

EDICTS OF KING PIYADASSI (AŚOKA) IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHNICITY

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Abstract:

We live in a post-colonial era, when many theories and approaches to historiography have lost their validity because of the negative connotations of recent experiences, which left their mark on our perception of reality. Even if we are not aware of it, ideology quietly steals into our narrations of antiquity. For this reason writing history became extremely difficult. Many historians in the face of such threats may adopt the attitude of an archivist busily collecting and describing the sources available to us. The problem is that most of the available sources from antiquity, such as literary sources, inscriptions, artifacts, etc., have already been thoroughly described. Therefore, the only possible direction of development of research on antiquity seems to be the development of new directions of interpretation, and in this way, giving new narratives to the history. It is important to be more self-critical in our studies, to understand the ideas which affect our view on antiquity. That is why in my essay on the inscriptions of king Piyadassi (Aśoka) and his policy of *dhamma* which it expresses, in the context of the relations between the Mauryan Empire and the Greeks, I adopted an interdisciplinary approach by making use of contemporary theories on ethnicity, and especially two trends: research on hybridity and transculturalism (Kraidy) and the theory of the so-called middle ground (White).

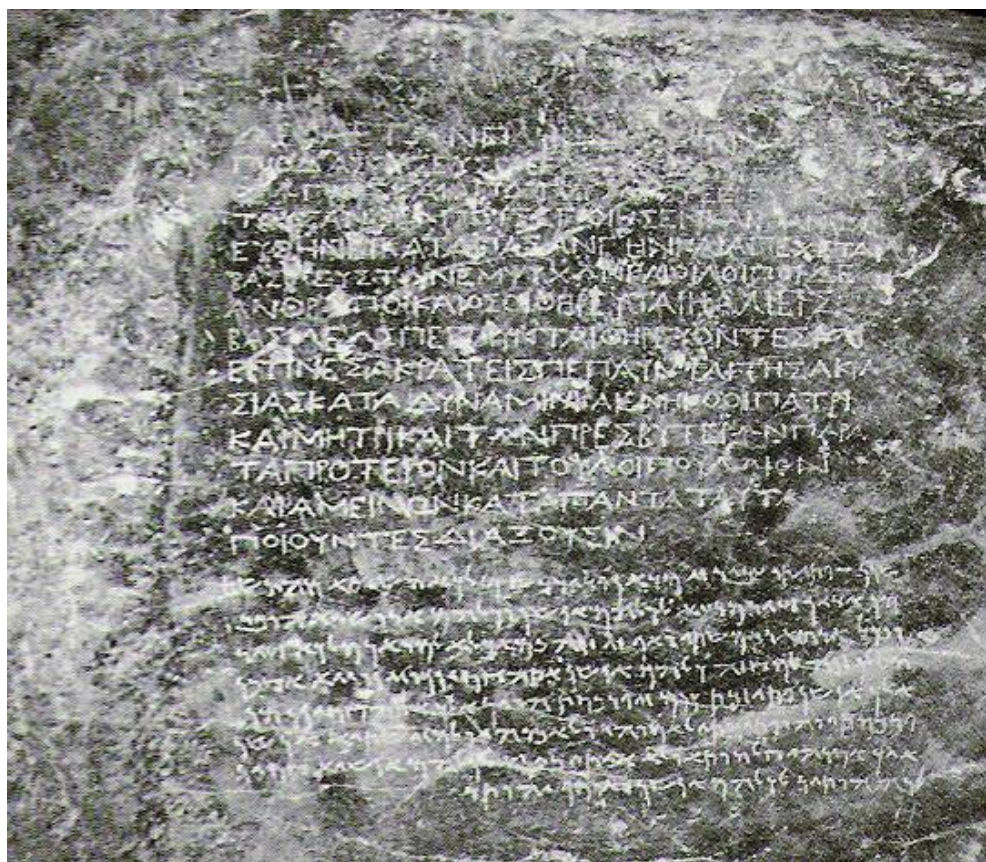
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Introduction:

Towards new understanding

In 1958 the *Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan* (DAFA mission) announced the discovery in Kandahar (Arachosia) of a bilingual Greco-Aramaic inscription of King Piyadassi (see: Schlumberger et al. 1958, Robert 1958, Pugliese Caratelli et al. 1964), which included precepts of the policy of *dhamma* (Greek *εὐσέβεια*) preached in Aramaic (the language of the Achaemenian chancellery) and in Greek, and addressed without doubt to the Greek inhabitants of the Mauryan Empire. Soon after that surprising discovery in 1964 DAFA published another inscription, this time entirely in Greek, which corresponds in large part to the content of the XII and XIII Rock Edict (RE) of King Piyadassi (see: Benveniste 1964, Schlumberger 1964, Norman 1972). These twin discoveries led some European researchers to investigate the correlation between the Indian phenomena and the phenomena from the Greek world. Nowadays such research is rejected as a symptom of Occidentalism, showing that Indian phenomena derived from western, indicating the superiority of European culture and sanctioning European supremacy. In recent years, another trend has emerged in the study of inscriptions of Piyadassi. This is somewhat ahistorical in so far as it examines these inscriptions in their interconnectedness without a deeper analysis of the socio-political context, and therefore passes over such issues as language, or geographical and historical background (see e.g.: Singh 2012). Such an interesting question as the state of intercultural relations between the Greeks and the Mauryan Empire has been completely silenced by modern orthodoxy. But Piyadassi surely did not fail to mention this issue in his edicts. Therefore, I believe that it is worth while resuming this topic, despite the inherent difficulties. Since the post-colonial experience led to the development of new concepts, such as ethnicity, ethnic identity, middle ground, hybridity, transculturalism etc., in this essay I attempt to examine the policy of *dhamma* in the context of these new studies to check the perspectives of those theories in the study of intercultural (or transcultural) relations in antiquity. I start with the presentation of Piyadassi, his legendary and real face. Then I examine the contacts

between the Greeks and the Mauryan Empire. And finally I outline the policy of *dhamma* to see subsequently how it presents itself in the context of contemporary research on ethnicity.



Bilinguistic inscription (in Greek and Aramaic) by King Piyadassi, discovered at Kandahar (National Museum of Afghanistan).

Main Text:

Piyadassi Aśoka – legend and reality

The Mauryan Empire was undoubtedly the first empire covering virtually the whole of the Indian subcontinent. It was founded in 322 BC by Chandragupta Maurya (340 BC – 298 BC) and later expanded by his son Bindusāra Amitraghata (c. 320 BC – 272 BC) and his grandson Piyadassi Aśoka (304–232 BC). But while we have a lot of information in Greek and Latin sources (such as: Plutarch, Strabo, Arrian, Megasthenes, Diodorus, Ptolemy or Pliny) about Chandragupta (Greek: Σανδρακότρος) and Bindusāra (Greek: Ἀμιτρογάτης), the Greeks did not tell us about their successor, Piyadassi Aśoka. And as Bloch (2007) noticed, what India relates about him is all a tissue of legends and miracles.

As Bloch relates (2007: 15-17), according to Buddhist sources Bindusāra had sixteen wives and hundred and one sons, of whom the eldest was Sumana (in Sinhalese sources) or Susīma (in Sanskrit sources) and the youngest was Tissa. His mother, who became the first queen by subterfuge, had another son, whose birth had caused her no pain, and so on this account he was called Aśoka (“without pain” from Pali *soka*, Sanskrit *śoka* “pain”). The king hated this child, whose body was rough to the touch, so the mother had to save him by carrying him away. When he had grown up, the king sent him to suppress a revolt in the Punjab, but gave him insufficient means in order to get rid of him. But through divine support, Aśoka won the hearts of the people and suppressed the rebellion without a fight. On the death of Bindusāra, an oracle designated Aśoka as his successor. Later Aśoka as the viceroy of Ujjayini (Avanti) rushed from Pāṭaliputra and began the killing of ninety-nine of his brothers. Only his youngest brother Tissa escaped. This and other horrific passages refer to the name

of “Aśoka the Cruel”, Caṇḍāśoka. In the Sinhalese story Aśoka changes his attitude after he is converted to Buddhism, while in that of the Buddhists from the North he retains his violent and cruel character even after his conversion, when he became “Aśoka of the Law”, Dharmāśoka.

Then follows the enumeration of the foundations of convents, of erection of monuments made on his order, the story of the Third Council which he chaired and of propaganda missions then decided. Miracles or novels of folk type abound in the story, such as that of his son Kunāla and the Empress Tissarakkhitā, which resembles the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus developed in the tragedy of Euripides. After the death of queen Asandhimittā, who was a pious Buddhist, Aśoka married Tissarakkhitā, a young, vain, unfaithful woman who fell in love with his son Kunāla and, rejected by him, assigned to him the government of Taxila in order to remove him. Later Tissarakkhitā forged a letter from Aśoka to the minister of Kunāla by affixing the seal with an impression of the Emperor’s teeth, in which she ordered him to tear the eyes of the prince, to lead him to the mountain and to abandon him there. Respectful of what he believed to be a paternal order, Kunāla had his eyes torn out by a pariah and travelled the country as a beggar. He reached Pāṭaliputra, entered the palace and, as he sang, the king recognized his voice; the case was solved, his stepmother was burned alive and her accomplices punished. As Bloch rightly noticed (Bloch 2007: 17), one can subscribe to the judgment of Kern (1956), that if we did not know Aśoka except from the Buddhist sources, from North and South, we would conclude that he was a sovereign of rare insignificance, remarkable only in so far as he was half monster, half idiot. His fellow believers have handed down not a single good deed on his part, not a single high feeling or a striking word.

The historical figure of Asoka remained obscure until 1837, when an official of the civil administration in Benares, James Prinsep, deciphered the Brāhmi alphabet, the earliest Indian script so far known to have been used for the writing of Sanskrit and Prākṛit, a script which developed over time, rendering previous versions archaic and unreadable. Prinsep was able to find the meaning of inscriptions on two columns of sandstone, lying in Delhi and Allahabad, but at first he attributed them to Tissa, king of Ceylon, guided by the title *devānaṃpiya* “friend of the gods”. Only later did he identify the title *piyadassi*, which in the Sinhalese chronicle *Dipavamsa* book VI (Oldenberg 2001: 41 ff.) is associated with the name of Aśoka. Nevertheless, it remained conjectural until 1915, when the only inscription which gives the name Aśoka was discovered in Maski.

Scholars unanimously agree as to the superiority of the genuine inscriptions issued by the ruler, the first signed and dated documents in all Indian history, over the legends. According to Bloch we are now in possession of authentic documents about a king, whose legend only attested his glory without really justifying it: “Nous voilà donc en possession de documents authentiques sur un roi dont la légende seule nous attestait la gloire sans vraiment la justifier” (2007: 18); the real man is not only much more alive, but more impressive than the legend: “l’homme réel est-il non seulement plus vivant, mais plus imposant que sa légende!” (2007: 40) John Strong in his book *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (1983) criticizes the tendency to interpret the Buddhist legends in the light of the inscriptions and vice versa. Indeed, scholars quickly realized the consequences which result from the fact that we first got to know Piyadassi Aśoka from the Buddhist sources. As Thapar rightly noticed (1960: 44), “Buddhist sources from Ceylon, Tibet and China contain fairly detailed accounts of his life. The Aśokan edicts were therefore interpreted on the basis of information provided by these sources. It is indeed unfortunate that in reconstructing his life and activities these and other religious sources were regarded as reliable and complementary evidence to that of his own inscription.” Although Thapar seems to realize the existence of this trap, nevertheless she could not avoid falling into it herself, just like Bloch and many other scholars, when she claimed that Aśoka is the proper name of the Emperor Piyadassi: “In the inscriptions, the author is described as *Devānaṃpiya Piyadassi rāja*, The Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi. The king seldom used his personal name, Aśoka, and generally referred to himself by the above title. The identification of the king Piyadassi was made on the basis of a comparison with the Buddhist chronicles of Ceylon in which Aśoka is referred to as Piyadassi.” (Thapar 1960: 43)

If Aśoka was the proper name of the Emperor, then why would he use the title *devānaṃpiya piyadassi rājā* (in Greek version Πιοδάσσης) in his inscriptions? I agree with Benveniste (1964), who argues that the name *Piyadassi* (*Priyadarśin*), which is usually translated as a qualifier meaning:

“with friendly look” is in reality a proper name, not a qualifier and that it was the personal name of the king, while Aśoka was his nickname, which “may well have been a name taken by the king after he came under the influence of the Buddha’s doctrine” (Singh 2012: 134); the name Aśoka subsequently became established as a proper name by the Buddhist legend, after the Brāhmi script became unreadable and the historical figure of the Mauryan Emperor vanished. I do not preclude the possibility that the opposite is true, but on balance the authentic edicts of king Piyadassi should be given preference.

Nevertheless, I find it quite disturbing that the name Aśoka was so easily established in an ‘orthodox view’ on the history of the Mauryan Empire. But even more difficult to justify is the tendency of some scholars to translate the titles of the Emperor, as did Festugière, who even went so far as to compare the name *piyadassi*, rendered as “au regard amical” or “gracieux”, to Greek ἡλιόφιλος and the title *devānaṃpriya*, translated as “ami des dieux”, to Greek proper name Θεόφιλος (Festugière 1951: 33). Festugière’s entire article *Les inscriptions d’Asoka et l’idéal du roi hellénistique* focuses on a comparison of the policy of Piyadassi expressed in his Edicts to the ideal of the Hellenistic ruler. The starting point for the comparisons is the description of Alexander as an ideal ruler by Diodorus, borrowed from the Tarn’s book on Alexander (1948: 66). Festugière traces the parallels to the precepts of *dhamma* in the moral prescriptions (*παραγγέλματα*) and characteristics given to good monarchs in Greek sources, such as *φιλανθρωπία*, ‘the benevolence and kindness towards the subjects’ or *πόνος*, concluding the argument with the statement that Greece and India are two entirely different worlds: “Ce sont deux mondes entièrement divers.” (Festugière 1951: 46) So one might ask, what is the purpose of such comparison? A more likely interpretation is that similar processes occurring simultaneously in both cases led to the emergence of similar but probably independent concepts. The role that Stoicism served in Greece, Buddhism had to fulfil in India. As Festugière said of Stoicism, it justified reasonably the mixture of peoples which was the result of the conquests of Alexander: “justifia en raison le mélange des peuples qui fut la conséquence des conquêtes d’Alexandre” (1949: 306).

Contacts between the Mauryas and the Greeks

To better understand the inscriptions of King Piyadassi in the context of transculturalism, we should look first into the relations between the Greeks and the Mauryan Empire. Long before the conquests of Alexander, areas between Greece and India were occupied by the vast and mighty Achaemenid Empire, whose satrapies stretched from the lands bordering with the Mediterranean to as far afield as the distant Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandhāra and Arachosia, acting as the rampart of India (see: Behistun inscription of Darius the Great). To hold their far-flung empire together the Achaemenids introduced Aramaic as an official language of the chancellery. It was influential to the extent that even Piyadassi was using it in his edicts. In Persian times Greek contacts with the residents of India were likely to be limited, although there are traces of Greek settlements in Bactria and Sogdiana, established as a result of the resettlement by Darius the Great of groups of population, the so-called Barkaioi and Branchidae (see: Amitay 2010: 42-3).

After the conquests of Alexander, in the time of the Diadochi, Greco-Indian relations seem to be more or less friendly, at least in so far as we can tell from the sources available to us. There is no mention of any battles, while the military campaign of Seleucus I Nicator (ca. 358-281) undertaken to recover the lands conquered by Alexander and lost to the emerging Mauryan Empire, ended in 305 BC with the conclusion of a treaty between Seleucus and Chandragupta Maurya (cf. Strabo XV 2, 9; Appian, *Syr.* 55), which established an alliance of friendship (*φιλία*; *pactio*) and of *connubium* (*ἐπιγαμία* or *κῆδος*). According to Scharfe (1971: 217-8) “These friendly relations were never interrupted – on the contrary, they were carefully cultivated.” Seleucus ceded Gandhara, Arachosia and Paropamisadae to Chandragupta in exchange for 500 elephants. As Scharfe writes in his article *The Maurya Dynasty and the Seleucids* (1971: 217), “Some historians have concluded that Seleukos must have suffered a military defeat, others that the pressures in western Asia forced a hurried return. They all overlook the fact that the treaty between Seleukos and Candragupta is more or less a copy of that between Alexander and Poros.” Scharfe argues that Chandragupta was conquered by Seleucus and lost his sovereignty to the Hellenistic ruler. As evidence to support his theory, he cites the title

devānāmpriya (*devānāmpriya*) attributed to the Mauryan rulers, which in his opinion is a translation of the Hellenistic court title *φίλος τῶν βασιλέων* ‘friend of the kings’ (1971: 215), whereas *φίλος τοῦ βασιλέως* was one of the group called *ἐταῖροι* at the time of Alexander, replaced by *φίλοι* under his successors. However, I think there is no sufficient evidence to support his thesis. Why, moreover, do none of the Greek sources mention the alleged victory of Seleucus over the Indian ruler? Was it not a sufficiently glorious accomplishment to boast of in front of compatriots?

While the issue of the sovereignty of the Mauryan Empire remains open and awaits further consideration, Greco-Indian relations were essentially good. This is evidenced by the fact that ambassadors were sent to the Indian court: Megasthenes to Chandragupta and Deimachus to Bindusāra (cf. Strabo II 1, 9); legates were sent by Piyadassi to the western kings: Antiochus II (261-247 BC), Ptolemy II (283-246 BC), Antigonus Gonatas (283-239 BC), Magas of Cyrene (275-250 BC) and the fifth king of the name Alexander (cf. RE XIII), and gifts and letters were also exchanged by Greek and Indian rulers, as shown by Von Hinüber in his article *Did Hellenistic Kings Send Letters to Aśoka?*, where he concludes that “[...] the royal correspondence of the Hellenistic kings would be another minute stone in the very fragmentary mosaic that must be put together if it is intended to trace relations between India and the West from direct evidence in ancient monuments and not only from equally fragmentary literary sources. This allows us to recover not only Iranian models suspected long since to be present in the inscription of Aśoka, but also stimulating thoughts perhaps derived from the then contemporary Hellenistic Greek culture.” (2010: 266) However, the approach presented here by Von Hinüber, which seems to me to be nothing more than the passion of a ‘butterfly-collector’, is something which I would like to avoid. I am presenting this evidence in sake of a deeper understanding of the processes taking place between the two Empires.

A very important insight into the cultural relations between the Mauryan and the Seleucid rulers is provided by the well-known anecdote of Hegesandros preserved in *Deipnosophistae* XIV 653 by Athenaeus, where Bindusāra (Ἀμυτροχάτης) asks Antiochus to send him grape-syrup, dried figs and a sophist, to which Antiochus replies, that the grape-syrup and the figs he will send, but it is not lawful to buy a sophist. This story was, probably already in antiquity, an opportunity to discuss cultural differences. That may constitute evidence that such differences were noticed and at least in this case, treated with a playful wink. But was this true in other cases also? We cannot forget that Athenaeus was an intelligent and erudite writer, and that his work was a dialogue taking place at a sumptuous banquet. But it is not excluded that, in other cases, these differences could have been discussed in less tolerant and liberal circumstances. Von Hinüber points to one very important matter, that this “[...] well-known anecdote mirrors the fact that there was some memory among the Greeks of close contacts between the Hellenistic world and India some four hundred years before the time of Athenaios or of the slightly older Hegesander. The correctness of the Indian name Ἀμυτροχάτης allows us to put a certain trust in the quality of the memory.” (2010: 265)

One of the most important, if not the most important, factor in Greco-Indian relations was the development of trade routes between the East and the West. As Pugliese Caratelli shows in his article *Asoka e i re ellenistici* (1953), trading was already carried out between Seleucid Syria and Central Asia, the great route was marked out in part by Alexander and later by the trade with China: the way to Bactria and the Kabul valley, evangelized by missionaries of Piyadassi, reached Taxila. Piyadassi himself recalls how his charitable initiative found its implementation even in the furthest realms. Everywhere in his empire and also in the neighbouring lands up to Taprobane (Ceylon), and to the lands of Antiochus the *yona* (*yavana*) king and the neighbouring kings of this Antiochus the king has set up two medical points, relief for men and animals. He planted everywhere medical plants and roots and fruit trees useful for men and animals and he dug wells and planted trees for refreshment of men and animals on the routes (see: RE II).

However, such favourable conditions for contacts between the two empires did not last long. Around 255 BC Bactrian Greeks under the command of satrap Diodotus revolted against the Seleucids and so cut off the Mauryan Empire from direct contact with the Greek world. Although in 206 BC Antiochus III renewed the alliance with Subhāgasena (Greek: Σοφάγασῆνος), probably a later Mauryan king, and again received war elephants (see: Polybius XI 34), still this situation was changed rapidly. In 185 BC the last Mauryan king Brihadratha was assassinated by Brahmin Pushyamitra and

the Śunga dynasty was established. Soon the Seleucid Empire also collapsed in confrontation with the Roman power. Thus two great empires ceased to exist, before the dialogue that took place between them was able to bring about long-term and profound changes.

The policy of *dhamma*

Smith in his book *Asoka, the Buddhist emperor of India*, which is the first monograph about Piyadassi, rightly noticed that “A difficulty experienced by all translators of the Asoka inscriptions is that of finding an adequate compendious translation of *dharma* and its compounds. ‘Religion’, ‘righteousness’, ‘truth’, ‘the law’, ‘the sacred law’, and, I dare say, other phrases, have been tried: all these are unsatisfactory. To my mind the rendering ‘piety’ or ‘law of piety’ seems the best. The fundamental principle of Asoka’s ethics is filial piety, the Latin *pietas*, the Chinese *Hsiao*, which is presented as the model and basis of all other virtues.” (1901: 6-7) I decided not to translate this term at all in order to avoid any possible distortion of its real meaning, just as Thapar (1960: 45) or Singh (2012: 131) have done. But I attempt to present a comprehensive view on the character of the policy of *dhamma* (Prākrit form of Sanskrit *dharma*) promoted by king Piyadassi in his edicts, mainly in the Major Rock Edicts, but also in Minor Rock Edicts and in Edicts on Pillars. They constituted the larger group of the inscriptions of Piyadassi, while the smaller group consists of the declarations of the king to the *samgha* (Buddhist order of monks), where Piyadassi stands as intolerant and even fanatical.

My presentation is based primarily on the views of Thapar, who saw the need for a multi-dimensional view of the policy of the Emperor.³¹⁵ According to her (Thapar 1960: 44) “Aśoka was certainly attracted to Buddhism and became a practising Buddhist. But his was not an eccentric or sudden conversion as is clear from his own edicts. Buddhism in the context of society as it was then, was not just another religion. It was the result of a widespread movement towards change which affected many aspects of life from personal beliefs to social ideas. Any statesman with an understanding of the period would have had to come to terms with such an important new development.” Thapar believes that the fact that Aśoka chose this precise policy was influenced by many factors, not only the result of his conversion to Buddhism in consequence of recognizing the horrors of war during the conquest of Kaliṅga, as had previously been considered. The conditions which gave rise to this policy of *dhamma* were in her opinion:

1. Aśoka’s private beliefs;
2. His immediate environment (Chandragupta is said to have been a Jaina and Bindusāra favoured the Ājīvikas; both were non-orthodox sects, antagonistic to Brahmin ideas);
3. The 6th century BC in India, which was a century of questioning (variety of sects, vigorous debate and discussion);
4. Criticism of Brahmin values: privileges of priests, cast system etc. “Generally the less fortunate of the four castes (mainly *vaiśyas*) tended to favour the new sects as against their previous allegiance to Brahmanism. [...] Buddhism was, as it were, the spearhead of these dissident groups. It demanded a relaxing of the social rigidity encouraged by the caste system.” (Thapar 1960: 46);
5. Economic changes in northern India – a semi-nomadic pastoral economy was changing to a settled agrarian village economy (introduction of taxes, state supervision, opening up of trade on an extensive scale, increasing importance of *vaiśyas* – traders and merchants, establishment of guilds); “The volume of trade along the overland routes across modern Afghanistan and Persia to the Mediterranean ports, increased greatly. For the many Greek settlers along these routes, who were deserters from Alexander’s army and others, this east-west trade became a highly lucrative business. Regular trade was also conducted between Broach on the west coast of India, and Babylon. The communication of ideas

³¹⁵For those interested in the inscriptions of Piyadassi in their consistency as regards to the religious and socio-political program presented in them, I recommend reading the book *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History* by Olivelle, Leoshko & Ray (2012) or an article *Governing the State and the Self: Political Philosophy and Practice in the Edicts of Aśoka* by Singh, which “attempts a fresh interpretation of Aśoka’s political philosophy as expressed in his inscriptions, with a special focus on identifying their inter-connected ideas and arguments regarding the relationship between political power, goodness and violence.” (Singh 2012: 131)

must also have accompanied the trade in spices, textiles, precious stones and gold.” (Thapar 1960: 48)

6. And finally the nature of the Mauryan empire, which extended over vast areas and included a variety of peoples and cultures. “The hub of the empire was the highly Aryanised region of Magadha in modern Bihar. The extremities however were quite foreign to each other. The cosmopolitan Indo-Greek region of Gandhāra in the north-west, belonged to an almost totally different culture from the Dravidian south. [...] It would seem that the people of the Mauryan empire needed a focus or some common stand for all these conflicting or divergent forces, something that would draw them together and give them a feeling of unity. Such a focus would naturally have greater success if supported by the emperor, since the structure of Mauryan India invested control in the ruler at the centre. In fact the emperor himself was the author of a movement which aimed at this very object. In seeking a group of unifying principles, Aśoka concentrated on the fundamental aspects of each issue, and the result was his policy of *Dhamma*.” (Thapar 1960: 48)

The basic principles of this policy of *dhamma* were: toleration (towards other religious groups), non-violence (renunciation of war and conquest by violence, and a restraint on the killing of animals, but not fanatic religious precepts) and social-welfare (planting trees, digging wells, building rest-houses on the roads, which supported trade).

According to Bloch (2007: 31) Aśoka’s *dhamma* is the Buddhist “Good Law”, one of the Three Jewels, which recommends the essential virtues taught by both Brahmanism and by Buddhism: respect for life, that of the animals included, obedience to parents, truthfulness, charity (RE III, IV, IX, XI, 7, Minor RE II). There is no question of the conventional notions and features of the Buddhist doctrine, such as the Four Truths, the series of causes, nirvana; the very salvation is presented as the release from the circle of transmigration; whoever observes the Rule, will win this world, that is to say probably a good rebirth, and the other world, that is to say the heaven (*svaga*, Sanskrit *svarga*). Grousset (1941: 48) has well summarized the conclusions of modern criticism about the relationship of the *dhamma* taught by Piyadassi with Buddhism, arguing that his edicts had intended not to preach Buddhism as such, but to recommend a universal, or at least pan-Indian, morality that Brahmanism and Jainism might claim as their own no less than Buddhism. It is not less true, however, that this universal charity and universal tolerance seem directly inspired by the religion of Buddha.

Bearing in mind the universalistic character of the policy of Piyadassi, it might be worthwhile to return shortly to the article by Pugliese Caratelli about Aśoka and the Hellenistic kings (1953). According to him, the *dhamma* enthusiastically preached by the Indian king in the Hellenistic courts was regarded as equivalent to humanitarian principles, which were of Greek spirit. According to Pugliese Caratelli, the religious revolution from the age of Alexander, which was accompanied by radical changes in Greek political life, and born from the convergence of the speculations of the schools of philosophers (especially the Academia and then Stoa), from religious crises related to the events of the *poleis* and the decline of their freedom, and from the experiences of conquerors and politics in contact with other people - had inspired and fuelled the moral teaching of the Stoics and had extended its influence to a large sphere, among the people and in the courts. The new monarchs found in the new teaching ideas which served to justify their own personal power, or at least its representation under the guise of humanitarian notions. As we can see, similar factors account for the development of similar thoughts at the same time in both countries, but probably independently. What this shows is that the new society needed a new philosophy, because previous rigid forms did not fit in for the purposes of the society and its evolving ethnic identity.

It follows clearly that the policy of *dhamma* implied by Piyadassi was individualistic and dictated by the needs of the reality of his empire and not a fancy of some fanatic ruler. As Thapar rightly noticed “It was in the conception of this policy, seen in the context of Mauryan India, that the true achievement of Aśoka lay. He did not see *Dhamma* as piety resulting from good deeds inspired by formal religious beliefs, but as an emphasis on social responsibility. [...] The policy of *Dhamma* was a policy of social responsibility. It aimed at building up an attitude of mind in which social behaviour, the behaviour of one person towards another, was considered of great importance. It was a plea for the recognition of the dignity of man, and for a humanistic spirit in the activities of society.”

(1960: 45) According to Thapar, Aśoka understood the problems of his age, but his policy was too vague and too idealistic to unite the empire or produce a large scale enthusiasm.

Another point which is worth mentioning on the policy of *dhamma* is the new category of officers instituted by Piyadassi to implement his policy, the superintendents of *dhamma* (*dhammahāmahāttas*): “They were responsible for publicising *Dhamma*, acting as the reporters of the king and more generally for bringing the king and his government in touch with public opinion. They seem gradually to have developed into a type of priesthood of *Dhamma*, with extensive powers of interference in the lives of the people, thus to a degree nullifying their very purpose. They were also sent on missions to neighbouring countries and to various Hellenic kingdoms in the west. Aśoka was so convinced of the success of his *Dhamma* and of his attempts at encouraging Indian society to adjust itself to the changes, that he appears to have believed that his own efforts might be of help to other rulers elsewhere.” (Thapar 1960: 50) According to Singh (2012: 141) their mission was closely related to the problems of pacification and consolidation of the empire and the policy towards the unsubdued (*avijita*) neighbours. An interesting fact, introduced by Benveniste (1964), is that in the Greek version of the RE XII the administrative actions contained in the last line of Indian text, nominations of superintendents of *dhamma* and other officials, are omitted. It seems that only the moral content of the proclamation was made known to the Greeks, and that it deliberately ignores the desire that the king personally had to see these precepts followed everywhere, as well as practical steps that were taken to enforce them.

The policy of *dhamma* in the context of the theory of ethnicity

Siân Jones in her book *The Archaeology of Ethnicity* (1997) examines the development of studies on ethnicity in the context of archaeological research; she describes two opposing perspectives: the primordial and the instrumental perspective, in the context of the consequent establishment of processual archaeology. Jones does not give here any ready answers to some fundamental difficulties in creating a coherent theoretical basis for research on ethnicity, if it is even possible to create such.³¹⁶ But she presents some important conclusions about the non-existence of “bounded, monolithic cultural entities”. It is perhaps an obvious statement, but one which in the context of research on antiquity is often overlooked. For our studies, the adoption of such a statement as the starting point is very significant: it becomes apparent that we cannot look at Buddhism as a monolith, and so the fact that in the *dhamma* of Piyadassi we do not find the basic rules of Buddhism will not be a surprise and we will not look for coherence at all costs. Instead, we should look at the inherent mixture in all phenomena, which is in contemporary theory known as hybridity.

Kraidy in his book *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (2005) presents the theory of critical transculturalism. It is based on the concept of hybridity, *mestizaje*, the theory of mixture, developed among others by Jean-Loup Amselle, who in his book *Mestizo Logics* expressed his belief “that mixture is originary” (Amselle 1998: x). Kraidy outlines the development of this idea from the theory of miscegenation in biology and its racist background; through the theory of syncretism in religion and its negative connotation in the context of Christianity; the theory of *mestizaje* and transculturation; *creolization* in language and culture; to post-colonial theory, where hybridity became a “fundamental dimension of intercultural relations” thanks to such scholars as Bhabha (2004); and to the “anti-hybridity backlash” due to realizing the theoretical uselessness and “neo-colonial” rhetoric of this theory. According to Kraidy (2005: 68) “hybridity is a discourse with a particular geopolitical directionality, and as a result should be treated with suspicion.” Thus he proposes to see the cultural relations between different groups in terms of transculturalism. “The prefix “trans” suggests moving through spaces and across borders, not merely between points. I use “transculturalism” to reflect my vision of culture as a synthetic, not holistic, entity. Unlike cross- or intercultural communication that tends to study contacts between individuals from different cultures that are assumed to be discrete entities, transcultural communication believes all cultures to be inherently mixed. It seeks to understand the depth, scope, and direction of various levels of hybridity

³¹⁶ My goal is not to find a single coherent theory, but I adopted a functionalist approach, i.e. the theory serves to highlight or to explain certain phenomena.

at the social – not individual – level. Critical transculturalism integrates both discursive and politico-economic analysis in the study of international communication and culture.” (Kraidy 2005: 14)

In the light of this theory it is tempting to see the policy of *dhamma* of Piyadassi as a phenomenon which evolved as an example of transculturalism, in response to the needs of a new society and its hybrid cultural identity. Aśoka could address all people living in his realms and speak to them about Buddhism, because it represented a kind of hybrid (or transcultural) religion. This is illustrated perfectly by the social, economic and political conditions which gave rise to the policy of *dhamma* (presented by: Thapar 1960), as discussed above.

The relationship between the two cultures took place on the so-called middle ground, which I define as an imagined space of negotiations of relations between the two culturally different entities. White in his book *The Middle Ground* (1991) examines the process of accommodation (instead of *acculturation*, popular previously) in the context of colonization of America as taking place on the middle ground. He develops the theory of de Certeau (1984) about the strategies “of the strong” (dominant power) and tactics “of the weak” (dominated people). According to White (1991: 52) “Perhaps the central and defining aspect of the middle ground was the willingness of those who created it to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner's cultural premises. Those operating in the middle ground acted for interests derived from their own culture, but they had to convince people of another culture that some mutual action was fair and legitimate. In attempting such persuasion people quite naturally sought out congruences, either perceived or actual, between the two cultures. The congruences arrived at often seemed - and, indeed, were - results of misunderstandings or accidents.” One of the examples used by White to illustrate that theory is the example of an Indian woman Aramepinchieue, who used Christianity for the sake of preserving her own cultural traits. Her father Rouensa told her to marry Michel Accault to strengthen the relationship between Kaskaskia family and the French. But she refused to marry him and father Gravier supported her saying that she has the right to do what she wants. He did this because Accault had a bad reputation as a libertine and an enemy of the faith. He thus appealed to the desire of Algonquian women to return to their ancient culture, which gave them unrestricted sexual freedom. “Gravier, who sought to subvert traditional Illinois sexual practices because they contradicted Catholicism, and Aramepinchieue, who used Catholicism to maintain the values that supported those same practices, thus found themselves allies.” (White 1991: 72) It can be asked, what was the identity of Aramepinchieue? In my opinion, it was a hybrid identity of an Indian woman, who could not anymore live freely, as she did before, because of the strategy of the French colonizers, with the result that she used a tactic of apparently adopting a Christian identity to maintain her original freedom. We can try to look in the same way at cultural relations between the Greeks and the natives in ancient Bactria and North-West India. Maybe we will find that the Greeks assumed Buddhism for similar reasons to Aramepinchieue, because it was their tactic to achieve some goals in Indian society against the strategy of powerful Brahmins who established system of four *varṇas* and probably treated all foreigners as outcasts. For a short moment in the history of India the supremacy of Brahmanism was supplanted by the tolerant policy of *dhamma*. Maybe if the Mauryan Empire had lasted longer, Indian society would have looked completely different today.

Another possible example of accommodation may be the mysterious title “Δορσάνης · ὁ Ἡρακλῆς παρ’ Ἰνδοῖς” (“Dorsanes: Heracles among Indians”) in the Lexicon of Hesychius of Alexandria (see: Gray, Schuyler 1901: 197-8) identified by Eggermont (1986) with Piyadassi (Priyadarśin). It is similar to the case study presented by White in a relationship between French colonizers and the American Indian tribes of the Algonquians, who tried to compose Europeans into their own worldview and treated the French as *manitou*, “an other-than-human person, a spiritual being capable of taking manifold physical forms.” (White 1991: 25) Because they provided iron, the Indians hunted the beavers to trade with them. But Europeans realized that they cannot satisfy all needs of the Indians, so they tried to turn Indians to worship Christ and not them. The result of that was startling. The Indians started worshipping Christ, but as a *manitou*: “[...] heads of animals once offered to the manitous at feasts were now offered to Christ. Public offerings went to the cross and to the Christian God, the “Great Manitou.” Indians were not so much being converted to Christianity as Christ was being converted into a manitou.” (White 1991: 26) This example shows perfectly that

Indians were not acculturated at all, but instead that Christianity was accommodated to their needs and beliefs. If we accept the theory of Eggermont, that Dorsanes is Piyadassi, then a similar accommodation could have occurred here. Namely that the Greeks accommodated the Indian ruler to their personal beliefs. Conclusions from such assumptions can be far-reaching and point to the superstitious and backward nature of Greek beliefs in relation to the sublime philosophy of king Piyadassi, but I will refrain myself from such statements, because that is not the purpose of this essay.

Conclusion:

In this essay, I have tried to show how we can understand intercultural (or transcultural) relations between the Greeks and the Mauryan Empire in the context of contemporary anthropological research and in relation to examples presented by researchers studying similar phenomena in the modern world, parallels that serve to make ancient relations easier to understand and more tangible. I have shown how the socio-economic changes that occurred in the Mauryan Empire influenced Piyadassi to support the policy of *dhamma* in the quite individualistic form presented above; and on the other hand the way in which this policy could have appealed to the Greek inhabitants of the Mauryan Empire. I wanted to show that Piyadassi adopted this policy as his strategy against the supremacy of the Brahmins, while the Greeks used it as their tactic to achieve certain goals in Indian society. They both supported the same idea, but for different reasons. They created a kind of middle ground, a place of temporary agreement between the two different cultures. If those relations lasted longer, probably Indian society would have looked completely different today. But the empire of the Mauryas soon ceased to exist and quickly a Brahmin dynasty of Śungas established again a social order based on Brahmin values, which turned out to be much more stable... one could say that to this day it has not been superseded.

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