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What Chinese sources really have to say about the dates of the Buddha

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My opening words should be of gratitude to the International Association of Buddhist Studies, for offering a prestigious forum to my research, and in particular to Max Deeg, who organized an extremely stimulating panel, and invited my undeserving contribution to it. I should also thank him for accepting to read this paper in my stead.

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In the following remarks, I shall attempt to suggest that material scattered among the Buddhist sources in Chinese, which has only received very inadequate treatment so far, may warrant a major reassessment of our understanding of the chronologies of the Buddha's death. The limited time at my disposal shall only allow a very partial discussion, and I must ultimately refrain from my initial plan, advertised in this paper's abstract, to engage the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition and a sizeable number of Aśokan narratives, which jointly point to a considerably lower date for the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha than anything that has been accepted so far. I simply could find no meaningful way to compress this bulky array of documents for a 25-minute presentation. I will, however, try to live up to the title, and focus on at least some aspects of what Chinese sources have to say on the Indian chronologies of the Buddha. If the mere glimpse of an alternative picture is raised today, this will be more than enough. Please listen without prejudice, and let the evidence be the only guide.

Before I start, I wish to dedicate this paper to Hubert Durt, to whose kindness and scholarship I am indebted in many ways. As some will know, Hubert suffered a terrible stroke shortly before Christmas 2008, and since then has been going through a difficult and slow recovery. Whatever positive energy should come out of this talk, may it go to the healing of Hubert.

I have to add, however, a less personal reason for this dedication, for it was the reading, many years ago, of one of Hubert Durt's essays that triggered the first idea of the research, some preliminary results of which I am now going to present. In *Problems of chronology and eschatology*, a study of the Buddhist scholarship of

Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715-1746), a maverick Japanese intellectual of the Tokugawa period, Durt reviews a number of East Asian chronologies of the life of the Buddha, and mentions in passing four Indian datings that Xuanzang 玄奘 (d. 664) reports in his *Da Tang Xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 (Memoir on the Western Regions under the Great Tang), the celebrated account of his pilgrimage in Central Asia and India between 629 and 645. Durt notes that one of these datings is surprisingly low, since it "places the Buddha close to the time of Alexander, who reached India in 327-324 B.C., and Aśoka, whose reign took place in the middle of the third century B.C."; he further criticizes what he calls "its unjustified dismissal by modern historians".[1] It took me more than fifteen years and a fortuitous set of circumstances to go back to these tantalizing remarks, and engage the source on which they were based.

Let us introduce, then, Xuanzang's testimony. In the section on Kuśinagara, the place of the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, the monk drops a brief comment on a number of different sectarian chronologies of that crucial event:

> 自佛涅槃，諸部異議。或云千二百餘年，或云千三百餘年，或云千五百餘年，或云已過九百、未滿千年。
>
> [As for the time elapsed] since the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, the sects have different opinions: some say more than 1,200 years, some say more than 1,300 years, some say more than 1,500 years; some say that 900 years have already passed, but not yet 1,000 years. (T vol. 51 no. 2087, 6.903b24-27)

Assuming that Xuanzang[2] was counting backwards from 646 CE, the year when his memoir was completed and presented to the throne, the data above would place the *nirvāṇa* some time before respectively 554 BCE (i.e. 646 – 1200-odd years), 654 BCE, 854 BCE, and between 354 and 254 BCE. The modern scholar will be disappointed to observe that none of the currently reputable chronologies is represented in this sample, reportedly taken on Indian fieldwork. These datings are either too high or too low, as we cannot find in them the once established 'corrected chronology' of 483 BCE, nor especially can we use them to accommodate any of the 'revisionist' views expressed at the Göttingen symposium of 1988 and in its aftermath, which have been willing to place the Buddha's death in the span of a few years on either side of 400 BCE, in any case no lower than two or three decades past that threshold.[3] With a dash of hubris, then, Xuanzang's report shall be dismissed as the result of confusion, or sheer Chinese invention.

While I cannot account for all the four alternative sectarian chronologies mentioned in the *Xiyu ji*, I should notice in the first place that the opening dating (≥

554 BCE) is not overly dissimilar from the traditional Theravāda era of 544/543 BCE; as for the lowest chronology (354/254 BCE, or 304 BCE ± 50), which is the one envisaged in Hubert Durt's previously mentioned remarks, for now we should at least grant it the benefit of an argument that Heinz Bechert claimed in support of his own assessment: for such a low dating also runs counter to "[t]he tendency to claim high antiquity for the founder of a tradition", which "is common to all periods of Indian – and not only Indian – history", so that we are forced to explain why Indian Buddhists should have claimed such a recent epoch for the *nirvāṇa*.[4]

I shall defer to another occasion the discussion of the sources – more than thirty, and in Chinese, but also in Sanskrit and Tibetan – that support this shortest chronology. Here I will focus instead on the Chinese evidence for the traditional long chronology of the mid-6th century BCE, which was apparently known to Xuanzang, and on its interesting implications, which are nonetheless of consequence for a general appreciation of the problem.

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As is well known, the Theravāda countries of South and Southeast Asia share a Buddhist era that places the death of the Buddha, and its own starting point, in 544 or 543 BCE. European scholars noticed early on that this particular chronology, which is clearly attested since the 11th century, fails to accommodate the reign of the Maurya kings, notably the dates of Candragupta. It was therefore assumed that a miscalculation of about 60 years had taken place, possibly in stages, before the 11th century.[5]

But however unreliable this scheme may be, it is certainly considerably older than that. In 1960, Senarat Paranavitana published an inscription from Ceylon dated in a Buddhist era, which equated the 28th year of reign of the Sinhalese king Upatissa with the year 941 after the *nirvāṇa*. Since Upatissa is known to have been the immediate predecessor of Mahānāma, and the latter is mentioned in the Chinese records for sending an embassy to the Liu Song 劉宋 court at Jiankang in 428 CE, Paranavitana aptly concluded that the date in the inscription was compatible with the long chronology of 544 BCE, and more generally with a range between 550 and 528 BCE, but not with the corrected chronology of 483 BCE (nor with any lower figure, we shall add).[6] Paranavitana further attempted to demonstrate that the era in the inscription was precisely the Theravāda era of 544 BCE, although this part of his argument is somewhat less cogent.[7] Suffice it to notice here that some kind of long chronology was already known in Ceylon between the late 4th and the early 5th

century. All those scholars who uphold the historical validity of the Theravāda sources – notably the great Sinhalese chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa* – have been unperturbed by this discovery. They have simply backdated the 'miscalculation' to an earlier period, crucially assuming, however, that it was the fact of Sinhalese Buddhists mishandling their local sources.[8]

It is on this important point that Chinese materials offer a considerably different picture.

The earliest intimation of the chronology of the Buddha in China appears in Daoan's 道安 (ca. 312-385) 'Preface to an abstract of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* scripture' (*Mohe boluoruo poluomi jing chao xu* 摩訶鉢羅若波羅蜜經抄序), written in 382 or shortly thereafter in Chang'an 長安, in the final years of the monk's life.[9] There we read:

> 阿難出經, 去佛未久, 尊大迦葉令五百六通迭察迭書。今離千年而以近意量裁。
>
> When Ānanda delivered the Scriptures, he was as yet not distant from the time of the Buddha. The Venerable Mahākāśyapa instructed five hundred [Arhants], all possessed of the six *abhijñās*, to investigate them repeatedly and to copy them by turns. Now, a thousand years removed from those times, we try to comprehend and judge them.[10]

Writing in 382 or 383, then, Daoan was seemingly putting 1,000 years between the epoch of the First Council shortly after the Buddha's death and his own time. In the ensuing decades, and throughout the first half of the 5th century, one lay Buddhist and several Chinese monks mention in their writings that they are living at the end of the millennium after the *parinirvāṇa*: Wang Mi 王謐 (360-407) in 402,[11] Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-416) in 404,[12] Sengzhao 僧肇 (374-414) in ca. 406,[13] Sengwei 僧衛 (d.u.) in ca. 406-411,[14] Huiguan 慧觀 (ca. 377-447) in ca. 410-412,[15] Daolang 道朗 (d. after 439) in 421-422,[16] Xuanchang 玄暢 (ca. 420-494) some time after 445.[17] Such references, however, peter out by the middle of the 5th century. Writing around 473, the monk Daoci 道慈 (d.u.) seems to imply that the millennium has been completed,[18] and shortly thereafter a number of native chronologies appear that, while pushing the dates of the Buddha further back in time, convert them into the regnal years of one or another of the ancient Chinese kings.[19]

Pivoting on a suspiciously round figure, and scattered as they are across a few decades, these indications may seem overly vague, and we may be tempted to dismiss them altogether. But we would be wrong. If we go back to the late writings of Daoan, we shall find a more specific reference in his preface to the 'Scripture

compiled by Saṃgharakṣa', translated in 384-385 from a text recited by Saṃghabhadra (fl. 382-399), a monk from northwest India. The preface opens as follows:

> 僧伽羅剎者, 須賴國人也。佛去世後七百年生此國, 出家學道, 遊教諸邦, 至揵陀越土，甄陀罽膩王師焉。
>
> Saṃgharakṣa was a man from the kingdom of Surāṣṭra (Xulai guo 須賴國). He was born in this kingdom [in the] seven hundred years after the Buddha had left the world. He left the household and studied the path. Travelling and teaching [across] the countries, he reached the land of Gandhāvatī (Qiantuowei 乾陀衛, i.e. Gandhāra), where the king Caṇḍa Kani[ṣka] (Zhentuo Jini 甄陀罽膩) took him as his master.[20]

If we read this document in the light of Daoan's nearly contemporary statement that 1,000 years had elapsed since the death of the Buddha, we shall notice in the first place that the monk, no doubt following his informants from northwest India, had a tolerably clear idea of the dates of Kaniṣka, at least as far as we understand them today. Here, however, the meaning of '700 years' deserves attention. In his biographical notice on Harivarman (written some time after 445), Xuanchang states that this Indian master "appeared (= was born? *floruit*?) in Central India nine hundred years after the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha" 佛泥洹後九百年出在中天竺.[21] But two separate sources, of which one at least is earlier than Xuanchang, respectively specify that Harivarman lived "*within* (*nei* 內) the nine hundred years after the extinction of the Buddha" 佛滅度後九百年內, and that he composed his major scholastic treatise, the **Satyasiddhi-śāstra* (or **Tattvasiddhi-śāstra*, *Chengshi lun* 成實論), "in the year 890 after the extinction of the Buddha" 佛滅度後八百九十年.[22] These combined indications convey that such reckonings "in the hundreds", far from being approximate figures, refer to *ongoing* centuries, as Noël Peri had correctly understood a long time ago.[23] Accordingly, we are allowed to read the previous document by Daoan to the effect that a Buddhist tradition placed Saṃgharakṣa and Kaniṣka *in the 7th century* of a Buddhist Era. We have also learned that between 382 and the middle of the 5th century CE, and again starting from Daoan, several witnesses place themselves at the end of a 1,000-year period after the *nirvāṇa*, quite possibly because they thought they were living in the final century of such a period.

If the above should seem unduly speculative, one more document will offer substantial corroboration to the scenario I have been tracing. This is a colophon appearing at the end of the Song, Yuan and Ming editions of the *Fo bannihuan jing*

佛般泥洹經 (T vol. 1 no. 5), a probably 3rd-century translation of a non-Mahāyāna *Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*.[24] It reads as follows:

> 從佛般泥洹到永興七年二月十一日，凡已八百八十七年餘。七月十有一日至今丙戌歲，合為九百一十五年。是比丘康日所記也。又至慶曆六年丙戌歲，共計一千九百九十四年。
>
> "From the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha until the 11th day of the 2nd month of the 7th year of the Yongxing 永興 [era], overall 887 years elapsed (*yi* 已), with a remainder (*yu* 餘). [From] the 11th day of the 7th month until the current *bingxu* 丙戌 year, it is 915 years altogether". This is what was recorded by the *bhikṣu* Kang Ri 康日. Furthermore, until the 6th year, a *bingxu* 丙戌 year, of the Qingli 慶曆 [era] (1046 CE), one reckons 1,994 years altogether. (T vol. 1 no. 5, p. 175c22-26)

The document clearly consists of two parts. The latter is a note by a Song 宋 copyist, writing in 1046 CE; his calculation assumes a date of the *nirvāṇa* in 949 BCE (1994 – 1046, plus the initial year). This dating, of purely Chinese invention, is well attested in China ever since the Tang period.[25] The Song copyist, however, reproduces a much earlier colophon by a *bhikṣu* Kang Ri 康日, which evidently follows a completely different chronology (otherwise, we would have to place Kang Ri in 33 BCE!).[26] The original colophon equates the year 7 of a Yongxing 永興 era with the year 887, elapsed, of a Buddhist era. It further adds that the current year, the one in which Kang Ri is writing, is a *bingxu* 丙戌 one in the sexagenary cycle, and corresponds to the year 915 of evidently the same Buddhist era. Kang Ri was therefore writing his colophon 28 years (915 – 887) after the initial annotation, whose occasion is unstated: there is no indication that it refers to the translation of the scripture, and it may simply – indeed, more probably – record its initial copying.[27] It should also be noticed that Kang Ri's Buddhist era is apparently reckoned from the 11th day of the 7th month.

It remains to be seen how all this translates into the Gregorian calendar. There were no less than six Yongxing 永興 eras in Chinese history;[28] none of them lasted as much as seven years, and we must assume a clerical error in the year number (*qi* 七), which will have been easier than a scribal mistake in the characters of the era name. However, one – and only one – of the six Yongxing eras fulfils the condition demanded by the colophon that 28 years after one of its years, a *bingxu* 丙戌 year should occur. This is the Yongxing era (357-359) that opened the reign of Fu Jian 苻堅, emperor of the Former Qin 前秦, who ruled in Chang'an from 357 to 385,

and personally wanted (indeed, abducted) the monk Daoan at his court.[29] The *second* (instead of *seventh*) year of this era falls in 358 CE,[30] and 28 years later, in 386 CE, we have a *bingxu* 丙戌 year.[31] With a simple emendation (七 > 二), then, our colophon falls fully into place: the *bhikṣu* Kang Ri wrote it in 386 (the *bingxu* year), probably at Chang'an, reporting an initial annotation written on March 7, 358 (Yongxing *2*. 2. 11), and converted both dates in a Buddhist era of which *he* was aware, but probably not the first annotator. He calculated that on the earlier date, 887 complete years had elapsed since the *parinirvāṇa*, with a remainder, and that in his own day 915 years had elapsed. Both indications point to a Buddhist era starting in 530 BCE.[32] This is too close to the Theravāda era of 544/543 BCE (which is, however, only attested with this value since the 11th century) to be unrelated to it; it is, in fact, perfectly consistent with the inscription of Upatissa of the year 941 BE (Buddhist Era), and it seems difficult to assume that two slightly different Buddhist chronologies could develop simultaneously, and independently from each other, in Ceylon and in northwest India. It is equally unlikely that this Buddhist era of 530 BCE may have been anything different from what Daoan, writing at the same time and place as the *bhikṣu* Kang Ri, had in mind in his documents.

The 7th century (years 601 – 700) of this era would have fallen between 70 and 169 CE, which seems an extremely reasonable interval for the reign of Kaniṣka. The 10th century – the last one in a 1,000-year period – would fall between 370 and 469 CE, and this will explain why, starting with Daoan, so many Chinese monks cry "Millennium!" in that very span.

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One rather serious consequence of the foregoing remarks is that we should reconsider the origins and nature of the long chronology, so far seen as an exclusively Theravāda and notably Sinhalese tradition, which Western scholars have been at pains to reconcile with their own reckonings almost ever since it came to their notice. The simultaneous emergence of this chronology in Ceylon and in northwest India towards the end of the 4th century CE begs the question of its provenance. Coincidence being unlikely, we may assume that either one area imported it from the other, or that both took it from a third place, presumably from Central India. Before advancing any guess, it will be useful to reflect on the *meaning* of this chronology. Here again, the colophon to the *Bannihuan jing* will be our guide. That document seemingly states that the Buddhist era should be reckoned as of the 11th day of the 7th month. The day is very close to the date of the *pravāraṇā* ritual at

the end of the rainy season, which the Buddhists of China would place on the 15th day of the 7th month, and it might indeed be identical by simply amending a second character in the colophon (七月十有一日 > 七月十有五日). This will ring a bell. The marking of years since the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* on the closing day of the *pravāraṇā* ritual, on the 15th day of the 7th month, is the trademark of the so-called 'Dotted Record of Canton'. Several studies have been devoted to this tradition, which in the past enjoyed some scholarly favour as it was seen as proof for the corrected long chronology, but has now gone out of fashion.[33] Here I will simply recap its main points. The *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀, a catalogue and chronology of Buddhism completed in 598, reports that a Buddhist chronography, initiated by Upāli upon the first compilation of the Vinaya at the end of the first *pravāraṇā* after the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, was yearly updated by adding a 'dot' (*dian* 點), or mark, "before the Repository of Discipline" (*lüzang qian* 律藏前), which has been generally understood to the effect that a mark was made on the manuscript of the *vinayapiṭaka*. This chronography would have been introduced in China, at Canton, in 489, along with the translation of the *Samantapāsādikā* (rendered in Chinese as the *Shanjian piposha lü* 善見毘婆沙律). Following the tradition, the translator, who was the foreign master Saṃghabhadra, would then have added a mark, "and in that year, the reckoning totalled 975 marks" 當其年計得九百七十五點.[34] At face value, this would imply a Buddhist era starting in 486 or 485 BCE (975 – 489), thus different from the one discussed above. But leaving aside the unlikelihood of a written transmission of the *vinaya* ab initio, the story has many moot points. The *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集, compiled in layers between 503 and 515, which is an older and considerably more reliable source than the *Lidai sanbao ji*, includes a notice apparently written in 492, when a copy of the *Shanjian piposha lü* was brought from Canton to the southern capital Jiankang; the author of the notice knew that "in the record of the years since the *nirvāṇa* of the Venerable in the World, one mark is respectfully set down before the assembly on the 15th day of the 7th month, at the conclusion of the 'reception of the year' (*shousui* 受歲, a Chinese name for the *pravāraṇā*), and it is thus every year" 世尊泥洹已來年載, 至七月十五日受歲竟, 於眾前謹下一點, 年年如此, but adds nothing further.[35] On the other hand, the *Lidai sanbao ji* draws its detailed account from a certain Zhao Boxiu 趙伯休, who in 543 had come across a further unknown *vinaya* master Hongdu 弘度, who in turn, and under unstated circumstances, would have come into possession of this 'Dotted Record of All the Sages' (*Zhongsheng dianji* 眾

聖點記), ultimately going back to Saṃghabhadra, the translator of the *Samantapāsādikā* in 489. We are therefore dealing with a third-hand account, written more than half a century after the facts. The only certainty is that a Buddhist era related to the transmission of the *vinaya*, and marking years at the end of the annual *pravāraṇā*, accompanied the translation of the *Samantapāsādikā* in 489. As for the figure of 975 yearly marks that was calculated in that year, and notwithstanding the fact that the translator Saṃghabhadra reportedly added his own dot on that occasion, it is by no means inconceivable that it was actually written on the manuscript of the *Samantapāsādikā*, but referring to the initial composition of this text, or to an early transcription thereof, in which case that figure might still be compatible with the era of 530 BCE mentioned in the colophon of the *Bannihuan jing*. The ensuing date of 446 CE (975 – 530 + 1) would indeed fit the tradition that assigns the *Samantapāsādikā* to Buddhaghoṣa, who is known to have been active around that period.

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I must now draw my remarks to a conclusion, and a few final observations are in order. We have three early records of a Buddhist era – the colophon to the *Bannihuan jing*, the inscription of Upatissa, the 'Dotted Record' – which are clearly connected, and may well all be based on the starting point of 530 BCE expressed in the first of them, notwithstanding the confusion surrounding the last one. Two of these records are seemingly related to the transmission of the *vinaya*, and start their reckoning from the end of the first rainy season following the Buddha's death – in other words, from the end of the First Council – rather than from the *parinirvāṇa* itself. This was very likely the case for the inscription of Upatissa as well.[36] The dates in these records are also noticeable: years 915, 941, 975 of the Buddhist era – all of them in the last century of a 1,000-year period. We may wonder why a Buddhist chronology should suddenly emerge towards the very end of the millennium after the *parinirvāṇa*, without any prior indication of its existence and observance; indeed, we have scores of dated Buddhist inscriptions from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE, but not a single one of them is dated in a Buddhavarṣa.[37] Of course, some scholars will object that we do have evidence of an early Buddhist chronology in the great Sinhalese chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, or rather in their "sources". But we should not necessarily follow them in their commitment to this kind of materials. We may rather observe, with Paranavitana, that the emergence of a Buddhist era is close to the time when the older chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, took its final form, and that both the era and the chronicle ensue from a common "interest in

the history of the Buddhist religion" in that period.[38] It is left to explain what sparked that interest, and where.

A straightforward answer comes, once again, from the *Bannihuan jing* and its colophon. That scripture belongs to a sizeable cluster of Buddhist texts, of which those having a recognisable sectarian affiliation bend on the Sarvāstivāda side, indicating a duration of the *saddharma* for a thousand years after the extinction of the Buddha.[39] The *Bannihuan jing* notably mentions that "in the span of a thousand years there will be people observing the precepts" 千歲之中有持戒者, and next comes a chronologically unclear reference to the coming of Maitreya.[40] We can understand why the *bhikṣu* Kang Ri 康日 would attach particular interest to this text, and why he was concerned to establish exactly where he stood in the Buddhist era.

It should be noticed that the figure of one thousand years is totally meaningless in the Indian cultural sphere, whereas it is well attested as a major chronological unit in the ancient Mediterranean.[41] It is significantly in a document of Buddhist worship from northwest India – the inscription of Senavarma (ca. mid-1st c. CE), king of Oḍi in the Swāt valley – that we read of this Indo-Scythian ruler's wish to endure over his enemies "for a thousand years", in an expression that has puzzled more than one scholar.[42]

One may speculate that the millennium was initially imported in northwest India, from the Hellenistic and especially Roman world, as an auspicious time frame. The earliest narratives of the *saddharma* lasting "for a thousand years" must have been no doubt well-meaning. But if the Indo-Scythian contemporaries of Senavarma, who do not seem to have had the slightest clue about the dates of the Buddha, may reasonably have seen the millennium as a sufficiently long duration for his Law, things must have started to appear in a decidedly different light just few centuries later. If the Dharma had a best-before date, the vaguest perception that that date was approaching would have made it necessary to come up with something in order to protract its shelf life. This will explain why Buddhist chronology, from the pupillary succession in the *Dīpavaṃsa* to the *pravāraṇā* eras in the colophon to the *Bannihuan jing* and in the 'Dotted Record', appears closely linked to the transmission of the *vinaya* since its emergence. Producing dated narratives attesting to the uninterrupted handing down of the precepts would have been the best way to defuse the millennium bomb, by proving that anyone living at the end of the 1,000-year period could still have been tethered to the *saddharma* through the umbilical cord of a lineage of *vinaya* masters. But if Buddhist chronology appears closely linked to

eschatology, as once again Hubert Durt had remarked years ago with admirable insight,[43] this by no means implies that such chiliastic concerns rested on an already accurately established Buddhist era. The reverse scenario is perfectly conceivable – and indeed far more likely, in view of the fact that a Buddhavarṣa only appears in its 10th century – whereby someone would arbitrarily establish a reckoning of years anticipating the fateful deadline in order to push an ecclesial, reformist or even messianic agenda.

Am I saying that we should discard all Buddhist chronology as ideologically driven, and therefore ultimately unreliable? I am not. We should certainly be wary of the notion that accurate records of an age-long pupillary succession, including the ages at ordination and death and the years of monastic seniority of a large number of monastic figures, may have been flawlessly handed down in an oral culture.[44] But we have seen that the long chronology yields a very reasonable dating of Kaniṣka (which, incidentally, points to an origin of this chronology in a Kuṣāṇa environment),[45] and nothing prevents us from accepting that a Buddhist era was established with that ruler still in clear view. And while I must reiterate my caution against just-so narratives that feed us with strings of dates and years for an age where Indian history is still floating through the haze of fiction, it is entirely conceivable that the memory of a rough synchronism, and surely no more than that, may have been transmitted for a long time, and have eventually inspired a retrospective attempt to create a Buddhist era.

That synchronism has been staring at us for ages, and from so many corners of the Buddhist tradition. It is the notion that, in the time of Aśoka, younger contemporaries of the Buddha were still living, albeit in their very old age. A distorted echo of this tradition survives in the story of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja in the *Divyāvadāna*, which in its present form cannot be earlier than the Gupta period.[46] But *avadāna*s only preserved in Chinese tell of encounters that the Maurya king has with Ānanda, or with the younger sister of king Prasenajit.[47] And the celebrated story of the gift of dirt, where Aśoka as a child meets the Buddha, and which the *Divyāvadāna* places in a former life of the king, is ostensibly referred to his current and only existence in many sources in Chinese.[48] The Kuṣāṇas, who by the 3rd century had started reckoning their years by 'omitted hundreds', and who therefore represent the only corner of ancient greater India where the notion of an ongoing period of a hundred years might have been conceived,[49] must have codified this synchronism in the notion that Aśoka had lived and ruled *in the* century after the Buddha's death. This

notion made its way into Sanskrit as a tag phrase, *varṣaśata parinirvṛtasya*, the real meaning of which is still transparent in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*, when it refers to Ānanda's attendant Mādhyandina (a.k.a. Mādhyantika), who cannot possibly have been thought of as living a full hundred years after the Buddha.[50] But in cultures that were farther afield from the Roman *saeculum* than the Kuṣāṇas in the 3rd century CE, misunderstanding an *ongoing* hundred for a *completed* one would have been easy. This will also explain the awkward story, in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, of Sabbakāmī and the other seven theras, who had once personally seen the Buddha (*diṭṭhapubbā tathāgataṃ*), and yet were still hanging around at the Council of Vesāli in 100 BE.[51]

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But this was nothing more than a sneak preview of a rather complex argument, whose presentation shall, of course, await another occasion. And I should thank you very much for having borne with me this far.

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Da Tang Xiyu ji 大唐西域記 (Memoir on the Western Regions under the Great Tang). 12 *juan*, written by the monk Bianji 辯機 (d. ca. 652) on the basis of Xuanzang's 玄奘 (d. 664) account of his pilgrimage in Central Asia and India, 629-645. Presented to the throne on August 29, 646. T vol. 51 no. 2087.

Fo bannihuan jing (Scripture of the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha). 2 *juan*, translation attributed to Bo Yuan 帛遠 (a.k.a. Bo Fazu 帛法祖, fl. 290-305), but probably by an anonymous translator in the 3rd century. T vol. 1 no. 5.

Gaoseng Faxian zhuan 高僧法顯傳 (Account of the Eminent Monk Faxian). Written by an anonymous monk, probably around 420, on the basis of a verbal report given by Faxian 法顯 (331/342 – 418/423) in 416. The title of the work in the Song, Yuan and Ming editions of the canon is 'A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms' (*Foguo ji* 佛國記). T vol. 51 no. 2085.

Hongming ji 弘明集 (Collection Aggrandizing and Clarifying [Buddhism]). 14 *juan*, by Sengyou 僧祐 (445-518). The received text derives from a recension edited after Sengyou's death, with major departures from the original plan. T vol. 52 no. 2102.

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[1] Durt 1994:31.

[2] For the sake of convenience I shall refer to Xuanzang as the sole author of the *Xiyu ji*, although the book was in fact redacted by the monk Bianji 辯機 (d. ca. 652).

[3] See especially Bechert 1991a; Gombrich 1992; Cousins 1996.

[4] Cf. Bechert 1991a:228.

[5] For a detailed summary of the problem of the long chronology see Bechert 1991b. The classic study presenting the thesis of a miscalculation accumulated before the 11th century is Fleet 1909.

[6] See Paranavitana 1960:131-137.

[7] See Paranavitana 1960:137-142.

[8] See for example Gombrich (1992, esp. p. 257), who in fact does not consider the inscription of Upatissa, but in his attempt to validate the chronological indications in the *Dīpavaṃsa* explains away their inconsistencies as resulting from a local "monastic author/redactor".

[9] Two documents might claim an earlier date. The biography of Kang Senghui 康僧會 (d. 280) in the *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集 (the biographical section of which dates from ca. 503) reports a dialogue between this monk and the Wu 吳 ruler Sun Quan 孫權 (r. 222-252) in 247, where the former is made to say, "it happens to be more than 1,000 years [since] the Thus Come moved his traces (i.e. passed away)" 如來遷跡忽逾千載 (*Chu sanzang ji ji*, 13.96b11). This would imply that by the mid-3rd century there was a notion of the dates of the Buddha in southern China, and that the *parinirvāṇa* was placed before 750 BCE. I could find, however, no ground to assume that this conversation is anything but fictional, nor that this fiction predates considerably the *Chu sanzang ji ji*, the oldest hint at the story being in a document

from the 490s preserved in *Hongming ji*, 11.71c18-20. The chronology underlying this anecdote indeed reflects a late 5th-century perspective, as we shall see shortly. The other alleged early document is a quotation from the lost *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 by Xie Cheng 謝承 (fl. 222-229), mentioning the birth of the Buddha "in the 10th year, *jiayin* 甲寅, of King Zhuang 莊 of Zhou 周" (687 BCE); Zürcher (2007:272), who accepts this quotation as genuine, observes that it is included "[i]n the *Suihua jili* 歲華記麗, an obscure work by a further unknown Tang author named Han E 韓鄂" (a source that was, in fact, accessed from an excerpt in the 17th-century edition of a 14th-century miscellany, as can be seen from Zürcher 2007:420 n. 136). There is more than the third-hand nature of the source that should caution us from following Zürcher here: there is no evidence of this particular chronology, or in general of equivalences between the dates of the Buddha and those from ancient Chinese history, before the 5th century. The sexagenary cycle was not used to date regnal years before the Han period, as Chatley (1938) explains well, and its retrospective application (usually inaccurate, as in this case) to the Zhou kings is a telltale mark of religious chronologies in medieval China, but an unlikely procedure for a 3rd-century court historian such as Xie Cheng.

[10] *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 8.52c6-8. The translation in this case is from Hurvitz – Link 1974:428.

[11] Correspondence with Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369-404) concerning the obligations of the clergy towards the ruler, in *Hongming ji*, 12.82a10-11; Zürcher 2007:236 hints at this statement. Wang Mi, a top statesman at the end of the Eastern Jin, had strong connections with the Buddhist clergy and notably to the monk Huiyuan, who may have been his source on Buddhist chronology. See on him Zürcher 2007:213-214.

[12] Introduction to 'On *śramaṇa*s not paying homage to the ruler' (*Shamen bu jing wangzhe lun* 沙門不敬王者論), in *Hongming ji*, 5.30a6-7. On this document and its circumstances see Zürcher 2007:15-16, 236-239. The relevant passage is particularly significant in that Huiyuan links Huan Xuan's restrictive measures against the clergy to the apprehension that the Dharma may be facing utter destruction at the end of a thousand years: "This is where the doom comes from, the evil turn of the millennium, and I deeply fear lest the Great Law be going to perish" 斯乃交喪之所由、千載之否運, 深懼大法之將淪.

[13] Preface to the 'Glosses to the Scripture of Vimalakīrti', in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 8.58b8-9.

[14] Preface to the 'Collected glosses to the Scripture of the Ten Stages' [i.e. the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*] (*Shizhu jing hezhu* 十住經合注), in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 9.61c17-18.

[15] Preface to the *Xiuxingdi bujing guan jing* 修行地不淨觀經, also known as the 'Dhyāna-Scripture of Dharmatrāta' (*Damoduoluo chan jing* 達摩多羅禪經), in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 9.66c3-5.

[16] Preface to Dharmakṣema's translation of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 8.60a3-9.

[17] Biographical memoir on Harivarman, in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 11.79a5-7.

[18] "The 'Scripture of the Victorious Garland' (*Śrīmālā-sūtra*) is the summit of the principle of the 'Broad and Equal' (*fangdeng* 方等, a rendering of Skr. *vaipulya*), therefore it has been preserved for a thousand years" 勝鬘經者, 蓋是方等之宗極者也, 所以存于千載。; preface to a commentary to the Chinese translation of the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* (*Shengman jing* 勝鬘經), in *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 9.67b11-12.

[19] The most famous and probably the earliest of these chronologies is the one placing *the birth* of the Buddha in the 9th or 10th year of King Zhuang 莊 of Zhou 周 (688/687 BCE). One of the oldest hints at this dating appears in the 'Dhūta monastery inscription' (*Toutuo si bei* 頭陀寺碑) written by Wang Jin 王巾 (a.k.a. Wang Jianqi 王簡棲, d. 505), probably between 494 and 498. On this document see Forte 1996, esp. pp. 479-481; also Durt 1994:29. The prestige of this chronology would be sanctioned in 550 by its endorsement in the *Wei shu* 魏書 (114.3027), the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty. I have explained before (n. 9) why the reference to the King Zhuang dating in an alleged quotation from Xie Cheng's lost *Hou Han shu* (ca. 222-229) cannot be accepted as genuine. The emergence of native chronologies is probably related to the eschatological crisis triggered by the Indian ones, as I am going to elaborate. Apart from the equivalence with the regnal years of the Zhou kings, the trait that gives Chinese reckonings away and tells them from Indian traditions is that they are based on the birth of the Buddha rather than on the *nirvāṇa*; this is particularly conspicuous in

the *Lidai sanbao ji* (completed in 598), 1.23a15-b5. In the memoir on Faxian's 法顯 (331/342 – 418/423) travels, one reads of an equivalence between the period falling three hundred-odd years after the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, when the erection of a gigantic statue of Maitreya in the Darel valley would have marked the beginning of the diffusion of Buddhism beyond India, and the reign of king Ping 平 of Zhou (r. 770-720 BCE); farther on, in the account of Ceylon, the memoir quotes a proclamation recited at the Abhayagirivihāra in Anurādhapura, according to which 1,497 years had elapsed until then (ca. 411/412) since the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha; see *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan*, pp. 858a14, 865a26-27; tr. Deeg 2005:519, 566. The two indications are roughly consistent: the latter implies a *nirvāṇa* in ca. 1086/1085 BCE, and three hundred-odd years after this date is close to the reign of King Ping. The mention of a Chinese monarch and the inconsistency of this era with the known Sinhalese chronology led Heinz Bechert (1991a:233-234) to reject it as a "Chinese tradition" (and it would be the oldest attested, if true), but this is almost certainly wrong. Faxian's dating is based on the *nirvāṇa*, not on the Buddha's birth; it is absolutely isolated among the Chinese chronologies (cf. Durt 1994:27-29); and if Faxian (or his redactors) had known of a Chinese tradition pegging the birth or death of the Buddha to the reign of an ancient Chinese king, he would no doubt have mentioned it in connection to the Buddha's epoch rather than to attempt a rough estimate of a much later episode. It is, of course, possible that Faxian or his informants misunderstood the figure given at the Abhayagirivihāra. But since, as we are going to see, the so-called 'Sinhalese' or 'Theravāda' chronology is very likely of northwest Indian origin, the existence in the island of an alternative Buddhist era in the early 5th century is by no means impossible, and just like the native chronologies produced in China later in the same century, it may have been concocted to address eschatological concerns.

[20] See *Sengqieluocha suoji jing*, p. 115b18-20; *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 10.71b3-5.

[21] *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 11.78c3-4.

[22] See the anonymous preface to the *Chengshi lun* and Sengrui's 僧叡 (ca. 356-436) preface to the same book, both quoted by Jizang 吉藏 (549-623) in his *Sanlun xuanyi*, pp. 3b17-18 and 3c12-14.

[23] See Peri 1911:355-356.

[24] For a systematic assessment of the date and authorship of this translation, which bears an apocryphal attribution to Bo Fazu 帛法祖 (fl. ca. 290-305) in the Taishō canon, see Park 2008; cf. also the remarks in Nattier 2008:127-128.

[25] See Durt 1994:38.

[26] If 1994 BE (Buddhist Era) = 1046 CE, then 915 BE = 33 BCE.

[27] This is what led astray Tang Yongtong, one of the very few scholars to pay some attention to this document. Assuming that the initial date in the colophon referred to the date of the translation, and further accepting the mistaken attribution of the latter to Bo Fazu, Tang tried to reconcile that date with the Yongxing 永興 era (305-306) of the Western Jin dynasty (see Tang 1997:425-426). This, however, entails insurmountable chronological difficulties, of which Tang was aware, and which I am going to explain below.

[28] 1, Eastern Han 東漢, from 11 February 153 to 19 February 155; 2, Western Jin 西晉, from 12 January 305 to 27 June 306; 3, Ran Wei 冉魏 kingdom, from March-April 350 to 8 September 352; 4, Former Qin 前秦, from 3 July/1 August 357 to 12 July/9 August 359; 5, Northern Wei 北魏, from 25 October 409 to 5 February 414; Northern Wei, from 11 January to 9 February 533. Chinese dates are taken from relevant dynastic histories and from the *Zizhi tongjian*; calendar conversions are based on the chronological tables provided by the Academia Sinica at http://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw .

[29] Yongxing 永興 was the first era name adopted by Fu Jian upon his enthronement, between 3 July and 1 August 357 (Shenping 升平 1. 6); it was discarded for the new era name Ganlu 甘露 between 12 July and 9 August 359 (Shengping 3. 6); see *Zizhi tongjian*, 100.3165, 3175; *Jin shu*, 113.2884, 2887 (only years provided). On Daoan's abduction by Fu Jian and his activities at Chang'an see Zürcher 2007:197-202.

[30] More accurately, the second year of Fu Jian's Yongxing era, a *wuwu* 戊午 year, corresponds to the second year of the Shenping 升平 era of the Eastern Jin 晉, running from 26 January 358 to 13 February 359.

[31] More accurately, this *bingxu* year goes from 15 February 386 to 4 February 387.
[32] 887 – 358 = 915 – 386 = 529, plus the initial year of the era, which is expressly referred to in the initial part of the colophon, mentioning 887 elapsed years with a remainder.
[33] See Eggermont 1956:132-143; Pachow 1965; Bechert 1991a:228-229; Durt 1991:486-489; Durt 1994:29-35; Heirman 2004:378-381.
[34] See *Lidai sanbao ji*, 11.95b18-c17.
[35] See *Chu sanzang ji ji*, 11.82a23-b2. My interpretation of this part of the document differs from the one given in Pachow 1965:343.
[36] See Paranavitana 1960:489-492, which gathers robust evidence showing that the Buddhist year in ancient Ceylon, and with particular reference to the inscription of Upatissa, did not start from the traditional date of the Buddha's death in Vaiśāka, but later in the year, probably from the month of Kārttika.
[37] The attempt by Abaya Aryasinghe (1992) to read three Brāhmī scribbles on a rock in Ceylon as numerals, these numerals as the year in a date, and this date as one in the Buddhavarṣa of 543 BCE, with the further assumption that the year should convert to 33 BCE, can hardly be accepted as evidence of "the earliest lithic reference to a date in the Buddha era" (*ibid.*). It is unfortunate that Heinz Bechert (1991b:330, 341) should have advertised this shaky piece as a credible scholarly contribution.
[38] See Paranavitana 1960:432.
[39] For a discussion and partial inventory of these texts see Nattier 1991:42-48. The list, however, should be somewhat longer, and on the Chinese side include T.5, T.6, T.99, T.157, T.158, T.184, T.196, T.212, T.362, T.390, T.738, T.1451, T.1507, T.1545, T.1546, T.1547, T.2026, T.2027, T.2028, T.2029, T.2042, T.2043.
[40] See *Fo bannihuan jing*, 2.175c6-15.
[41] See e.g. Feeney 2007:142-145.
[42] See Fussman 1982:9, 36; Salomon 1986:272, 281-282; von Hinüber 2003:41-42.
[43] See Durt 1994:*passim*, and Durt 1995:413.
[44] The trenchant remarks of Paolo Daffinà (1987:50-70) on Buddhist chronology stand as yet unchallenged and unanswered, despite the isolated weaknesses in his argument that Heinz Bechert pointed out in a piqued rejoinder (Bechert 1991a:232-234).
[45] The foreign and therefore derivative nature of the Buddhist era in Ceylon is betrayed, in my opinion, by the fact that while in the northwest the era had been apparently put to use in an actual historical context to date Kaniṣka (and various Buddhist personalities), neither the *Dīpavaṃsa* nor the *Mahāvaṃsa* are able to deploy this chronology to date the historical kings of Ceylon; both chronicles use dates in the Buddhist era only for the largely fictional period down to Devānaṃpiyatissa (236 BE) in what are evidently retrospective narratives, and only in 941 BE do we have evidence that the era had been actually adopted in the island.
[46] Elsewhere (Palumbo 2010:20 n. 31) I have given a preliminary explanation of the reasons why the attribution of the translation of the *Ayu wang zhuan* 阿育王傳 (T vol. 50 no. 2042) to an An Faqin 安法欽 in 306 cannot be accepted, and the translation itself should be moved to the 5th century, so that the terminus ante quem of ca. 300 CE for the *Aśokāvadāna* falls entirely. For the episode of Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja see *Divyāvadāna* (XXVII, *Kunālāvadāna*), ed. Cowell – Neill, pp. 399 l. 23 – 400 l. 5, tr. Strong 1983:260. It should be noticed that while the *Divyāvadāna* highlights Aśoka's staggered reaction at the news that someone who had seen the Buddha is still around, with the implied assumption that the time of the Buddha was too far away for this to be expected, the oldest Chinese version of the episode has nothing to say about the king's astonishment, and conveys that in Aśoka's time, people who had known the Buddha could still be met; see *Za ahan jing*, 23.169b13-19. This is even clearer in the sources mentioned in the following note.
[47] See the *Anan xianbian jing* 阿難現變經 (probably early 4th c.) quoted in *Jinglü yixiang*, 15.81b10-82a20; the lost *Ayu wang zhuan* 阿育王傳 quoted in *Shijia pu*, 5.77c25-78a2; the *Piyu jing* 譬喻經 (probably 4th c.) quoted in *Ōjōyōshū*, 2.59c2-15.
[48] See e.g. *Ayu wang taizi Fayi sangmu yinyuan zhuan*, p. 179b4-15; *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan*, p. 863b23-26.
[49] See on this point the remarks in Falk 2004:168.

[50] "[In the] hundred years after my *parinirvāṇa*, there will be a monk named Mādhyandina, an attendant (*sārdhaṃvihārin*) of the monk Ānanda" (*mama varṣaśataparinirvṛtasya mādhyandino nāma bhikṣur bhaviṣyaty ānandasya bhikṣoḥ sārdhaṃvihārī*); *Gilgit manuscripts* (ed. N. Dutt), vol. III, part 1, p. xvii, ll. 5-6. The wording of this prophecy is identical to the one concerning Aśoka in the *Divyāvadāna*. Chinese translations waver in their interpretation of *varṣaśata parinirvṛtasya*, but in several cases it is evident that the expression was understood as referring to an ongoing century. See e.g. *Za ahan jing*, 23.165b23-24: 於我般涅槃後百世之中, 當有長者, 名瞿多, and cf. *Divyāvadāna* (XXVI, *Pāṃśupradānāvadāna*), ed. Cowell – Neill, p. 348, ll. 23-24: *mama varṣaśataparinirvṛtasya gupto nāma gāndhiko bhaviṣyati*. The translator is explicit in placing Upagupta's father Gupta "within a period of a hundred [years]" 百世之中 after the Buddha's death. I shall leave to the judgment of someone whose knowledge of Sanskrit is less amateurish than mine to establish whether *varṣaśata parinirvṛtasya* can indeed be understood as "*in* the century after the *parinirvāṇa*", or it compels the notion of an elapsed hundred years. My incompetent impression is that the temporal use of the genitive in this phrase is ambiguous, and we should also observe that the same phrase is occasionally declined in the locative (*varṣaśataparinirvṛte*).

[51] See *Dīpavaṃsa*, IV.49-51, in Oldenberg 1879:34, tr. *ibid*. p. 137; *Mahāvaṃsa*, IV.57-59, tr. in Geiger 1912:24.