

The Pāli Language and the Theravādin Tradition

K.R. Norman

A History of Indian Literature Vol. VII, Facs. 2, Pāli
Literature, 1983

CHAPTER I

THE PĀLI LANGUAGE AND THE THERAVĀDIN TRADITION

1. THE NAME "PĀLI"

The dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan which is found in the texts of the Theravādin Buddhists and usually called "Pāli" by European scholars¹ is nowhere so called in the Theravādin canon. The word *pāli* is found in the chronicles and the commentaries upon the canon, but there it has the meaning "canon" and is used in the sense of a canonical text or phrase as opposed to the commentary (*aṭṭhakathā*) upon it.² This usage is made clear by the fact that the word *pāli* sometimes alternates with *tanti*.³

It would seem that the name "Pāli" is based upon a misunderstanding of the compound *pāli-bhāsā* "language of the canon," where the word *pāli* was taken to stand for the name of a particular *bhāsā*, as a result of which the word was applied to the language of both canon and commentaries. There is evidence that this misunderstanding occurred several centuries ago. CHILDERS stated⁴ that the English usage was taken from the Sinhalese,⁵ who used the word in the same way. This probably accounts for CLOUGH's adoption of the name when he published his grammar in 1824.⁶ BURNOUF and LASSEN also used the name "Pāli" in their essay on Pāli grammar which was published in 1826,⁷ but in the survey of Pāli studies up to that year included in that work BURNOUF pointed out that the first person to mention Pāli was SIMON DE LA LOUBÈRE

¹ For a survey of earlier views about the name "Pāli," see O. VON HINÜBER, "Zur Geschichte des Sprachnamens Pāli," in *Beiträge zur Indieforschung*: Ernst Waldschmidt zum 80. Geburtstag gewidmet, Berlin 1977, pp. 237–46.

² E.g. *Pālimattaṃ idh' ānitaṃ, n' atthi aṭṭhakathā idha* (Mhv XXXVII 227); *sabbākārena n' eva Pāliyaṃ na aṭṭhakathāyaṃ āgataṃ* (Vism 107, 15–16).

³ Cf. *imaṃ pālīnayaṅvurūpaṃ saṃvannanaṃ dāni samārabhissaṃ* (Sp 2, 11–12) with *manoramaṃ bhāsaṃ tantīnayaṅvucchavikaṃ āropento* (Sv 1, 19–20).

⁴ R. C. CHILDERS, A dictionary of the Pāli language, London 1875, p.vii n. 1.

⁵ The earliest example quotable seems to be from the Saṅgharājasādhucariyāva (*śaka* 1701 = A.D. 1779), according to C. H. B. REYNOLDS (quoted by BECHERT, BCSRS, p. 16).

⁶ B. CLOUGH, A compendious Pali grammar with a copious vocabulary in the same language, Colombo 1824.

⁷ E. BURNOUF et CHR. LASSEN, *Essai sur le Pali ou langue sacrée de la presqu'île au-delà du Gange*, Paris 1826.

who visited Siam in 1687–88, and published a description of the kingdom of Siam in 1691, which was translated into English in 1693.⁸

It is clear from this account that in Thailand in the late seventeenth century the name “Pāli” was already being used of the language of the Theravādin texts. LA LOUBÈRE noted that in contrast to Thai, which was a monosyllabic language, “Balie” (or “Baly”) was inflected just like the languages of Europe.⁹ He also drew attention to the fact that the names for the days of the week were similar in Pāli and Sanskrit,¹⁰ and reported that he had been told that there were similarities between Pāli and the languages spoken near Coromandel. He commented that this was not surprising in view of the fact that the Buddha was reported to have been the son of a king of Ceylon.¹¹

The Sāsanavaṃsa, written in Burma in 1861, uses the word *pāli* in a context where it seems to be the name of a language.¹² Since the Sāsanavaṃsa is based upon an earlier Burmese text,¹³ the usage of the name “Pāli” in Burma is probably earlier than would appear. It seems unlikely that the usage arose independently in all three countries, but in the present state of our knowledge it does not seem possible to determine where the misunderstanding first occurred.

2. THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PĀLI LANGUAGE

The commentaries state that the language spoken by the Buddha, which is the language of the canon, is Māgadhī.¹⁴ This is referred to as the *mūla-bhāsā*,¹⁵ the root language of all languages, and the language which a child would speak naturally if it heard no other language spoken.¹⁶

An examination of the Pāli canon shows clearly that portions, at least, of it were either composed or transmitted through one or more other dialects of Middle Indo-Aryan, before being turned into the version which exists at present. It can be shown that these dialects included those where the voicing of

⁸ SIMON DE LA LOUBÈRE, *The kingdom of Siam*, London 1693 (repr. 1969).

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹² [*Buddhaghosa*] *icc evaṃ pālibhāsāya pariyattim parivattitvā pacchā ... jīnacakkam ... atidibbati* (Sās 31, 31); cf. *parivattesi sabbā pi Sīhalatṭhakathā tadā sabbesaṃ mūlabhāsāya Māgadhāya niruttīyā* (Mhv XXXVII 244).

¹³ See V. B. LIEBERMANN, “A new look at the Sāsanavaṃsa,” in BSOAS 39 (1976), pp. 137–49.

¹⁴ *sammāsambuddho pi tepitakam Buddhavacanam tantim āropento Māgadhābhāsāya eva āropesi* (Vibh-a 388, 7–8).

¹⁵ *Buddhaghosa* says: *Māgadhikāya sabba-sattānaṃ mūlabhāsāya* (Vism 441, 34); cf. *sabbesaṃ mūlabhāsāya Māgadhāya niruttīyā* (Mhv XXXVII 244).

¹⁶ *ubhinnaṃ pi pana katham asuṇanto Māgadhābhāsaṃ bhāsissati* (Vibh-a 387, 32–33).

intervocalic consonants took place, or their reduction to *-y-*, or *-r-* became *-l-*.¹⁷ Some of the Pāli material came from or through dialects where the absolutive was in *-ttā*,¹⁸ the nominative singular in *-e*, or the locative plural in *-ehi*.¹⁹ It is clear, therefore, that the statement that the canon is in one dialect, whether Māgadhi or anything else, cannot be true of all of it. What we know of Māgadhi as described by the grammarians in later times, however, enables us to say that Pāli is not Māgadhi, and although we have no direct evidence about the characteristics of Māgadhi in the centuries before Asoka, we can deduce with some certainty that Pāli does not agree with that either.²⁰

It would seem likely that, because the texts tell of the Buddha at times preaching in Magadha, although none of the scenes of the great events in his life was situated within the boundaries of Magadha as we know it in historical times,²¹ the tradition arose that all his sermons were preached in the dialect of that region of North India. It is also possible that the prestige attaching to Magadha, and by implication to Māgadhi, during the time of the Mauryan kings, and also the way in which the Māgadhi²² of the original Asokan edicts was everywhere in India “translated” into the local dialect or language, led to the taking over by the Buddhists, at about the time of the council which the Theravādin tradition reports was held during the reign of Asoka, of the idea that their “ruler” too employed such a language.

Although there is some doubt about the interpretation of the phrase the Buddha used when asked if it was permissible to translate his sermons,²³ it is generally agreed that he did not preach in Sanskrit, but employed the dialect or language of the area where he was preaching. We must assume that his sermons and utterances were remembered by his followers and his audiences as they heard them. In the course of time, during his lifetime and after his death, collections must have been made of his words, and translations or

¹⁷ See LÜDERS, BSU, §§ 58—86, 88—115.

¹⁸ See O. VON HINÜBER, “Pāli as an artificial language,” to appear in IT 10 (1982), and K. R. NORMAN, “Four etymologies from the Sabhiya-sutta,” in BALASOORIYA, BSWR, p. 183 n. 21.

¹⁹ See LÜDERS, BSU, §§ 1—21, 220—25.

²⁰ See K. R. NORMAN, “The dialects in which the Buddha preached,” in BECHERT, LEBT, pp. 69—71.

²¹ F. EDGERTON (BHS Grammar, New Haven 1953, p. 3 n. 8) has pointed out that neither the Buddha’s home (Kapilavastu), nor one of his favourite dwelling places (Śrāvastī), nor the scene of his first sermon (Benares), nor the place of his death (Kusīnagarī, Pāli Kusinārā) was in Magadha.

²² I use “Māgadhi” here in the sense of the language of Magadha at the time of Asoka, without thereby implying that it necessarily had the same features as the grammarians’ Māgadhi.

²³ When asked if his words could be translated *chandaso*, the Buddha forbade it, but added: *anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttīyā buddhavadānaṃ pariyāpuṇitum* (Vin II 139, 14—16). For a discussion, with references to earlier views, of the words *chandaso* and *sakāya niruttīyā*, see J. BROUGH, “Sakāya niruttīyā: Cauld kale het,” in BECHERT, LEBT, pp. 35—42.

redactions of these must have been made as the need arose, either because the collections were being taken into an area where a different dialect or language was spoken, or because as time went by his words became less intelligible as their language became more archaic.

As Buddhism became established in various parts of North India, there must have been an attempt made to render all the holdings of any particular *vihāra*, which were probably still in various dialects as they had been remembered, roughly homogeneous in language, although we must bear in mind the fact that, as the dialects of North India had probably not diverged greatly from each other in the fourth and third centuries B.C., absolute perfection of “translation” was not essential. The anomalous forms in Pāli mentioned above probably represent the remnants of recensions in other dialects, which had not been completely translated.

The Theravādin tradition tells of councils (*saṅgītis*) being held to recite the canon, of which the third was held in the time of Asoka,²⁴ and although the discrepancies with the Northern tradition cast doubt upon this, there must have been gatherings of some sort where recitations took place, and the “imprimatur” of the *Saṅgha* was bestowed. Such councils would inevitably have led to a normalisation of the language of the canon to a greater or less extent.

Since this normalised language was an “ecclesiastical” one, being recited by monks who probably spoke a variety of languages or dialects, there is no necessity to assume that it coincided exactly with any one particular spoken language. It has been claimed in the case of Pāli that as there are resemblances between it and the Gīrnār dialect of the Asokan inscriptions,²⁵ and also between it and the language of the Hāthigumphā inscriptions,²⁶ Pāli must have been the language of one or other of these two areas. A careful examination of the language of these inscriptions shows that Pāli is not identical with either of them, and there is, moreover, some doubt about the language of the Gīrnār version of the Asokan inscriptions, since it is possible that it represents, in part at least, the scribe’s attempt to convert the Eastern dialect he must have received from Pāṭaliputra into what he thought was appropriate to the region in which the edict was being promulgated, rather than the actual dialect of that region.²⁷ The language of the Hāthigumphā inscription, although it agrees

²⁴ If the Northern tradition that the second council took place in Asoka’s reign is correct (see THOMAS, HBT, p. 34), then it is possible that the Theravādins held a third council later in the same reign, after ridding themselves of heretics. Perhaps the figure of 118 years connected with this third council refers to the number of years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, not after the second council.

²⁵ J. BLOCH, states: “Gīrnār fournit la langue la plus proche du pali des livres bouddhiques singhalais, qui nous servira de repère: c’est du reste en raison de cette ressemblance qu’on suppose le pali originaire d’une région voisine” (Les inscriptions d’Asoka, Paris 1950, pp. 44–45).

²⁶ See OLDENBERG, Vin I, p. liv.

²⁷ See K. R. NORMAN, “The dialects in which the Buddha preached,” in BECHERT, LEHT, p. 69.

with Pāli in the retention of most intervocalic consonants and in the nominative singular in *-o*, nevertheless differs in that the absolutive ending is *-(t)ā*, and with two doubtful exceptions there are no consonant groups containing *-r*.²⁸

While it is not impossible that there existed in India in the third century B.C. an unattested dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan which had all the features of Pāli, the fact that some of the consonant clusters found in Pāli are unhistoric and must therefore represent incorrect attempts at backformation, e.g. *disvā* (which cannot be from *dr̥ṣṭvā*) and *atraja* (which cannot be from *ātmaja*), makes it more likely that by the third century B.C. the dialect of the canonical texts of the Theravādins conformed to the general pattern of Middle Indo-Aryan dialects of that time, and all consonant clusters had either been assimilated or resolved. It is probable that this represented the form of the language of the Theravādin canon at the time of the reign of Asoka, which was perhaps the *lingua franca* of the Buddhists of Eastern India, and not very different from the language of the Hāthigumphā inscriptions.

At some unknown date, probably around the end of Asoka's reign (c. 235 B.C.), the importance of Sanskrit which had been in eclipse began to rise again, and as we can see from the progressive Sanskritisation of the Mathurā inscriptions²⁹ and the non-Pāli schools of Buddhism, an attempt was made to translate from the Middle Indo-Aryan dialects into Sanskrit. It is probable that this would have been done in a haphazard way at first, in the same way as the early texts had been remembered and translated from dialect to dialect. With the crystallisation of sects and schools, and with the increased use of writing from the time of Asoka onwards, it is probable that the use of Sanskritised forms by the Theravādins became more standardised.

The tradition recorded in the Sinhalese chronicles states that the Theravādin canon was written down³⁰ during the first century B.C. as a result of threats to the *Saṅgha* from famine, war, and the growing power of the Abhayagiri *vihāra*, to which the king was more favourably disposed. There is no reason to reject this tradition, because there are indications that texts were already being written down before this date.³¹ It seems probable that the Sanskritisation of Pāli was virtually fixed at the stage it had reached by the time of the commission to writing, and except for any changes made later by the scribes for the sake of consistency, no further progress was made with the restoration of consonant groups. Those changes which had been made, in a haphazard way as already stated, had probably occurred for specific religious or cultural reasons. It is, for example, probable that the authentic Middle Indo-Aryan form *bam-*

²⁸ In his revised edition of the inscription, B. M. BARUA read *brahmaṇānam* in line 8a and *-prāci-* in line 9 ("Hāthigumphā inscription of Khāravēla," in IHQ 14, p. 466).

²⁹ See TH. DAMSTEEGT, *Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit*, Leiden 1978, p. 265.

³⁰ See p. 10 below.

³¹ See BROUGH, G Dhp, p. 218.

haṇa “brahman” had been replaced by the Sanskrit form *brāhmaṇa* because of the strongly anti-brahmanical flavour of the Buddha’s teaching. It was perhaps of little value to condemn the brahmans or to maintain that a Buddhist “brahman” was better than a true-born brahman if the recipients of the attack did not recognise their name in its Middle Indo-Aryan guise. Once the *br-* group had been restored³² in *brāhmaṇa*, then the way was open for its “restoration” in other words, e.g. *brūheti*, even if it were not historically justified. On the other hand, there was no specific need to restore *pr-*, even though one might have expected the treatment of voiced and unvoiced labials in conjunction with *-r-* to have been identical.

Although the chances of major changes being made to the language of the canon must have diminished once the texts had been written down, nevertheless there was room for a certain amount of minor emendation to take place in the course of the centuries-long scribal tradition. Once the Pāli grammarians had begun to classify and categorise the features of Pāli, it was inevitable that their writings would have some effect upon scribes. It is clear from some of the later commentaries that the commentators had a knowledge of Sanskrit.³³ There is evidence that the opinions of the commentators sometimes had a bearing upon the readings which the scribes handed down,³⁴ and it seems likely that their knowledge might well also affect the phonology and morphology they transmitted. It has been said, with some justification, that the Pāli of the canon as we have it now is a reflection of the Pāli of the twelfth century,³⁵ when the influence of the Pāli grammarians was at its highest.

It was to be expected that Pāli would show the influence of Sanskrit, because it was copied by scribes who were influenced by the grammarians, who were themselves influenced by Sanskrit, but we must also recognise the fact that as Pāli became the religious language of Buddhism in Ceylon and South-East Asia, it was used by a variety of persons as a second language. This led inevitably to the introduction into Pāli of features of their first language, more particularly of vocabulary, but also of syntax. Studies of Pāli texts written in Ceylon show clearly the influence of Sinhalese Prakrit and Sinhalese, and also Dravidian,³⁶ probably through the medium of Sinhalese. In the same way

³² It would be possible to argue that the form *brāhmaṇa* had been retained unchanged from the very oldest stage of MIA for this same reason. It can, however, be shown that in certain contexts, at least, the expected MIA form of the word occurred. The etymologies which connect *brāhmaṇa* with the root *bāh-*, e.g. *bāhita-pāro ti brāhmaṇo* (Dhp 388), make sense only in a dialect where initial *br-* had become *b-*.

³³ See DE SILVA, DAT, I, pp. lvi–lviii.

³⁴ See O. VON HINÜBER, “On the tradition of Pāli texts in India, Ceylon and Burma,” in BECHERT, BCSRS, pp. 55–57.

³⁵ HELMER SMITH (Sadd, p. vi) writes of “la conviction que notre pali est une fonction de celui du 12^{me} siècle.”

³⁶ See K. DE VREESE, “Dravidian idioms in later Pali,” in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11, pp. 179–222.

texts written in Burma³⁷ or Thailand³⁸ may reveal features of Burmese or Thai.

All Hīnayāna canonical texts show evidence of being translated from a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan. The North-Western Prakrit of the Gāndhāri Dharmapada has features, e.g. dental *-s-* where retroflex *-ṣ-* is expected, which prove that it has been translated from some other Prakrit.³⁹ The Sanskrit of the Sarvāstivādin texts from Chinese Turkestan and the Mūla-sarvāstivādin texts from Gilgit shows, in general, less Prakrit features than the language of the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādin texts,⁴⁰ although the latter, mostly known only from a single manuscript, are not consistent in their degree of Sanskritisation. Their version of the Dharmapada,⁴¹ for example, has restored some retroflex and palatal sibilants, many long vowels before consonant groups, and some consonant clusters containing *-r-*, but very few containing *-v-*,⁴² e.g. absolutes have the ending *-tā*. The nominative singular ending is *-o*. In the Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya,⁴³ on the other hand, the absolute ending is *-tvā*, and the nominative ending *-aḥ* occurs.

3. THE HISTORY OF THE THERAVĀDIN TRADITION

All the schools of Buddhism agree that there was a council held soon after the death of the Buddha. According to the earliest version found in Pāli,⁴⁴ there was a meeting of 500 *bhikkhus*, where Mahākassapa asked Upāli about the *vinaya*, questioning him about the rules of the *Pātimokkha*, where the offence was laid down, with respect to whom, on what subject, etc. He then questioned Ānanda about the *dhamma*, starting with the Brahmajāla-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya, and then the Sāmaññaphala-sutta, and so on through the five *nikāyas*. As the two experts expounded these matters, the other *theras*

³⁷ See VICTOR B. LIEBERMAN, "A new look at the Sāsanaṃsa," in BSOAS 39 (1976), p. 146.

³⁸ See N. A. JAYAWICKRAMA, The sheaf of garlands of the epochs of the conqueror, PTS London, 1968, pp. xxxvii—xxxix, and G. TERRAL, "Samuddaghosajātaka," in BEFEO 48 (1956), pp. 263—65.

³⁹ See BROUGH, G Dhp, § 50.

⁴⁰ See F. EDGERTON, BHS Grammar, New Haven 1953, p. xxv. EDGERTON classifies the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādin Mahāvastu as being the oldest BHS text we have.

⁴¹ Ed. G. ROTH, in "The language of the Ārya-Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādins," in BECHERT, LEHT, pp. 78—135, and also by N. S. SHUKLA, The Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dharmapada, Patna 1979.

⁴² From the Pkt form *ditthā* the redactor produced *drṣṭā* instead of *drṣṭvā*.

⁴³ Ed. G. ROTH, Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya: manual of discipline for Buddhist nuns, Patna 1970.

⁴⁴ Vin II 285, 9—287, 28.

repeated their words after them. Buddhaghosa, in his account of the same council,⁴⁵ states that the fifth *nikāya*, the Khuddaka-nikāya, included whatever sayings of the Buddha were not included in the first four *nikāyas*. The Pāli account does not mention the Abhidhamma specifically, although Buddhaghosa's interpretation of *nikāya* does not preclude the inclusion of the Abhidhamma in the Khuddaka-nikāya. The versions of the story included in the Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvaṃsa⁴⁶ state that Ānanda repeated the *dhamma*, which could be taken to include the Abhidhamma. Some of the Northern schools, however, do specifically include the Abhidhamma, and state that this was expounded by Kassapa himself.⁴⁷

The version in the Dīpavaṃsa⁴⁸ states that the *theras* divided up the nine-fold *dhamma* into chapters, etc. This seems to be an attempt to reconcile the old nine-fold division with the arrangement of the canon as we have it now. Buddhaghosa attributes to the *theras* all the *uddāna* verses, noting of repetitions, etc., which exist in the canon.⁴⁹ There are in commentaries by Buddhaghosa and others not infrequently statements that a portion of the text is due to the *saṅgītikāras*, and it is probable that these ascriptions are taken over from the earlier Sīhala *aṭṭhakathās*. Although there is no reason to doubt that these portions are indeed later additions to the canon, and were made by *saṅgītikāras*, there is no certainty that they were added at the time of the first council.

Although we may have reservations about the texts which were dealt with at the first council, there is no reason to doubt the general way in which it was held. The chosen expert in each section of the Buddha's teachings expounded what he could remember, and when it had been approved as a genuine utterance of the Buddha the assembly as a whole confirmed their approval by repeating it together. The commentaries explain that the words "Thus have I heard" at the beginning of the *suttas* are the words which Ānanda used to introduce his recitation.⁵⁰

Buddhaghosa tells us that after the council the Vinaya was entrusted to Upāli and his pupils. Similarly the Dīgha-, Majjhima-, Saṃyutta- and Aṅguttara-nikāyas were entrusted to Ānanda, Sāriputta, Mahākassapa and Anuruddha, respectively, and their pupils.⁵¹ This was probably the beginning of the system of the *bhāṇakas* ("reciters"), who shared out the recitation of the *dhamma* among themselves. We find in the commentaries references to *bhāṇakas* of the first four *nikāyas*, and to Jātaka-*bhāṇakas* and Dhammapada-*bhāṇakas*.⁵²

⁴⁵ Sp 16, 14—15.

⁴⁶ Dīp IV 11; Mhv III 35.

⁴⁷ See THOMAS, HBT, p. 28 n. 1.

⁴⁸ Dīp IV 18—20. See p. 16 below.

⁴⁹ Sp 30, 1—5.

⁵⁰ *Brahmajāla*sāpi "evam me sutan" ti ādikaṃ āyasmatā Ānandena paṭhama-mahāsaṃgīti-kāle vuttaṃ nidānam ādi (Sv 2, 14—15).

⁵¹ Sv 13, 23—24; 15, 2—13.

⁵² See ADIKARAM, EHBC, pp. 24—32.

Although there seems to be only one reference to Khuddaka-*bhāṇakas*,⁵³ we may assume that there were *bhāṇakas* of the other texts of the Khuddakanikāya. We may deduce from the fact that versions of one and the same *sutta* or utterance in different parts of the canon sometimes differ, that the *bhāṇakas* responsible for the transmission of each text were quite independent, and were not influenced by the traditions of the *bhāṇakas* of other *nikāyas*. This would explain why the versions of Vaṅḡsa's stanzas in the Saṃyutta-nikāya and the Theragāthā do not entirely agree.⁵⁴

The views of the *bhāṇakas* were not confined to the texts for whose recitation they were responsible. They also had views about the books which were to be regarded as canonical. We read that the Dīgha-*bhāṇakas* put the Khuddakagantha into the Abhidhammapiṭaka, classifying the texts in the following order: Jātaka Mahāniddeśa Cūlaniddeśa Paṭisambhidāmagga Suttanipāta Dhammapada Udāna Itivuttaka Vimānavatthu Petavatthu Theragāthā Therīgāthā. The Majjhima-*bhāṇakas*, however, put them in the Suttanta-piṭaka together with the Cariyāpiṭaka, the Apadāna and the Buddhavaṃsa.⁵⁵ They thus omitted the Khuddakapāṭha from the canon. We must assume that the Dīgha-*bhāṇakas* closed their list of the Khuddakanikāya before these texts were added to it, while the Majjhima-*bhāṇakas* closed their list before the Khuddakapāṭha was reckoned as being canonical.

The schools of *bhāṇakas* also had their own views about the history of early Buddhism, e.g. the Dīgha-*bhāṇakas* said that the Bodhisatta saw all four *nimittas* on the same day,⁵⁶ while other *bhāṇakas* had other views; the Majjhima-*bhāṇakas* gave a different reason from the Dīgha-*bhāṇakas* for Ānanda's late arrival at the Council.⁵⁷ To judge from the way that Buddhaghosa speaks about them, the *bhāṇakas* were still active in his day, but they seem not to exist today, at least not in Ceylon.⁵⁸ It is likely that the growth of the practice of writing, and the increasing use of MSS, made it unnecessary to keep up the schools which were dedicated to the recitation of the complete *nikāyas* entrusted to their care.

The Pāli Vinaya-piṭaka goes on to relate how, following a dispute over certain points of discipline 100 years after the death of the Buddha, a second council was held. In the presence of 700 *bhikkhus*, Revata asked the *thera* Sabbakāmin about the discipline. This council is described in the Vinaya as a *vinaya-saṅgīti*.⁵⁹ The Dīpavaṃsa calls it a *dharmasāṅgha*, and is followed in this by the Mahāvaṃsa.⁶⁰ The latter source adds that the 700 were *tipiṭakatta-*

⁵³ Mil 342, 1.

⁵⁴ Compare especially Th 1253–62 with S I 196, 11–21.

⁵⁵ Sv 15, 22–29.

⁵⁶ Ja I 59, 31–32.

⁵⁷ Sv 11, 3.

⁵⁸ See ADIKARAM, EHBC, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Vin II 307, 35.

⁶⁰ Dīp V 28; Mhv IV 63.

yadharins.⁶¹ Buddhaghosa expands the story, and says that 700 *tipīṭakadhara*s were chosen to rehearse the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*, which they recited in their entirety.⁶²

At some time after the second council, the dissident monks split off from the Theravādins and held their own "great council" (*mahāsaṅgīti*). They consequently became known as Mahāsaṅgitikas⁶³ or Mahāsāṅghikas.⁶⁴ During the following centuries further splits occurred, from both the Theravādins and the Mahāsāṅghikas, until by the time of the early chronicles eighteen sects were known and named.⁶⁵

The earliest Pāli source for the account of the third council, held during the reign of Asoka and not mentioned as such in the Northern Buddhist sources, is the *Dīpavaṃsa*.⁶⁶ There we read that the council was held after the expulsion of certain heretics from the Order. Moggaliputta presided over 1,000 *bhikkhus*, and during the course of the *saṅgīti* he recited the *Kathāvattu*. The *Mahāvamsa*⁶⁷ adds the detail that the *bhikkhus* were all *tepiṭakas*. Buddhaghosa states⁶⁸ that they recited both the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*.

Buddhaghosa gives an account⁶⁹ of an assembly held in Ceylon, soon after the introduction of Buddhism there, when the elder Mahā-ariṭṭha preached the *vinaya*. The *Mahāvamsa* does not mention this assembly, but in the account of it given in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*,⁷⁰ the recitation is said to have included both the *vinaya* and the *dhamma*, and the assembly is specifically called the fourth assembly, and verses attributed to the *porāṇas* are quoted which include the words *catutthaṃ saṅgahaṃ katvā*.⁷¹ The *Jinakālamālī*⁷² follows Buddhaghosa in stating that Mahā-ariṭṭha recited the *vinaya* only. The verse found in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* is quoted by Buddhaghosa,⁷³ without attribution to the *porāṇas*, but the words of the *pāda* in question are different, and make no mention of the *catutthasaṅgaha*.

The *Dīpavaṃsa* states⁷⁴ that during the reign of Vattagāmaṇi Abhaya (29–17 B.C.) the monks who had previously remembered the Tipiṭaka and its commentary orally now wrote them down in books, because of the threat posed by famine, war, and the growing power of the newly established Abhayagiri

⁶¹ Mhv IV 62.

⁶² Sp 34, 16–22.

⁶³ Dīp V 32.

⁶⁴ Mhv V 4.

⁶⁵ Dīp V 51; Mhv V 10.

⁶⁶ Dīp VII 39–40; 57–59.

⁶⁷ Mhv V 275.

⁶⁸ Sp 61, 19.

⁶⁹ Sp 102, 23–103, 22.

⁷⁰ *Saddhamma-s* 43, 29–44, 29.

⁷¹ *Saddhamma-s* 45, 11.

⁷² *Jinak* 50, 17.

⁷³ Sp 104, 5–6.

⁷⁴ Dīp XX 20–21.

vihāra, which enjoyed the king's favour. The Mahāvamsa⁷⁵ also refers briefly to the writing down of the canon and the commentaries at this time. The Pūjāvaliya and Nikāyasaṅgraha,⁷⁶ however, written in Ceylon in the 13th and 14th centuries respectively, state that the writing down was a result of the holding of a council of 500 *bhikkhus* at the Aluvihāra (Āloka-vihāra), although neither source gives a number to the council.⁷⁷ The Jinakālamāli,⁷⁸ however, entitles this section of its narrative Catutthasaṅgītikathā, and quotes a statement from the Sāra-saṅgaha, written in the 13th or 14th century, that the *saṅgīti* was *catutthadhammasaṅgītisadisā*. The Saddhammasaṅgaha does not specifically call this the fifth council, as it might have been expected to do, but states: *pañcamaṃ dhammasaṅgītisadisam eva akāsi*.⁷⁹ Of the writing down of the Tipitaka and commentaries in the time of Vattagāmaṇi, the Sāsanavaṃsa, written in Burma in 1861 by Paññāsāmi, but following earlier sources, states⁸⁰ that "this should be called even by the name of the fourth council." It quotes as an authority for this statement the Vinaya-tīkā called Sāratthadīpanī, written by Sāriputta⁸¹ probably in the 12th century, which states "The council for writing the books was indeed the fourth council." The Sāsanavaṃsa also states⁸² that the list of elders down to Sīva which is found in the Vinaya⁸³ is the "succession of elders down to those who assembled in the fourth council as recorded in books."

The Dīpavaṃsa, followed by Buddhaghosa and the Mahāvamsa,⁸⁴ tells how one of the missions sent out by Moggaliputta after the third council consisted of Soṇa(ka) and Uttara who went to Suvannabhūmi, which is usually identified as Burma. The Burmese tradition, however, has it that Buddhism was established in Burma even earlier than that. The Sāsanavaṃsa⁸⁵ tells of the Buddha actually visiting that country, a story doubtless invented to match his alleged visits to Ceylon. The later Burmese tradition even claims Buddhaghosa as a native of Thatôn.⁸⁶

There is evidence for the existence of Buddhism in both Burma and Siam by the seventh century A.D., and a number of Buddhist texts were certainly

⁷⁵ Mhv XXXIII 100—101.

⁷⁶ "During his reign 500 Rahats resided in the Alulena cave and rehearsed the [sacred] books" (Pūjāvaliya, tr. B. GUNASEKERA, Colombo 1895, ch. 34). "At that time 500 Rahats who assembled at Alulena in the country of Mātale, under the patronage of a certain chief, recited and reduced to writing the text of the Three Pitakas" (Nikāyasaṅgraha, tr. C. M. FERNANDO, Colombo 1908).

⁷⁷ As I am informed by Mr C. H. B. REYNOLDS, Lecturer in Sinhalese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London.

⁷⁸ Jinak 61, 11—12.

⁷⁹ Saddhamma-s 49, 5—6.

⁸⁰ Sās 23, 26—27.

⁸¹ Gv 61, 30—31.

⁸² Sās 20, 5—6.

⁸³ Vin V 3, 1—28.

⁸⁴ Dīp VIII 12; Sp 64, 3—4; Mhv XII 6.

⁸⁵ Sās 36, 33—37, 3.

⁸⁶ See PE MAUNG TIN and G. H. LUCE (tr.), *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, London 1923, pp. 46—50.

known in Burma in the eighth century,⁸⁷ although it is not certain whether the whole Tipiṭaka was known there at that time. The Sāsanavaṃsa⁸⁸ refers to inscriptions stating that King Anuruddha established the religion c. A. D. 1057 after conquering the town of Sudhamma (Thatôn). He had the Tipiṭaka brought from Ceylon and compared with that from Sudhamma. Communication with Ceylon at this time is confirmed by a report in the Mahāvāṃsa⁸⁹ that King Vijayabāhu, finding that there were not enough ordained monks in Ceylon to hold the *upasampadā* ceremony, asked Anuruddha to send monks to hold the ceremony, and to recite the Tipiṭaka.

In the following century, when Parakkamabāhu I became king, he found that Buddhism in Ceylon was still rent by heresy. He accordingly called a council under Mahākassapa and had them settle the points in dispute, and thus managed to reconcile the three main sects in Ceylon at that time.⁹⁰

We read in the Jinakālamāli⁹¹ that in A. D. 1430 the Sīhalasāsana was brought to Siam, and not long after, in 1475–77, a council was held in Siam⁹² at which the three Piṭakas were “cleansed of scribes’ errors” by great elders appointed for the task, who were well versed in the Tipiṭaka. As in the case of Burma, the traffic was not all one way. In 1756 Buddhism had declined to such a state in Ceylon that it became necessary to re-establish the *upasampadā*, and monks were invited from Siam to do this.⁹³ They brought with them books of various sorts, on the *dhama* and the *vinaya*, which were not extant in Ceylon. In 1802 Burmese monks were invited to Ceylon to introduce the Burmese *upasampadā*.⁹⁴ Subsequently Sinhalese monks went to Burma and studied the Abhidhamma, and on their return they brought back Pāli books written by Burmese monks.

Towards the end of the 19th century King Min-dōn-min, whose tutor Paññāsāmi had written the Sāsanavaṃsa only a few years before, convened a fifth council (1868–71), where under the presidency of the king eminent monks and teachers read or recited the sacred texts to restore the best readings. The complete text of the Tipiṭaka was engraved on 729 stone slabs around the Kuthodaw Pagoda in Mandalay. The dates on the slabs indicate that the texts had probably already been carved before the council was held, and were then corrected in the light of any discussion.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ See G. H. LUCE, “The advent of Buddhism to Burma,” in COUSINS, BSIBH, pp. 119–38.

⁸⁸ *silālekhanesu vuttam* (Sās 64, 1–2).

⁸⁹ Mhv LX 5–7.

⁹⁰ Mhv LXXVIII 16–27.

⁹¹ Jinak 93, 17–20.

⁹² Jinak 115, 5–6.

⁹³ Mhv C 152–53.

⁹⁴ See MALALASEKERA, PLC, p. 309 and BODE, PLB, pp. 77–78 and 83–84.

⁹⁵ See W. B. BOLLÉE, “Some lesser known Burmese Pāli texts,” in HEESTERMAN, Pratih, pp. 493–99.

The Mandalay slabs were re-inked and copied for the sixth council which was held in Rangoon in 1954—56, to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth (according to the oriental tradition of chronology). We are informed⁹⁶ that a draft edition of the Tipiṭaka, commentaries and sub-commentaries, based upon the fifth council edition which had been revised after comparison with texts from other countries, was prepared by a body of scholars. This was then checked and re-edited by a large number of Burmese *mahātheras*, and simultaneously by a smaller number of Sinhalese monks. The final version was decided upon (not without argument) by boards of reviewers composed of Burmese, Sinhalese, and Thai monks. The new editions were then ready for printing. The task of the council, spread over two years, was the ceremonial recitation and formal confirmation of the new editions. Although invited, no representative of Cambodia or Laos was able to attend the meetings for scrutinising the new editions, but the Cambodians and Laotians are reported to have given their assent to the decisions arrived at by the representatives of the other countries. While the vast majority of monks present at the sixth council were Burmese, recognition was given to the other countries by appointing their representatives as chairmen for the various sessions.

It is not inappropriate to talk of a Burmese or Siamese or Sinhalese tradition for the transmission of a particular text, and the differences which we find between the readings of the MSS belonging to the various traditions must go back to the councils which have been held from time to time in the different countries. The value of each tradition will depend upon the care with which evidence for variant readings was sifted, and the criteria which were adopted as the basis of the decisions which were made. We have, of course, no way of discovering this for the earlier councils. The way in which the preliminary work for the sixth council was carried out should have resulted in an eclectic edition of the canon and the commentaries, incorporating the best readings from all the oriental editions. It is probable, however, that the *Chatṭhasaṅgāyana* edition is based predominantly upon the Burmese tradition, but it is not possible to be certain about this without carrying out a detailed comparison between that edition and the one inscribed after the fifth council.

The way in which the *upāsampadā* was re-introduced from one Buddhist country into another, and books were brought by visiting monks, has led to a situation where the traditions of each country have become to some extent interwoven. It is sometimes possible to detect the effect which this has had. When, for example, variant readings in a Sinhalese MS depend upon the similarity in shape of two *akṣaras* which resemble each other in the Burmese script, but not in the Sinhalese syllabary, then we have a clear indication that at some time a Burmese MS has been transliterated into Sinhalese characters.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁶ See D. E. SMITH, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton 1965, pp. 160—63.

⁹⁷ The *anusvāra* and the *i-mātrā* are similar in the Burmese script, but not in the Sinhalese, so that any Sinhalese manuscript which shows *-am* as a mistake for *-i* must be based upon a transcript from a Burmese manuscript.

export of MSS sometimes results in the fact that a text which has been lost in the country of its origin may be found, safely preserved for centuries, in another country.⁹⁸

In more modern times the ease of communication has led to a situation where it can become very easy for cross-fertilisation of traditions to take place. The editors of the second European edition of the Sutta-nipāta draw attention to the fact that they have ignored the Siamese edition of that text because it has been influenced by the first European edition.⁹⁹ It is nevertheless possible that MSS are still extant in libraries in Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand which are based upon a tradition which pre-dates, and therefore perhaps preserves readings older than and rejected by, more recent councils and editions.

Although not so well documented as the Theravādin tradition, it must be assumed that the other traditions followed a similar pattern of recitation and validation as canonical by assemblies of monks. The council held by the Mahā-sāṅghikas after the schism which followed the second council has already been mentioned. The alternative name of the sect suggests that the story of their holding a council is correct, although it is possible that its occurrence was merely deduced by the Theravādins, who observing differences between the canons of the two sects assumed that their rivals would, like themselves, need the authority of a council to authenticate their canon.

Hsüan-tsang records a story that under Kaniṣka 500 elders subjected the Buddhist texts to a revision and wrote commentaries upon them.¹⁰⁰ These commentaries were then deposited in a *stūpa*. This is designated in the Kanjur as the third council.¹⁰¹ If the story is true, it presumably refers to the Sarvāstivādins, who were strong in Kashmir, where the council was held. It is, however, possible that the story was an invention, made up as a direct imitation of the accounts of the earlier councils. The fact that one of the commentaries alleged to have been composed at that council actually exists¹⁰² does not prove the existence of the council.

⁹⁸ NĀNAMOLI suggests (Peṭṭ tr., p. xiii) that an original manuscript of the Peṭṭakopadesa may have been imported into Burma from Ceylon or South India at an early date, and all other Indian and Sinhalese manuscripts have been subsequently destroyed by time and neglect, so that the text is now entirely dependent upon a single Burmese manuscript, now lost.

⁹⁹ See D. ANDERSEN and H. SMITH, Sn, p. vi n. 1.

¹⁰⁰ See S. BEAL (tr.), Buddhist record of the western world, London 1884, I, pp. 152–56.

¹⁰¹ See THOMAS, HBT, p. 175.

¹⁰² See *ibid.*, p. 176.