YONA or its Sanskrit equivalent Yavana seem to have served as umbrella terms for the Greeks in general, be these Ionians living in Asia Minor, mainland Greeks, "Greeks living in the Northwest of India ... and even, as in Tamil literature, ... merchants sailing to the harbours of South India. Later ... the name was used for all westerners, especially for Arabs". The term as such appears to have been in use relatively early, as the Sanskrit form Yavana occurs in Pāṇini (4.1.49), and its Persian equivalent Yauna is found in an inscription of Darius I (522-486). In the Pāli canon, the Yona country is mentioned in the Mahāvamsa as the region converted to Buddhism after the third council by Mahārakkham, being also the country of origin of Dhammarakkha (Mhv. verse 12.4-5). The Milindapañha refers to Yona in relation to King Milinda, whom it presents as a native of the Yona district (Mil. I, 82 and 83). Other instances can be found e.g. in the Mahānāḍa (Nd. I, 155 and 415), which speaks Yona and Paramayona; in the Cullanāḍa (Nd. II, 37: Yona), and in the Apadāna (Ap. II, 358: Yonaka).

The term Yona occurs not only in such comparatively later texts, but already makes its appearance in an early discourse. This is the Assālyana Sutta which, in agreement with its Madhyama Agama parallel, specifies that among the Yonas a two-class society can be found, consisting of masters and slaves (M. II, 149 and T. I, 664a18). Some scholars have suggested that here Yona refers to the Greek-Bactrian kingdom, based on which they conclude that this reference must have originated at a time shortly before Asoka. Yet, a close look at ancient Greek history suggests that this need not be the case.

In the year 480 before the present era, the Persian king Xerxes had begun an invasion of mainland Greece. The Persian invasion was in revenge for the Greek support of a revolt by the Ionians (living in Asia Minor) against Persian dominion. For the purpose of this campaign, Xerxes mustered a staggering large army, among which there were also Indian contingents. Under the leadership of Spartan Leonidas, the outnumbered Greeks tried to resist the Persian attack at the pass of Thermophylae. Being informed by a traitor of a narrow by-pass, the Persians circumvented the Greek defenders and attacked them from the rear as well. In order to enable on orderly withdrawal of the Greek army, Leonidas remained with a small group to defend the pass of Thermophylae, heroically
resisting until the last man. The heroism of the Spartans made a great impression on the soldiers under Xerxes' command.

In view of this historical background, it would not be surprising if a report of valiant soldiers from a master-slave society in Greece should have been brought home by the Indian soldiers that had participated in Xerxes' campaign. Since according to modern scholarship the teaching activities of the Buddha are probably best assigned to the second half of the fifth century, by this time the tale of the heroic Spartans may well have reached the Ganges area. Notably, according to the Assaśāyana Sutta and its Madhiyama Āgama parallel the Buddha inquired from his visitor if the latter had already heard about, sūtra te?, the master-slave society among the Yonas, (M. I, 149, with its Chinese counterpart in T. I, 664a18).

This gives the impression as if he was referring to something that was a relatively new piece of information. Hence there seems to be no need to assume that the reference to Yona in the Assaśāyana Sutta is anachronistic. In fact, apparently "the term Yona-... cannot be attributed to a direct contact with the Greeks", but instead seems to have been "taken over into Indian from the Old Persian form Yauna- some time about the end of the sixth century B.C.". Thus "references to yona, etc., in the Pali canon need not be later interpolations, added after Alexander's campaign. They may well go back to the oldest layers of the canon".

Anālayo

References


6 Herodot in his Histories 7.65 lists an Indian contingent in Xerxes' army, describing that they were clad in cotton and armed with reed bows and iron-tipped arrows.

7 Bühler: On the Origin of the Indian Brahmi Alphabet, Varanasi 1963: 27 note 1 comments that "it seems to me not wonderful that an author ... whose countrymen, the Gandhāras, had furnished a contingent for Xerxes' invasion of Greece, should mention the old Oriental name of the Greeks".

8 A collection of articles on the topic can be found in Bechtel: When did the Buddha live?, Delhi 1995.


YONAKADHAMMARAKKHITA: As indicated by the first part of the name, he appears to be a recruit to the Buddhist Saṅgha from the Yavana (Pāli: Yona) community of the Indian sub-continent. According to Sri Lankan Pāli chronicles, the Mahāvamsa (12.4) and the Dipavamsa (8.7) and also the Pāli Vinaya commentary of Buddhaghosa (Vin. I.67) he was the leader of the Buddhist mission sent by Arahant Moggaliputta Tissa, after the Third Buddhist Council, to Aparantaka, probably the extreme western region of India. Geiger has identified the region with the 'western ends' (of India) comprising the territory of northern Gujerat, Kathiawar, Kachchh and Sind (s.v. Aparantaka for more details regarding the identification). The Burmese Pāli chronicle, Sasana vaṃsa, according to Hazra, takes Aparantaratha to be Sunaṃparanta of the Burmese, the region lying to the west of the Upper Irrawaddy. But Hazra regards this identification a late one. According to him Aparanta is identified by scholars with Northern Konkan with its capital at Surpāraka or
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