DHARMAKĪRTI’S DURBODHĀLOKA
AND THE LITERATURE OF ŚRĪVIJAYA

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Abstract
Although Śrīvijaya was esteemed as a centre of Buddhist scholarship, only one example of its presumably extensive literature has survived. This is an abstruse philosophical commentary entitled Durbodhāloka composed at the beginning of the 11th century by Dharmakirti. Written originally in Sanskrit, it survives only in a Tibetan translation done by Atiśa, a monk from Bengal who later travelled to Tibet. Information about the author and place and date of composition of the Durbodhāloka is given in the colophon, which is studied in this paper.

T

he Southeast Asian polity known as Śrīvijaya was not only a political and economic power, but also a centre of Buddhist culture. Writing at Śrīvijaya itself towards the end of the seventh century, the redoubtable Chinese pilgrim-scholar I-ching described it as a centre of Sanskrit and Buddhist studies (Takakusu 1982: xxxiv).

In the fortified city of Po-shih [Takakusu transcribes this as Bhoja] Buddhist priests number more than 1000, whose minds are bent on learning and good practices. They investigate and study all the subjects that exist just as in the Middle Kingdom (Madhyadeśa, India); the rules and ceremonies are not at all different. If a Chinese priest wishes to go to the West [India] in order to hear (lectures) and read (the original), he had better stay here one or two years and practise the proper rules and then proceed to Central India.

It seems that Śrīvijaya maintained its standards of scholarship until at least the first half of the eleventh century, when the Indian monk Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (circa 982–1054) travelled there to study, and stayed for twelve years, from about 1012 to 1024. Through his translations into Tibetan, Dīpaṃkara—also known as Atiśa—is responsible for the preservation of the only certain example of the literature of Śrīvijaya that has survived. Some scholars have questioned or even rejected the historicity of Dīpaṃkara’s journey to Śrīvijaya, but I feel that the evidence is inconclusive. Dīpaṃkara was from eastern Bengal, and studied at Vikramaśīla and Nālandā. East Bengal is itself on the fringes of South East Asia, and cultural and religious (especially Mahāyāna Buddhist) relations between Nālandā and South East Asia are well-attested throughout the Pāla and Sena periods. Even if we reject the tradition, the fact remains that the reputation of Śrīvijaya and its scholars was such that the Tibetans saw fit to invent the journey: that is, whether legend or fact, the tradition is significant in the context of South East Asian history.

One of the important documents bequeathed to us by Atiśa is his translation of the Durbodhāloka by Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti is a common name, and the author of the Durbodhāloka should not be confused with other Dharmakīrtis, such as the famous logician, or the Dhammakīrtis of Theravādin tradition. Nothing is known of our Dharmakīrti except that he was a resident of Śrīvijaya: in Tibetan tradition he became known as Dharmakīrti of

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Suvarṇabhūmi. The Durbodhāloka or Illumination of [Points] Difficult to Understand is a commentary on an Indian text, the Abhisamayālaṃkāra. The Abhisamayālaṃkāra, or Ornament of Realization, is a terse and systematic verse explication of the Prajñā-pāramitā or Perfection of Wisdom. Composed in the 4th century CE, it was one of the most influential texts of scholastic Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the subject of numerous commentaries. It remains on the curriculum of Tibetan monasteries to this day.

Like the Abhisamayālaṃkāra, Dharmakirti’s commentary is divided into eight chapters. It takes up 128 folios in the Peking xylograph edition of the Tibetan Tanjur (collection of commentaries and treatises). In this short paper, I am concerned with the historical information embedded in the colophon. The colophon, which will be translated and edited below in Parts II and III, consists of two parts:

(1) three verses and a prose sentence that were part of the original Sanskrit manuscript, and composed by Dharmakirti;

(2) a brief prose ‘translators’ colophon’ giving the name of the translators into Tibetan, which would have been added at the time of translation.

Sections 1.3 (in verse) and 1.4 (in prose) establish that the Durbodhāloka was composed at the request of, or during the reign of, King Śrī Cūḍāmanivarman of Śrīvijaya. Section 1.4 establishes that the work was composed in the city of Śrīvijaya itself. The importance of this information cannot be gainsaid: the composition of the Durbodhāloka presupposes the existence and study in Śrīvijaya of the abstruse Prajñāpāramitā and Abhisamayālaṃkāra literature; of a high level of scholarship; and of royal sponsorship. The evidence of the colophon is unambiguous: whether or not Atiśa travelled to Śrīvijaya, the fame of the work composed by a Śrīvijayan author was such that he introduced it to the ‘Land of Snows’.

The colophon states that the commentary was composed at the behest of King Śrī Cūḍāmanivarman, in the 10th year of his reign. We do not know when the king took the throne, but we do know that he died between 1005 and 1008. It seems then that the Durbodhāloka should have been written before 1005. This makes it one of the earliest extant works of South East Asian literature, predated only by a few works in Old Javanese. The translation of the Durbodhāloka into Tibetan was done in Western Tibet (mNga’ ris, perhaps at Tho ling) by Atiśa and Rin chen bzang po. Since Atiśa arrived in Western Tibet in 1042, and stayed there for three years, the two scholars must have made their translation between 1042 and 1045.

Cūḍāmanivarman is one of the few South East Asian kings of the period about whom we have any significant information. He is known from the present colophon, from Chinese records, and from Cola inscriptions from South India (Cœdès 1968: 141-2). Where did he reign? The colophon supplies two toponyms: Śrīvijaya-pura (dPal rnam par rgyal ba’i grong) ‘of’ Suvarṇadvīpa (gSer gling). In an earlier contribution to the pages of this journal, I have argued that Suvarṇabhūmi/Suvarṇadvīpa was a general name for the region of South East Asia, rather than a specific kingdom or state (Skilling 1992: 131). Paul Wheatley (1983: 267) arrived at a similar conclusion:

Whatever the name signified to those who braved the perils of the ocean, it is more than doubtful if the Indians of the Classical period in general entertained any conception of Suvarṇadvīpa more precise than that of a beckoning eldorado beyond the ocean.

That is to say, the mention of Suvarṇadvīpa does not help us here.

Much has been written about the location of the political centre of the entity known from various sources as Śrīvijaya, but the issue has not been resolved. While Cœdès
placed it in Palembang in south-eastern Sumatra, other scholars have proposed other sites, either elsewhere in Sumatra or on the Malay peninsula. It has also been suggested that Srivijaya (perhaps a title) may have been attached to the name of more than one political entity over the centuries; or that the capital (and ruling family) may have migrated from one place to another, taking the name with them; or that there may have been two capitals of a single Srivijaya at one and the same time. This is not the place to review the evidence, arguments, and counter-arguments. For the period in ques-

Figure 1. Part of the 'domain of Srivijaya' with modern names of places mentioned in the text.
tion here, there is reason to conclude that King Cùdāmani-varman and his son and successor Māravijayottungavarman reigned in the central Malay peninsula, perhaps in the region of Kedah. The evidence for this lies in the inscriptions of the Cola kings Rājaraja I and Kulot tunga I, the so-called 'Leiden Plates'. The 'Larger Plates', in Sanskrit and Tamil, were issued in 1044/46, but refer to a grant made in 1005. The Sanskrit section describes Māravijayottungavarman as 'belonging to the Sailendra lineage,' (Sailendra-vamśa), 'lord of Śrīvijaya' (Śrīvijaya-adhipati, taking Śrīvijaya to equal Śrīvijaya), and 'lord of Kadāha' (Kaṭāha-adhipati) (Majumdar 1938: 242, ll. 80–82, 90; 243, l. 100). The Tamil section describes King Cùdāmani-varman as 'lord of Kadāha/Kidāra' (Majumdar 1938: 243, l. 6; 244, l. 13; 250, l. 200). The 'Smaller Plates', composed in Tamil and issued in about 1089–1090, refer to the 'lord of Kadāha' and describe Cùdāmani-varman as a Sailendra (Majumdar 1938: 276, l. 10; 277, ll. 13–14; 278, ll. 39–40). Again, the Tanjore inscription of Rājendra I which details a Cola invasion of (pen)insular South East Asia in about 1025 describes Sangrāmavijayottungavarman as the King of Kadāram (Wheatley 1961: 199–201).

Here as well, much has been written. Many scholars, including Coedes, have concluded that Kadāha/Kaṭāha/Kidāra refers to Kedah. Kaṭāha is frequently referred to in Indian literature, and Kedah, in the central Malay peninsula at the head of the Straits of Malacca, occupied a central and strategic position on the maritime trade routes as one of the first landfalls (after the Nicobar islands) on the journey across the Bay of Bengal from India. Kaṭāha is sometimes identified with the Kalāh of Arab sources, which some have equated with Kedah, others with the isthmus of Kra further north (Bradell 1980: 381–6; Wheatley 1961: 216–24; 1983: 234–7 and n.28, 254). This gives us several possibilities to contemplate:

Kaṭāha = Kalāh = Kedah
Kaṭāha = Kalāh = Kra (area of

What can we conclude? The colophon states that Dharmakīrti composed the Durbdhā-loka in the city of Śrīvijaya in South East Asia (Suvarṇadvipa), sometime before 1005. This is a contemporary and reliable document. Cola inscriptions inform us that the line of kings to which Dharmakīrti’s patron Cùdāmanivarman belonged reigned in Kaṭāha. One of the inscriptions mentions Śrīvijaya, and Chinese annals relate the same kings to the realm of ‘San-fo-ch’i’, which is interpreted as Śrīvijaya. These too are contemporary and reliable documents.

It seems within the evidence to conclude
that Cūḍāmaṇi-varman and his successors ruled from Kaṭāha, and that Kaṭāha was on
the west coast of the central Malay peninsula. But what was its extent, its sphere of
influence, in the 11th century? Where were its ‘borders’? We do not know, except that it
had a number of tributary states. It is not
impossible that Kaṭāha stretched from the
isthmus of Kra down to Kedah and beyond:
what better way to control the trade, both
transpeninsular and through the straits?
What was the relationship between Kaṭāha
and Šrīvijaya? Were they the same? (That is,
did the kings of Kaṭāha adopt Šrīvijaya as
title or prestigious name for their realm?). Was Šrīvijaya a city within the state of
Kaṭāha, or was it a tributary state, else­
where in the central peninsula? Our sources
cannot answer these questions.16

We can conclude that the Durbodhāloka
was composed in the city of Šrīvijaya, in the
reign of King Cūḍāmaṇi-varman of Kaṭāha,
a powerful monarch who had relations with
India and China. Perhaps Dharmakirti
worked in the area of modern Kedah, per­
haps elsewhere on the peninsula. This would
make the Durbodhāloka not only one of the
earliest extant works of South East Asian
literature, as mentioned above, but more
specifically the oldest surviving work com­
posed on the Malay peninsula—whether in
modern Malaysia or Siam cannot be said. If
the illustrious Bengali pandita Atiśa indeed
visited Šrīvijaya, he would have visited Kaṭāha in the central Malay peninsula, and
not, as is given in all modern books on the
subject that I have seen, Palembang in
Sumatra.17

Three other works translated or written
by Atiśa are associated in their colophons
not with Šrīvijaya as such but with
Suvarṇadvīpa (Eimer: 1981: 73-8). The evi­
dence of these colophons is ambiguous, and
raises more questions than it answers. I hope
to deal with the colophons in a future article.

II

Colophon of the Durbodhāloka: 
translation18

1. Authors’ colophon

1.1. I have composed [this work] entitled
‘Illumination of Difficult
Points’
If in doing so I have [written] anything
inappropriate
May the wise please forgive me.19

1.2. By this merit (puṇya) may all beings
Realize the perfection of wisdom (prajñā­
pāramitā)
And may I act for the benefit (arthā)
Of sentient beings (sattva) equal to the space­
element (ākāśadhatu).20

1.3. This Illumination (āloka) has been com­
posed
By Dharmakirtiśrī, at the request of the King,
The illustrious (Śrīmān) Čūḍāmaṇi-varman,
Of the delightful (ramya) abode of Šrīvijaya.

1.4. Completed (samāpta) is the Durbodhāloka,
composed in the city (pura, nagara) of

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Śrīvijaya of Suvarṇadvīpa on the eleventh day of the first month of spring (Phālguṇa) in the tenth regnal year of Deva Śrī Cūḍāmanivarman.

2. Translators' colophon
Translated, revised, and finalized by the Indian preceptor (upādhyāya) Dipamkaraśṛjñāna and the Great Translator Bhūṣu Rin chen bzang po.21

III

Colophon of the Durbodhāloka: Tibetan text

The edition of the colophon compares the text as found in four xylograph Tanjurs: Cone (C), shes phyin ja, 265a3; Derge (D) 3794, sher phyin ja, 254a4; Narthang (N), mdo ja, 275b5; Peking (Q) 5192, sher phyin pa, 288b7.

tshig don rtogs par²² dka' ba yi //
de nyid snang ba zhes bya ba //
bdag gis sbyar 'di²³ byas gyur pas //
ma 'tsha'i²⁴ dam pas bzod par mdzod //

bsod nams 'di yis 'gro ba kun //
shes rab pha rol phyin dngos shog /
bdag kyang nam mkha'i dbyings'dra bar //
sems can don ni byed gyur cig /

dpal ldan rnam rgyal nyams dga'i²⁵ gnas //
rgyal po dpal ldan gtsug²⁶ nor bu //
go chas chos kyi²⁷ gras dpal la //
gsol ba btab pas snang bar byas //

gser gling gi dpal rnam par rgyal ba'i grong
du lha dpal gtsug gi nor bu'i go cha'i rgyal po'i ring²⁸ lo tshigs bcu²⁹ pa las dpyid yla ra ba'i tshes bcu gcig la mdzad pa³⁰ rtogs par dka' ba'i snang ba zhes bya ba rdzogs so //
rgya gar gyi³¹ mkhan po di paṃ ka ra shri dznyā na dang /
sga bsgyur gyi lo tsa³² ba
chen po dge slong rin chen bzang pos bsgyur
cing zhus te gtan la phab pa'o //

NQ only add: 'dis kyang bstan pa rin po che
rgyas par byed nus par gyur cig / shubham/

/. Not in CD.

References

Abbreviations:
EI = Epigraphia Indica
JGIS = Journal of the Greater India Society (Calcutta 1934 to 1959, reprinted New Delhi 1987)
MBRAS = Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

Agrawala, V.S. 1944. Some References to Kațāhā
Dvīpa in Ancient Indian Literature, JGIS XI 96–7 (repr. New Delhi, 1987).


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Majumdar, R.C. 1987. Commentaries on the works of Maitreya, and the commentaries, see Chattopadhyaya n. 61, p. 323. A translation into English of the prose is given in Chattopadhyaya 1967: 88 and 475. Cordier, Credes, and Chattopadhyaya all include the phrase ‘in Malayagiri’ (according to Cordier, the Tibetan is *ri mala*), which is not given in any of the four standard xylographic editions of the *Durbhdhāloka* studied below. I suspect that the extra detail comes from a catalogue (*dkar chag*) of Srivijaya’s 7th century and that of the 11th were the same, which is not certain: see below, n. 16.

Notes

1 This statement assumes, provisionally, that the Srivijaya of the 7th century and that of the 11th were the same, which is not certain: see below, n. 16. For Atiśa’s dates see Chattopadhyaya 1967: 66, 330–1. For the date of his journey to Srivijaya, see ibid, p. 85. (I follow Eimer (pers. com.) in spelling Atiśa with short i, against the Atiśa with long i of some sources.)

2 I exclude here inscriptions, as well as the works that I-ching composed during his stay in Srivijaya. These (although the latter were composed in Chinese for a Chinese readership) both belong to the intellectual legacy of Srivijaya (or at least of the ‘early Srivijaya’: see, again, n. 16).


4 For the question of Dipaṃkara’s birthplace, see Chattopadhyaya 1967 Chap. 6.

5 The Sanskrit is sometimes given as *Durbbhāloka*. The full title is Abhisamayālaṃkāra-nāma-prajñāparamitopadesāstra-vrtti-durbhāloka-nāma-iśka (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa’i man ngag gi bstan bcos mgon par rtogs pa’i rgyan ces bya ba’i ‘grel pa rtogs par dka’ ba’i snang ba zhes bya ba’i ‘grel bshad): see Cordier 1915, mdo ‘grel VII (3) and Suzuki 1957, cat. no. 5152 sher phyin ja, 161.8.

6 *gSer gling pa* Chos kyi grags pa: at e.g. the beginning of the Tibetan translation of the *Durbdhāloka* in the Peking edition (*sher phyin ja*, 161a7), or in Bu ston’s catalogue of books translated into Tibetan (Nishioka 1981: 539).

7 For the Abhisamayālaṃkāra, the question of authorship, and the commentaries, see Obermiller 1932; Conze 1978: 101–20; Nakamura 1980: 260–1.

8 As far as I know, the prose colophon was first translated into a European language by Cordier (loc. cit.). Its significance was noted in Coedès 1968: 141 (the colophon was apparently known to Coedès only from a personal communication from Naudou: see Coedès’ n. 61, p. 323). A translation into English of the prose is given in Chattopadhyaya 1967: 88 and 475. Cordier, Coedès, and Chattopadhyaya all include the phrase ‘in Malayagiri’ (according to Cordier, the Tibetan is *ri mala*), which is not given in any of the four standard xylographic editions of the *Durbhdhāloka* studied below. I suspect that the extra detail comes from a catalogue (*dkar chag*) of...
the Tanjur. (The chapter colophons simply give a version of the title and the name of the author, Chos kyi grags pa for all but Chap. 3, which gives instead 'Dharmakirti' in transcription.)


10 Rin chen bzang po was one of the central figures in the revival or ‘Later Diffusion’ (phyis dar) of Buddhism in Tibet. For his life and work, see Tucci 1988 and Naudou 1968, Chap. V.

11 For the dates of Atisa’s journey to Tibet and stay in mNga’ ris, see Chattopadhyaya 1967: 307–11 and 330–3.

12 The relation between the two is given in the genitive in Tibetan (but the original Sanskrit could well have been a compound, *Suvarṇatadvātpa- Srivijayapura). Tibetan grong can stand for nagara as well as pura: the name could be either Śrivijaya-pura or Śrivijaya-nagara.


14 See Majumdar 1938; Aiyer 1938.

15 For discussion of the plates and related sources see Majumdar 1979: 29–31, 50, 63–81, 82–93, 94–101. I take the dates of issue from Majumdar, pp. 63 ( Larger Plates) and 75 (Smaller Plates).

16 For Kaṇṭhā see Sircar 1938: 59–60; Nilakanta Sastri 1938: 128–46; Agrawala 1944: 96–7; Braddell 1980: 343–52; Wheatley 1983: 336, n. 53. For a recent study of archaeological remains in the area, see Jacq-Hergoulac’h 1992. I would suggest that the kingdom of San-fo-ch’i—which, starting from 904–5, sent numerous embassies to China through the 10th and 11th centuries and beyond—was also located in the region of Kedah, although the Chinese annals that record the embassies do not give any hints as to its location. For the embassies see Cœdès 1968: 131–2, 141; Majumdar 1938: 281–2, and 1979: 60–62. I leave aside here the question of the location of the ‘earlier Śrivijaya’, and refer here only to the San-fo-ch’i of the 10th and 11th centuries: except to note that, as accepted by Cœdès (1934: 63; 1968: 320, n. 176) there is no proven link between the earlier name Shih-li-fo-shih and San-fo-ch’i.

17 Another interesting question is the relationship between Kaṇṭhā and central Siam during the 11th century, especially in view of the fact that from the time of the early European records Kedah and other northern ‘Malay states’ were tributary to Ayutthaya (or, later, Bangkok). But the 11th century is a dark age in the history of Siam, and even the name(s) of the principal polity(ies) are not known. For European accounts of Kedah in the early 16th century, see Cortesão (1944: 106–7; Longworth Dames 1989: 164–5. For a later account, see Bowrey 1905: 259–85.

18 Palembang does not enter into the question, since we are concerned with Kaṇṭhā (the importance of which is attested by a wealth of references, compared with a paucity of references to Palembang). This is not to deny that Palembang might have been associated with the ‘earlier Śrivijaya’, or might also have styled itself Śrivijaya during the period studied here: points which merit further sober research.

19 I am grateful to Michael Aris (Oxford) and Gene Smith (Jakarta) for illuminating several of the difficult points in the colophon.

20 Here the construction seems unusual, as is the use of the term ‘tshal.

21 Like the element of space, sentient beings are without limit; like the element of space, sentient beings have no inherent existence.

22 Here the Narthang and Peking Tanjurs only add: ‘By this may the jewel of the dispensation (sāsana-ratna) be enabled to flourish. Blessings!’ This statement would have been added by the Tanjur editors.

23 par DNQ : pa C.

24 ‘di CD : ni NQ.

25 ‘tshal CD : mtshal NQ.

26 dga’i CD : dga’ NQ.

27 gtsug DNQ : btsug C.

28 kyi CD : kyis NQ.

29 ring CDQ : rang N (broken ki ku?).

30 bcu NQ : bcos CD.

31 / NQ : not in CD.

32 gyi CDN : not in Q.

33 tsā CD : tshā NQ.