority over the adjoining area including North Kathiawad. But in the list of the provinces of Gautamiputra's kingdom there does not appear any name which indicates North Kathiawad alone.²⁸

Surashtra under the Satavahana monarch could possibly have included parts of south-easternmost Sind or areas lying near it. The Kushana authority in the region of modern Sind is well attested. The Hou Han-shu speaks of the conquest of V'ima Kadphises.²⁹ The topographical description of this territory indicates that it included the ancient Sindhu country to the west of the lower Indus and perhaps also parts of the land to the east of the same section of that river.³⁰ The Kushana hegemony in the lower Indus area might have been acknowledged at least up to sometime in the reign of Vasudeva I.³¹ This indicates the rule of Kanishka I, the successor of V 'ima and a predecessor of Vasudeva I in this region. Another piece of evidence may perhaps testify to Kanishka I's hold over at least parts of the territories near or on the lower Indus. In the ruined stupa of Sui Vihar, situated about sixteen miles to the south-west of the town of Bahawalpur, was found a copper plate inscription dated in the 11th year of (the reign of) king Kanishka.³² The date apparently refers to the Kanishka Era.³³ Its provenance further suggests that in the 11th year of Kanishka I's reign the Sui Vihar area was within the Kushana empire. Sui Vihar is not far from the possible northern limits of ancient Sauvira, which in the early centuries of the Christian Era was on the eastern side of the lower Indus and included at least parts of the territory later annexed to the British province of Sind.³⁴ Hence the provenance of the inscription in question may perhaps also allude to Kanishka I's influence in or near the northern zone of the lower Indus region.

These premises tend to mark out the area now known as Sind as one of the possible regions of contact between Kanishka I and the Satavahana monarch Gautamiputra Satakarni or his son Vasishtiputra Pulumavi. We are referring to Akara, which, in the early centuries of the Christian Era, certainly included the land now called Eastern Malwa.³⁵ Gautamiputra Satakarni was the 'lord' of this Akara.³⁶ In the heart of Eastern Malwa is Sanchi, Kakanada or Kakanada- boṭa of some early Indian

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epigraphs.³⁷ Here excavations have yielded an inscription, engraved in Kushaṇa Brahmi on the pedestal of an image of the Buddha.³⁸ The epigraph is dated in the year 22 of King Vaskushaṇa. It is impossible to deny the existence of the name Kushana in the expression Vaskushaṇa. So it may be taken for granted that the inscription of the year 22 refers, as do all epigraphs mentioning Kushana monarchs and dated in any year below 100, to the era of Kanishka I.³⁹ The only ruler who could have ruled in the year 22 of this reckoning and whose name could have been corrupted into Vas- kushaṇa was Vasishka Kushaṇa. The same king is mentioned in another record from Sanchi, inscribed in Kushaṇa Brahmi on the pedestal of a Boddhisattva statue. The epigraph notes the dedication of the image and a shrine in the Dharmadeva monastery in the year 28 of (Maharaja) Rajatiraja Devaputra Vasashka.⁴⁰ The form Vasashka is a mistake for or a variant of the name Vasishka.⁴¹ It is only natural to suggest that these inscriptions indicate the authority of the Kushaṇas over the Sanchi area, Eastern Malwa or Akara, at least during the years 22 to 28 apparently of the Kanishka Era.⁴² Since Kanishka I reigned, at least until the year 23, Vaskushaṇa or Vasishka Kushaṇa was his co-ruler in the year 22.⁴³ Hence the region in the heart of Akara was annexed to the Kushaṇa empire before the end of Kanishka I's rule. Thus in the land of Akara Kanishka I could have clashed with the Satavahana sovereign Gautamiputra Satakarni, the lord of Akara. It is also not unlikely that Vasishthiputra Pulumavi, who inherited Gautamiputra Satakarni's dominions, was the Satavahana rival of Kanishka I.⁴⁴ The existence of these possible areas of contact indicates that the legend may have a definite historical core. There seems to be no doubt that such legendary stories and myths which exist in one form or another for such a long period as a popular narrative in significant writings of their era were all inspired by a historical fact.

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