The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A review article, by L.S. Cousins

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THE DATING OF THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

A review article*

L.S. Cousins

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In the fifteenth century the author of the Blue Annals wrote: "In general (it must be observed) that there exists a great disagreement in the statements of scholars regarding the years of the Birth and Nirvāṇa of the Teacher."[1] Presented with well over a thousand pages on the subject in two volumes (with a third to come), one might be excused for supposing that not much has changed in the last half millennium. In fact that would be somewhat illusory. Even if we have not yet been able to fix the exact dates of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, considerable progress has of course been made, as even a cursory look at the traditional dates of the past makes quite clear.

Within the Eastern Buddhist tradition of China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan (especially the latter two countries) the traditional date for the Mahāparinibbāna (death) of the Buddha was 949 B.C., although a variant giving 878 B.C. is also possible. Earlier and down to the fifth century A.D. a date of 686 B.C. seems to have been fairly common. Although they may in part have been motivated by a desire to place the Buddha earlier in time than Lao-tse, these and other such dates were created by relating such events in the life-story of the Buddha as the earthquakes mentioned in various texts to phenomena found in Chinese records – a clear enough testimony that no very definite chronological information was brought to China by the early Buddhist missionaries.

In the Northern Buddhism of the Tibeto–Mongolian cultural area the Mahāparinibbāna was officially dated to 881 B.C., although other ninth-century dates are also known. This is based upon the, probably mythical, chronology of Shambhala associated with the Kālacakra system. At an earlier stage Tibetan authorities seem to have tended to dates in the twenty-second century B.C., the origin of which is not clear. Both Chinese and Tibetan scholars were, however, well aware that many other dates had been advanced. This is in sharp contrast to the Southern Buddhist tradition, which has retained no memory of

any disagreement over the basic chronology of events since the Buddha's lifetime. (There have of course been slight differences as to the exact moment at which the year one commences.)

The era they preserve places the Buddha's Mahāparinibbāna in 543 B.C. This is certainly much closer than the more widely accepted of the alternatives; so it is not surprising perhaps that it has tended to spread in modern times: it seems to have been adopted in Vietnam and Indonesia as well as by such modern organizations as the World Fellowship of Buddhists. There is some evidence also to suggest that it had been widely accepted in Kashmir, India and Nepal in the last period of Buddhism there (after the twelfth century or earlier).[2]

The volumes reviewed here stem from a conference held near Göttingen in 1988 under the auspices of Heinz Bechert. Indeed the modern revival of interest in this topic is very much to the credit of Bechert who wrote a number of articles on this subject prior to the conference.[3] Undoubtedly, even without the further source materials promised for the final volume, this is a major contribution to research in the field and for a long time to come will be essential for any serious study of pre-Mauryan chronology or early Buddhist history.

In fact these volumes are not limited to the specific question of the date of the Buddha. A proportion (over 120 pages) is devoted to the history of research while another large section (about 60 pages) reprints a number of relevant sources, some of them not otherwise conveniently accessible. A considerable space is in effect devoted to the history of the use of the various chronological systems in particular Buddhist countries. This is certainly of great interest for the history of Buddhism in various areas, but no doubt the greatest interest lies in the papers which relate directly to the dating of the Buddha.

The history of research

A valuable and detailed paper by Sieglinde Dietz surveys the history of research (Symp. II, 2, pp. 11–83). It is clear that from 1687 (Couplet) onwards scholars gradually became aware of the main traditionally-espoused dates and by the beginning of the nineteenth century had, not surprisingly, begun to favour the seemingly more reasonable dating found in the Pali sources which underlie the Southern Buddhist tradition. As these became better known and as the Greek synchronisms which fix the dates of the Mauryan Emperors Candragupta and Aśoka to within a decade or two became more firmly established, problems appeared. Indeed, already in 1836 G. Turnour, the translator of the *Mahāvaṃsa*, recognized that the Pali sources place the Mauryan rulers some sixty years too early.

Subsequently in the course of the nineteenth century a number of dates in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. were advocated by various scholars, notably a date proposed by T. W. Rhys Davids of "within a few years of 412 B.C." to which we will return. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a consensus gradually formed that the Buddha

died towards the beginning of the fifth century B.C. – the dates most often cited are 483 or 486 B.C. In part this was because it became clear that the longer dating could be supported by data from the *Purāṇas* and by Jacobi's evaluation of the Jain evidence.

Also important here was a Chinese source: the so-called "Dotted Record" of the fifth century A.D. which seemed to present an independent dating for the Mahāparinibbāna around 486 B.C. Already, as is made clear in Hubert Durt's survey of the Japanese and Korean data, some Japanese scholars had from the eighteenth century onwards begun to favour a date based upon the Dotted Record and information about the Record was communicated to Max Müller as early as 1884 by B. Nanjio. Another paper by Erhard Rosner refers to Yü Cheng-hsieh who in 1813 put forward the first century B.C. for the birth of the Buddha, erroneous no doubt but a clear enough indication of the critical trend developing.

At all events the consensus developed above was to remain overwhelmingly dominant in European[4] and South Asian scholarship for the first half of the twentieth century. I exclude from consideration the more fantastic Indian chronological speculations documented in otherwise interesting papers by Jens-Uwe Hartmann and Gustav Roth. (There are equally fantastic pseudo-historical works in European literature too – e.g. the entertaining books on Atlantis, Mu, etc. by such writers as Donnelly, Churchward, Scott-Elliot and the like – we don't usually treat them in a survey of serious scholarship!) There has been perhaps slightly more variety in Japanese scholarship (surveyed by Hajime Nakamura), but there too the dating of the Buddha's death to the first quarter of the fifth century remained fairly standard.

More recently, doubts have gradually increased. Three reasons may be adduced for this: 1) a growing sense that such an early date does not fit well with the archaeological data; 2) a gradual recognition that the Dotted Record may be of Sinhalese origin and hence not fully independent from the Southern tradition; 3) a fuller awareness of the existence of a considerable number of largely Sarvāstivādin sources which date the accession of Aśoka around one hundred years after the Mahāparinibbāna as opposed to the 218 years of the Pali sources. This was first perhaps expressed by Étienne Lamotte who in his highly influential history placed the previous consensus and the Sarvāstivādin sources on an almost equal footing, distinguishing between the long chronology (i.e. the corrected version of the Southern Buddhist tradition) which places the death of the Buddha in c. 486 B.C. and the short chronology i.e. the Sarvāstivādin which places the same event in c. 368 A.D. In fact, Lamotte does then adopt the long chronology: "comme hypothèse de travail,"[5] although he may have favoured a later dating in his last years.

The chronological systems in use in Buddhist countries

Space obviously would not permit a full review of the wide range of papers included in these volumes. Let us then simply note that the Tibeto-Mongolian

data is thoroughly reviewed in articles by Günter Grönbold, Claus Vogel, Per Kvaerne, Klaus Sagaster, Eckart Zabel, Champa Thupten Zongtse (in Tibetan) and a rather fully annotated paper by Seyfort Ruegg. Central Asian and Iranian data is looked at by Klaus Röhrborn, Werner Sundermann (two papers) and Klaus Schmidt. In addition to the papers already mentioned, Eastern Buddhist matters are covered by Herbert Franke, Lewis Lancaster and Bhikkhu Pāsādika (Vietnam).

There are also two papers concerned with the "Axial Age Theory" derived from the ideas of Karl Jaspers and a comparative paper concerned with parallel issues in early Greek history. Most of the above contributions represent a high standard of scholarship. I have more doubt in the case of some others. Let us simply note the over fifty pages devoted to the rather improbable, if erudite, speculations of P. H. L. Eggermont and the doubtful attempt of A. K. Narain to revive the old theory that there is a date in one of the inscriptions of Aśoka (MRE I).

The conclusions of these volumes on the date of the Buddha

A number of contributors attempt to assess the most likely date for the Buddha by the use of indirect evidence as to Indian cultural history. Bechert has placed thirteen contributions under this section heading and sums up the result as follows:

> . . . the conclusion seems unavoidable that all major sources of indirect evidence point to later dates of the Buddha than those suggested by the corrected long chronology.
>
> (Symp. IV, 1, p. 11)

This seems to slightly overstate the case as not all the contributors propose any dating and others have worded their position very cautiously. It might be better to say that the overall tendency is to conclude that there is at minimum no objection to a later date. Undoubtedly the archaeological evidence as presented here by Herbert Härtel and in part by Hermann Kulke is the major factor tending to support a later date. It is not however clear whether it is as yet overwhelming. The other contributions which seem to support a late date are those by: Georg von Simson, Oskar von Hinüber, Siegfried Lienhard (around 400 B.C. with a margin of about twenty years), Wilhem Halbfass and, rather cautiously, Lambert Schmithausen.

Turning to the ten papers which Bechert classes as dealing directly with the evaluation of the Indian tradition, seven seem to present a viable case. At the extremes: Gen'ichi Yamazaki defends the long chronology, while none of the other contributions in this section envisage a date before 420 B.C. Akira Hirakawa defends the short chronology and Heinz Bechert himself sets a range from 400 B.C. to 350 B.C. but a "somewhat later date is not inconceivable."

(Symp. IV, 1, p. 236); no other contributor (except Eggermont) seems to propose a date after 380 B.C. Hajime Nakamura, K. R. Norman, and Richard Gombrich all propose dates within the range suggested by André Bareau: around 400 B.C. with a margin of twenty years on either side. Expressing this in other terms, the Buddha's period of teaching activity was in the second half of the fifth century B.C., perhaps extending into the first quarter of the fourth century.

It is worth noting that this is quite close to being a "median chronology" i.e. halfway between the short and the long chronology. Perhaps after all the difference between the short and the long chronology may in origin have simply amounted to whether 150 years was rounded down to a hundred or up to two hundred i.e. a difference in literary conventions.

The Rhys Davids-Gombrich thesis

In a paper read to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1874 and subsequently published in his *On the Ancient Coins and Measures of Ceylon*, T. W. Rhys Davids put forward an argument on rather different lines, as mentioned above. He interprets some of the information given in the oldest of the Ceylon chronicles in Pali, the *Dīpavaṃsa* in a way different both to the tradition of the chronicles and to the understanding of later scholarship. Partly because of the development of the consensus mentioned above and partly also because his interpretation of the *Dīpavaṃsa* was based upon manuscript materials and seemed to be superseded by the editions and translations of Wilhelm Geiger, the views of Rhys Davids were subsequently disregarded.

His position depends upon the interpretation of the list of five Vinaya authorities prior to Mahinda in the third century B.C. as giving data on their ages at death rather than on their number of years as a monk. The latter interpretation gives the traditional 218 years down to the accession of Aśoka i.e. the long chronology, but contains a number of problems. Indeed it has been generally recognized that a succession of five is too short for the long chronology. The alternative gives a shorter period of about 150 years.

Richard Gombrich has now developed a similar theory, based upon the same proposition but with a more detailed and somewhat modified argumentation. In his version the accession of Aśoka took place after 136 years. (I have elsewhere suggested some further minor changes.[6]) Gombrich's arguments have undoubtedly shown that the data in the *Dīpavaṃsa* on the lineage of the teachers is impressively consistent when interpreted in this way. He is certainly right to argue that the lineage is a succession of teachers expert in the Vinaya and not a succession of individuals with some institutional authority. No doubt too he is correct in pointing out that the existence of other lists of such teachers with different names, as found in various non-Pali sources, is in no way in contradiction. There would have been many such pedigrees for different pupil-teacher lines.

If the general arguments of the Rhys Davids-Gombrich thesis are correct, and they may well be, then the overall picture must be something like the following:

when the creators of the Sinhala chronicle tradition attempted to work out a chronology, they had basically two sources of information for the period prior to Aśoka. One was a lineage of teachers with ages at ordination and death. They must also have had some kind of brahmanical king-list, of the sort preserved for us in various *Purāṇas*, perhaps derived from diplomatic links with North India. (We know from Megasthenes that such lists were current in Mauryan governing circles.) The long chronology as we have it is the result of combining the two sources with adjustments to make them fit.

Plausibly, then, the oldest Sinhala tradition is that of the lineage of teachers. How old is that? It may of course go back to the arrival of Buddhism in Ceylon in the third century B.C. and have then been compiled on the basis of information handed down intact from the time of the Buddha. Unfortunately, there is no way of proving that at present. Since the last book of the *Vinaya-piṭaka* the *Parivāra* or "Appendix" already gives the list of the teachers together with a list of subsequent Vinaya authorities in Ceylon which terminates around the first century B.C., it must be relatively early and may well have been current by that date i.e. by the time at which the Pali Canon was set into writing.

Most probably then it represents the oldest attempt at a dating known to us. It seems quite possible that Ceylon which was a major trading area around this period may have been one of the main centres of South Asian Buddhism during some periods after the end of the Mauryan dynasty. Indeed prior to the Kuṣāṇas Anurādhapura and the Suṅga and Sātavāhana capital of Vidiśā (with which the Buddhism of Ceylon appears to have had some links) were quite possibly the two chief focal points of Buddhist activity for a while. If so, it is not at all surprising that the Sinhala texts should preserve earlier Buddhist traditions linked to the dynasties of North and Central India. Heinz Bechert, however, takes a rather different view.

Bechert's arguments

These two volumes contain around 66 pages of editorial material and substantial contributions from Bechert; so his views are quite well represented. A part of his argument is simply to make the point that the former general acceptance of the (revised) long chronology is a thing of the past. This is clearly the case.

In a different area, however, it seems to me that his position is more debatable. He writes:

> I am also convinced that the "short chronology" represents the earliest Buddhist chronology found in our sources. This does not, however, imply that it represents reliable chronological information.
>
> (Symp. IV, 1, 8)

On the face of it this seems much more doubtful. Lewis Lancaster in his contribution points out that short chronology sources appear in Chinese translation

from A.D. 306, while the long chronology appears first in a text translated between 265–317. (Symp. IV, 1, 455f.) Short chronology sources are more numerous, but since this simply reflects Sarvāstivādin influence it does not take us much further.

The primary reason for Bechert's belief does appear to be his acceptance of the claim that there is evidence for the presence of the short chronology in ancient Ceylon, specifically in the *Dīpavaṃsa*. I have elsewhere[7] argued that this is mistaken and must refer the reader there for the full arguments. In brief there are two passages which can be taken as supporting the short chronology (and many that do not.) The second of these (Dīp V 55–9) concerns the prophecy of the arising of Moggaliputta Tissa "in the future, in 118 years". Bechert, and several predecessors, take the prophecy as by the Buddha. However, he does not take. account of the parallel passages (Dhs-a 3–4; 6; Sp 35ff:) which make it clear that it is a prophecy given by the Elders of the Second Council. Indeed the fact that immediately after the prophecy the *Dīpavaṃsa* itself refers to the death of those elders (V 60) makes it sufficiently certain that it is recounting the same story. The problem is perhaps a result of the insertion of a section on the history of the eighteen schools at the beginning of chapter five (i.e. vv. 1–54) immediately before the prophecy. This has separated verse 55 from the description of the second council at the end of chapter four.

Bechert is clearly mistaken in this case, but his second example is little more plausible. In a prophecy of the Buddha concerning the Third Council and the advent of Mahinda we meet the same figure of 118 years immediately after a mention of the First Council (Dīp I 54–5). Most scholars have taken the view that there is a lacuna of some sort here and lines referring to the Second Council have dropped out.[8] This seems likely to be the case, since there is specific reference to the *third* council (*tatiyo saṃgaho*) – it does not seem very probable that anyone argued that the Third Council was only eighteen years after the Second which is traditionally dated to 100 B.C. or slightly later.

In any case, even if the text is taken as it stands, it would not prove Bechert's contention in the sense intended. He suggests that the passage in question will originate from a non-Mahāvihāra tradition (Symp. IV, 1, 344). However, the non-Mahāvihāra schools, notably that of the Abhayagiri monastery, were precisely those most influenced by North Indian traditions and the passage in question could then derive from Sarvāstivādin sources i.e. it would not be evidence of an independent Sinhala version of the short chronology.

In conclusion

It is clear that if the objective of these volumes was to find absolute proof as to the exact date of the Buddha, then they would have failed. No method or evidence we have at the present is sufficient to establish that to the strictest standards of evidence. What certainly has been done is to firmly dethrone the old consensus – it is not impossible that the long chronology may yet be rehabilitated, but

someone will have to undertake the task. From the point of view of reasonable probability the evidence seems to favour some kind of median chronology and we should no doubt speak of a date for the Buddha's Mahāparinibbāna of c. 400 B.C. – I choose the round number deliberately to indicate that the margins are rather loose.

It follows that the date of Mahāvīra and of kings such as Pasenadi or Bimbisāra must be correspondingly brought down, as they are part of the same historical context. Probably also the date of the Upaniṣads must be later and possible connexions with the Greek world must be rethought.

Notes

* A review article of *The Dating of the Historical Buddha, Die Datierung des Historischen Buddha*. Edited by Heinz Bechert, 2 Vols (of 3). (Symposium zur Buddhismusforschung, IV, 1–2) pp. xv + 525; x + 530. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991–2. DM 310, 256.

1 *Blue Annals*, p. 22 (cited Symp. IV, 1, p. 399).

2 In the present volumes see: Symp(osium) IV, 1, pp. 344–57; 359–61; 398–9; 409–11; Symp. IV, 2, pp. 266–8 (nn. 15 and 17); 271 n. 42.

3 Bechert, H., "The date of the Buddha reconsidered", *IT* (1982), pp. 29–36; "A remark on the problem of the date of Mahāvīra", *IT* (1983), pp. 287–90; *Die Lebenszeit des Buddha – das älteste feststehende Datum der indischen Geschichte?* (Göttingen, 1986); "Remarks on the date of the Historical Buddha", *Buddhist Studies* (1988), pp. 97–117.

4 There were a few hold-outs, notably E. J. Thomas.

5 Lamotte, É., *Histoire du bouddhisme Indien, des origines à l'ère Saka*, Bibliothèque du Muséon, vol. 43 (Louvain, 1958), p. 15. The origin of the expression "working hypothesis" in this context is usually attributed to Max Müller. (He applied it to the date of Samudragupta). However, the *OED* attributes its first use in English to R. H. Hutton in 1871.

6 Cousins, L. S., "The 'Five Points' and the origins of the Buddhist schools", in *The Buddhist Forum*, ed. T. Skorupski, ii (London, 1991), p. 59f.

7 *Op. cit.*, pp. 55–7.

8 Most clearly expressed by Gombrich: Symp. IV, 2, p. 239 n. 12.